

Pulling Back from the Near-Brink

How can it be explained that two countries with such advanced programmes in nuclear energy, ones with clear weapons capability objectives, could in only a few years have moved from mutual suspicion and a series of knee-jerk reactions to the actions of the rival state, to a situation of cooperation in nuclear matters which would be admired by most of the world? What were the elements pushing for improvement in the bilateral relationship and in the nuclear contest thereof, and what elements were working to sustain the negative picture of previous years?

The answer lies largely in the political situation of the two countries as the early eighties advanced. And the key evolution must be seen in the context of Argentina's internal and international politics. The 1978 near conflict with Chile (Argentine Special Forces were actually on Chilean soil when Papal intervention finally brought both sides sharply up) left elements of the Argentine forces spoiling for a fight and for an opportunity to unite the country behind the increasingly unpopular military government. In 1981-2 plans were made for either war with Chile or invasion of the British colony of the Falkland Islands, long claimed by Argentina and a source of great public frustration over many years.

The decision was of course made to go for the Falklands which were seized in early April 1982 with a miscalculation of the then state of British political resolve and military capabilities which seems inconceivable to most observers. Be that as it may, the Argentine armed forces were routed in a campaign that showed them to be poorly led, hopelessly divided in conducting the war (really one war for each armed service was conducted), and simply incompetent. Having shown for some time that they could not run the economy, the armed forces had now shown that they were useless at winning wars as well.

The result was a public outcry that brought the end of the military government the next year. A new civilian president Raúl Alfonsín replaced the military junta's head after elections that year and benefited from a vast public rejection of the military and all they had stood for in the "dirty war" against leftist armed movements at home and the Falklands shambles abroad. The new civilian government had its hands more free on foreign and defence policy matters than any for decades. The public perception of the armed forces could not have been lower and nationalist opinion makers, deemed partially responsible for not only defeat in war but also the collapse of the economy, had been totally discredited by recent events.⁸

Two years later, in very different circumstances, the military government in Brazil yielded power to one of a civilian stripe. Here, however, the military did not leave as a humiliated and

⁸ David Pion-Berlin, *Through Corridors of Power: Institutions and Civil-Military Relations in Argentina* (University Park (Pennsylvania), Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 63-74; and Alejandro Dabat and Luis Lorenzano, *Argentina, the Malvinas and the End of Military Rule* (Thetford (Derbyshire), Verso Press, 1982), pp. 145-56.