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The Falklands War – Did War prove to be a Successful Means of Achieving Political Objectives?

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The question is based on the thinking of Clausewitz, who wrote, that «… war is merely the continuation of policy by other means».[1] This statement today still has its relevance. Most democratic nations have their own Armed Forces as one instrument of a credible security policy supporting their strategic objectives. The article examines - from the perspectives of the United Kingdom (UK) and Argentina – whether war did prove to be a successful mean of achieving political objectives. It explains the political objectives of both opponents and then describes how and why they were achieved. It concludes by showing the relevant consequences for UK and Argentina.

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What happened in 1982?

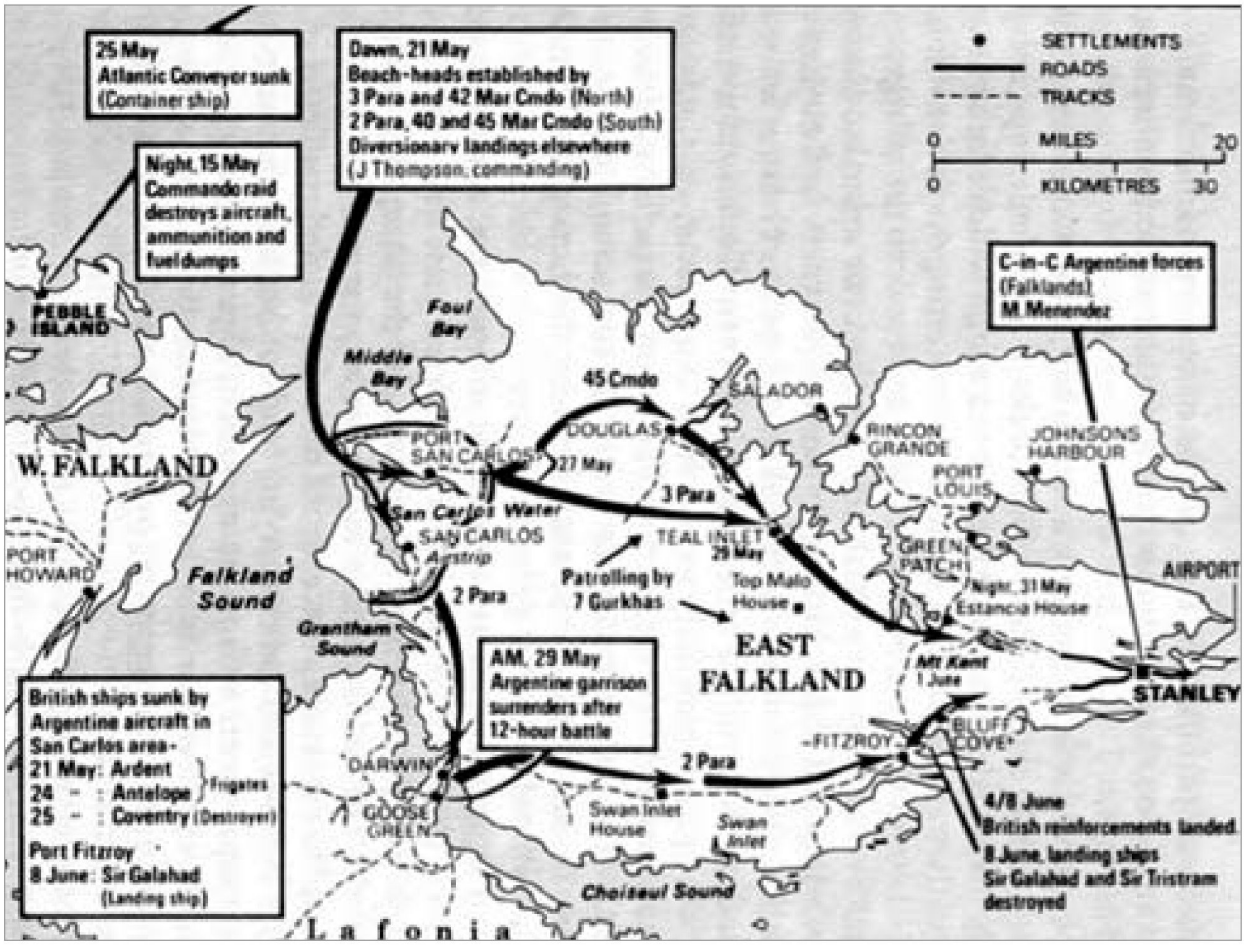
The Falklands War between March and June 1982 was the culmination of a long-standing dispute over sovereignty of the Falkland Islands between UK and Argentina. It is an example of the decisive and successful use of force to directly achieve the strategic objective.[2] The war was caused by political miscalculation and miscommunication as well as failed diplomacy and the breakdown of deterrence.[3] Though initially surprised by the Argentine invasion and occupation of the islands in the South Atlantic, the UK deployed a large Naval Task Force to engage the Argentine Navy and Air Force. It regained the islands by an amphibious assault. Following a series of battles, the Falklands were retaken and remain under British control up to this day.

> The war was caused by political miscalculation and miscommunication as well as by failed diplomacy and the breakdown of deterrence.

The assessment of the prosecution and the utility of war proves that Argentina failed in its efforts to gain sovereignty over the Falkland Islands. It didn't achieve any of its political short and long term objectives. It succeeded in surprising its enemy, but failed to exploit the momentum and realized too late the will and the capabilities of the UK to fight. As a consequence, the military Junta headed by President General Leopoldo Galtieri was replaced by an elected civilian government. On the other hand, war proved to be a successful option for the UK. It achieved all political short and long term objectives. It did fight a decisive operational battle, "… a struggle for a real victory, waged with all available strength".[4] The Royal Navy regained its stature in the eyes of the British political leadership. The internal and external effects of the war were strong in both countries.

The Argentine Invasion – Consequence of Economic Failure?

At the beginning of the eighties, Argentina was in the midst of a devastating economic crisis.[5] The regime had failed in its plan to reorganise the society. There was a great civil unrest against the military Junta. The grievance about the loss of the Falklands was centuries old and 'the invasion was a diplomatic inevitability'[6]. Thus, the political long term objective was the interruption of British rule and in order to gain sovereignty over the Falklands. Argentina pursued a course which targeted the Falkland question as an international "decolonisation issue and that the controlling norm was a territorial integrity".[7] The political short term objective was to reclaim the islands if ever possible through diplomacy.[8] The purpose of the quick and easy invasion first of South Georgia, then of the Falklands was not to initiate a war, but merely to force UK into continued negotiations about the transfer of sovereignty of the islands.[9] Argentina endeavoured effective control of the islands with an interim administration, freedom of access and a settlement formula which would result in sovereignty. However, it can be also argued that the invasion's aim was to distract domestic attention away from the declining economic conditions and the failing of national reorganisation and to focus on issues of national pride and unity.[10]



[1]

The British Principle of Credibility

For the UK, the war was a tool of rational security policy, it fought a national war over universal issues. For the British Government and its Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher the decision to go to war was basically a question of principle, particularly a general principle of credibility.[11] Thus the political long term objective was to defend and claim British interests. It had less to do with the Falklands, in which UK had had no great interest over the last twenty years.[12] The real national interests were rather rooted in wider considerations.

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[1] von Clausewitz, Carl (1976), On War, translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Guildford: Princeton University Press), p. 87
[2] Joint Operations (2004), Joint Doctrine Publication 01, Ministry of Defence (London: The Stationary Office), pp. 2-4
[3] Train, Harry D. (1988), 'An Analysis of the Falkland Islands Campaign', Naval War College Review (Newport: Naval War College), pp. 33-50
[4] von Clausewitz (1976), p. 248
[5] The economy had been collapsing since the end of 1979.
[6] Kinney, Douglas (1985), 'Anglo-Argentinian Diplomacy and the Falklands Crisis' in Alberto Coll and Anthony C. Arend eds., The Falklands War: Lessons for Strategy, Diplomacy and International Law, (London: George Allen & Unwin), p. 87
[7] Kinney (1985), pp. 88-89
[8] McClure, Jason (2004), The Falklands War: Causes and Lessons, Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 11 (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School), p. 6
[9] McClure (2004), pp. 5-9
[10] McClure (2004), p. 5
[11] The Falklands War (1982/83), Strategic Survey (London: Brassey's for the International Institute for Strategic Studies), p. 119
[12] The Falklands War (1982/83), pp. 118-121

[1] General Overview of the Battle (Source: www.latinamericanstudies.org)

[2]

[3]

On the domestic side, the government wanted to reject the impression of being weak and irresolute in matters concerning the lives of its citizen. A weak government could hardly be expected to convince in political debates.[13] On the external side, the British government wanted to demonstrate national determination and thus deter other adventurers elsewhere. With the UK being a strong ally of the United States of America and an important member of NATO, an abandonment of the Falklands would have been a signal of weakness vis-à-vis the USSR, not just of a weak UK but also of a politically and militarily weak NATO alliance. In addition, the UK and Argentina had conflicting claims in Antarctica. Having not reacted at that time, would have undermined the British claims to share the future development of that continent.

The political short term objectives were the cease-fire and the withdrawal of the Argentinian forces from the Falklands and its dependencies. It wanted the restoration of British authority and desired a guarantee of local rights and institutions. The world community should accept that the invasion in the midst of negotiations was illegal and a breach of international law. For that purpose, the UK sought for third-party participation in the implementation of the settlement. At the same time it also intended to re-establish Argentine access to and communication with the islands at pre-conflict levels, as governed by the 1971 bilateral agreements. Finally, the UK planned an interim agreement which would not prejudge the final outcome of the negotiations about sovereignty.[14]

Each of the two opponents concluded that the other was not really prepared to go to war.

Political Miscalculation

"When guns speak and blood flows, we have failed in our pursuit of the first and foremost political objective assigned to armed forces: that of deterring war."[15] Political miscalculation and miscommunication as well as failed diplomacy coupled with the breakdown of deterrence led to war.[16] Each of the two opponents concluded that the other was not really prepared to go to war.[17] "Seventeen years of British diplomacy unsupported by either military force or the political determination to settle a territorial question definitely had inevitably failed".[18] The British military presence in the Falklands was insufficient, at least after the military coup in 1976, in which Argentina's democratic government was ousted. In 1981, the British government had even planned a general downsizing of the fleet presence throughout British territory[19] and the Falkland Islanders were stripped of full citizenship rights by the British Nationality Act. With this, Great Britain was sending wrong signals to Argentina. Furthermore it was not aware of the fact, that the 150th anniversary of the British occupation of the islands resurfaced strong feelings in Argentina about this major territorial loss.[20]

Crisis Management Situation or War?

At U.N. headquarters in New York, Argentina exerted pressure by raising subtle hints of a possible invasion. But the British either missed or ignored this threat and did not react. The Argentines interpreted this lack of reaction as another disengagement from the Falklands. They assumed that the invasion would be quick and easy with no forceful reaction from the British government. At the very beginning of the war, Argentina had the operational advantage on its side. It succeeded in surprising its enemy and in demonstrating its strength of resolve. It practiced the "... best policy to take a state intact"[21] and did really «... attack the enemy's strategy".[22]

On the very beginning of the war, Argentina had the operational advantage on its side, succeeded in surprising its enemy and in demonstrating its strength of resolve.

[4]

Between the invasion on 2 April and the arrival of the British submarines, Argentina lost the momentum and thus the war.[23] The misjudgement of the British will to defend the islands by launching a full-scale counter-invasion operation proved as Argentina's biggest mistake. The Junta planned the invasion as a "touch and go" operation, intending to occupy the islands for a short period of time and thus forcing the British to the negotiation table.[24] The lack of a solid military plan to defend the islands and the surprise by the determination and size of the British reaction caused a number of non-deliberate decisions, one of which was the decision to reinforce – more or less improvised - their troops.[25] "Argentine leadership thought they were in a crisis management situation, while the British, on the other hand, believed they were at war. These disparate mind-sets dominated their respective decision-making process."[26] Once Argentina had dispatched troops to the Falklands, the Junta was unable to effectively participate in international mediation. This attitude ultimately led the British Government to engage in forceful ejection of the invading forces. Argentina failed to understand the unfavourable reaction of the international community, especially of the United States. Its position on the international stage was never as strong as the UK's. Hence, the Junta had no chance to force the UK to negotiations about the transfer of sovereignty, neither politically nor militarily. Its attempt to gain sovereignty over the Falklands was a failure. However, it was able to raise the question of sovereignty as an international issue. The UN recognized the need for decolonisation of the Falklands and supported a resumption of negotiations over sovereignty. As of 2009, Argentina still has not relinquished its claim to the Falkland Islands. There is very little chance to even get both sides to the negotiating table.

If the Argentine government ever hoped that the invasion and its failure could actually let the Argentine public forget about its domestic declining economic status or its repression, it proved to be wrong.[27] However, it seems that the invasion produced a temporary euphoria and some sort of pride and self-esteem among a large percentage of its population.[28] It certainly did produce a unifying effect and brought together a nation that was falling apart.[29] But it wouldn't last long.

[13] e.g. fishing disputes, budgetary debates and defence contributions
[14] Kinney (1985), p. 88
[15] Train (1988), p. 33
[16] Train (1988), p. 34
[17] The Falklands War (1982/83), p. 119
[18] Kinney (1985), p. 87
[19] HMS "Endurance" was relieved.
[20] McClure, Jason (2004), p. 6
[21] Sun Tzu (1993), The Art of War, translated by Yuan Shibling (Ware: Wordsworth Reference), p. 105
[22] Sun Tzu (1993), p. 105
[23] Train (1988), p. 38
[24] McClure (2004), pp. 1, 6
[25] Train (1988), p. 38
[26] Train (1988), p. 38
[27] McClure (2004), p. 7
[28] McClure (2004), p. 5
[29] McClure (2004), p. 7

[2] The destroyer HMS "Sheffield" was mortally hit on 4 May 1982 (Source: www.latinamericanstudies.org)
[3] Lt Col Andrew Whitehead, of 45 Commando, with his team at Mount Kent (Source: www.latinamericanstudies.org)
[4] Argentinian soldier captured during the battle of Goose Green (Source: www.latinamericanstudies.org)

[5]

[6]

With exception of the UN supporting the need of decolonisation of the Falklands, Argentina didn't achieve any of its political short nor long term objectives. In the aftermath of the conflict, Argentina stumbled into an economic and social chaos. General Galtieri and his military Junta were ousted. Democratic elections followed the year after.[30] It took Argentina more than ten years to recover.

British Response to the Territorial Invasion

The British government achieved all political short and long term objectives. It succeeded in justifying its actions on the basis of UN Resolution 502, which required withdrawal of forces, but also on the basis of Article 51 of the UN Charter which recognizes the "inherent right to self-defence". Thus, the international community, with the exception of most Latin American states and to some extent the Eastern bloc, accepted that the UK was the aggrieved party. Many countries imposed economic sanctions against Argentina. It was widely appreciated, that the UK applied all reasonable means to retrieve the islands – such as political isolation, economic sanctions, diplomatic mediation as well as military force. Unfortunately, only military force was capable of resolving the dispute. Whereas the UK demonstrated exceptional political, diplomatic and military skills in responding to the territorial invasion and continued in mediation efforts, only the capable military response was ultimately decisive. The quickly assembled armada was always a strong support of all preceding non-military solution efforts. The Falklands campaign was considered a great victory for the UK and had great political effects.

> Unfortunately only military force was capable of resolving the dispute.

On the domestic homefront, a wave of patriotic sentiment swept through the UK, supporting the popularity of the Tory government and of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It played an important role in ensuring her overwhelming re-election in 1983. It is not likely – as was often said – that Mrs Thatcher acted so determined and decisively because of the forthcoming elections. It was just her style and she had delivered everything she had always promised. There is no doubt that no British Government would have survived politically if it had not successfully done all what was necessary to recover the islands. Thanks to the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Henry Leach, the Royal Navy regained its significance and the planned cuts were amended. In the international context, it produced an increase in international respect for the UK, formerly regarded as a fading colonial power. The victory was closely watched and noticed by the USSR. It was an important junction in the Cold War.

The successful conduct of the war led to a cease-fire on 14 June 1982 and to the withdrawal of the Argentine forces from the Falklands. British authority was again fully restored. The victory enhanced UK's international standing and helped reassure all friends that the UK was a trustful and capable ally – should ever they require assistance and help.[31] Nonetheless, the war blocked further negotiations over the sovereignty of the Falklands.

Conclusion

The Falklands War was the culmination of a long-standing dispute over the sovereignty issue of the Falkland Islands. Both opponents failed to prevent a crisis and subsequently the war. They also failed to make progress in negotiations about the sovereignty of the Falklands. As of 2009, there is very little chance to even get to the negotiating table.

> The victory enhanced UK's international standing and served as a reassurance to allies and was an important junction in the Cold War.

Before 1982 the British military presence in the Falklands was insufficient and Argentina underestimated the British will to defend the islands. The assessment of the conduct and the utility of war indicate that Argentina – perhaps with the exception to raise sovereignty as an international issue – didn't

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achieve any of its political short and long term objectives. It failed to gain sovereignty over the Falkland Islands. Though, it succeeded in surprising the UK, it later failed to exploit the momentum and was not prepared to defend and hold the Falklands. After the war, the militarily Junta was replaced by an elected civilian government[32] and it took Argentina more than ten years to recover from the economic and social disaster. On the other hand, the war proved to be a success for the UK. It achieved all political short and long term objectives. In the eyes of the political leadership the Royal Navy regained its stature and credibility. The UK demonstrated exceptional political, diplomatic and military skills in responding to the territorial invasion. Simultaneously to mediation efforts, a powerful Naval Task Force was quickly prepared and deployed to a geographically remote area, more than 10'000 kilometers away from home where it launched a full-scale counter invasion.[33] This – by the way - also included a highly professional logistical master-piece. After an amphibious assault and a series of battles, also involving numerous Army and Royal Air Force units, the Falklands were recovered and remain under British control up to this day.

[30] McClure (2004), p. 1
[31] Freeman, Lawrence (1988), 'Was it Worth it?', Britain and the Falklands War (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), pp. 109-110
[32] Train (1988), p. 49
[33] Joint Operations (2004), pp. 2-7

[5] Maj Gen David Thorne, Commander British Forces Falkland Islands, with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher during her visit in January 1983 (Source: www.latinamericanstudies.org)

[6] A para of 2nd Para Battalion in a firing position at San Carlos Bay in the Falklands, securing a bridge-head (Royal Navy Photo/Collection: Kürsener).

[7] The aircraft-carrier HMS 'Hermes' departs Portsmouth in 1982 heading towards the South Atlantic. Aboard were Sea Harrier and GR 3 Harrier combat aircraft as well as Sea King, Lynx and Wessex helicopters. 14 Sea King helicopters and 11 Harrier combat aircraft are visible on this photo. During the war the composition of the Air Wing aboard changed several times. (Royal Navy Photo/Collection: Kürsener).