

UK-Argentine tensions rise over Malvinas Islands

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On the eve of the 30th anniversary of the war between Britain and Argentina, tensions over the Malvinas Islands are being ratcheted up once again.

Argentina's President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on Tuesday assembled an extraordinary audience including cabinet members, governors, military commanders, members of the political opposition, trade union functionaries, leaders of social organizations and veterans of the 1982 Malvinas War to deliver a speech announcing her government's intention to go before the United Nations Security Council to charge Britain with the "militarization" of the South Atlantic.

The move follows a series of actions by the Tory government of Prime Minister David Cameron that have been widely seen as direct provocations in Argentina.

Britain announced that it is dispatching its most advanced warship, the destroyer HMS Dauntless, to the South Atlantic, where it has also deployed a Trafalgar-class nuclear-powered submarine armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles.

The Argentine government also took as a deliberate affront the announcement last week that Prince William, second-in-line for the British crown, would be sent in uniform as a helicopter pilot to the disputed territory, known as the Falkland Islands in Britain.

The latest British measures follow heated rhetoric from the Cameron government in response to a decision last December by the member states of the South American trading bloc, Mercosur, to deny ships flying the flag of the Falkland Islands the right to dock in their ports.

British officials described the move as a "blockade," while Cameron cynically branded Argentina as "colonialist," because it was failing to respect the supposed right of the barely 3,000 British residents of

the islands—protected by a garrison of 1,700 troops, warplanes and warships—the right to "self-determination."

Argentina has long laid claim to the Malvinas, a former Spanish colonial territory, which was seized by the British in 1833, during the Argentine wars for independence. The United Nations has treated the Malvinas as a question of British colonialism and on the basis of international law has specifically ruled out the principle of "self-determination" for the British colonists as disruptive of Argentina's national unity and territorial integrity.

The Argentine military invaded the Malvinas in April 1982 under the military dictatorship then headed by Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri. The ill-prepared military adventure was part of a desperate bid by the ruling junta to divert growing mass opposition, fed by intensified economic crisis and popular hostility to the crimes of the dictatorship, which had murdered some 30,000 people and tortured and imprisoned many more.

The Argentine dictatorship made the strategic mistake of anticipating US support for its actions, based on previous collaboration with Washington in carrying out murderous repression of leftists throughout Latin America's Southern Cone, as well as in providing "advisers" for the dirty wars waged under US auspices in Central America. Instead, however, while maintaining a position of formal neutrality, Washington lent crucial logistical support to Britain, seeing the defeat of an imperialist power, even by a right-wing, pro-US military junta, as an unacceptable precedent.

In the one-sided conflict that followed, 649 Argentine and 255 British soldiers, sailors and airmen were killed. The sinking of the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano alone claimed 323 lives, while 194 poorly armed and ill-clad soldiers, the majority of them young conscripts,

died on the islands themselves.

The debacle unleashed mass opposition to the junta, leading to its downfall in less than a year.

In her speech, Fernandez took pains to disassociate her government's current campaign over the Malvinas from the disastrous war waged by the dictatorship. "We are a people who have suffered too much violence in our country," she said. "Neither playing with guns nor wars attract us, on the contrary."

In an indication of the government's appeal to nationalist sentiments, however, Argentina's minister of defense, Arturo Puricelli, declared Wednesday that, while the country was seeking to make its claim on the Malvinas by "diplomatic means," Argentina would "exercise our legitimate right of defense" if British armed forces encroached on the country's territory.

Fernandez felt compelled to address the widespread belief that her government has brought the Malvinas question to the fore once again for much the same reasons that the military dictatorship did 30 years ago: to use the national question as a means of diverting mounting social tensions.

The day after the presidential speech, parliamentary leaders announced the results of analyses by multiple economic institutions of the country's inflation rate, which they concluded hit 1.9 percent in January, the same level as the month before.

Rising prices have been accompanied by slowing economic growth, as the world capitalist crisis has led to falling demand for the country's major exports like corn and soybeans. The government has begun cutting subsidies on utility bills and other spending in an attempt to counter mounting deficits.

The audience assembled for Fernandez's speech clearly suggests a bid to promote national unity over the Malvinas in the face of impending class conflicts.

Fernandez turned the charge of using jingoism to divert the population back against the British, however, suggesting, justifiably, that much the same political dynamics are at work in the bellicose posturing of the Cameron government.

"I could repeat what some English newspapers have said, that some of the decisions taken or phrases used have more to do with the economic situation which today Old Europe or Old England are confronting," said Fernandez. "But I am not going to resort to any journalistic rhetoric. I simply want to ask the English

prime minister to give peace a chance."

Indeed, Cameron has every reason to want to dress himself up as Margaret Thatcher and use a conflict over the Malvinas as a diversion from the unprecedented social inequality in Britain and growing anger over government austerity measures.

Underlying the conflict are profit interests. Tensions have increased markedly since 2010, when the British government awarded contracts for exploratory drilling in the coastal shelf around the Malvinas, which geologists have estimated could contain up to 60 billion barrels of oil.

Under conditions in which the US and Western European ruling elites have waged multiple wars to assert control over energy resources in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, a conflict over potential reserves in the South Atlantic is inevitable.

While Argentina as an historically oppressed nation has every right to lay claim to the Malvinas and fight for the expulsion of British imperialism, the long history of the Argentine bourgeoisie, and in particular of the Peronist movement with which Fernandez is affiliated, makes clear that this native ruling class is incapable and unwilling to wage any such struggle.

What Argentina's capitalist government seeks in its calls for "negotiation" and "dialogue" with Britain on the status of the Malvinas is, on the one hand, an instrument for diverting the class struggle at home, and, on the other, the possibility of reaping a share of the profits by facilitating the exploitation of the region's resources by foreign capital.

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