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Politics and the Falklands

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By George Philip

A few months ago, British Foreign Secretary William Hague made a speech at Canning House in which he promised upgraded and more constructive relations with Latin America. It is fair to say that this promise has not exactly been fulfilled. On the contrary, not only have British relations with Argentina deteriorated because of the Falklands issue but there are also signs that the Argentine position is being supported by countries such as Uruguay which have their own differences with Argentina.

While the current spat can be blamed, to an extent at least, on British insensitivity toward Argentinean susceptibilities, some underlying realities have to be faced. The most important one is that, in highlighting its claim that the British government hands over the 'Malvinas', or at least starts negotiations with that end in view, Argentina is banging its head against a wall. No British government could afford to do this. This is not primarily because of events that may have occurred in the nineteenth century where the record is genuinely ambiguous. It may indeed be true that the Argentina's version of the events of 1833 is flawed – there is evidence that the non-military Argentine population of the Falklands left voluntarily rather than being forcibly expelled. However this is probably not the key point. It is a fact that successive British governments did agree to negotiate on sovereignty at various points in the 1960s and 1970s. There is every indication that successive British governments, including that of Margaret Thatcher, would have been happy to see some kind of sharing of sovereignty with Argentina and regarded the lack of enthusiasm for this on the part of the Islanders with a degree of impatience. If Argentina had not invaded the Islands there is every chance that subsequent some British government, probably one facing economic difficulties, might have found it in Britain's interest to do a deal. The fact that there were negotiations with Argentina prior to the invasion may not give the Argentineans a case in strict law, but it clearly indicates the real issue.

The problem is the fact that Argentina did indeed invade the Falklands. British lives –as well as Argentinean ones- were lost in getting them back. Argentina would sometimes seem to suggest that the invasion was an anomalous event precipitated by an unrepresentative and repressive military dictatorship but this argument will not wash. Galtieri's decision to invade was evidently designed to increase the popularity of the Junta –as indeed it would have done had the invasion been militarily successful. The whole strategy of invasion was predicated on the entirely borne-out belief that most Argentineans would support it. There is persuasive though not quite compelling evidence from US archival documents that Galtieri was at the time planning to call elections in Argentina in which he was intending to be a candidate. The Falkland invasion, had it succeeded, would have played a prominent part in his campaign. It may still be true that British military action helped rid Argentina, and other South American countries too, of some particularly unpleasant military governments but it cannot seriously be disputed that Galtieri's move was popular at the time.

There is, of course, no international law which states that any country that invades the territory of another should thereby forfeit its territorial claim. However that comes close to the way in which many British people think. The British position in reality is that 'our soldiers must not have died in vain.' Once lives have been lost, the picture changes. The events of 1982 make it inconceivable that any British government would hand over sovereignty to Argentina, or even to agree to share. The apparent discovery of oil in the region is a secondary issue but it also plays some part in hardening the British position. Meanwhile, as William Hague pointed out in his Canning House speech, relations with Latin America have hardly been a central British interest in the past. Barring a new war in the South Atlantic, Argentina's ability to pressurise its fellow South American republics to put pressure on Britain is quite limited. There is insufficient British interest in the region.

All of this is not intended to be an unconditional defence of the British position. Britain, in relation to Latin America as elsewhere, too often suffers from what I think of as 'Jeremy Clarkson's syndrome' –namely a complete lack of understanding of what might give offence to foreigners. We saw something of this with our disastrous recent World Cup bid and we are seeing it again now. Argentina was surely justified in seeing Prince William's posting to the Falklands as an avoidable provocation, Surely the Defence Chiefs could have found a suitable posting for Prince William other than in the Falklands? Even if he had to be sent there at some point for career reasons, then was the 30th anniversary year of the South Atlantic conflict quite the best time to choose? The British government should have shown more sensitivity to the fact that Cristina Kirchner has her own public opinion to cope with.

By the same token, Prime Minister Cameron is already known in Britain for being combative at the Dispatch Box –his job requires this- but his comment on Argentine colonialism did not give one the impression of a Prime Minister that cared about good relations with that country. Perhaps he thought that he was dealing with Sarkozy where relations appear to thrive on the periodic exchange of schoolboy insults. However Cristina Kirchner is no Sarkozy and there is no 'entente' between Britain and Argentina. The two countries fought a war thirty years ago and all the wounds have not yet healed.

For the future, there may be some downside for Britain in a continued conflict with Argentina, but not very much. Cristina Kirchner potentially has more to lose domestically once it becomes clear that her approach will not get the Falklands. I hope that she is now careful to keep an eye on her military. After all Argentina experienced many years of military government prior to the 1982 debacle. Since then its military has been in the doghouse, and successive civilian governments have made it a priority to keep it there. Keeping the military in its place, indeed, has been one of the marked achievements of post-1983 Argentina. By raising the issue of military preparedness, however indirectly, Kirchner may identify the military in the Argentine public mind with a cause and so assist in its political rehabilitation. That would not be a good idea.

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