

Memories of Falklands War Still Inspire Today's Geopolitics

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The Falkland Islands (referred to as Malvinas in Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese) are once again generating tensions, and the Argentine authorities in Buenos Aires have been expressing their dissatisfaction with both the United Kingdom and neighboring Brazil.

Last Friday Argentina demanded the UK resume flights with stopovers in Río Gallegos (Argentina) – they were unilaterally interrupted in March 2020 due to the pandemic. They favored communication with the Malvinas archipelago, and allowed the relatives of those who died in the 1982 Falklands war to visit the graves of the Argentine soldiers in Darwin Cemetery. A few weeks ago, the Argentine ambassador to Brazil, Daniel Scioli, also expressed his “concern” to the Foreign Ministry of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro about the significant increase in “military flights from the UK between Brazilian territory and the Malvinas Islands.”

The Brazilian government officially backs Buenos Aires’ claims over the island’s territory, but this gesture seems to be a kind of signal to the UK. It is unprecedented: even the Brazilian military dictatorship, which Bolsonaro admires, supported Argentina.

On January 5, the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement reaffirming that the Malvinas were “illegally occupied” on 3 January 1833 by British forces who “expelled the Argentine authorities legitimately established there”. On February 12 there was also an

incident when Argentina denounced the passage of an American nuclear-powered submarine – the USS Greeneville – in the South Atlantic sea, near the Falklands. It counted with the support of a British airplane.

The main economic activities in the islands are fishing, tourism and sheep farming. Oil exploration, licensed by the Government of the archipelago, remains controversial as a result of maritime disputes with Argentina. The Falklands, based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, claim an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extending 370 km (200 nautical miles) from its coastal baselines – it overlaps with Argentina’s own EEZ. The islands’ government is a self-governing British Overseas Territory, with a Governor appointed by the British Queen.

In 1982 there was a ten-week undeclared war between London and Buenos Aires over the islands. It ended with Argentine surrender. At the time the Brazilian military government allowed Argentine airplanes to refuel in its territory and, although Brazil at the time was ruled by a military anti-communist regime, it even helped Soviet support operations for Argentina during the conflict.

Both Buenos Aires and London claim sovereignty over the Falklands. The latter does so based on the continuous British administration of the archipelago since 1833, while Buenos Aires claims it acquired the islands from Spain when Argentina achieved its independence (in 1816). In 1833, England sent two naval vessels to the Malvinas. This event is interpreted by the Argentine as a usurpation, while the British see it as a reassertion of sovereignty. The troops however left the area without formal government.

In the twentieth century, the Malvinas faced significant population decline, with many young residents seeking job opportunities overseas. And, in recent years, the population decline was reduced mostly thanks to immigrants from the UK, as well as from Saint Helena and Chile.

The official and predominant language in the archipelago is English, but Spanish is also employed and South American Gauchos (once a majority) have also influenced the local dialect and culture.

In February, Argentine President Alberto Fernández began an international tour to Russia, China and Barbados. In Russia, Fernández expressed Argentine desire to join the [BRICS group](#) and received support from Vladimir Putin. Days later, in China, the same topic was discussed with President Xi Jinping, who also signaled a favorable position regarding Argentine entry into the bloc. It is noteworthy that the path to possible inclusion in the BRICS has been Russia and China, and not neighboring Brazil. This is yet another signal of Brazilian-Argentine deteriorated bilateral relations, and the issue of the Malvinas also plays a part in this situation.

It would be wrong to frame the issue of the Falklands within Argentine nationalism or a mere dispute over fishing rights. The Malvinas issue is part of the geopolitics of the western portion of the South Atlantic Sea. Only two regional players occupy most of the continent’s Atlantic coast: Brazil and Argentina. Meanwhile, Washington and London control a chain of islands that are located in the center of the South Atlantic Ocean (between America and Africa), and these two powers also exercise naval control over this zone. Thus, the “Malvinas issue” is actually part of a larger dispute over a vast ocean full of resources. The Falkland

Islands also have great geostrategic importance due to the connection they establish with Antarctica. Moreover, the Strait of Magellan and the Beagle and Drake channels enable Atlantic-Pacific interoceanic communication and are essential for monitoring global trade.

The Falklands War is a kind of geopolitical trauma in South America, with a South Atlantic mostly controlled by London, which is the local hegemon there – it controls access to Antarctica and the Indian Ocean. The Sandwich Islands, as well as the islands of Saint Helena, Gouch, South Georgia, and others are all ruled by Queen Elizabeth. With the independence of Brazil, the islands of Martim Vaz and neighboring Trindade became Brazilian. In 1890, the British occupied Trindade, but abandoned it after a bilateral agreement mediated by Portugal. The return of Trindade to Brazil through diplomatic means avoided a serious problem, but such was not the case with the Malvinas.

The 1982 Falklands War short-circuited the Monroe Doctrine and the Brazilian own “National Security Doctrine”. The very concept of the “Blue Amazon”, the Brazilian exclusive economic zone, developed partly out of these events and they still resonate today. For example, in 2019, Brazilian Colonel Leandro Freitas Ribeiro argued (in his Naval War School [dissertation](#)) that the country needs a nuclear submarine to defend its Blue Amazon, based on the experience of the Malvinas war.

[Brazil’s goal today is to develop the first nuclear submarine in the Southern Hemisphere.](#) According to an [Economist October 2021 piece](#), the South American country could in fact achieve it before Australia, notwithstanding [AUKUS](#). This would of course not please the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO). Brasilia and Moscow in fact advanced on their [nuclear cooperation](#) talks when Bolsonaro and Putin met in February. By 2010, Buenos Aires also had similar plans regarding the development of nuclear propulsion for its Navy’s vessels, and it even tried to participate in the Brazilian project, which did not happen. The 1982 war operates as a kind of a background to all these developments. Bolsonaro’s somewhat erratic foreign policy would in fact benefit a great deal from improving bilateral relations with Argentina within BRICS. A possible Lula electoral victory in October could boost the BRICS group again.

To sum it up, the Falkland Islands remain an important topic in the South American continent. They are part of a larger geopolitical dispute in the South Atlantic sea and we will be hearing a lot more about them.

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