

**ELEMENTS OF GEOPOLITICS:
RELEVANCE OF THE GEOGRAPHIC FACTOR
IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC CONFLICT**

Geography, along with politics and technology, forms one of the pillars upon which geopolitics is built. Politics, understood as the discipline that studies state-related practices, is influenced by both geographic factors and technological possibilities (communications, transportation infrastructure, etc.)¹. Based on these definitions, I propose to present the relevance of geographic factors in the geopolitical study of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, located in the South Atlantic.

Brief historical background:

The Malvinas/Falkland Islands are an archipelago located in the South Atlantic, 500 km off the southeastern coast of Argentina and part of its continental shelf. The two largest islands are West Falkland (Isla Gran Malvina) and East Falkland (Isla Soledad)². It is not definitively known who first discovered the islands, and this uncertainty has been exploited by various countries to claim discovery rights (England, the Netherlands, France, and Spain). In the mid-18th century, Spain—then the colonial power occupying the southern part of the American continent—gained control of the small settlement of Port Saint-Louis from France, formalizing Spain's first permanent presence on the islands. In 1811, during the Spanish colonies' independence process, Spain abandoned the islands to strengthen its positions on the continent against independence forces. It is worth noting that there were already English settlements on the islands dedicated to the whaling industry.

The islands were repopulated by Americans in 1820, this time by the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata (later the Argentine Confederation and ultimately the modern Argentine state), which had emerged from the wars of independence against Spain. Between 1820 and 1833, the islands were primarily engaged in whaling and sealing. In 1831, due to a sovereignty dispute, the USS Lexington of the US Navy attacked Puerto Soledad and expelled the Argentine authorities, leaving the town in a state of anarchy. Buenos Aires broke off relations with Washington, and order was not restored until

¹ Rodríguez, Y. (2023) – *Por un pedazo de tierra*. Editorial Deusto. Madrid. pp. 5–10.

² There are also smaller islands: South Georgia Islands and South Sandwich Islands.

1833, when the Royal Navy took advantage of the state of abandonment and anarchy to land on the islands, raise the Union Jack, and defeat the small remaining Argentine garrison in some of the settlements³.

The situation remained largely unchanged until 1982. At that time, Argentina was under a military dictatorship that was losing internal popularity. In an effort to regain support, the government decided in April to recover control of the islands through a military operation. After nearly three months of war, the Argentine garrison surrendered to the British and withdrew from the islands—a situation that continues to this day.

Relevance of geographic factors in the geopolitical understanding of the conflict:

The Malvinas/Falkland Islands represent, in geographic terms, a similar strategic interest for both countries involved in the dispute. We will focus on two geographic factors: natural resources and strategic location.

Natural Resources:

- **Oil.** Since 1993, it has been known that the islands sit above a 200,000 km² reserve of crude oil, equivalent to approximately 60 billion USD (though infrastructure for extraction is not yet in place).
- **Fishing.** This activity accounts for 60% of the archipelago's economic activity. Political tensions have frequently arisen over overlapping exclusive economic zones between the British-controlled island government and Argentina.

Strategic Location:

- **Control of maritime routes.** Control of the islands allows for greater oversight of maritime traffic through the Drake Passage, located south of the continent. In 1833, this was the only navigable route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (the Panama Canal only became operational in 1912, nearly 80 years later). During both World Wars, the South Atlantic was the site of naval clashes between the Royal Navy and the German Navy: the Battle of the Falklands in 1914 and the Battle of the River Plate in 1939⁴. Today, the ongoing increase in

³ Yofre, J. (2011) – *1982: Los documentos secretos de Malvinas/Falklands y el derrumbe del proceso*. Editorial Sudamericana. Buenos Aires. pp. 34–36.

⁴ Fraga, R. (2004) – *El factor estratégico en la cuestión Malvinas/Falklands*. Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, no. 9. Buenos Aires, Argentina. pp. 2–4.

the size of merchant ships may render the Panama Canal obsolete⁵, revaluing the Drake Passage⁶.

- **Military/Antarctic projection:** From a thalassocratic perspective, the British military base at Mount Pleasant, located on the islands, serves as a strategic point for both NATO and the United Kingdom for intervention in Antarctica, South America, and southern Africa. It is Britain's southernmost military base. The base currently houses 1,200 personnel⁷, and includes a port and a military airfield. The Antarctic issue is critical⁸: the British territorial claim partially overlaps with Argentina's claim, which lies near the archipelago. From the islands, the icebreaker HMS Protector delivers supplies to British outposts on the White Continent.

Conclusions:

Geographic factors are extremely useful for understanding the geopolitical value of the islands to Great Britain, especially considering their distance of 13,000 km from London. There are other socio-cultural factors (the islanders' right to self-determination) and symbolic concerns (the risk of a domino effect in other British colonies). While for Argentina the geographic element—particularly natural resources—is also significant, the country's main geopolitical factor is not strictly geographic but political. It lies in the factual impossibility of projecting any form of sovereignty⁹ over a territory Argentina considers its own, by direct inheritance from Spain (the *uti possidetis iuris* principle), enshrined in its National Constitution as a permanently claimed territory.

⁵ Jorge Battaglino, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella.

⁶ Yofre, op. cit.

⁷ Data from 2012.

⁸ Snyder, C. (1989) – *The Falklands War of 1982: A Legal, Diplomatic and Strategic Evaluation*. Documents of Politics, Brock University, Ontario. pp. 95–97.

⁹ According to Krasner, S., in his book *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (2001), there are four types of sovereignty: legal-international, westphalian, domestic, and interdependent.