

# Asymmetric Conflict in the International Relations of the XX<sup>th</sup> Century

## Case Study: Argentinean Invasion of the Falkland Islands

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“*My Argentinean colleague and I could debate endlessly on the goods and evils of history, and I doubt that we could ever agree on them*”<sup>1</sup>. It's more than a quarter of a century since Sir. Anthony Parson, the British representative of the UN, has said these words, on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982, within the highest institution of the United Nations – the Security Council. On the next day, the conflict between the United Kingdom and Argentina burst. Falkland was a reference point in the history of post-war international relations, both through the evolution of military force and through the political significance of the dispute. Therefore, a re-evaluation of the events from the South Atlantic, happened 25 years ago, is very necessary from the perspective of the conflict's consequences and represents a small homage brought to the participants at this forgotten war.

The concept of asymmetric conflict is a very interesting one, for that part of the academic community who studies international relations, leading to a series of debates and controversies around it, in time. This study has been inspired by a publication signed by T.V. Paul<sup>2</sup>, a professor at the Department of Political Sciences of the *McGill University*, and it is a short assertion and extension of those mentioned by that researcher in his work.

According to T.V. Paul, this concept starts from the hypothesis that various nations confront with more powerful states, in

divergent matters, due to the sensation of the weaker state that, by declaring war, may solve the dispute in its favour. Consequently, the asymmetric conflicts appear due to some factors, such as sudden changes in the internal political environment, the strategic calculations of the war-makers, a presumed relation of alliance between the weak state and a big power or the rapid changes in offensive/defensive capacities<sup>3</sup>. In case of Argentinean invasion, the sudden changes from the internal political environment were critical in making the decision of invading the islands, because, through the access at power of the military Junta, the change of decision was influenced, at political level, in favour of the intervention in the archipelago. As regards the strategic calculation of the worriers, the “*fait accompli*” strategy plays an essential role. When the objective is a limited one, such as the transfer of sovereignty of the archipelago from a country to another, usually, the initiator of an asymmetric conflict approaches a rapid offensive, followed by a defensive one. It is strange that, in case of Argentina, this one did not expect for the United Kingdom to use military action to recover the islands. As regards the assumed relation of alliance between the weak and strong state, Buenos Aires waited and wished at least a diplomatic support from the United States as regards their gesture, this factor becoming essential when one confronts with a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. Shouldn't the

Argentinean Government have over-appreciated the American support, it "almost surely" hadn't started the conflict. If the changes were analyzed, at the level of the offensive and defensive capacities of the belligerents in this case, the following should be noticed, as T.V. Paul says, that, as regards the challenger's decision to use armed force, this depends a lot on adopting in its strategy limited objectives, which could determine a limited war "with a small theatre of operations". Besides, the initiator of such conflict must take into account the defender's percentage of disinterest in making a war, which the Argentinean factor could not properly appreciate<sup>4</sup>.

The Falkland Islands, placed in the South Atlantic Ocean, at about 500 km from the coast of Argentina and at 13,000 km. from the United Kingdom, were named after the British Marine Treasury keeper, Viscount Falkland, by the first European whose disembarking in the archipelago is officially mentioned – the English captain John Strong (1690). These contain two main islands, West Falkland and East Falkland, the latter hosting the capital, Port Stanley, and 200 small islands, among which South Georgia and South Sandwich, which do not belong to the archipelago, but depend on this.

It is not our intention to refer to the rich colonial past of the islands, but we must mention a few aspects. Discovered, seemingly, at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, by the Dutch<sup>5</sup>, the islands, which later on will be called Falkland, were a subject of dispute during the whole 18<sup>th</sup> century, between Spain, France and United Kingdom. From the proofs regarding the discovery and colonial evolution of the archipelago, from the perspective of the juridical dispute regarding the sovereignty over the archipelago of either Argentina or United Kingdom, we may conclude that these proofs are incomplete and incoherent, deepening the vague character of the claims of both sides, with realistic arguments. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Argentina's gaining

independence, in disfavour of Spain, the former claimed the islands, based on the succession right received from the Spaniards. Despite all these, in 1833, the Falkland Islands entered in the possession of the United Kingdom, being peopled by the Anglo-Saxon colonialists, and London had continuous 150-year sovereignty until the moment of Argentinean invasion, on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1982.

After World War II, both nations entered the UN as members with full powers and obligations, thus accepting, according to art. 2, par. 3 from the Charta, to solve any international dispute, using "peaceful means" without violence. When this matter was brought in front of the U.N. by Argentina, United Kingdom mentioned that the islanders were direct descendents of the British colonists, who benefited of the right to self-determination that they did not exercise, because they wished to maintain the political relation with the metropolis. In exchange, Argentina claimed that the archipelago was one of the latest remainings of the European colonialism in Latin America and that the principle of self-determination did not have any relevance, due to the artificially maintained British character of the population of islands.

The negotiations, which started in 1965, did not reach any result, because neither party ceased in defending their position with solid arguments. According to some of these assertions, the change occurred in the international statute of the islands, after 1833, was a significant one. From the British point of view, the sovereignty title was transferred to the United Kingdom, because this one conquered the islands and thus exercised its sovereignty on them. Also, the ambiguous control of Argentina on the islands, turned into penitentiary colony in 1832, and the United States' claims on the fishing rights from that area, offered London the possibility to claim them. The British right on the Falkland Islands is not well justified by the first geographic discovery or by their first occupation, but the United Kingdom could

claim that, since 1833, it has had a more important role in the islands, coming from their continuous administration. On the other side, Argentina has never accepted a transfer of sovereignty as regards the islands (as Spain did in case of Gibraltar), frequently protesting against the "*British usurpation*", so that the Argentinean possession title on the islands, from Buenos Aires' point of view, remained as infallible in 1982 as in 1833, mainly because the British have not claimed the islands based on the legal principle "*terra nulla*"<sup>6</sup>. If, from the point of view of the international relations, the sovereignty dispute between Buenos Aires and London could be compared to the dispute between Japan and Russian Federation regarding the sovereignty over the Kurile archipelago from the Far East, the Argentinean attempt to recover the Falkland Islands by force makes these two situations clearly different.

Another Argentinean argument is the one according to which, from the point of view of the international law, the islands were not literally conquered, because the United Kingdom did not declare a war to Argentina, and the latter did not disappear as political-military entity neither on the moment of 1833 incidents, nor later. Thus, it appeared the idea, from the Argentinean point of view, that the islands could not be conquered because these two countries were not at war in 1833. In this context, Argentina has not officially recognized never the loss of archipelago. So, the conclusion is that the occupation of the islands and the settlement of the colonists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century granted to the United Kingdom the *de facto* control over this territory until 1982, whereas the Argentineans used their *de jure* historic claims and rights they had taken over from Spain, to explain the action they performed in April 1982, as an internal incident, without international involvement, though the standards in the domain, as regards the utilization of violence, considered it as a clear aggression.

The matter of claiming the Falkland Islands is a very complex one, from the prism

of the international law, being related to the right over the sea and that is why, our intention is not to get involved in this long debate regarding the dispute of the rights of exclusivity on the continental platform in the area. Still, a few elements need to be presented from this point of view. In the first place, we notice that the Argentina's unjustified claims towards the United Kingdom regard the much more extended issue of theirs and Chile's requests, regarding the British area from Antarctica, as well as of the dispute between these two South-American nations, regarding the sovereignty over the *Beagle Channel*. Also, we have to mention that, as years go by, within the negotiation rounds, the British side has seen in the subject of the dispute a peripheral importance to them. In conclusion, the sense of islanders in Falkland has become more acute, as regards their "*abandonment*" by London. In parallel, Argentina's claims have become more acute also due to the military dictatorships which have led the country, since 1976, having the intention to detour the attention of the traumatized population from the horrors of the regime, regaining thus its trust with nationalist theses and slogans. Thus, the attempt of the Buenos Aires regime to gain the sovereignty over three small islands, at south of *Tierra del Fuego*, in disfavour of Chile, ended dreadfully in 1977-1978, when the arbitration of the International Court of Justice considered Chile as winner, in the "*dispute over the Beagle Channel*", causing tension between the two South-American states.<sup>7</sup> Freezing the dispute with Chile has led to the reorientation of the Argentinean military government towards East, towards another objective of foreign politics, in view to distract its own population's attention from the difficult domestic economic situation: to recover the Falkland / Malvinas Islands.

From the perspective of the international law, the concept of asymmetric conflict finds a strong support in the theory of Nigel Purvis, who specified that: "...at an elementary level, the sovereigns may seem to take seriously the

property to get engaged in the legal international discourse when they seek to solve their international problems"<sup>8</sup>. This interesting theory affirms that, usually, the international actors use the international right to claim their position in terms of possession of some legal rights. Thus, when a nation decides to use armed force to recover/gain a territory, this will represent its claim, invariably, in terms of international law. In this context, Purvis's theory fits the Falkland conflict.

The perception of the conservatory government from London, according to which the archipelago had a peripheral importance, has led to the acceptance of some budgetary decreases in defence, which materialized in the South Atlantic in withdrawing the only British military ship which activated in that area (HMS Endurance). This has made the Argentinean traders rise the Argentinean flag on the South Georgia Island, placed at South-East of Falkland, in March 1982; the British army chased them away. Initially, the Argentinean Government took into account a possible military action for the most favourable period, meaning the end of the year, but the events from South Georgia, between March 19<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, advanced the project. Subsequent to this incident, on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Argentinean military forces debarked in Falkland and faced the strong resistance of the small British garrison around the British governor's residence, Rex Hunt. The "Rosario" operation continued on the next day with the invasion and occupation of the South Georgia and South Sandwich islands. The London's reaction came immediately and, on the same day, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher, declared in the House of Commons the following: "*I must say to the House that the Falklands and their dependences remain a British territory. No aggression and no invasion can affect this simple fact. The Government's objective is for the islanders to be released from occupation and to return under British administration as soon as possible.*"<sup>9</sup>

A War Cabinet led by the "Iron Lady" was founded within the British Government, which would manage the actions related to the "Corporate" operation, aiming at the recovery of the islands. A series of factors concurred to the efficient transit of the British Expeditionary Force from the British harbours to the South Atlantic. One of these elements is mentioned by Admiral Sandy Woodward, the commander of the Corporate operation, who, in his notes, specified the logistic importance of the United States' support, mainly through the agency of the Secretary of Defence – Caspar Weinberger, used by the British to operate the facilities of the American military equipment from Ascension island, placed in the middle of Atlantic Ocean. This island is part of the dependences of St. Helen Island, colony of the United Kingdom.

In the spring of 1982, the United States were in a delicate position, from the point of view of the international relations, because the American decision factors were aware that they were in the situation of choosing between their traditional ally and a political regime which, no matter how appalling, was a strong supporter of the politics of containment communism in Latin America, practiced by Washington. Firmly attached to the values guiding the international law, America could not agree with an encroachment upon the principles mentioned in the *U.N. Charta*, according to which, a territory could not be taken with force by any state. The United States took a position of neutrality, benevolent to the United Kingdom, and the collaboration between these two nations was discretely, almost clandestinely, performed. However, at official level, the United States and other Latin-American states tried to mediate the conflict from a distant position to both parties. However, "...if the Argentine Junta ... not had such a bad reputation for human rights violations..." maybe United States had sustain the Argentinean cause.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to specify, from the perspective of the international relations, the fact that neither party declared war to the

other, mainly due to the restrictions imposed by the U.N. Charter, and the military hostilities had a limited character. We can assert that art. 2, par. 3, but, more specifically, par. 4 from the U.N. Charter, practically remove from the international law the possibility for a member state to use war in order to solve its international disputes. In 1833, when the United Kingdom took over the archipelago, no war was declared between it and the United Provinces (Argentina), thing that supports the Buenos Aires's thesis according to which, the Great Britain was, in 1982, illegally in the possession of an Argentinean national territory, upon which Argentina claimed sovereignty. The belligerent intentions of the Great Britain were emphasized in the declaration of an *Area of Maritime Exclusion*, and, after April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1982, of an *Area of Total Exclusion* around the islands.

It is not our intention to make a detailed presentation of the conflict's dynamics, but few elements should be reminded. On April 25<sup>th</sup>, the Great Britain obtained a first military success, recovering the South Georgia Island. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, fights continued on sea, having as purpose the creation of a diversion, able to allow the infiltration of the commando troops in the archipelago. Observation posts were placed by the British around the most important localities from the islands, but a crucial signification belonged to an observation post placed by S.A.S. members in Chile. The need for the Sea Harrier planes to receive a warning in due time required this action. Rumours were that the American satellites supplied information to the British, but the truth was that the observation post was monitoring the take-offs of the Argentinean planes and was transmitting useful information to the British fleet, in real time, through a latest-generation equipment. Even in these conditions, the British lost many planes, but the actions of S.A.S., which avoided capturing, reduced a lot the number of losses. Later on, when General Augusto Pinochet, Chile's leader, was held in London, under the accusation of genocide, he was

visited by Margaret Thatcher. The British specialists considered that the *Iron Lady* remained deeply grateful to the Chilean dictator, for the support offered by to the Great Britain in the Falkland Islands war.

On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1982, the Argentinean battle cruiser *General Belgrano* was hulled and sunk by the British nuclear submarine *Conqueror*. Over 370 Argentinean soldiers lost their lives and the immediate consequence of this tragic event was the withdrawal of the Argentinean military marine in harbours. The withdrawal of the Argentinean military marine in its territorial waters meant also the decrease of danger represented by the Argentinean carrier *25 Mayo* for the British fleet. Two days later, in reply, two Argentinean Super Edendard planes hit with Exocet anti-ship missiles and sunk the destroyer *HMS Sheffield*, causing the death of 20 soldiers and the wounding of other 24 soldiers, this being the first military conflict in which such type of weapon was used. Some historians claimed that the attack had caused the withdrawal of the British carrier groups to the East of the archipelago, thus weakening the air defensive of the forward ships, as well as of the debarked infantry. The conclusion is that, after May 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Argentinean air force was the only one opposing a real resistance to the British Expeditionary Force, the terrestrial troops being overwhelmed by the technical superiority, the professionalism and efficiency of the British adversaries, while the marine preferred to withdraw in harbours after the disaster of the cruiser *General Belgrano*.<sup>11</sup> On May 21<sup>st</sup>, the British troops debarked in Port San Carlos, on the main island of the archipelago. After fixing a bridgehead at San Carlos, the British army went to the capital, but, because their advancement was threatened by the presence of the Argentinean troops around the location at Goose Green, in the south of the island, they focused to that direction. Here, in the night of May 28<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>, 1982, a long nocturnal fight took place, when the members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion of the parachutist regiment defeated a net superior

Argentinean force, and, later on, the British resumed their march to Port Stanley. The Argentineans withdrew in the mountains of the island, where they opposed resistance, mainly around Kent' Mountain, but the strongest region fortified by the Argentineans was the one around Longdon Mountain and Two Sisters, where the British troops had the most violent confrontations, in the night of June 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>. On June 14<sup>th</sup>, the Argentinean aviation recorded the greatest loss, and the situation for the Argentinean terrestrial troops was at a dead end, because the British troops were supervising Port Stanley from the heights around the capital. In this context, the commander of the Argentinean troops camped in Islas Malvinas, *gen. Mario Menendez*, surrendered with all the subordinated troops, in the evening of June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1982. The Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, received the following message: "*The Commander of the Terrestrial Forces from the Falkland Islands, Port Stanley. In Port Stanley, at 9.00 PM local time, on June 14<sup>th</sup>, the general major Menendez surrendered with all the Argentinean armed forces from East and West Falkland, with all the weapons. Preparations are made for the people to return to Argentina and to collect all weapons and equipment. The Falkland Islands are again under the government wished by their inhabitants. May God protect the Queen. (signed) J.J. Moore*"<sup>12</sup>.

The political consequences of the Falkland war appeared immediately. Three days after the surrender, *lieutenant-general Leopoldo Galtier*, the supreme commander of the Junta,

was released from the position of President of the country, opening the way to instituting a democratic regime in Argentina. The conservatory Margaret Thatcher took advantages from the patriotic emergence started by the conflict among the British, assuring thus a huge electoral victory and her re-election as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. After the conflict, Argentina repeated its claims, declaring its wish to achieve them, exclusively by peaceful means. Many years have passed since the conflict, and the diplomatic relations between London and Buenos Aires were resumed only in 1990<sup>13</sup>. Until 1993, the only contacts these two countries had were limited to international sportive contests, the resentments continuing on both sides. For example, at the World's Football Championship in Mexico, in 1986, these two nations met in a game from the superior level of the competition, game won by Argentina, trough a goal marked by Armando Diego Maradona, by hand. The Argentinean football player claimed that it was "*God's hand*", a clear allusion to a possible divine punishment and revenge of the Argentineans. The British did not hesitate to call Maradona a cheater. In 1993, the British foreign affair Minister, Douglas Hurd, was the first member of a British cabinet who visited Argentina officially, since the end of the war. It was only in August 2001, 19 years after the conflict, when Tony Blair was the first Prime Minister to visit Argentina, which was in full economic crisis, thus putting an end to a period of avoidance and susceptibilities at diplomatic level.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> His Majesty's Stationary Office, *Britain and the Falkland Crisis: a Documentary Record*, London, 1982, p. 24, *Apud*. Peter Beck, *The Falkland Islands as an international problem*, London, New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> T.V. Paul, *Asymmetric conflicts: war initiation by weaker powers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> *Idibem*, p. 3-15, T.V, Paul gives samples of asymmetric conflicts: Japanese attack on the United States naval base from Pearl Harbour, 1941; the war of Yom Kippur between Egypt and Israel, 1973; the Pakistani offensive in Kashmir, 1965; and others...

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 167-179.

<sup>5</sup> It seems that the Dutchman Sebald van Weerdt was the first European who came to these islands.

<sup>6</sup> The principle of international right which signifies: "territory that does not belong to any state".

<sup>7</sup> Adrew Boyd, *An Atlas of World Affairs*, London and New York, Routledge, tenth edition, 1998, p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> Study of Nigel Purvis, *Critical Legal Studies in Public International Law*, no. 32, in Anthony Clark Arend, *Legal Rules and International Society*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, London, Harper Collins Publishers, 1993, p. 183.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Carlton, *The little platoon: diplomacy and the Falklands dispute*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989 *Apud* International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944 -), vol. 66, no. 3. (July 1990), pp. 647/648  
<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0020-5850%28199007%2966%3A3%3C647%3ATFFT%27T%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O>

<sup>11</sup> Marin Middlebrook, *The fight for the "Malvinas": the Argentinian forces in the Falkland War*, London, Viking, 1989. *Apud* International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944), vol. 66, no. 3. (July 1990), pp. 647/648

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<sup>12</sup> Rodney A. Burden, Michael I. Draper, Douglas A. Rought, *Falkland – the Air War*, London, Arms and Armour Press, 1987, p. 478.

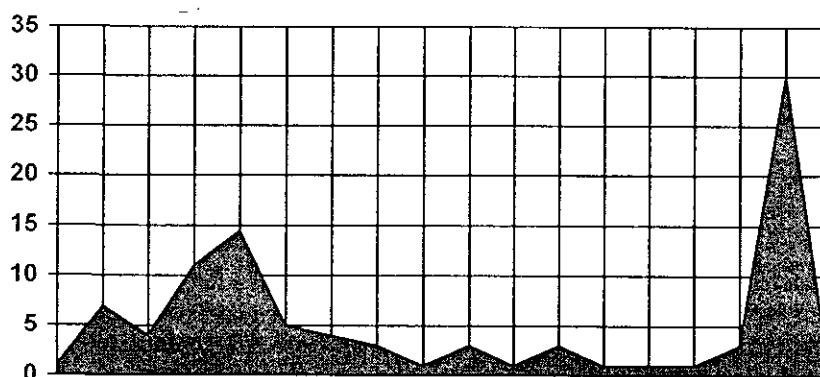
<sup>13</sup> Adrew Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>14</sup> Source: Rodney A. Burden, Michael I. Draper, Douglas A. Rough, *op. cit.*, 1987.

## Annexe

### Losses of argentinean air force during the Falkland War

2 April – 15 June 1982.<sup>1</sup>



2.IV.

21.V.

28.V.

14.VI.82'

April 2<sup>nd</sup> – the war starts.

May 21<sup>st</sup> – the British troops debarked in Port San Carlos.

May 28<sup>th</sup> – the fights around location at Goose Green.

June 14<sup>th</sup> – the second attack of British troops against the argentinean pozitions around Port Stanley.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Rodney A. Burden, Michael I. Draper, Douglas A. Rough, *op. cit.*, 1987.