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The Falkland Islands: Creative Claims and the 2013 Referendum

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ALASDAIR PINKERTON, JUL 16 2012

On 12 June 2012, the Falkland Islands Government (FIG) announced that a referendum would be held in early 2013 to determine the future sovereignty of the Falkland Islands. This is an unprecedented and dramatic move in the international relations of the South Atlantic. Falkland Islanders will, for the first time in their history, have a direct democratic say in the future political allegiance of their island nation. For many within the Falklands and elsewhere the news of a referendum came as a complete surprise. But the FIG's plan must also be regarded as only the latest move in a series of high-profile clashes, stunts and diplomatic encounters that have collectively animated the 30th anniversary of the Falklands Conflict.

Increased tensions

UK-Argentine relations are at their lowest point in 30 years (see Dodds 2012). Ever since Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner assumed their consecutive Presidencies of Argentina (beginning in 2003), they have pressed Argentina's sovereignty claims over the Falklands/Malvinas with ever-greater force. In 2007, for example, Nestor Kirchner scrapped an UK-Argentine accord intended to foster cooperation on oil exploration around the Falklands. Energy companies active in the Falklands were, in turn, banned from operating in Argentina. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK) has continued her late-husband's stance on the Islands. In December 2011 the Mercosur trading bloc—which includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay—agreed to close their ports to ships flying the Falkland Islands flag in sympathy for Argentina's claims to the Islands.

The 2011 Mercosur agreement was the opening economic salvo in an ongoing series of high profile geopolitical gestures designed to unsettle and undermine what Argentina regards as the 'illegal occupation' of the Islands by the United Kingdom. As I have argued elsewhere (with Klaus Dodds), the Argentine government has embraced three distinct strategies in the recent pursuance of their claim to the Falklands/Malvinas: (i) they have sought to publicly embarrass the UK government at every opportunity, as William Hague discovered to his chagrin, (ii) they press for Latin American—including Mercosur—and even North American political support at every regional and international summit, and (iii) they press their claims at a popular level by recruiting and/or encouraging 'celebrity' supporters (see Benwell et al 2012) while releasing advertisements aimed at domestic and international audiences. Each of these strategies is undertaken with an assertive, even aggressive, determination. Even so, the prospect of a renewed military encounter in the South Atlantic is highly unlikely. There is neither the popular desire nor military capacity within Argentina to undertake a military invasion such as the one that occurred in 1982. As CFK and her Foreign Minister, Héctor Timerman, have each stated, Argentina is committed to using the 'creativity' of its 'publicists' in pursuing their territorial ambitions.

Creative claims

One such example of this creativity was the Olympics-inspired commercial shown initially on Argentine television on 2nd May 2012, but which went 'viral' shortly thereafter. The film featured the Argentine Olympic hopeful, Fernando Zylberberg, undertaking intense physical training in advance of the 2012 Olympics Games. While this, in itself, is hardly remarkable, it is the film's striking (and more subtle) geographies that propelled it to international attention.

The Falkland Islands: Creative Claims and the 2013 Referendum

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Rather than featuring the iconic avenues of Buenos Aires, or the mountains of Patagonia, this particular video was secretly filmed in and around Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands, in March 2012. Icons of Stanley are woven into Zylberberg's training routine. The picnic tables outside the Globe Tavern become the apparatus for calisthenics, Ross Road (site of the Governor's residence) is used for burst sprinting and, perhaps most controversially, Stanley's Great War memorial is the scene for a bit of real world 'step aerobics'. These shots are further interspersed with images of red telephone boxes, Union and Falkland Island flags, Land Rovers and UK streets signs. Just as we think the athlete has pushed himself as far as he can possibly go—a physical state signalled [at approx. 1:00m] by his strained attempt to compete a single gruelling press-up—he is splendidly restored to physical peak as his lips connect with the sand of the disputed Islands. Stirring stuff, made all the more emotional by the obligatory soundtrack of strings and brass instruments, and the closing titles, which read: "Para competir en suelo inglés entrenamos en suelo argentino" [to compete on English soil we train on Argentine soil].

The UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague, condemned the video as "a stunt", while Falkland Islands Government representative Ian Hansen expressed "disappointment" that Argentina had sought to use the Olympics "in the service of their territorial ambitions". Hansen also confirmed that the video had been made without the knowledge of local authorities.

Falkland Islanders were quick to note the more sinister implications of the video. Other than the presence of Zylberberg, for example, the Islands are shown to be entirely and eerily depopulated—a powerful visual gesture that has been interpreted in Stanley as symbolic of Argentina's policy towards the Islands, i.e. "to pretend that the people of the Falkland Islands do not exist". There are also strong resonances with the events of thirty years ago. Just as in 1982, the Islands are represented as a testing ground for a particular expression of Argentine power, albeit with a sporting motif that reflects CFK's supposed commitment to "creativity and truth" as opposed to any renewed military campaign.

But the video is not beyond playing on the sentiment and emotion attached to the Falklands conflict. The timing (coincident with the 30th anniversary) and closing dedication to the memory of the "fallen soldiers and war veterans" root the commercial in the events of 1982. The producers—a team working for Y&R Buenos Aires (part of Sir Martin Sorrell's WPP)—have also acknowledged that the war and its legacies were fundamental in the inception of the campaign. "The first thing we did", they state, "was to test the script with the Malvinas veterans: they were really motivated". In a curious blurring of fiction and fact even the athlete-cum-advertising star, Fernando Zylberberg, seems to have been affected by the associations with 1982. "I ran all over the Islands so as to have the different sequences," he is reported as saying. "There were many veterans so in my head I felt I was running in a battlefield and after that it's impossible not to have energy to keep running."

Falkland Islanders responded to the Zylberberg film with a humorous video riposte that subverted and diffused the Argentine commercial in equal measure. Using much of the footage from the original video, Islanders spliced images of a London Routemaster bus driving through Stanley, giving the impression that Zylberberg (and, by implication, Argentina) had, again, failed to catch their Falklands opportunity. The spoof closes with the tagline, "To catch a bus on Falklands soil...we advise not using an Argentine timetable".

Democratic devices

With the announcement of the referendum in 2013, the Falkland Islands Government have demonstrated their willingness to deploy democratic levers (and no shortage of creativity) in responding to the escalating rhetoric in the South Atlantic. Few people outside the FIG were privy to the decision, which would have been taken after consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London. But it would not be difficult to imagine why the UK government would have supported such a move. A referendum and its inevitable appeal to the values of self-determination, democracy and human rights addresses many of the concerns perennially discussed at the UN's Special Committee on Decolonisation while providing a straightforwardly democratic message for international observers and global media audiences. The announcement has also had the effect, at least momentarily, of neutralising Argentina's particular brand of creativity and 'soft power'. It defiantly challenges Mrs Kirchner's suggestion that the UK is an unwanted colonial presence in Latin America and starkly juxtaposes Falklands self-

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determination with Argentina's appeal to issues of geographical proximity. The FIG played their ace card and caught their opponents off guard. But the announcement of the referendum begs more questions than it answers.

Unlike in Gibraltar (another of Britain's politically contested Overseas Territories which undertook referenda in both 1967 and 2002) the basis of the referendum is, as yet, unclear. In the case of Gibraltar, registered voters were asked in 2002 to accept or reject a negotiated settlement (joint sovereignty) between the governments of Spain and the UK. Gibraltarians rejected the 'joint sovereignty' proposals with an overwhelming majority. In the context of the Falkland Islands there is no such negotiated settlement to seek approval for, nor is there likely to be one before Spring 2013. A poll is, therefore, most likely to test Islanders desire to remain a British Overseas Territory. It is less certain how or whether the 'alternative' will be framed. Will Islanders be asked whether they wish the Islands to become independent, or will they be asked to consider opening discussions with their near neighbours in Argentina? It is also uncertain whether there will be active campaigning. If so, who would act as the cheerleaders for the respective campaigns, particularly that of the 'alternative'? If *not*, the FIG may stand accused of presiding over a referendum with a predetermined outcome and a deficit of democratic credibility. Added pressure may come from a number of high profile individuals born in the Falkland Islands who have relocated and or taken citizenship within Argentina (known in Argentina as *Malvinense*), the most prominent and outspoken of whom is Alejandro Betts.

Conclusions

For those of us interested in geopolitics, this latest episode in Falkland Islands-Argentine-UK relations is a powerful reminder of the unresolved emotions associated with the 1982 conflict, and further evidence of Argentina's strategy of using 'soft power' (including commercials and celebrity endorsements) in the pursuit of their territorial claims in the South Atlantic. It is also a reminder of the importance of sport and more particularly the Olympic Games as a lightning rod for political protest, as a venue for competing ideologies, and as a forum for geopolitical intrigue. It equally serves to highlight that advertising, and the globalised world of advertising agencies, is powerful, intensely (geo)political and fickle. It was, after all, a young advertising executive called Martin Sorrell who masterminded the expansion of Saatchi & Saatchi—reputedly Margaret Thatcher's favourite advertising agency—during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The 2013 referendum is intended to act as a powerful statement of intent. Just as the people of Gibraltar rejected Franco's aggressions in 1967 and joint sovereignty proposals in 2002, the 3000 strong community in the South Atlantic is widely expected to favour continued links with the UK as an Overseas Territory. Will Argentina listen to such a result? No. Nor, ultimately, is the referendum intended to persuade Argentina. Rather, the Falkland Islands Government hope that a clear, resolute, and democratic statement of Falkland Islander opinion will persuade South American neighbours (such as Brazil, Uruguay and Chile) and the wider international community that future support for Argentina's regional policies can no longer be considered acceptable. The US may be harder to persuade judging by a recent exchange between State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland and Associated Press correspondent Matthew Lee at a Washington D.C. press conference. Nuland was repeatedly pressed by Lee on whether the Obama administration would respect the outcome of the proposed Falklands referendum. Nuland's equivocation, accompanied by a re-statement of the US's "neutrality", will make for particularly painful viewing in London and Stanley [see video from 24m]. Nonetheless, Nuland's obfuscation reminds us that while the outcome of the 2013 referendum may be fairly easy to anticipate, the diplomatic reflexes of other countries—even those that have been evangelical in the promotion of democratic principles around the world—may be less straightforward to predict.

The challenge for the Falkland Islands Government now is to ensure that, in seeking a clear democratic mandate, it embraces the highest principles of democratic process and participation. Anything less would play into the hands of Argentina and risk the FIG sacrificing their 'ace' rather too cheaply.

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Dr. Alasdair Pinkerton is a Lecturer in Geography and Geopolitics at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research concentrates on the geopolitics of communications and the media and he is particularly interested in

The Falkland Islands: Creative Claims and the 2013 Referendum

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international broadcasting and new social media. He is currently writing a book called 'Radio' for Reaktion press (with the Science Museum) due to be published next year. Dr. Pinkerton teaches on Royal Holloway's new MSc Geopolitics & Security launching in September 2012.

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About the author:

Alasdair Pinkerton is Senior Lecturer in Geopolitics in the department of Geography at Royal Holloway University of London, and plays a key role in the MSc in Geopolitics and Security.