



# **SOUTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL OCCASIONAL PAPERS**

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## **BRITISH DEFENCE POLICY AND THE SOUTH ATLANTIC**

by

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From their discovery until the present day, the Falklands remain an inhospitable and unfruitful territory with a harsh climate and difficult of access. That this territory should be a bone of contention between nations is perhaps understandable, but that the question of sovereignty over it should be a *casus belli* seems to many absurd. But this of course is what happened in 1982. If we look back in history we see that in the 18th century too, war over the Islands between Britain and Spain was also a possibility had not Dr. Johnson successfully endeavoured to persuade the nation that "it was wise and laudable to suffer the question of right to remain undecided rather than to involve our country in another war". As the Falklands have shown, disputes over sovereignty because of their connection with perceptions of national identity and nationalism, have tremendous explosive potential. This paper however is not concerned with examining either the causes of or possible solutions to the Falklands problem, but is aimed at reviewing the military situation in the South Atlantic and assessing its implications for British defence policy.

This is worth doing if only to strike a balance between extreme views. On the one hand it is contended that the present government's policy in the Falklands is ruinously expensive, bad for service morale, destructive of ships and aircraft and an unwarrantable distraction from higher priority obligations under the North Atlantic Treaty. On the other hand it is held that the Soviet threat to the South Atlantic is such that it is in Britain's interest (and NATO's) to maintain substantial forces in this region. On closer examination neither view holds much

water.

Immediately following the end of the conflict in 1982 the determination of the British Government was made clear that "the Falkland Islands should never again be a victim of unprovoked aggression". In the short term this required, and until there is no longer risk of armed threat from Argentina will continue to require, the deployment of substantial army, air force, and naval resources in and around the Falklands, the maintenance of rapid communication between the UK and the Falkland Islands and the consequential diversion of these resources from their primary commitments, particularly to NATO. In July 1982 the 200 miles Total Exclusion Zone around the Falklands was replaced by a 150 mile "Protection Zone" against the intervention of Argentine warships and military aircraft and, except by prior agreement, of Argentine civilian shipping and aircraft. Thus the British position is purely reactive to the Argentine threat - as this is perceived. Though President Alfonsin has stated that while he is in charge there will be no military adventures to "regain" the islands there has so far been no formal declaration by Argentina that all hostilities are terminated. The military have been involved intermittently in the political running of the country for over 50 years and the expectation of their return is widespread. No civilian government's president has completed his term of office for over 30 years. Until it is clear that the restoration of democracy in Argentina is definitive it is only prudent to focus upon capability no less than presently expressed intention. Its first conflict with Britain cost the Argentine armed forces 800 lives, their heavy cruiser, a submarine, many trained pilots and aircraft of their air force and much of the weapons, equipment and supplies of three army brigades. These kinds of losses are very costly to a country that is trying to save all the hard currency it can to pay back their heavy debt. Economic *force majeure* coupled with the present government's perception of a need to emphasize civilian control of the military has enforced enormous reductions in the size of the defence budget. Before the war this amounted to some 8% of GDP; by the financial year 1983/4 this had been cut to less than 6%, and in 1984/5 under the civilian defence minister, this fell to 3.71%. President Alfonsin has more than once suggested that he hopes to cut it down still further to perhaps only 2%, and there are rumours of further plans to alter the whole structure of the military by ending conscription, recruiting an all-volunteer force, and halving the size of the army. Meanwhile it is certainly upon the army that the main weight of the axe has fallen. The large military complex of Campo de Mayo, near Buenos Aires, is to be drastically cut down, and headquarter schools and units moved out into the countryside. Most conscripts are being retained for six months only. Almost the only positive change for the army is the announced formation of a helicopter-borne mobile assault brigade based on a force of 24 Super Pumas. This will be a formation to watch. The traditional role of the army has been to defend the country's long borders with Chile and Brazil. The treaty with Chile on the Beagle Channel, which came into force in 1985 and is

massively popular, has put relations with that country on their best footing for a century or more. Alfonsin's preference for co-operation, rather than confrontation, with Brazil has also received a generally positive response. With no potential enemies left on the mainland, no internal urban guerilla movement to speak of, and after its generally abject performance in 1982, the army must be feeling much beleaguered. Matters are otherwise with the other two services. The navy is now reaping the benefits of ship contracts placed in the mid-70s in the context of the Beagle Channel dispute. The most notable acquisition is the force of four (possibly six) TR-1700 submarines being built by Thyssen-Nordseewerke in Emden and a local yard, Manuel Domecq Garcia, at Tandamor of which one has so far been delivered. These are reported to have an attack speed of over 20 knots and a submerged endurance of 70 days. This compares with a pre-war force of only two modern (type 209) submarines, which are still being run on and two ancient boats of which one was cannibalised and one caught at South Georgia. The existing force of six destroyers (two of them British type 42s said to be up for sale) has been supplemented by four MEKO 360-H2 built by Blohm and Voss of Hamburg, with British propulsion systems. Construction of a force of six MEKO 140 frigates, with Decca radar, is in progress at the Rio Santiago shipyard to supplement the pre-existing forces of three French A-69; one has been delivered. The navy has standardised on the Exocet as its anti-shipping missile and when the programme is complete it will have 92 launchers fitted to surface ships. Finally the aircraft carrier *Veinticinco de Mayo* now has a complement of 6 Skyhawks and 4 Super Etendard strike aircraft. During the war, after their cruiser had been sunk, the Argentine surface navy played no part. As re-equipped, and whatever may be thought of its quality either in sea-keeping or combat, (its high sea exercises were cancelled last year for want of cash) the navy will be a powerful one, some 24 warships strong, much the most modern in Latin America, and in terms of Exocet missiles afloat fourth only behind West Germany, France and Britain.

The air force and naval air force re-equipment programmes have numerically made good the losses in the Falkland Islands war, though not precisely type for type.

	<b>Pre-War</b>	<b>Current</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>AIR FORCE</b>			
Fighter/bomber:	c. 115	C. 120	France, Israel, Peru
<b>NAVAL AIR FORCE</b>			
Fighter/bomber:			
Skyhawk A-4Q	11	6	Israel
SuperEtendard	5	14	France

An uncorroborated report by the University of Bradford School of Peace Studies in January 1985 reports that a number of aircraft are deploying the Israeli Gabriel III anti-ship missile; the Mirage/Dagger force is being equipped with aerial

refuelling probes; the air force has bought French-made *Durandal* anti-runway bombs and the Navy has acquired seven US Lockheed Electras of which four are for maritime reconnaissance with state-of-the-art surface detection radar. If these were acquired they would all be relevant, and dangerous, additions in the context of any future conflict around the Falklands.

Bradford also reports rumours, probably without foundation, of the development of a surface-to-surface missile with a range to reach the Falkland Islands from the mainland – doubtless with conventional submunitions for the attack of runways, aircraft shelters, radar sites and other installations. On 18 November 1983 Admiral Madero announced that the technology of enriching uranium had been mastered. President Alfonsín though proud of the progress of the “peaceful uses” programme, declared at his swearing-in ceremony that future Argentine efforts would not aim at weapon production. Argentina is not a signatory of the non-proliferation treaty or the Treaty of Tlatelolco, and explicitly reserves the right to conduct “peaceful nuclear explosions”.

It is difficult to reconcile the scope and scale of naval and airforce rearmament either with the financial stringency being apparently applied to Argentina’s defence budget or with her realistic defensive needs. As to the first point, the suggestions made by the Bradford report are that naval and air improvements are all being paid for at the expense of the army, or that the armed forces may still enjoy independent financial resources as a legacy of military rule. These explanations are barely credible. Nevertheless the main factors seem well substantiated, and it is hard to disagree with Bradford’s cool conclusion “Argentina has now acquired the ability to engage, should it desire, in a process of low intensity military operations in the South Atlantic in a manner which would have been impossible two years ago. There would not appear to be a likelihood of a further invasion of the islands, even under an aggressive military regime in Argentina, but it *would* be possible to envisage a low intensity war of attrition which would be costly to Britain, and would require a massive increase in the UK commitment to the defence of the islands”.

As has already been explained, the objective of this British military commitment is purely deterrent: “to make clear the determination of the Government to defend the islands”. As such it is psychological in purpose, designed to act upon the adversary’s mind, to convince him that the cost of resort to arms will always exceed any possible benefit. Up to April 1982 it was judged that 42 marines and HMS *Endurance* would suffice. The present military presence is massive by comparison, but if judged against the Bradford criterion – the ability to cope with a low intensity war of attrition – it is modest indeed bearing in mind that the land area is much the same as Wales and there are no roads, the coastline is exceptionally long and difficult, the Protection Zone encompasses some 96,000 square miles.

The British Ministry of Defence has been in difficulty over its information policy for the Falklands from the beginning, and still does not strive officiously to clarify the detailed order of battle despite the remorseless (and fundamentally misguided)

probing of Mr. Tam Dalyell. Nevertheless the main outlines are clear. The army garrison consists of a strong infantry battalion group, Royal Artillery (6 x 105 mm Light Guns), Royal Engineers (now much reduced in numbers), an armed reconnaissance squadron (Scorpions), an Army Air Corps Squadron (Scout and Gazelle helicopters), Blowpipe, signal units and a logistic battalion. There are ammunition dumps, a container park, a floating harbour, fuel dumps. Apart from the teeth arm combat troops dispersed on defensive duties, most of the garrison lives in three floating hotels ("coastels"). There are squash courts, a gymnasium, NAAFI and education services, video, local radio, live entertainment. Normally people do a tour of five months only including time in transit. It is not a popular posting, particularly in the winter, but training is excellent (there are 31 live firing ranges), the challenge of possible action gives an edge to it, living conditions are tolerable and morale generally high. In itself this is a commitment that could be sustained indefinitely.

The naval order of battle includes one nuclear powered or diesel submarine, a number of escorts (destroyers, frigates) previously reported as four, but now reduced to two, apart from those in transit, three permanently allotted patrol vessels, fleet auxiliaries, ships taken up from trade and a detachment of Sea King helicopters.

Since the Stanley airfield was opened to RAF Phantom aircraft in November 1982, there has been no ASW Carrier on station and the main naval presence has been the group of escorts patrolling the protection Zone: to resist attack, provide sea-borne early warning and to fend off incursions from raiding craft and submarines. In evidence to the Defence Committee of the House of Commons on 1 March 1983 Admiral Whetstone opined that "a ship would probably spend two tours there in any two and a half years". Since, as he had already explained, the tour of duty (UK to UK) of escorts is five months this could imply the involvement of such ships for ten months in every thirty, or one third of the effective force. Plainly this was unsustainable in the long run. The reductions feasible after the installation of ground radars and the opening of the Mount Pleasant airport have made all the difference.

The Air Force presence is no less crucial. It is reported to include a squadron of 9 Phantoms, 6 Chinook helicopters for heavy lift and construction tasks, 6 Hercules in the tanking and maritime reconnaissance roles, a Sea King detachment for search and rescue and support, Rapiers for air defence of airfields, and a number of land-based long-range radars for the Air Defence Ground Environment. The Harriers flight has now been withdrawn. The RAF also operates the airbridge to the Falklands via Ascension Island using VC10s and Hercules. This latter operation is being transformed by the construction of a new airport at Mount Pleasant, a major construction project some 30 miles from Port Stanley. This first received traffic in May 1985 and will be fully operational early in 1986. Until then its use is limited to wide-bodied aircraft owned or chartered by the Ministry of Defence (who have ordered six Tristars from British Airways). These carry service personnel,

civilian passengers and priority freight. The Airport is open also to locally based light aircraft and possibly the occasional civil charter. When fully ready it will be available to operators wishing to establish scheduled services and will include a second runway allowing RAF air defence aircraft to be moved from Stanley.

The utility of the new airfield has been much debated. On the one hand its existence will not immediately eliminate the need for Hercules flights with their cumbersome air-refuelling, nor will it save much in the way of manpower (perhaps 100 posts) nor in running costs (reputedly £25m a year). Nor does it seem likely to generate an upsurge in tourism; although it is encouraging that an Edinburgh travel firm has already taken some bookings. What is certain is that an airport greatly improves air defence operations, giving the RAF true all-weather capability, and much enhances the ability to reinforce the garrison in an emergency. Nimrods have already proved the 8,500 miles route, and part of the case for buying the Tristars was as a means of flying a reinforcing battalion quickly if a threat developed.

There is no reason to doubt the viability of the concept underlying these deployments. Where deterrence is concerned force levels are always of a more subjective nature than planners care to concede and are tolerant of fairly wide variations. Major General de la Billiere, in a lecture given to the Royal United Services Institution in November 1985, has reportedly canvassed the option of making a stronghold of Mount Pleasant airport in which sufficient forces from all three services would be maintained not only to deny the airport to any foreseen assault but to ensure it remained in operation to receive reinforcements. This might allow some reduction in the forces deployed, and the Government are in any case considering to what extent reductions can be made once the Mount Pleasant airport complex is complete. But it is hard to see how a force level substantially lower than what is now provided could fill the bill over the next few years, when the Argentine naval and air build-up is complete. Nor, as it stands, is the garrison any conceivable threat to mainland Argentina. The key to success is the capability for rapid reinforcement in an emergency, hugely improved by the new airfield and transport force. Bradford University, in a further study published in May 1985, make much of the likelihood of successful strikes against the Mount Pleasant and Stanley Bases. They conclude, not without irony, that "several bases such as Mount Pleasant should be built. Alternatively, it might be appropriate to conclude a political settlement with Argentina". So it would – but not for this reason. It is easy to overstate the vulnerability of airfields. Runways are notoriously hard to put out of action; difficult to hit, as the RAF found in 1982; and even when cratered by specialized munitions, not too difficult to repair. More Phantoms, and air defence missiles and some Harriers could be flown out in an emergency. The Ministry of Defence have done their homework well.

But quite a different perspective is opened up by the question of opportunity costs – the capabilities foregone (not least in the UK's commitment to NATO) in

order to meet the Falklands commitment. In round figures the effect is startling.

In the Report of the Defence Committee of the House of Commons, published on 23 May 1985, it was explained that the total Falklands costs over the period 1982 to 1994 will be some £4,650 million at 1983/84 prices; almost exactly half the programme cost of Trident on the same price base and over a rather longer period. The Treasury would no doubt deny that this represents costs which would otherwise have been spent on general defence provision, on the grounds that Falklands costs over and above the defence budget proper have been, and will continue to be, met by supplementary provision. But there is another side to that coin. Since 1979-80 the UK, like other NATO powers, has accepted a commitment to increase defence budgets in real terms in the region of 3% a year. Over the first five years of this commitment the total increase in the UK defence budget averaged 2.9% a year but this included Falklands expenditure: if this is excluded the figure falls to 2.2% – so there is a sense in which the Falklands money was owed to the defence budget anyway.

Under the June 1981 Defence Review the surface fleet was to be sharply reduced: by some 25% in the number of escorts; the carrier *Invincible* was to be sold, as were four fleet auxiliaries; doubt was cast on the *Sea King* replacement and the assault ships phased out early. Since the Falklands war much of this has been rescinded. All four battle losses have been replaced with Type 22 vessels, all three carriers retained, 6 more *Sea King* bought, the assault ships reprieved. Up to four ships that would have been mothballed have been run on, as have three Tribal class frigates on the disposal list. More Phantom air defence aircraft have been bought, 24 Rapier fire units, 5 more Chinook and 7 *Sea Harrier*.<sup>(1)</sup> This, in the Ministry of Defence view, more than offsets the reduction in state of readiness of those NATO-declared forces deployed in the South Atlantic. The Defence Committee expressed itself “not completely satisfied” with these reassurances. The fact is that, so far as the surface fleet is concerned, while commitments like the Standing Naval Force Atlantic continue to be honoured in full, some fleet tasks such as training exercises and trials have had to be curtailed or postponed. There has been some lowering of readiness categories in forces declared to NATO, some reduction in deployments for example to the Far East. It is not clear that the operational life of aircraft and ships is being substantially curtailed. In all it is fair to say, with the Ministry of Defence spokesman Mr. Jago, that “by and large, by all these measures, by making the best use of the Falklands operation for training purposes, the effect on our capability elsewhere will *not be too great*” (my italics).

Looking to the future, however, it is difficult to be so sanguine. Planned Falklands costs are reported as £552 million in 1985/86, £450 million in 1986/87 and £300 million in 1987/88. This includes replacements for war losses and capital

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(1) A full list of additions to the Defence Programme since the June 1981 Defence Review is at Appendix A, with the Falklands supplement shown separately.

costs of the garrison including the full cost of the airfield.

Garrison running costs account for only £135 million a year and even if an early decision were taken to allow the garrison to be run down to token size arguably only this component would be saved – and since it forms part of the “Falklands supplement” in theory it would not be available for general defence purposes anyway. But this will be a time of stringency quite unlike the halcyon days of 1979/80 to 1985/86, because from this point on the regime of 3% a year real growth is being succeeded by an indefinite period of “level funding”. What this means was spelled out in illustrative form by the then Chief of Defence Staff, Field Marshal Sir Edwin Bramall, in his evidence to the Defence Committee on 6 February 1985. He forecast an effective reduction of up to 4% a year in the volume of defence expenditure. This would be likely to mean foregoing, in part at least, some capability such as amphibious lift, smaller purchases of ammunition and fuel, the curtailment of exercises, slower replacement of damaged ships and aircraft, fewer mine countermeasure vessels. The cumulative effect of such measures upon British commitments to NATO, if carried on over a number of years, will be serious. The case for looking at savings elsewhere within the defence area is strong, and Falklands expenditure in that respect becomes a prime candidate.

The wider strategic implications are also worth a moment’s thought. Hope of major oil exploration in the South Atlantic have been relegated to a distant future. Economic development of the islands is likely to be limited and gradual – not least for the islanders’ sake. The islands’ most obvious economic value is as gateway to the British Antarctic Territory – a long shot indeed. A new military perspective could emerge, as Lord Buxton has pointed out, if the Panama Canal were ever closed, and shipping forced round Cape Horn, while the Falklands airfield as a base for maritime reconnaissance aircraft (Nimrod) opens up a vast area of ocean to surveillance.

But these are somewhat distant and putative advantages from which one might argue a strong NATO case for the British Falklands commitment. As Amos Jordan has said “Soviet achievement of global projection capabilities increases the risk that a regional conflict could escalate to a global one. A commitment of military forces by one or more NATO states out-of-area thus risks increasing the danger of Warsaw Pact–NATO conflict, even as it diminishes defence capabilities in the NATO area”. As to the latter point, Admiral Wesley L. McDonald, Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, has stated in terms “Across the board, SACLANT is currently about 50% short of requirements. The worst shortages are in modern destroyers, frigates, nuclear and diesel attack submarines, maritime patrol aircraft and assets used in mine warfare.” When the British naval presence in the South Atlantic is set against that inventory the conclusion is obvious.

So here is a dispute screaming for a solution. Both sides are being driven by it into forms of military investment which are needed, almost desperately, for other purposes. The political stakes are high. On the Argentinian side there is need to devise safeguards that will provide for all the misgivings felt by the islanders – ten times



the more since they were invaded. On the British side there is need to defer to Dr. Johnson's principle that the "question of right" is not worth a war. There remain three military hangovers from empire all due for settlement: Gibraltar, Hong Kong and Falkland Islands. A bargain has been struck in Hong Kong effective twelve years hence. In the Falklands we may not have so long. Mr. Geoffrey Gibson, living in Argentina, who describes himself as a fourth generation *estanciero*, wrote to *The World Today* (February 1983) "It is equally obvious today that hostilities will be renewed within a decade, even with the present high level of military deterrence... The stock phrases about time healing and waiting for passions to cool should not give the ostrich an excuse to keep his head buried in the sand until struck at its other end by a French missile". If this were indeed the outcome it would be an indictment of a whole political sub-culture; and not only a Foreign Secretary alone who should resign.

### Appendix A

#### Major additions to the Defence Programme since Cmnd 8288

	<u>Cost (£m)</u>
Trident programme changes (D5, improved submarine, King's Bay processing)	700
Polaris remotoring	400
Additional Type 22	145
Retention of HMS INVINCIBLE	30 pa
Operating more destroyers/frigates	26 pa
Fitting close-in weapon systems to HM Ships	200
Additional Sea King V and Sea Harriers	131
Retention of HMS FEARLESS and HMS INTREPID	16 pa
AEW equipment for 2 Sea King Flights	28
Formation of Fifth Challenger regiment	97
Additional Rapier	80
Enhancement to war maintenance reserves for out of area operations	15
Purchase of Phantom F4J	109
Additional Chinook	18
Additional Sea King SAR	10
Additional Service manpower	40-50 pa
Slow down Tornado deliveries	*
Additional Tristars	123

This is in addition to the following items which are attributed to the "Falklands Supplement", the costs of which, so long as the supplement is separately funded, will not fall upon the defence budget:-

	<u>Cost £(m)</u>
<i>Replacement equipment</i>	
4 Type 22s (this includes the cost of running on ships to maintain numbers during construction period)	705
Equipping and fitting of 4 Type 22s	132
Logistic landing ships	46
Aircraft (fixed wing and helicopters)	108
Weapons and ammunition stores	53
Other items (spares, support, etc.)	128
 <i>Garrison</i>	
Running costs	about 150 pa
Falklands Airfield	215
Other works (including Ascension)	175-200
Equipment (including Tristars)	265

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*The views expressed in South Atlantic Council Occasional Papers are those of the author and are not necessarily shared by all members of the Council.*

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