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Falkland Islands: U.S. Should Support Right to Self-Determination

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On March 10–11, the Falkland Islands, a British Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic, will hold a referendum to decide whether to maintain allegiance to Great Britain. The islands are self-governing but maintain the British monarch as their head of state. The referendum is an answer to Argentina, which, though defeated by Britain in the 1982 Falklands War, is again waging a campaign of threats and intimidation in an effort to gain control of the islands. The U.S. should respect the outcome of the Falkland Islands referendum.

The Falkland Islands Today.

The islands, like all British Overseas Territories, have chosen not to be completely independent. They are economically self-supporting, the sole exception being their defense, which is provided by Britain. The islands consist of two larger

islands—East Falkland and West Falkland—and 776 smaller islands. As of the 2012 census, the official population of the islands was 2,932. According to the census, 59 percent of the residents consider their national identity to be “Falkland Islander,” 29 percent consider themselves British, 9.8 percent St. Helenian, and 5.4 percent Chilean.¹

The History of the Islands and the Islanders. The British have administered the Falkland Islands peacefully and continuously since 1833 with the exception of the two months in 1982 when the islands were invaded and illegally occupied by Argentine military forces. There is no archeological proof or anecdotal evidence that anyone visited or lived on the islands before they were sighted and settled by Europeans.

In 1765, the British explorer Captian John Bryon landed on and explored West Falkland and claimed British possession of it and “all neighboring islands” for King George III. The British reasserted their claim in 1774 and again in 1833, when a British warship evicted the remains of an illegal Argentine garrison. In 1838, the Falkland Islands were upgraded to the status of a Crown Colony. This historical claim was further strengthened by the

1982 war, which led to the collapse of the Argentine military junta that launched the invasion.

But the current controversy is not ultimately about history or about the islands: It is about the right of the islanders to govern themselves as they see fit. As British Prime Minister David Cameron recently put it, “The future of the Falkland Islands should be determined by the Falkland Islanders themselves, the people who live there.”² Argentina argues that Britain is exercising “19th-century colonialism” by allowing the people of the Falkland Islands to govern themselves as they see fit.³ But as Jan Cheek, a member of the Falklands Legislative Assembly, pointed out in response: “My grandchildren are the eighth generation of my family to have lived here, which is considerably longer than the Argentine president’s family have been living in Argentina.”⁴

Argentina’s Campaign of Intimidation. Under President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the Argentine economy has undergone a slow-motion collapse, and the Kirchner regime has returned to the strategy, born in the 1970s, of making the status of the Falkland Islands a major issue. But Argentina has also turned this rhetoric into action in

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a campaign against the air and sea links that sustain the islands. Cruise ships have been denied port calls in Argentina because they had previously visited the islands.

Argentina's campaign should not distract from the fact that it owes global investors, both private and public, up to \$35.7 billion. It faces a serious inflation crisis and has been censured by the International Monetary Fund for falsifying its inflation data. It has nationalized a foreign-owned oil company and persecuted unfriendly journalists, and it now ranks 160th out of 177 countries—lower than Angola—in the 2013 edition of Heritage's *Index of Economic Freedom*.

In 1999, President Bill Clinton designated Argentina as a Major Non-NATO Ally, which gives Argentina preferential and privileged access to U.S. military cooperation.⁵ Yet the Kirchner regime has sought to foster friendly relations with some of the world's most odious and anti-American regimes. In Latin America, the regime has made a concerted effort to develop closer relations with the dictatorial regimes of Venezuela and Cuba. Argentina refused to support a letter signed by 57 U.N. members criticizing the crackdown on Syrian civilians by Bashar al-Assad's regime, and Argentine–Iranian

relations have improved under Kirchner.

U.S. Support for Negotiations Is a Dangerous Error. Over the past three years, the U.S. has repeatedly called on Argentina and Britain to negotiate the status of the Falkland Islands. In March 2010, in a joint press conference with then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Kirchner stated that she wanted the U.S. to “get both countries to sit down at the table and address these negotiations within the framework of the U.N. resolutions strictly.” In response, Clinton stated, “And we agree. We would like to see Argentina and the United Kingdom sit down and resolve the issues between them across the table in a peaceful, productive way.”⁶ This is not the same as taking no position on the dispute: Under the guise of neutrality, the U.S. echoed Argentina's position.

In the context of Argentina's campaign of intimidation, the unbroken record of British sovereignty over the islands, and the wishes of the Falkland Islanders themselves, the U.S. policy is both wrong and dangerous. By regularly calling for negotiations, the U.S. is encouraging Argentina to persist in its campaign. If Argentina takes military action against the islands or against the sea- and airborne traffic that

sustains them, the U.S. would be partly responsible for encouraging that aggression. The only threat to the peace of the South Atlantic derives from Argentina. By siding with Argentina, the U.S. is making that threat worse.

The U.S. does have material interests at stake. U.S.-based cruise ships have been targeted by the Argentine campaign, and a U.S. firm is a leading investor in the promising oil and gas fields that surround the islands. Today, the islands are of little economic importance and lack strategic significance, but in the coming years, that could change in ways that would benefit the U.S. But the overriding U.S. interest is in supporting the right of the islanders to choose their own form of government and in rejecting the bullying of the tottering Kirchner regime.

What the U.S. Should Do. The U.S. should recognize the outcome of the March 10–11 referendum as an official and legitimate expression of the will of the Falkland Islanders and of their right to choose their own government. It should stop calling for negotiations on the islands, recognize British sovereignty over them, call for an end to Argentine provocations, revoke Argentina's status as a Major Non-NATO ally, and continue to oppose further

1. Falkland Islands Government Policy Unit, “Falkland Islands Census 2012: Headline Results,” September 2012, p. 6, <http://www.falklands.gov.fk/assets/Headline-Results-from-Census-2012.pdf> (accessed February 7, 2013). St. Helena is a small island in the central South Atlantic, most famous for being the final home in exile of Napoleon Bonaparte.
2. Rowena Mason, “David Cameron: We Would Fight a Falklands Invasion,” *Telegraph*, January 6, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9783568/David-Cameron-we-would-fight-a-Falklands-invasion.html> (accessed February 7, 2013).
3. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, “Letter to David Cameron,” *Buenos Aires Herald*, January 3, 2013, <http://www.buenosairesherald.com/article/120753/cfks-letter-to-david-cameron> (accessed February 15, 2013).
4. Barney Henderson, “Falkland Islands Census Delivers Blow to Argentina,” *Daily Telegraph*, September 13, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/falklandislands/9540493/Falkland-Islands-census-delivers-blow-to-Argentina.html> (accessed February 15, 2013).
5. See Luke Coffey, “Argentina No Longer Deserves to Be a Major Non-NATO Ally of the U.S.,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3782, November 26, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/11/argentina-no-longer-deserves-to-be-a-major-non-nato-ally-of-the-us>.
6. U.S. Department of State, “Remarks with Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner,” March 1, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/03/137539.htm> (accessed February 15, 2013).

lending to Argentina through the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank until it becomes a freer and better neighbor and ally.

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