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# The Soviet Union and the Falklands War

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by  
Vojtech Mastny

**T**he 1982 conflict between Great Britain and Argentina was the first time that a Nato power, other than the United States, tested itself in combat since France had lost the Algerian war twenty years before. The campaign in the South Atlantic involved predominantly sea power—the element of military might in which the Soviet Union had been investing vigorously. A clash between two of America's friends in a region of great political instability, the crisis offered apparent opportunities for expansion of Soviet influence at the expense of the United States. For both military and political reasons, therefore, Moscow was bound to follow the Falklands drama with keen interest.

Like the rest of the world, the Soviet Union was initially caught by surprise at the Argentine seizure of the islands on 2 April. The Marxist conceptual framework, through which Moscow still tends to interpret world events, could not supply a plausible explanation for a conflict between two conservative capitalist governments half around the globe away from each other, nor could it provide a ready guide for action. As a Soviet journal later philosophically observed, this was a “strange war,” showing how “unreliable and fragile is the peace which exists on earth.”<sup>1</sup> The one material stake that the Soviet Union had in Argentina—to insure for itself continued supply of Argentine grain—was unlikely to be seriously affected regardless of the outcome of the dispute. The initial response of the Soviet Union and its allies to the bizarre case of aggression that had taken place in one of the world's most remote corners was therefore ambivalent.

Looking for some plausible, albeit unproven, causes of the conflict, early Soviet commentaries dwelt on presumed strategic importance of the islands and the supposedly fabulous oil riches hidden underneath the surrounding waters.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the Havana television on 7 April made the more pertinent comment that Argentina's anti-communist rulers had seized the Falklands in a desperate bid for domestic popularity, trying to divert

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attention from their economic incompetence and other misdeeds, notably the fate of "the thousands of missing and murdered" political opponents.<sup>3</sup> Significantly for its uncertainty about the true meaning of events, the Soviet government, on 3 April, abstained in the UN Security Council vote which urged Argentine forces to withdraw from the islands. It underlined the uncertainty by withholding the news from its own citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Moscow adopted a more definite position only after one unexpected development was followed by another, namely, the possibility of Britain's using force to repossess the Falklands. This was potentially far more consequential than the original Argentine seizure of those barren pieces of land. However, the possibility was not a certainty, particularly in view of the strenuous efforts by Secretary of State Alexander Haig to mediate the dispute. Nor was the outcome of hostilities easy to predict. With war's benefits, if any, for Moscow thus difficult to calculate, the Soviet press no longer belabored the two themes most likely to prod London into an action decisive enough to be successful—the strategic value of the Falklands and the putative oil deposits around them. Instead, Moscow insisted that British military intervention would be both unwarranted and futile.

Predictably, the Soviet Union sought to derive maximum propaganda advantage from the conflict which it portrayed as one between a Third World nation striving to recover a piece of its national territory and an ex-colonial power clinging to a remnant of its empire. Commentators depicted the British government as embarking on an imperialist adventure in a desperate effort to divert its people's attention from a catastrophic economic situation at home. They also cast the United States in the sinister role of trying to benefit at the expense of both contestants, particularly by proposing to share in a tripartite administration of the islands. Referring to an obscure report in the Brazilian newspaper, *Correio Brasileiro*, the Soviet press charged an American plan to establish a military base in the South Atlantic.<sup>5</sup>

But the Soviet line was more anti-British and anti-American than pro-Argentine. Since there was a distinct possibility that, in case of a war, Argentina would be defeated, Moscow did nothing that could be interpreted as a commitment to the prospective loser. It did please Buenos Aires by promptly concluding the pending negotiations for the sale of nuclear equipment and two additional trade agreements. However, keeping economic and political interests separate, it never unequivocally endorsed Argentina's claim to the islands.

The true reasons behind Moscow's failure to do so may be gleaned from the untypical interpretation of the conflict by the well-connected *Izvestiia* commentator, Aleksandr Bovin, whose role had frequently been to address the real issues of a case with a candor not to be expected from ordinary Soviet propagandists. While not explicitly differing with their fare, unlike them, Bovin in an interview on 11 April conceded that the Argentine aggression

had violated international law and that the incorporation of the fiercely pro-British Falkland islanders was incompatible with the principle of self-determination.<sup>6</sup> In further discussing the motives behind the seizure of the islands, he duly mentioned its connection with Buenos Aires' expansionist ambitions in the Antarctic, as well as the need on the part of the country's ruling generals to placate domestic unrest by rallying the nation behind a patriotic cause. Even though Bovin concluded by confessing his "sympathy" to be on Argentina's side, his reasoning suggested that Moscow was looking for excuses for not translating any such sympathy into effective aid.

It was Argentina, rather than the Soviet Union, that schemed to bolster its position by floating rumors to the effect that Moscow's backing extended considerably further than was in fact the case. On 6 April Argentine news media reported that Soviet submarines were about to begin operations around the Falklands. On 10 April the Buenos Aires *Diarios y Noticias* cited a "reliable diplomatic source" from the eastern bloc as saying that Moscow was ready to support Argentina by any means, the military ones not specifically excluded.<sup>7</sup> The report alleged a routine presence in the Falkland waters of Soviet submarines, adding pointedly that the British fleet could not possibly escape their attention. It denied rumors that a special Soviet envoy was soon to arrive in Buenos Aires, but noted insidiously that the Soviet ambassador and the Argentine foreign office were in close daily contact anyway.

It is uncertain whether in Washington any of these outrageous insinuations were taken seriously or, more likely, rather as a suitable occasion to help justify the inevitable American commitment to support Britain. Besides placing American facilities on the strategic Ascension island at the disposal of the British expeditionary force, the United States admitted allowing London to use its reconnaissance and communications satellites. It was at this time, on 14 April, that President Reagan lent his authority to support the charges that the Soviet Union had been supplying Argentina with intelligence about the movements of the British fleet, adding that he "would like to see them butt out."<sup>8</sup>

While publicly denying any intention to share intelligence data with the Argentines, the Soviet Union launched, in the course of the war, seven reconnaissance satellites over the South Atlantic.<sup>9</sup> The Bear aircraft routinely operating from Cuba and West Africa surveyed the Ascension island area but were unable to reach as far as the Falklands. Intelligence-gathering ships, likewise operating from West Africa, sailed toward Ascension in an apparent effort to cross the track of the British fleet, but desisted after a British request to keep off.

Even without using deception to help fool the spy satellites, the British commanders had good reasons not to worry too much about the possible Soviet transfer of useful intelligence to the Argentines. The data first had to

be transmitted to Moscow, sifted through and evaluated, before the high-level political decision could be made to determine what, if any, were to be shared with Buenos Aires. By the end of that time-consuming process, most of the information was likely to be obsolete. If Moscow nevertheless decided to pass on some, the purpose was therefore bound to be more to generate good will than to give effective help. Certainly, the Argentines' behavior gave no inkling of any knowledge that could not be gained by their own intelligence-gathering operations.<sup>10</sup>

After London had, on 30 April, proclaimed a 200-mile war zone around the Falklands, from which not only Argentine but any non-British ships were banned, Moscow indignantly, though somewhat belatedly, protested. On 14 May, the Soviet Foreign Ministry charged that the establishment of the total exclusion zone violated the 1958 High Seas Convention and rejected British warnings to keep out.<sup>11</sup> Soviet ships, nevertheless, did keep out, thus giving evidence of Moscow's reluctance to materially hamper the British venture. Nor did Moscow do anything that could be interpreted as probing Nato defenses in the North Atlantic at a time half of the British fleet had been dispatched from there to the south.

The more the war progressed after the failure of the mediation attempts, the greater was the Soviet incentive to keep distance from the prospective loser. Argentine defeat appeared probable after the recapture of South Georgia on 25 April and especially the sinking of the *General Belgrano* on 2 May had demonstrated British resolve. Two days later, Party Secretary Leonid Brezhnev was conspicuously vague in his public remarks about the Falklands war, choosing the unexceptionable theme that all international disputes ought to be settled by peaceful means.<sup>12</sup> When an official delegation from East Germany, Moscow's favorite proxy in the Third World, arrived in Buenos Aires on 6 May, its pronouncements seconded the Soviet mentor, with an emphasis added. Though supporting the recent Argentine initiative for mediation by the UN Secretary General and condemning Western European economic sanctions against Argentina, the delegation's leader, Deputy Foreign Minister Bernhard Neugebauer, urged pointedly that international conflicts, including those about sovereignty, be resolved peacefully to begin with.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, more militant statements had been emanating from Havana, which previously had been more reserved in its support for Argentina than Moscow. On 10 May, Fidel Castro called upon the non-aligned nations to take "whatever steps you may deem appropriate" to stop "British-U.S. aggression." He expressed solidarity with the Argentine people and, somewhat less plausibly, also with the "British soldiers thrown into battle."<sup>14</sup> Having signed a \$100 million trade agreement with Buenos Aires, Cuba—unlike the Soviet Union—went so far as to promise military aid and condone Argentine use of force.<sup>15</sup> All this still did not imply any firm commitment to

the Argentine cause but conveyed clearly enough growing uneasiness about the likelihood of a major British victory—an issue of even greater interest to Moscow than to Havana because of its impinging on the whole question of Nato's military preparedness and combat capability.

The Russians have always been fascinated by naval power which they have seldom been able to employ effectively themselves. They have had particular respect for amphibious operations, as illustrated by Stalin's almost ecstatic commentary about the Anglo-American achievement in the 1944 Normandy invasion: ". . . One cannot but recognize that the history of warfare knows of no other similar undertaking in the breadth of its conception, in its giant dimensions, and in the mastery of its performance."<sup>16</sup> Now the Soviet Union had been developing its own impressive naval and amphibious capability, yet lacked opportunities to test it. As the first naval war of the missile age neared its climax, the performance of the world's most experienced navy therefore overshadowed for Moscow all other aspects of the South Atlantic conflict.

Like many Western observers, the Soviet ones had initially seemed skeptical about Britain's chances of success. Dwelling on its economic plight, they displayed much of the same contempt for presumed British decadence that had been at the heart of the Argentines' original miscalculation. In a *Pravda* article, Vice Admiral A. Gontaev questioned Britain's ability to wage the extraordinarily complex operation required to project power at such a tremendous distance. He conjectured that in a short campaign the British might inflict considerable damage on the Argentines, but in the event of a protracted war "may encounter difficulties in providing new forces with material and technical supplies."<sup>17</sup> He conveyed the Soviet estimate—and presumably also hope—that because of the British inability to force a decision, the war would be a protracted one.

The opinion expressed publicly in Moscow changed once the landings at San Carlos gave reason to believe the opposite. Even then, in a *Krasnaia Zvezda* article on 23 May, Vice Admiral K. Stalbo, the Soviet Union's foremost naval theoretician, was inclined to give the credit less to the British than to the Americans whose assistance he deemed decisive.<sup>18</sup> Against the background of rising US naval power, he interpreted the Falklands campaign as a dress rehearsal for the Rapid Deployment Force. He then proceeded to draw preliminary lessons from the war about the usefulness in combat of attack submarines, particularly nuclear ones, the importance of sea-based aviation and gunfire support for troop landings, the indispensability of control of the sea lanes for insuring the movement of men and supplies at long distances, and the utility of not only "tactical" but also "strategic" bombers in raiding enemy positions.

There are indications that the Soviet Union not only wished the war to drag on, but also acted accordingly. At variance with Stalbo's estimates, *Krasnaia Zvezda*, on 30 May, upgraded the assessment of Argentina's military

capabilities, reverting to the theme of a protracted war.<sup>19</sup> It is hard to determine what caused the reassessment—whether the pitched air-naval battles that followed the San Carlos landings, causing significant British losses, or anticipation of severe weather conditions likely to hamper military operations, or plain wishful thinking. In any case, the change coincided with the spread of rumors about Soviet-Argentine negotiations on military and economic aid.

On 31 May, President Leopoldo Galtieri met with Soviet Ambassador Sergei Striganov, and three days later, the Argentine leader declared that his country would accept such aid from the Soviet Union or any other country. However, on 4 June, Buenos Aires denied that Soviet technicians were installing a radar system along the country's coast.<sup>20</sup> The weight of the evidence suggests that Moscow made offers but the Argentines were unresponsive and the war in any case proceeded too fast for any aid to become topical. As an Argentine official explained graphically in a private conversation, "we'd rather lose and die with our boots on and mouths open than win with Soviet help."<sup>21</sup>

Though Moscow tried to make itself "useful" in a variety of ways, the value of its help was questionable. By extolling the alleged virtues of saturation bombing raids, it proffered tactical advice of the sort that, if heeded, would have maximized the losses of the Argentine Air Force which presumably could then be replaced by purchases of Soviet aircraft. Months later, in December 1982, the Buenos Aires journal *Aerospacio* disclosed the use during the Falklands campaign of Soviet SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles which had probably come from Libya or Peru. It added pointedly that the missiles had not been very effective.<sup>22</sup>

The surrender of the Argentine garrison at Port Stanley on 14 June ended any uncertainty about the outcome of the war, thus prompting the Soviet Union to take stock of the new situation. Moscow's most immediate concern was the possible military integration of the Falklands into the Western alliance system. Among the disconcerting options examined by the Soviet news and propaganda media were the permanent presence of a major British force in the islands, their transformation by the United States into a South Atlantic equivalent of Diego Garcia, and their use as the nucleus of a southern counterpart of Nato, which would include unspecified Latin American countries and perhaps South Africa as well.<sup>23</sup>

Moscow voiced its opposition to such putative schemes by dwelling on the "objective" obstacles to their realization. Soviet commentaries insisted that the British use of force could not possibly solve the Falklands problem, that the cost of a military presence would be prohibitive for Britain, and that the war had destroyed the whole system of inter-American relations dominated by the United States. But in private statements, some Soviet officials indicated that they were not so certain. They were but moderately critical of

London's policies. And while regarding the United States as holding the key to the "real solution" of the Falklands issue, they did not think Washington would find it too difficult to cope with the adverse feelings the war had engendered in Latin America—an estimate borne out by subsequent developments.

In the immediate aftermath of the Argentine defeat, the Soviet Union renewed efforts to sell Buenos Aires MiG fighter aircraft, antiaircraft missiles, and other weapons—an initiative which, if successful, would have helped to reduce Moscow's large trade deficit resulting from its massive purchases of Argentine grain.<sup>24</sup> But the shaken anti-Communist regime, increasingly vulnerable to left-wing pressure, had even less incentive than before to enter into a relationship which would make it dependent on Soviet arms supply. Nor could Argentina expect from Moscow any significant help to alleviate its catastrophic economic situation; such help could only come from the West. In any case, the Soviet Union did not press very hard and the relationship between the two countries remained much the same as before the war.

Moscow's conduct thus defied the predictions of those American critics of Washington's policy who would have preferred the United States to put its apparent interests in the Third World above its loyalty to its foremost European ally. According to Robert S. Leiken's testimony before the House Sub-Committee on Inter-American Affairs, for example, the American "orgy of principle" in support of Britain gave the Soviet Union the opportunity to gain a "real foothold" in the southern part of Latin America while "Nato, the barrier against Soviet aggression in Europe, has been weakened materially."<sup>25</sup> But even if this were true, Moscow evidently did not see it that way, for despite its rhetoric to the contrary, it behaved as if it regarded the outcome of the Falklands conflict a major Western success.

Beyond the Latin American political scene, the Soviet Union pondered the performance of the British task force, with its implications for the East-West military balance. Already the brief survey of the hostilities in the July issue of the leading Soviet naval journal, *Morskoi sbornik*, showed a thorough familiarity with the course of the operations, giving special attention to some of the most pertinent aspects.<sup>26</sup> Though largely descriptive, it emphasized the speed with which the British had been able to assemble their force and the losses suffered by both sides. In this respect, however, undue credit was given to the inflated Argentine reports of enemy casualties.

The more detailed and systematic assessment of the lessons that the Soviet Union hoped to draw from the Falklands war finally appeared in the November 1982 issue of the *Morskoi sbornik*. The dominant theme of the article, written by Rear Admiral I. Uskov, was the crucial importance of surface ships; without them, the author argued, the British would have been unable to achieve their goal of projecting power at long distance.<sup>27</sup> This was



partly a self-serving argument, implying that the Falklands experience proved the wisdom of the massive buildup of a surface navy that the Soviet Union had been implementing under Admiral Sergei G. Gorshkov. The article also stressed the importance of the variety of auxiliary ships that the British had used to insure proper balance in their fighting force, as well as coordination between naval and land forces—both favorite themes of this Soviet epigone of Alfred T. Mahan and especially Julian Corbett.

There were other lessons of the war, however, not so heartening for Soviet military planners. The author of the article appeared particularly impressed by the efficiency of the British mobilization, the prompt requisitioning of civilian ships by the government, and the ingenious transformation of the vessels and their equipment for the unexpected requirements of the campaign. Although the comparison was understandably not made, these were all accomplishments contrasting with the extraordinary disorder reported to have hampered the mobilization of Soviet armed forces for possible intervention in Poland in the winter of 1980-81.<sup>28</sup> Uskov also noted with respect the timely psychological blow at Argentine morale that the British had performed by sinking the *General Belgrano* at the onset of the campaign and their conduct of the land operations with the minimum loss of life.

The Soviet author singled out for special attention amphibious landing operations, particularly at nighttime—something for which the Soviet armed forces had been training extensively yet had never had an opportunity to practice in actual combat. Focusing on the role of Ascension island as the vital staging area and on the inadequacy of British air cover, he further reflected on the importance of forward bases and carrier-based aircraft—both aspects of military might in which the Soviet Union is lagging behind the Western alliance. But the most critical lessons shown by the Falklands conflict concerned communications and the role of electronics in warfare—the recurrent theme of two additional articles in the same issue of the *Morskoi sbornik*.<sup>29</sup>

Like the British commanders themselves, the Soviet experts appreciated the invaluable assistance rendered by rapid and secure communication systems, as well as by intelligence gathered by satellite deployed by the United States. Moreover, both the sinking of the *Sheffield* by an Argentine Exocet missile and the subsequent successful defense of British ships by means of the Sea Wolf and other systems demonstrated in different ways the critical role of electronic equipment. Indeed, Rear Admiral G. Popov, in his article on the subject, went so far as to posit that the next war would be won by the side with the better electronics. Considering that this is an area of pronounced Western technological superiority over the Soviet Union, the implications of his thesis could not be graver.

In its retrospective assessment of the Falklands campaign, the British government's "White Paper" cautioned that the necessity to fight an unexpected war in a distant part of the globe by no means diminished the

primacy of the military threat posed by the Soviet Union.<sup>30</sup> However, the successful waging of that war helped to diminish that threat. By demonstrating the preeminence of a military technology in which Moscow is relatively weak, the experience had a sobering effect on any Soviet readiness to challenge the West by force. Even if the increased awareness of the weakness enhanced in the long run Soviet determination to overcome it—as it had happened with armor and antitank weapons after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war—pending the actual results, the Western alliance emerged with a new margin of advantage.

The British response to the aggression also demonstrated that Nato's preparedness and efficiency in meeting any military challenge is greater than many Soviet—and Western—observers may have thought. The Falklands campaign vindicated the effectiveness of a compact, highly motivated, and well-equipped volunteer force—the kind of force that also the United States, but not the Soviet Union, relies upon. By widening the range of uncertainty about just how easy an attack on Nato might be—at the very time when the Polish crisis put the reliability of the Soviet Union's own allies in doubt—the Falklands drama thus further strengthened deterrence. By doing so exclusively by conventional means, the outcome also supplied arguments in favor of emphasizing conventional rather than nuclear deterrence.

Most important, the decisive British action and, to a lesser though still convincing degree, the support eventually extended to it by both the United States and London's European partners, served to impress on the Soviet Union that the decline of Western power and resolve may have been reversed. Not only did Britain's conduct prove premature all speculation about the impending demise of this supposed "sick man of the West"; its readiness to protect an even tiny group of citizens from subjugation by an aggressor also vindicated that important part of the Western tradition which upholds freedom despite material cost. Therein is the most crucial accomplishment of the Falklands campaign as long as the test of strength between East and West remains political and ideological rather than military.

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