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Whose Islands Are These Anyway?

Recent news about a growing dispute between China and Japan over uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, and increased rhetoric from Argentina's President over that country's claim to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, raises questions about why conflicts over territory continue to vex the international community. Despite a more interconnected global economy, where actions in one region can have profound impacts elsewhere, local politics often shape or override wider concerns. As Robert Kaplan argued in a recent *Wall Street Journal* essay, the perceived preciousness of disputed territory can create deep geographical insecurities within individual countries.

Breakaway countries like South Sudan, enclave territories like Chechnya, or disputed islands such as the Malvinas/Falklands raise important questions about self determination, sovereignty, human rights, and a host of political and economic issues. Political states have always been loath to give up territory voluntarily. Historical territorial losses through war or domination can shape the collective memory and identity of a society in ways that have profound consequences. The term *Italia Irredenta*, for example, referring to Italy's loss of territory in the late 19th century, has become a metaphor for similar territorial losses over time. Ecuador still frets about the loss of its Amazonian lands to Perú in the early 1940s. Guatemala staunchly clings to claims over Belizean territory, and Mexico still laments the loss of its northwestern region to the U.S. in 1848. A recent advertisement by Absolut Vodka that showed modern Mexico with its lost territory restored under the caption "in an Absolut world" created quite a stir and focused renewed debate on the nature and validity of historical territorial claims.

How would the world map look today if all of the territory lost and gained over the past two centuries reverted to its 19th century status? Quite a ludicrous proposition, of course, but there are many extant territorial claims that have their roots in the late 18th-early 19th centuries. Argentina's claim to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands is one such claim that has been in the news recently, in part because of the 30th anniversary of the 1982 war between Britain and Argentina over the islands, and in part because of heightened political rhetoric by the leaders of both countries over the righteousness of their respective positions.

In Argentina and elsewhere, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner has ratcheted up the public rhetoric over her country's claim to the islands. Yet a more nuanced analysis of her government's claims beyond the surficial media and political speechifying suggests some serious weaknesses in her analysis and speaks volumes about political opportunism and institutional memory. Not a peep has been heard from President Kirchner and her supporters about the illegality of the military's invasion of the islands in 1982. Does she support those ill-fated decisions made then in the name of flag and country? What is her position on the government's declaration of war on a few thousand innocent civilians and slightly more sheep? Her government has presented no plan or guarantees for maintaining the cultural integrity of the Falklanders in the event that political control should pass to Argentina. Would their right to self

determination be protected and respected? How long would it take for the Falkland Islanders to be “removed” or re-aculturated by Argentina in the name of solidifying the island’s *Argentinidad*? None of these questions has been put on the table for open debate by either party to the conflict.

Argentina’s claim to the Malvinas/Falklands may have some theoretical or historical legal validity, yet to paraphrase a classic line from the film *Quigley Down Under*, Madam President this isn’t Dodge City and you’re not Bill Hickock! Shooting from the proverbial hip with political posturing and empty rhetoric will not resolve the core underlying questions about the disputed islands. The right to self determination by the islanders must be recognized and protected *a priori* to any political territorial settlement in the future. In the meantime, Argentina’s government might find a more profitable road in addressing rampant inflation, growing unemployment, and declining quality of life for its own people.

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