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Falkland Islands: United States Should Back Great Britain

Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., and Ray Walser, Ph.D.

In a blatant show of disdain for the Anglo–American Special Relationship, the Obama Administration has weighed in on the mounting tensions between Great Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands. Just two days after Prime Minister David Cameron issued a robust statement in the House of Commons in mid-January vowing to defend the sovereignty of the Falklands, the U.S. State Department undercut Britain with a deeply unhelpful statement¹ that played directly into Argentina’s hands.

The Obama Administration has repeatedly called for a negotiated settlement, a slap in the face for a key U.S. ally. The question of sovereignty was emphatically settled in 1982 and should not be reopened. Washington should stop suggesting that it can be. It has nothing to gain by doing so—except winning the enmity of America’s closest friend and ally.

Cristina Kirchner, Hugo Chavez, and U.S. Bashing. Argentina’s stance over the Falklands has become increasingly aggressive under the Kirchner administration in Buenos Aires, which is closely aligned with Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela. This has occurred against a backdrop of growing hostility toward the United States in Argentina and parts of Latin America with a rise of populist nationalism.

Following Argentina’s ferocious “Dirty War” and the disastrous invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982, Argentina’s disgraced military junta yielded to civilian rule and a return to democracy in 1983. The U.S. fully supported Argentina’s return

to democracy and developed remarkably amicable relations during the presidency of Peronist Carlos Saul Menem (1989–1999).

The onset of a period of economic recession and crisis in the late 1990s culminated in financial panic, bloody riots, and disruptive changes in government. As their financial woes mounted, many Argentines blamed the U.S. and market economies for their economic ills. Under Presidents Nestor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (2007–present), Argentina has enjoyed an economic recovery as a result of growing global demand for its agricultural products while continuing to wrestle with debt default issues.

However, the Kirchner tandem also pursued a foreign policy agenda that inclined toward more assertive nationalism, alignment with the leftist anti-American policies of Venezuela’s authoritarian populist Hugo Chavez, and greater friendliness with Iran on commercial and other issues—seemingly to undercut continued efforts to bring to justice those in Iran behind the 1992 and 1994 terrorist bombings.

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President Chavez found a receptive and disruptive audience in Argentina during the 2005 Summit of Americas, which led to widespread anti-U.S. rioting. The U.S. was also shocked with the cavalier manner in which Chavez's agents delivered suitcases stuffed with Venezuelan cash intended for the Kirchner electoral campaign in 2007.

Under Argentine Foreign Minister Hector Timerman, who is spearheading the current diplomatic offensive on the Falklands, U.S.–Argentine relations have ebbed toward a new low. In 2011, Timerman accused Washington of running a torture school in Central America and later provoked a diplomatic incident when he temporarily ordered the seizure of U.S. military cargo, claiming that America was sneaking military and intelligence equipment for the Buenos Aires police into his country.

On the diplomatic front, Kirchner and Timerman are quick to use new diplomatic instruments such as the Union of South American Nations and the recently formed Community of Latin American and Caribbean States—both of which exclude the U.S.—to enlist Latin American support for Argentina's assertion of sovereignty over the Falklands. In the most recent meeting of the anti-U.S. Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, Chavez and his colleagues called for sanctions against the U.K., and the Venezuelan strongman vowed that if the Falklands conflict turned into a use of force, Argentina could count on Venezuela's military in a fight.

The Obama Administration's Foolhardy Policy Sends the Wrong Signal. The Obama Administration's intervention on the Falklands issue is hugely counterproductive—and grossly insensitive toward

Britain. It will encourage and embolden Kirchner's regime in its aggressive international campaign over the Falklands. In a major address in Buenos Aires on February 7, Kirchner ludicrously accused Britain of "militarizing" the South Atlantic and called for United Nations intervention. In recent months, Argentina has threatened a blockade of the Falklands and has pressured the Mercosur bloc of Latin American nations (which includes Brazil and Uruguay) to ban boats with a Falklands flag from docking² at any of its members' ports. In December, Argentine patrol vessels boarded Spanish boats operating under Falkland Island licenses as part of what it calls a "legal" blockade³ of sea channels to the Falklands. Argentina has also threatened to cut the islands' only air link with Chile, which passes over Argentine airspace.

In response to growing provocation by Argentina, Britain has announced⁴ the deployment of *HMS Dauntless*, a Royal Navy Type 45 destroyer, to the South Atlantic. This is a significant show of strength by Britain at a time when Argentina is testing Britain's resolve to defend the Falkland Islands and keep its sea lanes and supply routes open.

The U.S. should:

- **Stop calling for negotiations over the Falklands.** The sovereignty of the Falklands was decisively settled in the 1982 war when British forces retook the islands, with the loss of more than 250 servicemen, after Argentina's brutal military junta invaded them. There is nothing whatsoever to be negotiated over regarding the future of the Falklands, a position the British government has reiterated on numerous occasions.

1. U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Position on the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands," January 20, 2012, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/01/182294.htm> (February 7, 2012).
2. Andrew Hough, "South American Trading Bloc Bans Ships with Falklands Flags," *The Daily Telegraph*, December 21, 2011, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/falklandislands/8969569/South-American-trading-bloc-bans-ships-with-Falklands-flags.html> (February 7, 2012).
3. Fergus MacErlean "Argentina Launches Naval Campaign to Isolate Falkland Islands," *The Daily Telegraph*, December 5, 2011, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/falklandislands/8936750/Argentina-launches-naval-campaign-to-isolate-Falkland-Islands.html> (February 7, 2012).
4. Thomas Harding, "Royal Navy to Send HMS Dauntless to Falkland Islands," *The Daily Telegraph*, January 31, 2012, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/onthe frontline/9051564/Royal-Navy-to-send-HMS-Dauntless-to-Falkland-Islands.html> (February 7, 2012).

- **Recognize British sovereignty over the Falklands.** Washington should respect the position of its closest friend and partner on matters of vital British interest, including the future of British subjects living in the South Atlantic, whose only wish is to remain free under the protection of the Union Jack. The United States should formally recognize British sovereignty over the Falklands and acknowledge the wishes of its 3,000 inhabitants, who are 90 percent British⁵ and 0.1 percent Argentine and have no desire to live under the control of Buenos Aires.
- **Call for an end to Argentine provocations.** The recent spate of anti-British hooligan behavior in Argentina, war-like rhetoric from Chavez and his cohorts, and a general climate of coercion runs contrary to U.S. and international norms of behavior. The Obama Administration should speak out against this escalation of intimidation and threat.

The Special Relationship Matters. The Special Relationship is vital to the interests of both the United States and Great Britain, and its preservation is of paramount importance to the defense of freedom and liberty across the world. It is time for Washington to recognize and support British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands and stand by America's closest ally, not least at a time when nearly 10,000 British troops are standing shoulder to shoulder with their U.S. allies on the battlefields of Afghanistan.

—*Nile Gardiner, Ph.D.*, is Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, and *Ray Walser, Ph.D.*, is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Davis Institute, at The Heritage Foundation.

5. Falkland Islands Census Statistics 2006, at <http://www.falklands.gov.fk/documents/Census%20Report%202006.pdf> (February 7, 2012).