

Britain and Argentina

limited to the dominant classes alone. For an alienated majority, colonialism may have offered little more than a vicarious sense of power. Nevertheless, the process of decolonization has stripped away even this illusion, leaving in its place increasing fears of national impotence. The consequent backlash effects have been severe. Ominous tendencies within the national mood were apparent in the election of Margaret Thatcher, which clearly reflected the growing resistance to contemporary realities in some sectors of British society.

In Argentina, meanwhile, there was the myth of never-fulfilled grandeur. Lacking a genuinely nationalistic economic program of its own, the military regime resorted to an intensely xenophobic political campaign best described as symbolic chauvinism. However, here again, the retrospective and highly romantic 19th-century-style rhetoric reflected the anachronistic nature of the leadership itself, its almost total incomprehension of current international trends.

In both Argentina and Britain, drum-beating and flag-waving xenophobia have proven easy devices for tribal self-assertion. Both regimes seek to assuage popular dissatisfaction by cultivating ultra-nationalist sentiments. However, the particular historical experience of Argentina and Britain has determined that the official campaigns of the two countries differ in one respect: in Britain it entails appealing to feelings of power-nostalgia; in Argentina, it means developing illusionary power aspirations (*Argentina potencia*).

It is here that the other psychological component of the South Atlantic conflict becomes crucial. This involves elite perceptions — the way in which the leadership sees the world, and most important, overcomes strained relations with its constituencies through the manipulation of mass psychology. By amalgamating and articulating incipient fears, resentments and phobias in such a way as to focus attention away from themselves, governments forestall the brunt of public criticism. In Britain, the Thatcher cabinet — perhaps with the exception of Lord Carrington, himself a political casualty of the affair — is almost a contemporary anomaly, harking back to a Victorian view of world politics, when Britain ruled the world. As for the Argentine Generals, unrestrained by mechanisms of popular representation, their image of international politics clouded primarily by a geopolitical mold à la von Haushofer. In their view, force and war are not only the main tools of politics, but are in themselves intrinsic virtues.

While in both Argentina and Britain, the war did not smother all signs of domestic opposition, there can be no doubt that each regime managed, at least for a while, to diffuse much disruptive anger. In short, the war became crucial to legitimizing the ruling elites. The Argentinian surrender allowed the Thatcher government to consolidate its power, while it had the very opposite effect on the Galtieri regime and the Argentine military in general.

The simultaneous convergence of international (systemic) and national crises, as well as the above-mentioned psycho-cultural factors, created the "strike-out" conditions which led to the Argentinian action and subsequent British reaction. Yet, direct armed confrontation still need not have followed but for the presence of certain precipitating factors. One was that each regime miscalculated in "calling

the bluff" of the other. The point is, of course, paradoxical: war erupted due to a fortuitous congruence of chains of events affecting both parties. But it is the situational and ideological symmetry of those parties which stands out. Ironically, armed conflict between nations more often than not seems to occur not as the result of diverging world views, but rather because of converging — though incompatible — positions.

The situation in the South Atlantic has been further complicated by another factor: the attempts by Washington to mediate under objectively impossible conditions. Caught between two entangling defence commitments, that to NATO and that to the Rio Treaty, the Reagan administration has found itself in an extremely difficult, and often contradictory role. There was, too, the piteous incongruity of US Secretary of State General Alexander Haig in the role of peacemaker.

At least two possible scenarios develop from the South Atlantic crisis. The first concerns the far-reaching implications for existing alliances. The second involves the prospects for regional, and possibly global, peace emerging from the conflict.

Strained alliances

From the outset, strains in the NATO alliance were visible, as the initial neutrality of the United States threatened to sour relations between that country and Britain. However, with Washington's subsequent shift in favor of Britain, combined with its imposition of economic and military sanctions against Argentina, a rift of this nature became less probable. But within the European Economic Community, solidarity with Britain was by no means unanimous. Particularly since Britain's sinking of the Argentine cruiser, *General Belgrano*, many formerly-supportive member-countries reassessed their position. Ireland strongly condemned the British action, and with Italy withdrew its endorsement of sanctions against the Junta. France and West Germany, in more cautious terms, indicated a clear desire to distance themselves from certain aspects of British policy. Thus, with the breakdown of consensus within the EEC, the very unity of NATO as well came into question.

The reverse side of the same issue involved the repercussions for Latin America — and the Inter-American system as a whole — of Washington's support for Britain. From the perspective of the US, the potential far-reaching consequences for its economic and military hegemony were more significant than even the immediate Argentine-British dispute. For the American leadership, the situation presented a potentially disastrous balancing act. Unaccustomed to viewing conflicts in other than East-West terms, the Reagan administration, a non-crisis team in the best of circumstances, was suddenly confronted with the need to mediate between two important allies in two key parts of the Western world, and between two collective defence systems which were never thought of as being in danger of colliding. On the one hand, as the leader of NATO, the US is militarily committed to Western Europe. Moreover, at a time when anti-American sentiments on that continent are running high, the Reagan administration could hardly afford to withhold support from its only unconditional ideological ally in the region — the Thatcher government. To do so would only have alienated that ally, but might actually have contributed to its political defeat