

Political and Diplomatic Lessons of the Falklands War

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the Thatcher administration's foreign diplomacy and conduct of war during the Falklands War. Full-fledged research on the history of this war has been facilitated by the publication of a detailed official history of the Falklands War by Professor Lawrence Freedman of King's College London, along with the release of previously closed documents and other material by the British National Archives in December 2012.¹ Leaving the details of the Falklands War to Freedman's official history, this paper shall examine the Thatcher administration's conduct of war, specifically: (1) the extent to which the Thatcher administration was aware of the situation before the war; and (2) the Thatcher administration's foreign diplomacy and conduct of war.

1. Did Prime Minister Thatcher have a grasp of the situation?

When unraveling the history of the Falklands War, the issues which always become the focus of debate are whether Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was adequately aware of the situation regarding the Falklands before the war, and if so, the degree to which she did and the reasons why she did not take earlier action. The Thatcher administration's handling of the Falklands issue is often compared with the policy of deterrence adopted by James Callaghan's Labour Party administration in 1977. The Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) of the Cabinet Office estimated in October 1977 that Argentine forces were plotting a landing on the South Sandwich Islands, which was British territory. Prime Minister Callaghan accordingly made the risky decision to prepare for any contingency by sending a British fleet to stand by in the vicinity of the Falklands.²

Compared to the action taken by the Callaghan administration, the Thatcher administration's actions in 1982 seem to lack a sense of urgency. In particular, despite the heightened tension in British-Argentine relations which had resulted when Constantino Davidoff, an Argentine scrap metal dealer, landed on the British island of South Georgia without authorization in March 1982 and raised the Argentine flag there, Foreign Secretary Peter Carington, in charge of the Thatcher administration's foreign diplomacy, visited Israel, and Admiral Terence Lewin, who headed the military as Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, left for a visit to New Zealand. While the British were thus seemingly unable or unwilling to take any action, Argentina's military forces suddenly assaulted and occupied the Falkland Islands. As a result, some have accused the Thatcher administration of negligence for many years after the war. To address this question, the British government established the Falkland Islands Review Committee (also called the Franks Committee) after the war to carry

¹ Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, Vols. I-II, (Routledge 2005).

² Operation Journey 1977, FCO 7/4494, TNA (*National Archives, Kew*).

out a detailed study of the process leading up to Argentina's occupation of the islands. The Committee concluded that the Thatcher administration was not guilty of negligence.³

At the heart of this matter is the question of whether Thatcher and Carington possessed prior intelligence regarding Argentine intentions. According to the minutes of the Franks Committee that were made public by the British National Archives in December 2012, the JIC had not given Thatcher any prior warning. Thatcher herself testified repeatedly to the Franks Committee that "I never never expected the Argentines to invade the Falklands head-on," and the Franks Committee has acknowledged that "The report in the middle of 1981 is very similar to the one in 1980 but the tone, as it were, is milder in terms of the threat from the Argentine."⁴ This implies that the JIC could not predict that Argentina would resort to the use of force, even as late as just three days before the Argentine invasion. Thatcher finally accurately grasped the situation on March 31, just before Argentina launched its invasion. By this time, it was too late for the administration to take any action.

In short, it is more accurate to say that the problem lay with the JIC's capability to analyze intelligence, along with its capability to issue effective warnings. Having said that, it should be noted that even the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States, which was on friendly terms with Argentina at the time, was unable to accurately understand the situation. In other words, it was difficult for anybody to make a judgment based on the information available and predict an Argentine invasion of the Falklands at that time.⁵ Criticism of the JIC's failure to predict the Falklands invasion also benefits from hindsight, because the JIC in the early 1980s could not deal exclusively with the Falklands issue, but also had to focus on the ongoing Cold War with the Soviet Union and increasing tensions in the Middle East. In fact, it has come to light recently that Thatcher was the first prime minister to regularly attend JIC meetings in peacetime. This suggests that any assertion that she knew little about foreign or security policy is incorrect.⁶ Approximately one month prior to the invasion, Thatcher ordered the Ministry of Defence to prepare a contingency plan. It may be said that this order was issued based on her almost instinctive ability to sense crises.

2. Crisis Management under the Thatcher Administration

(1) Diplomatic Response

The Thatcher administration's crisis management following the Argentine invasion may be described as prompt and decisive. Thatcher first addressed this crisis through diplomatic channels. Specifically, she raised the issue of Argentina's invasion in the United Nations' Security Council and ensured an advantageous position for Britain in the international arena. Two days after the invasion, the Security Council adopted Resolution 502, which advised the withdrawal of the Argentine forces from the Falkland Islands. The passage of Resolution 502 represented a diplomatic victory for Britain, since it had been passed in spite of the sympathetic

³ Lord Franks, *Falklands Islands Review* (London: HMSO 1983), p. 73.

⁴ CAB 292/22, TNA.

⁵ Freedman, *Vol. I*, p. 198.

⁶ Ian Beesley & Michael Goodman, "Margaret Thatcher and the Joint Intelligence Committee," UK Cabinet Office website: <https://history.blog.gov.uk/2012/10/01/margaret-thatcher-and-the-joint-intelligence-committee/>

views towards Argentina held by many, including Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, UN Secretary General, and Jeanne Kirkpatrick, America's UN Ambassador, and despite the prevailing view that the possession of the Falkland Islands itself was a relic of the British Empire. In addition to the fact that Britain was one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, the brilliant diplomatic skills of Anthony Parsons, British Ambassador to the UN, played a large part in this diplomatic victory.

It was also important for Britain to maintain good relations with the United States. At the time, America viewed Argentina as a bulwark against communism and had amicable relations with it. America therefore remained neutral. Thatcher and Nicholas Henderson, British Ambassador to the U.S., therefore focused on establishing strong British-American relations. Immediately after the Security Council passed Resolution 502, American Secretary of State Alexander Haig offered to serve as a mediator, and the Thatcher administration, hoping to make an impression that it was making the utmost effort to resolve the crisis through diplomacy, accepted Haig's offer. Although the mediation ended in failure, Britain succeeded in leaving the impression among the international community that Argentina had refused to compromise even though Britain had made every possible diplomatic effort. Furthermore, because Thatcher maintained personal ties with Ronald Reagan, President of the U.S., America actively supported the execution of British operations during the war, including the provision of American weapons and the use of the American base on Ascension Island in the Atlantic Ocean. Reagan apparently believed that the continuation of Thatcher's administration would be preferable to its collapse and the replacement of the Conservative Party government by a Labour Party government.⁷ In short, in terms of diplomacy, Britain's efforts to convince others of its legitimacy within the UN and to maintain robust relations with America contributed greatly to Britain's subsequent prosecution of the war.

(2) Conduct of War

The establishment of a War Cabinet on April 6 played a significant role in the Thatcher administration's conduct of war, which was undertaken in parallel with its diplomacy. Thatcher's War Cabinet, which was later derided by historian Eric Hobsbawm as "Thatcher's small war cabinet," was a decision-making body that highly reflected her preferences.⁸ In the three months from April to July, the War Cabinet met 67 times. At times, when there were many issues requiring discussion, numerous meetings were held in a single day.⁹

The system of establishing a war cabinet is in keeping with the British tradition that had existed from the First World War. British war cabinets were intended to enable prompt and flexible decision-making by a small number of Cabinet members, and Thatcher's war cabinet was no exception. Hers was made unique by the exclusion of Geoffrey Howe, Chancellor of the Exchequer. While this was allegedly done on the advice of Harold Macmillan, former Prime

⁷ Dan Keohane, *Security in British Politics 1945-99* (London: Macmillan 2000), p. 77.

⁸ Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, *The Politics of Thatcherism*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd 1983), p. 261.

⁹ CAB 148/211, TNA.

Minister, it appears Thatcher herself also believed that the war effort should not be subject to fiscal constraints.¹⁰ Another feature unique to Thatcher's War Cabinet was the attendance of Admiral of the Fleet Terence Lewin, the head of the military, at its meetings. Admiral Lewin was also the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, comprised of the chiefs of the army, navy, and air force, and was the figure at the node of politics and the military. In short, since Cabinet members cannot always carry out sound war planning due to their lack of military knowledge, Admiral Lewin and the Chiefs of Staff Committee assumed the role of ensuring the reflection of Thatcher's political decisions in the operations of the forces in the field.

Lewin had an amicable relationship with Thatcher even before the Falklands War began. At the first meeting of the War Cabinet, Lewin presented the military's policy proposal and obtained the full support of the War Cabinet.¹¹ Furthermore, Lewin had personal ties with Caspar Weinberger, U.S. Secretary of Defense, and David Jones, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Considering the array of military cooperation America extended to Britain during the war, the role played by the relations between the American and British militaries was not insignificant. Following Argentina's invasion, Lewin's first act was to approach the U.S. Department of Defense about the use of the American military base and fuel on Ascension Island in the Atlantic Ocean, which suggests that the British and American staffs already had a fairly close relationship.¹²

Admiral Lewin and the chiefs of the army, navy, and air force essentially acted as military advisors to the War Cabinet. They stuck to their stance of responding to any questions Cabinet members may have had, rather than proactively providing their opinions. Lewin briefed Thatcher daily regarding the military situation, stayed abreast of the intentions of the War Cabinet, and relayed these intentions to Admiral John Fieldhouse, Fleet Commander, at the Northwood operation command center. As old acquaintances, the two admirals were able to frequently discuss with each other the intentions and the operation plans of the War Cabinet.¹³ It can be said that with Lewin single-handedly taking upon himself to do the communicating with politicians, Northwood was able to focus on operations planning.

The two most crucial political decisions made by Thatcher's War Cabinet were (1) the decision of April 30 to impose a complete blockade of the sea and airspace around the Falkland Islands, and (2) the decision of May 20 to execute a counterlanding operation in the Falkland Islands. The former meant an armed conflict with Argentina, which naturally entailed a decision to go to war. In retrospect, since we know the outcome of the war, i.e., that Britain won, its decision to impose a complete blockade may not seem all that remarkable. At the time, however, this was a decision fraught with great risk.¹⁴

The longer the War Cabinet waited to impose the blockade, however, the more Argentina would increase its troop strength in the Falklands with the addition of forces from the

¹⁰ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years Vol. I*, trans. Masahiko Ishizuka (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbun 1993), p. 238.

¹¹ CAB 148/211, TNA.

¹² C11-12: Terence Lewin, Falklands Files, LHCMA, *King's College London*.

¹³ Freedman, *Vol. II*, p. 25.

¹⁴ John Nott, *Here Today Gone Tomorrow* (London: Politico's Publishing 2002), p. 288.

mainland. Furthermore, it was clear that the onset of winter in the Falklands, which lie in the Southern Hemisphere, would increase the difficulty of military operations. Hence, the decision to impose the blockade was barely made in time. According to the minutes of the War Cabinet, Thatcher herself made the decision during the Cabinet meeting on April 25 to impose a complete blockade of the sea and airspace up to 200 nautical miles from the Falkland Islands, and to attack any Argentine military aircraft and vessel entering that area.¹⁵ Moreover, Thatcher personally explained to President Reagan that the military option was the only remaining option, and on April 30, Britain proceeded to impose a complete blockade of the area surrounding the Falklands.

The other important decision made by the War Cabinet was the decision to land British forces on the Falkland Islands and to recapture them through military means. Even during the war, the UN continuously pressured both Britain and Argentina to agree to a ceasefire. In such circumstances, deciding whether Britain should carry out an amphibious operation was a delicate issue. Thatcher therefore undertook certain diplomatic measures. Specifically, she recalled Ambassadors Parsons and Henderson from America to London, and included them in a War Cabinet meeting on May 16, at which diplomatic measures were discussed.¹⁶ The result was a foreign policy which called on Argentina to compromise by May 19, and this example is also evidence that Thatcher took into consideration the reaction of the international community and of the UN.

Meanwhile, the pros and cons of a full-fledged amphibious operation were discussed during the War Cabinet meeting of May 18.¹⁷ At the meeting, the chiefs of the army, navy, and air force each provided opinions. Aside from the concerns expressed by the Air Force over Argentina's air superiority, the service chiefs were of the view that an amphibious operation was militarily feasible and that it would be preferable to continuing with the war of attrition in the blockaded area. It was also predicted, however, that an amphibious operation would take a considerable toll of the landing forces and would invite even greater pressure from the international community for a ceasefire, and the many negative effects which could be foreseen were also discussed. Ultimately, Thatcher herself weighed the benefits of conducting an amphibious counteroffensive against the risks of not conducting such an operation, and made the decision on the spot to carry out a landing operation by May 20. Quoting the words of Thatcher, her decision was based on the following: "The later we act, the greater the risk of suffering losses will be, and the worse the situation facing our soldiers will be when we do need to fight."¹⁸

On May 20, after Argentina completely refused to accept Britain's diplomatic proposal, the War Cabinet ordered the task force to execute the landing operation. Accordingly, at 3:22 pm (local time) on the same day, British forces launched their amphibious operation, and ultimately succeeded in recapturing the islands on June 13.

¹⁵ CAB 148/211, *TNA*.

¹⁶ CAB 148/211, *TNA*.

¹⁷ CAB 148/211, *TNA*.

¹⁸ Thatcher (Vol. I), p. 282.

3. Implications for Japan

It is said that the failure of the 1956 Suez crisis was always in Thatcher's mind when dealing with the Falklands issue. Thatcher drew the following historical lessons from the Suez crisis:

- (1) Getting into a military operation requires firm determination to go to war, or confidence in the ability to finish it;
- (2) The United Kingdom should never again make the United States an enemy in an international crisis affecting U.K. interests;
- (3) The United Kingdom should ensure that its actions are in accord with international law; and
- (4) He who hesitates is lost.¹⁹

In essence, it was based on the above that Thatcher emphasized the need to have Britain's legitimacy recognized in the UN, maintained amicable relations with America, relied on a war cabinet to direct the war, and made and maintained firm decisions. If any one of these had been lacking, in all likelihood it would have been impossible for Britain to achieve the daunting goal of promptly recapturing the Falkland Islands.

The Thatcher administration's prosecution of the Falklands War also provides a number of lessons for Japan. In the area of diplomacy, the importance of the UN and the U.S.-Japan relationship need not be pointed out. In addition, however, Japan should continuously consider the extent to which it would be able to obtain the international community's support if it finds itself placed in a difficult international predicament. In the Falklands War, America, the Commonwealth nations, and the nations of the European Community which were members at the time supported Britain. The Japanese government, while consenting to the Security Council resolution, created difficulties for Thatcher by not participating in the economic sanctions against Argentina, and by voting in favor of the UN proposal of June 4 for an immediate ceasefire.²⁰ It is certainly conceivable that the Japanese government struggled with its response, since the Falklands War was an event which occurred outside of the framework of the ongoing East-West Cold War. Nevertheless, Japan should consider how many countries would support Japan if it should be confronted by a similar territorial dispute in the future.

With regard to crisis management, the system of establishing a war cabinet to direct a war also merits attention. Confronted with the critically difficult situation of having to recapture the Falkland Islands, Thatcher consolidated all decision-making powers related to the crisis within the War Cabinet and established a speedy and flexible decision-making arrangement in a country in which politics were normally based upon parliamentary democracy and consensus. This arrangement has been institutionalized into what is now the National Security Council (NSC). If the Falklands issue were to resurface, the present British administration

¹⁹ Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London: Harper Collins 1995), p. 81.

²⁰ Thatcher (Vol. I), p. 293.

has the ability to conduct crisis management using this institutionalized system of the NSC.²¹ As the Japanese government prepares to establish its own NSC, the British experience during the Falklands War represents a treasure trove of lessons for the Japanese NSC. These lessons include those concerning issues such as the civil-military relationship within the NSC, how to consolidate intelligence and reflect it in decision-making by politicians during the management of crises, and how to make bureaucratic organizations which are normally overly conscious of their respective institutional interests and territory put these aside and follow the NSC.

The final lesson of importance is indeed more of an “art,” namely, the importance of the leadership and determination of the Prime Minister. While these are the only aspects which cannot be institutionalized like an NSC, they nevertheless still are vital. During the Falklands War, Thatcher continued with the war and firmly maintained her stance of recapturing the Falkland Islands, regardless of the continuous pressure from within and without demanding a ceasefire, and regardless of the fact that at times President Reagan, her friend and ally, tried to persuade her to resolve the conflict by non-military means. Japan has much to learn from this as well.

²¹ In practice, the intervention in Libya in 2011 was led by the NSC. House of Commons, Official Report, 1 Dec 2011, “Libya Crisis”; Peter Hennessy, *Distilling the Frenzy* (London: Biteback Publishing 2013), p. 110.

