

HISTORY REPEATING..



Port Stanley [Photo: Falkland Islands Government]

THE FALKLANDS AT RISK AGAIN



A DISCUSSION PAPER FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM NATIONAL DEFENCE ASSOCIATION

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Why does Argentina covet the Falklands?

In 1995 Argentina officially renounced the military option for recapturing 'Las Malvinas', yet Argentine military planners still repeatedly plan how to seize the Falkland Islands by force. The attraction of oil, fisheries and minerals is obviously a very strong influence, and it should not be forgotten that Britain's South Atlantic and Antarctic interests include South Georgia, South Sandwich Islands and some 14% of Antarctica. All are managed from Stanley in the Falkland Islands.

According to latest estimates, "Oil explorers are targeting 8.3 billion barrels in the waters around the islands this year, three times the UK's reserves."¹ Meanwhile, Argentina, though an oil producer² with similar reserves to those of the UK, and currently self-sufficient in oil, is having to import increasing quantities as the economy rebounds and the small wells dry up.

The Falkland Islands cover an area about the same size as Northern Ireland but with a heavily indented coastline that cannot be closely watched by either the islanders or the small number of troops protecting Mount Pleasant airfield. Communications are poor despite roads being built on East Falkland. Guarding all this is a monumental task. Visiting yachts are common and have in the past raised concerns at their possibility of being clandestine 'special forces'. The islands have a small patrol and protection vessel supported by reconnaissance aircraft and an occasional visiting frigate or destroyer, but this is insufficient to monitor closely the entire coastline.

In looking at Argentine and UK military capabilities it is vital to compare forces available in theatre. Most of the British armed forces could *not* be deployed in time, whilst Argentina, now at peace with her neighbours, could field almost the entirety of her forces. One should furthermore assume that any Argentine operation would be pre-planned, allowing time for aircraft and ships in deep maintenance to be brought up to full war-fighting capability.

Is an Argentine attack feasible?

The distance from Argentina to the Falklands is 360nm, or one hour's flying time. The distance from the UK to the Falklands is 8,000nm, or over 16 hours' flying time. While some 747 or A-340 transport aircraft could make the flight from UK to the Falklands non-stop in 16 hours, for most military transport (e.g. C-17s) the journey would take closer to 24 hours, allowing for a re-fuelling stop, and loading and unloading. Similarly, acknowledging the paucity of air-to-air re-fuelling, the practical maximum fighter reinforcement rate would be two fighters every 24 hours.

Though reduced from its 1982 levels, Argentine air power remain potent; for example the Exocet threat against shipping remains, the missile being deployed not only on Super Etendards but now on virtually all major surface

¹ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-01-19/britain-s-oil-grab-in-falkland-islands-seen-tripling-u-k-reserves-energy.html>

² <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ar.html>

ships as well. On paper Argentina has 53 fast jets available³ but a more realistic estimate would probably envisage them operating 35-40 against the Falklands.

It would be unrealistic to believe that Argentine aircraft would only have 'dumb' bombs; with US exports to countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE and with regional powers such as Brazil developing precision weapons, it would be foolish for Argentina to embark on any action against the Falklands without precision weaponry. Allowing for the distances involved, and the need for air-to-air re-fuelling, one should assume one Argentine attack – or 35 aircraft – per day. In parallel, Argentine Special Forces would likely also be targeted against air assets on the ground.



Government House, Port Stanley [Photo: Falkland Islands Government]

Could British forces beat off an Argentine invasion?

Britain's current response is just four Typhoons, a Type-45 Destroyer, and Rapier Short Range missiles around Mount Pleasant airfield. These are complemented by a Command and Control system based on two mountain radars on West Falklands and another near Port Stanley. These provide coverage out to 200nm for high flying aircraft and, from the mountaintops, out to 70nm all around the islands.

Mount Pleasant Airfield is the centre of gravity for British operations; not just the greatest asset – enabling all reinforcement flows – it is also the greatest vulnerability. Were this airfield to be denied, even temporarily, the effect on British reinforcement would be catastrophic.

The UK never announces what forces are kept at which readiness for reinforcement. But, in even the most favourable circumstances, with troops and C-17 readily available, the deployment of additional fighters and a reasonable war-fighting force would take approximately a week. In effect, this means that the British garrison would necessarily have to hold Mount Pleasant airfield and its environs for a week before help arrived. To this one has to add the delays for political decision-making.

The paradox is that the Royal Marines and the British Army are today far better equipped, better trained, and more battle-experienced than they were in 1982 – thanks of course to years of fighting in Iraq and especially Afghanistan.

Despite current commitments, the two best brigades in the UK's armed forces, the 3rd Commando Brigade Royal Marines and 16th Air Assault Brigade, are both available for deployment. Neither formation is due to deploy to Afghanistan in the foreseeable future, although individual units may. The readiness and competence of these brigades, along with Special Forces, and other parts of the UK land forces is not an issue.

Once in the Falklands, they would have even less trouble defeating an Argentine invader, than we did in 1982. The problem would be **getting them there**.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argentine_Air_Force

Could we retake the islands if they fell?

If Mount Pleasant air base fell into Argentine hands, the Typhoons currently stationed there could either be destroyed on the ground, or having launched be unable to land back at Mount Pleasant (in the latter event, the pilots would have to eject to be taken prisoner). With no airfield, any form of air-lifted attempt at recovering them would be impossible. So the only way to take the islands back would be an amphibious assault as in 1982. This would require amphibious shipping and air cover. Thanks to the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) the UK's amphibious capability has been reduced from a brigade size to a commando group size lift.

In 1982, using two brigades, the liberation required 112 ships of which 43 were Merchant Navy, 25 Royal Fleet Auxiliary, and 44 Royal Navy - a number we could not contemplate raising now. Not only have the Merchant Fleet been largely flagged out to foreign nations but few merchant vessels are manned by Britons - and in '82 many British merchant seamen were fortunately also in the Royal Naval Reserve.

Since the 1980s both the RFA and RN fleets have been hugely reduced. While an amphibious assault capability has just survived, the loss of an aircraft carrier able to protect the ships and troops makes any opposed landing extremely vulnerable. Certainly technology has advanced and ships like the Type 45 Daring class are excellent air defence platforms, but there are too few of them.

There would be no fighter cover for the landing force and shipping. There is no carrier. Had the Sea Harriers been retained, it is just possible that they could have been taken south in the carrier HMS *Illustrious*. There is no question of providing air support using RAF fighters. There are no bases within range. In-flight re-fuelling, given the number of re-fuels required for a round trip of 8,000 miles from Ascension, would be impossible in the face of the threat posed by the Argentine Air Force, notwithstanding its poor quality.

In conclusion, were Argentina to mount an invasion of the Falklands, the UK would be hard put to protect, reinforce or retake the islands. A quarter of a century on from the Galtieri regime's seizure of 'Las Malvinas', history could well be about repeat itself – but this time with a different outcome.

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