

‘An Expression of Our Solidarity with You’: European Reflections on Britain in the Falklands Crisis, 1982-1990

Introduction

On 2 April 1982, Argentine forces launched an invasion of the Falkland Islands (*Las Malvinas* in Spanish), a British Overseas Territory situated in the South Atlantic.¹ On hearing the news of the capture of the islands, the UK government response was swift and decisive. Alongside the assembly of a military task force, Argentine assets in the UK were frozen and diplomatic relations were immediately broken off. In addition, Argentine imports were banned as were the export of arms.

Argentina's actions presented a test of European solidarity at a time when the European Council were at loggerheads with the British Government over the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) price increases and the British contribution to the community budget. That being said, the ten member states swiftly condemned the Argentine attack and, at the request of their offended European partner, imposed economic sanctions, including a community-wide trade embargo, on Argentina. This offer of support had been encouraged by developments at the United Nations (UN). On 1 April, the President of the Security Council had called for restraint to be shown by both sides and urged parties to continue negotiations over the future of the islands. However, Security Council Resolution 502, drawn up by British Ambassador to the UN, Sir Anthony Parsons, was of paramount importance in gaining European support. The resolution called for ‘the immediate withdrawal of Argentinian forces’ and for all nations involved to seek a ‘diplomatic solution to their differences and to respect fully the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.’ The resolution encouraged Community members to show

¹ For the purposes of this article, ‘Falklands Dispute’ refers to the debate over the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands and ‘Falklands Conflict’ refers to the military engagement between the forces of the United Kingdom and Argentina between April and June 1982. The ‘Falklands Crisis’ refers to the political impact of that conflict.

solidarity with the UK while a diplomatic solution to the crisis was sought as it gave legally justified the British military response.²

The United Nations and the American State Department became the focal points of British diplomacy with regards to the conflict, however, that is not to say that the European reaction was unimportant. Firstly, Britain needed European support in the UN on votes not only in 1982 but also up until 1988 to ensure that the British retention of sovereignty remained legitimate.³ In addition, Britain needed a coherent European Council decision on sanctions to increase its diplomatic pressure not only on Argentina but also on the White House in Washington, DC so they would publicly place their support behind the British cause and ultimately, finding a common solution to the Falklands Crisis would have also made finding solutions to other intra-European issues much easier.⁴

This article aims to use the reactions of the member states of the European Community to highlight how the Falklands Crisis impacted on reflections on Britain by foreign states and how this affected Britain's relations with those powers. Although some discussion focuses on the foreign policy making process of some of the states involved, this study does not offer any analysis of this.⁵ The Falklands Conflict came at a crucial time in the first Thatcher government and strongly impacted Britain's relations with other states. The European reaction to the conflict marked an important step in the development of a coherent European Foreign Policy as Britain became more integrated with its continental partners.⁶

Background

The debate over the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands stretches back to the fifteenth century with multiple colonial powers claiming administration over the territory in that time.⁷ This discussion does not aim to cover the sovereignty issue in much depth but a short evaluation of the immediate build up to the invasion can help understand the international reception to the crisis. Argentina had claimed sovereignty over the islands since 1833 when a British task force had expelled the last Argentine administration. In the years leading to the conflict, Argentina had been suffering from severe economic stagnation and large levels of civil protest against the military junta that had seized power in 1976. A new military trio had taken over control of the Junta in December 1981, who

² Geoffrey Edwards gives a detailed description of the importance of Resolution 502 in 'Europe and the Falkland Islands Crisis 1982' *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. XXII, No. 4 (June 1984) pp. 295-296.

³ Following the conclusion of the armed conflict between Argentina and Britain in June 1982, the UN Security Council voted annually on the issue of sovereignty over the Falklands from 1982 until 1988, questioning whether Britain should be forced to negotiate a compromise with Argentina.

⁴ Summarised in Stelios Stavridis and Christopher Hill (eds), *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy: Western European Reactions to the Falklands Conflict*, Berg (London: Bloomsbury, 1996) pp. 184-5.

⁵ See Stavridis and Hill, *Domestic Source of Foreign Policy* for an in depth analysis of decision making processes in the European Community at the time of the Crisis.

⁶ First noted by Edwards, 'Europe and the Falkland Islands Crisis'.

⁷ For a detailed study of the sovereignty dispute see Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign vol 1: The origins of the Falklands War* (London: Routledge, 2005).

hoped that the military solution to the long-standing question of *Las Malvinas* would bring about civil stability in Argentina through distracting the civilian population from domestic turmoil.⁸ Abhorrence of British sovereignty over the islands was one thing that united the majority of Argentines. Admiral Jorge Anaya, head of the Argentine Navy and one of the three Junta members, who was the main architect of the military campaign believing that the UK would not respond in kind.⁹

The Thatcher government was caught by surprise with the invasion and many members of parliament attributed the blame to them for ignoring signals that Argentina would be willing to invade. Discussions of a possible lease back solution in December 1980 and the announcement of the withdrawal of *HMS Endurance* from the islands in March 1982 were highlighted as signals to the Junta that Britain were no longer resolute in their determination to hold on to the islands.¹⁰ When the lease back solution was initially proposed, MPs from multiple political parties (including the Conservative) had insisted that the islanders' wishes remain "paramount".¹¹ This argument would become an important basis for justification of the British actions during the conflict itself. In the House of Commons, backbench opinion was against the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which became even more apparent after the invasion and was a leading factor to the resignation of Lord Carrington, one of the most revered and internationally respected diplomats of the time. Carrington resigned as a matter of pride following the astonishing attacks directed towards his office within the House of Commons.¹²

At the outbreak of the conflict, Britain's was arguing with Europe over two key issues of European cooperation: CAP agricultural pricing and its contribution to the community budget. When Britain called for solidarity over the Falklands, other foreign ministers called for Britain to show the same solidarity within these other debates.¹³ For many of the European states, if solidarity was to be shown over the Falklands, it had to be unanimous over all European issues. In addition to this, the Maze Prison Hunger Strikes in Northern Ireland were damaging Britain's reputation in other European Governments. The Secretary General of the Presidency in France, Pierre Bérégovoy, had referred to the situation as 'embarrassing' for the British government when commenting that the issue made it difficult for the French to be seen to be working with Her Majesty's Government.¹⁴

⁸ Oscar Krischbaum, Roger Van der Kooy and Eduardo Cardosa, *Malvinas, La Trama Secreta*. (Planeta: Buenos Aires, 1983).

⁹ 'Haig: 'Malvinas fue mi Waterloo'' *La Nación*. 10 August 1997. Also see Leopoldo Galtieri. "No criamos que la Gran Bretana se movlizara por las Malvinas", 125 (Buenos Aires, 1982).

¹⁰ Edwards, 'Europe and the Falklands Crisis, 1982', p. 296.

¹¹ Peter Shore, Labour Party's Spokesman for Foreign Affairs HC Deb 2 Dec 1982 vol. 995 c. 129.

¹² Edwards, 'Europe and the Falklands Crisis', p. 297.

¹³ Most prominent of all was French and German Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Claude Cheysson and Hans-Dietrich Genscher. See Stelios Stavridis and Elfriede Regelsberger, 'The Converging National Reactions (I): The Big States – France and Germany' in Stavridis and Hill (eds.) *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy* (1996).

¹⁴ Armstrong record of conversation (Armstrong-Secretary General to the Presidency of the Republic of France, Bérégovoy) National Archives, *PREM 19/470 f153*.

Despite these ongoing issues the speed with which the Ten offered their support to Britain was symbolic of the desire to maintain a coherent European foreign policy. Although not a new concept in 1982, the sanctions were agreed on with unusual speed when compared to their previous use against Rhodesia, Iran and the Soviet Union. It was the dispatching of the task force and the resulting military engagement that proved to be the true test of this European solidarity, unlike it had experienced in international incidents prior to 1982. The TV images of crowds of thousands waving the fleet out of port underlined the point that the British Government was acting with the full support of its own public and was resolute in regaining administration of the islands, but it the resulting conflict truly forced the re-evaluation of Britain's role within European Political Cooperation (EPC).

'Staunchest Of Our Friends'¹⁵

One of the strongest supporters of Britain throughout the crisis was West Germany. The government in Bonn showed almost unwavering support for the British position on the Falklands through the 1980s. This can be attributed to the practical implications in terms of what West Germany could gain in return from Britain as well as the fact that showing solidarity with the UK was of no great detriment to the German economy.¹⁶ Argentina had blatantly violated international law and the invaded islands were also part of the European Community, as they were territory of one of the member states, who also happened to be a guarantor of Berlin and German unification. In addition to this, trade with Argentina represented only 0.4-0.5 per cent of all West German overseas trade although from a Community dimension, Germany did take almost 30% of all the community's Argentine imports. As such for the West German Government to support the Community sanctions was highly symbolic of their commitment to European solidarity but would have very little impact on German trade in real terms. The West German government appeared to be genuinely motivated by the idea of a political union on the continent. In the years leading to the conflict, the Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, had been particularly vocal in attempting to get an agreement with Britain over CAP farm price supports. Upon agreeing to the sanctions, he swiftly argued that the solidarity being shown to Britain during the conflict should be reciprocated by the British in the European Council. British diplomats had convincingly argued that EPC mechanisms had led to this course of solidarity which gave Genscher the opportunity to argue that risking those mechanisms in CAP price disputes could lead to the faltering of that solidarity.¹⁷

The main issue for Germany came when the fighting started, with the sinking of the *General Belgrano* on 2 May being a particular moment when the German government began to question their own support for London. Figures in the German foreign office such as Genscher became increasingly frustrated at the British refusal to give any concessions to the Argentinians. They urged that the power of the Royal Navy be used

¹⁵ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993) p.189.

¹⁶ Elfriede Regelsberger, 'The Converging National Reactions (I)' in Stelios and Hill, *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy*, pp. 72-74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

proportionately.¹⁸ In public they expressed “great reservations” at every escalation of the conflict.¹⁹ Attention switched to maintaining the German reputation in South America, which resulted in the Minister of State in the Foreign Office, Peter Courtier, undertaking a diplomatic mission to South America to advocate for the German position and ultimately the swift lifting of sanctions against Argentina once the conflict was over.

Despite the reservations towards British military action during the conflict, West Germany was brought closer, politically speaking, to its European neighbour through the crisis. Britain had shown itself as a capable military power which in the Cold War context was of critical importance to the West Germany. Later in 1982, Margaret Thatcher made her first visit to the country and visited the Berlin Wall alongside Chancellor Helmut Kohl, symbolically placing a wreath at the symbol of East-West divide. In the subsequent votes on the Falklands in the UN, Germany never changed its position from abstaining and maintaining its support for negotiations over the islands future whilst many of its European partners changed the position at the 1985 vote causing problems for Whitehall. The main disputes within Anglo-German relations were removed as agreements over the farm price supports and the British budget contribution were made and Germany began to work much closer with Britain on European affairs through the annual Anglo-German conference after the conflict had ended.

France also showed strong support for the UK throughout the conflict and, similar to West Germany, changed its relations with the UK following the restoration of British administration on the islands. France immediately stopped arms sales to Argentina and joined in the condemnation of the attack. In public, President François Mitterrand stated that French support for Britain was offered in return for role Britain played in liberating France during the Second World War. Although this did appear to be genuine, there were more practical motives behind the move. Mitterrand’s government were keen to highlight their solidarity with their western neighbours despite their socialist beliefs. The Falklands Crisis brought about an ideal opportunity to highlight their commitment to European unity. In addition, France joined other in pushing for a reciprocal showing of solidarity from Britain with regards to the other disputes within the EC highlighting a political strategy behind their stance over the Falklands.²⁰

The importance of these other factors was highlighted through the limitations of French support as the crisis went on. Within the government itself, there had been divide over the direction of French foreign policy. Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson keen to incorporate more socialist ideals in government policy and became dismayed at the handling of the crisis in London as well as the potential effects on French interests in Latin America. In the French Press, Cheysson was regularly reported as being furious that Britain did not return the notion of solidarity in the discussions on farm price supports, He publicly criticised Britain for not being willing to negotiate and accused Whitehall of

¹⁸ See *Europäische Zeitung*, June 1982.

¹⁹ The words of the Federal Chancellor at a cabinet meeting according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 26 May 1982, *Bulletin d’informations*, 26 May 1982.

²⁰ See Stavridis and Hill, *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy*, pp. 61-68.

have a lack of respect for EC law.²¹ This notion was reinforced by the change in French voting at the UN in 1985. France voted in favour of the resolution calling for discussions over the sovereignty of the islands and against the two amendments put forward by the British which looked to ensure that the islanders right of 'self-determination' would be considered in any discussions. In return, Argentina abstained on the vote over New Caledonia when they had been expected to vote in favour highlighting how they had managed to save French reputation in the Latin American region.

Despite these issues of tension, the Falklands Conflict certainly forced the UK and France into a closer working relationship. Mitterrand was the only European head of state who was personally thanked by Margaret Thatcher in her memoirs for offering support and the UK's Conservative government was able to endorse the integration of a socialist power into the European political organisations.²² This culminated in such milestones as the Treaty of Canterbury in 1986, which would bring about the Channel Tunnel and more cooperation on a European level between the two nations. The British and French governments were able to work closely on matters such as the Spanish ascension to the EC and the unification of Germany, discussions that would have previously proved more difficult given the differing political views of the ruling parties.²³ Without the initial showing of French support in regards to the Falklands, this level of cooperation could not have taken place.

Belgium, the Netherlands and Greece are further examples of European nations who showed support to Britain in the Falklands and as such saw a new relationship develop with the Thatcher government. Greece could empathise with the British cause given their own dispute with Turkey over Cyprus, which has resulted in an armed invasion of an island the Greek Government held sovereignty over. The idea of mutual European cooperation was important to all three nations but especially Belgium which held the presidency of the European Council at the time, January to June 1982. All three benefitted from the ultimate resolution of the EC disputes as Britain was no longer an obstacle to the idea of European Political Cooperation (EPC).²⁴ Through the Falklands Crisis, Britain was seen as more coherent member of the EC through the solidarity many of its partners could offer. Despite criticisms towards the British attitude regarding other EC matters, the fact remains that the crisis brought about a swifter resolution to these disputes and Britain was seen as a major factor in the future of a united Europe.

'We Must Not Let New Problems Crowd Our Anxiety about Old Ones'²⁵

By far the most troublesome European state, from a British perspective, during the Falklands Conflict was Ireland.²⁶ Since the founding of the Irish State in 1922, there had

²¹ *Le Monde*, 19 April, 16 May, 20 May and 7 June.

²² Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 189.

²³ For example, see Thatcher Foundation Archive TCHR 1/8/8 concerning budgetary imbalances within the EC.

²⁴ Stavridis and Hill, *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy*, p. 93.

²⁵ Margaret Thatcher letter to Lord Lowry. Churchill Archive Centre *THCR* 3/2/88 f69.

²⁶ For this article, the term 'Ireland' or 'Irish' always refers to the Republic of Ireland.

always been accusations of Anglophobia in Irish foreign policy.²⁷ The ascension to power of the Fianna Fáil party under the new Taoiseach Charles Haughey, had only served to worsen relations since a high of the Anglo-Irish summit in 1980. Haughey accused the foreign ministry of being 'too anxious' at maintaining good relations with the UK and said they were not 'sound' enough on the issue of Irish nationalism.²⁸ Although Haughey had enjoyed a better personal relationship with Thatcher than other Taoiseachs, his nationalism served to damage relations between the two countries when attempting to negotiate over the future of Northern Ireland.²⁹

The Falklands Crisis echoed several themes evident in the troubles in Northern Ireland. The islanders as a loyal but isolated British community, being faced with the aggression of a hostile neighbour was redolent to the protestant community in the North.³⁰ As such it is unsurprising that some thought that Ireland's position throughout the crisis was affected as such but this is an accusation that Haughey strongly denied.³¹ Rumours that Ireland's representative at the initial UN vote (where Ireland had voted in favour of resolution 502) had acted without the consent of his government and comments by Fiánna Fail minister, Paddy Power, that Britain was the aggressor in the conflict, did little to aid the ever worsening Anglo-Irish relationship.³² In the same statement, Power also called for 'an immediate meeting' of the security council to address the issue, which caused problems at the United Nations through the confusion of the Irish stance on resolution 502 as well as the potential harm to the ongoing peace settlement talks.³³ The Irish government tried to distance itself from such comments, however, given Power's place within the Irish Administration, his words carried a lot of weight at Downing Street. This made them difficult to ignore for the British Cabinet.

With this, it may seem difficult to argue that the Falklands Crisis fostered a change in relationships between Britain and Ireland but the reaction from opposing Irish to parties to Fianna Fáil's handling of the crisis did just that. Dr Garret FitzGerald, leader of Fine Gael, criticised Haughey for the damage he had done to relations with the UK and upon succeeding Haughey to the role of Taoiseach, sort to bring a situation where the two countries could work together. More active and fruitful conversations took place between the two governments which resulted in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 giving the Republic some role in the government of Northern Ireland as well as establishing the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference which was a forum for discussion between the two states over the future of the North. This was an historic document as for the first time, an agreement between the two nations was reached with the mutual aim of ending the troubles. This led the way for further cooperation over the next two decades and

²⁷ See Ben Tonra, 'The Internal Dissenter (II): Ireland' in Stavridis and Hill (eds.) *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy* (1996).

²⁸ See Trevor Salmon, *Unneutral Ireland: An Ambivalent and Unique Security Policy*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) p. 252.

²⁹ See Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* p. 388.

³⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign Vol II: War and Diplomacy* (London: Routledge, 2005) pp.497-501.

³¹ *Dáil Reports*. Vol 334 pp. 798-819 11 May 1982.

³² *Sunday Independent* 11 April 1982 and *Irish Press* 16 April 1982.

³³ Ben Tonra, 'Internal Dissenter (II)', p. 144.

culminated in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Had FitzGerald not been as motivated to repair the damage done to relations with the UK through the Falklands Crisis, it is highly possible that such an agreement could not have come to fruition.

A similar affect was evident in Anglo-Italian relations despite Italy not supporting the British cause during the hostilities. The Italian government had felt unable to back Britain during the conflict due to internal political divide and the close cultural links between Italy and Argentina.³⁴ Italy voted against the renewal of sanctions on May 14 for these reasons and although the Britain had attracted criticism in the Italian press during the conflict, it was clear that this decision was not universally popular with some calling the Italian policy “an absurd inexplicable action” and an “historic blunder” in diplomatic terms.³⁵

Anglo-Italian relations saw a swift improvement after the conflict as Italy took a leading role in restoring the relationship between Latin America and Europe. It is for this reason that Italy changed its vote in the 1985 UN resolution on the Falklands and not any anti-British feeling. Thatcher visited Italy twice, in 1982 and 1984 and both times held positive talks with Prime Minister Giovanni Spadolini. Spadolini even offered Italy’s services as a mediator over the Falklands although Thatcher politely declined.³⁶ Prior to the conflict, Britain had never been convinced about whether Italy should be a member of the EEC but through showing its capability as a mediator between Europe and Latin America after the conflict, it more than proved its worth as a contributor to EPC.³⁷

Spain’s reception to the Falklands Crisis presents an important case study given the similar sovereignty dispute it had with Britain over Gibraltar. Esther Barbé commented that the similarity of the two debates was such that “if the link between the Falklands and Gibraltar can be identified as a minimum linkage approach...then we can also speak of a maximum linkage approach.”³⁸ As Argentine public opinion was resolute over the sovereignty dispute with the Falklands, Spanish opinion was as steadfast over the same issue with Gibraltar. Spanish Prime Minister Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo, initially attempted to create a separation between the Falklands issue and the Gibraltar debate in an attempt to save the Hispano-British talks which were due to begin April 20 after the invasion of the Falklands. Despite this, the link between the two issues was made clear when mention of the Falklands no longer appeared in Spanish political correspondence after the 1984 Brussels Agreement.³⁹ The Spanish government had cited its goal of decolonisation in supporting the Argentine claim to sovereignty over the Falklands and stressed that

³⁴ There were around one million Italian citizens living in Argentina who were eligible to vote in the next Italian elections, due in June 1983.

³⁵ For example, see *La Repubblica* 18 May 1982 and *Corriere della Sera* 18 May 1982.

³⁶ Domitilla Savignoni, ‘The Internal Dissenter (I)’ in Stavridis and Hill, *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy*, p. 130.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.117.

³⁸ Esther Barbé, ‘The External Dissenter’ in Stavrdis and Hill, *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy* (1996) p. 159.

³⁹ Signed by the governments of the UK and Spain guaranteeing the rights of Spaniards in Gibraltar, the free movement of persons, vehicles and goods between Gibraltar and Spain as well as the establishment of a negotiating process to overcome all differences between the two states.

continuously in debate within the United Nations until 1984. However, the Brussels Agreement settled many aspects of the Spanish dispute with Britain over Gibraltar and as such it was no longer of use to the Spanish government to continue to voice an opinion in the debate over the Falklands.

The Falklands acted as a catalyst to these talks due to the British government's desire not to see a similar situation develop over Gibraltar. Although it was unlikely that Spain would have ever considered a military solution to the Gibraltar debate, papers from the Prime Minister's Office highlight that it was a concern for the British Government.⁴⁰ The British recognised their own errors in miscalculating how the Argentines would react in the Falklands and the enormous cost the resulting conflict had on Britain. Coming to a peaceful settlement with Spain over Gibraltar avoided any such conflict happening again and allowed for more cooperation between the two countries after Spain joined NATO (1982), and, later, the European Economic Community (1986).

Conclusions

When Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, many believed it would be a political disaster for the United Kingdom, one which may have even led to the collapse of the government. Both domestically and internationally the incident was initially perceived as an embarrassment as severe miscalculations on the British part had led to the loss of overseas territory. However, when the longer-term effects are taken into consideration, it is clear that the crisis actually had a positive effect on Britain's role in European politics. For those countries, which supported the UK in the conflict, it presented the chance to demonstrate solidarity with its European partner. The rhetoric of a united Europe had been strong on the continent since the founding of the European Council in 1961, working together for European Political Cooperation. It forced all parties to address the other internal obstacles to that objective and come to swift resolutions for them all. This showing of solidarity brought Britain into a closer working relationship with Europe and Britain was seen as an equal partner working towards the same goal of European Political Cooperation.⁴¹ Those which had opposed the British policy during the conflict felt forced to repair any damage to relations with the British after the conflict had ended. It is notable that Ireland, Italy and Spain all reached made significant steps to resolving their major difficulties with Britain in the subsequent years after 1982. More so than prior to the conflict, Britain was viewed as a more coherent member of the European Council, which other states could work with for a common political objective. The Falklands Crisis elevated Britain's status as a leader in European Political Cooperation and an equal partner in a politically united continent.

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⁴⁰ See National Archives *PREM 19/770 f120*.

⁴¹ Analysis of the National Archives shows a large increase in the amount of discussion involving Britain on this part after the resolution of the Falklands Conflict than had taken place before.

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