



The defence of the Falkland Islands

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The reconfiguration of the Armed Forces envisaged in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review has raised questions about the United Kingdom's ability to defend the Falkland Islands. Of particular concern is the loss of a carrier strike capability for the next decade. The UK government is committed to supporting the Falkland Islanders right to self-determination. British forces are based in the Falklands to deter any military aggression against the South Atlantic Overseas Territories. They include air defence assets, maritime patrol capability and infantry, along with regular naval deployments. Despite the recent rise in tensions with Argentina over the Falklands, Jane's assesses the risk of a return to military conflict as remote.

This note should be read in conjunction with Library Standard Note SN05602, [Argentina and the Falkland Islands](#) (last updated 27 January 2012).

For further background, see Library Research Paper RP07/29, [The Falkland Islands: Twenty Five years on](#) (21 March 2007).

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1 Defence of the Falkland Islands: Overview

After the 1982 conflict in the Falkland Islands, the UK established a garrison consisting of naval, land and air elements. It is based at the Mount Pleasant Complex, which is based approximately 35 miles from the capital, Stanley. The mission of the British Forces South Atlantic Islands (BFSAI) is to deter any military aggression against the South Atlantic Overseas Territories. An infantry unit, four Typhoon fast-jets and Rapier surface-to-air missiles are among the assets deployed at the Mount Pleasant Complex. There is a standing naval commitment under Atlantic Patrol Task South (APTS) to provide either a destroyer or frigate and an RFA support vessel. In addition, the Falkland Islands Patrol Vessel, HMS Clyde, is permanently stationed in the region.

Prime Minister David Cameron articulated the Government position on the future of the Falkland Islands most recently on 18 January 2012:

The absolutely vital point is that we are clear that the future of the Falkland Islands is a matter for the people themselves. As long as they want to remain part of the United Kingdom and be British, they should be able to do so. That is absolutely key. I am determined to make sure that our defences and everything else are in order, which is why the National Security Council discussed the issue yesterday. The key point is that we support the Falkland Islanders' right to self-determination. I would argue that what the Argentinians have said recently is far more like colonialism, as these people want to remain British and the Argentinians want them to do something else.¹

The Prime Minister chaired a National Security Council meeting on the Falkland Islands on 17 January 2012.²

2 British forces in the Falkland Islands

British forces are based in the Falklands to deter any military aggression against the South Atlantic Overseas Territories (SAOT). The Ministry of Defence says they are there to 'to demonstrate the Government's continued commitment to the security of UK Overseas Territories in the South Atlantic.'³

The South Atlantic Overseas Territories comprises the Falklands, Ascension Island - the tropical stopover off West Africa - South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

The Commander of British Forces South Atlantic Islands (BFSAI), Brigadier Bill Aldridge, explains the purpose of the military presence:

We're here to deter any military aggression across the whole region of the South Atlantic Islands and to demonstrate the UK's commitment and capability to defend them if the need should arise.⁴

The Duke of Cambridge began a six-week tour in the Falkland Islands in early February 2012, the Ministry of Defence announced on 10 November 2011. Flight Lieutenant Wales will deploy as part of the normal squadron rotation for Search and Rescue.⁵

¹ HC Deb 18 January 2012 c 538 c744-5

² HC Deb 18 January 2012, c745

³ [MoD website](#), accessed 26 January 2012

⁴ "Falklands Garrison still going strong", *MoD military operations article*, 13 October 2011

2.1 UK military assets

UK military assets are drawn from all three services and include infantry and specialist troops, air defence assets, a maritime patrol capability and RAF Typhoon aircraft. The British Forces South Atlantic Islands (BFSAI) is based at Mount Pleasant Complex, 35 miles (56km) from the capital, Stanley. It consists of approximately 1,300 Service personnel plus around 50 MOD civil servants.⁶

As of February 2012 assets include:

- Approximately 1300 personnel
- Four Typhoon fast-jet aircraft
- VC-10 tanker aircraft
- Hercules C-130 aircraft
- Rapier surface-to-air missiles
- Frigate or Destroyer (currently Type 23 frigate HMS Montrose to be replaced by Type 45 destroyer HMS Dauntless)
- Royal Fleet Auxiliary Gold Rover
- HMS Clyde permanently stationed in the region as Falklands Patrol
- Infantry company currently from 2 Scots

The RAF currently has four Typhoon fast-jet aircraft based at Mount Pleasant Airfield to provide air defence of the islands; one VC-10 tanker aircraft for air-to-air refuelling; and one Hercules C-130 aircraft providing airborne maritime patrol capability, including fisheries patrolling. The C130 can also be used for air transport or medical evacuation if required. Two Sea King helicopters are available for search and rescue coverage; while the RAF regiment provides a Rapier Squadron of surface-to-air missiles. In addition, two Sikorski S61 helicopters, operated by British International, are based at Mount Pleasant for the routine movement of personnel and freight. Air traffic control, fire and meteorological services are also present. Remotely deployed early warning radars also provide an air defence framework.⁷

Atlantic Patrol Task (South), APT(S), is the standing naval commitment to provide either a destroyer or a frigate and an RFA support vessel to the South Atlantic and the West African region. The vessel is present in the Falkland Islands area for the majority of the year, including through the southern winter, and is at a maximum of 14 days notice from the islands for the remainder of the year. The current APTS vessel is the Type 23 frigate HMS Montrose, supported by RFA tanker Gold Rover⁸. HMS Montrose began her 6½ month deployment in October 2011⁹. She is to be replaced by Type 45 destroyer HMS Dauntless in

⁵ “Duke of Cambridge to deploy to Falklands”, *Defence News*, 10 November 2011 [online] (accessed 11 January 2012)

⁶ MoD email, 17 January 2012

⁷ More information on the RAF deployment is available on its [website](#)

⁸ “RFA Black Rover returns from 18 month deployment”, *Defence News*, 29 September 2011

⁹ “Montrose begins six month stint in South Atlantic”, *Royal Navy News*, 25 October 2011

spring 2012¹⁰. Type 42 destroyer HMS Edinburgh was on patrol prior to HMS Montrose for much of 2011.

In addition, HMS Clyde¹¹ is permanently stationed in the region as the Falkland Islands Patrol Vessel. The ship's company rotates every six months. A nuclear-powered attack submarine also supplements Atlantic Patrol Task South, on occasion. A Naval Engineering unit supports naval assets in the region. HMS Protector deployed to the Antarctic and South Atlantic in January 2012 to take up duties as the Ice Patrol Ship. HMS Protector is on loan from Norway and replaces the ice patrol ship HMS Endurance, in dock since 2008 with damage sustained by flooding.^{12 13}

The Falkland Islands Reinforcement Infantry company rotates on a regular basis.

A number of joint units also support Armed Forces personnel and assets based in the Falkland Islands, including:

- Falkland Islands Joint Logistics Unit
- Falkland Islands Support Unit
- Joint Communications Unit Falkland Islands
- Joint Services Provost and Security Unit
- Joint Services signals Unit.

The Falkland Islands Defence Force provides local support to British military personnel. Funded by the Falkland Islands Government, the Defence Force is recognised as a skilled and effective Territorial Army unit, not only forming an integral part of the Islands' defence operation, but also carrying out search and rescue operations.

The MoD provides a brief introduction to the Falkland Islands for the service community, including information on weather and flying time (18 hours).¹⁴

Relevant acronyms

BFSAI - British Forces South Atlantic Islands

SAOT – South Atlantic Overseas Territories

APTS - Atlantic Patrol Task South

2.2 Public expenditure

The cost of maintaining British forces in the Falkland Islands over the last five years has been as follows:¹⁵

¹⁰ "Royal Navy to send HMS Dauntless to Falkland Islands", *Daily Telegraph*, 31 January 2012

¹¹ More on HMS Clyde can be found on the Royal Navy [website](#)

¹² HC Deb 24 March 2011 c1228W

¹³ "HMS Protector arrives in South Atlantic", *Royal Navy*, 26 January 2012

¹⁴ "About the Falklands", *MoD website*, accessed 26 January 2012

Financial Year	£ million
2006-07	65
2007-08	67
2008-09	70
2009-10	73
2010-11	75

The Shadow Defence Secretary, Jim Murphy MP, tabled a written parliamentary question on 23 January 2012 requesting information about the cost to the public purse of protecting the Falkland Islands in each year since 1985; and what estimate has been made of the future costs of defending the Islands in each year to 2015. He is awaiting a reply.

2.3 Impact of port closures

The decision by a number of South American countries to close their ports to Falklands shipping does not affect Royal Naval vessels. It only affects ships sailing under a Falklands flag. Since the closure was announced, HMS Protector, an ice patrol vessel on a scientific mission to the South Atlantic, made a routine port visit to Montevideo in Uruguay in early January 2012. The Vice President of the Uruguayan Ports Authority, Juan Jose Dominguez, confirmed HMS Protector had full permission to visit Montevideo, saying “the issue is the Malvinas [Falkland Islands] flag.”¹⁶

3 The debate about the impact of the defence cuts

The reconfiguration of the Armed Forces envisaged in the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) of 2010 has led many analysts to question whether there is in fact a mismatch between intended strategy and the means to implement it. The loss of carrier strike capability for the next decade, the reduction in amphibious capability and the revision of the planning assumptions to reflect a much reduced intervention capability, and a smaller stabilisation capability, have raised questions over the UK’s capacity for effective force projection in the future, its ability to conduct operations on the level of the Falklands Conflict, the Gulf War in 1990, or indeed to make a meaningful contribution to the types of coalition operations seen more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁷

The new Defence Planning Assumptions (DPA) outlined in the SDSR envisages a future intervention operation envisages a force size of approximately two-thirds of that originally

¹⁵ HC Deb 24 January 2012 c185-6W additional note provided in the WPQ: These are the costs to the Chief of Joint Operations Top Level Budget which is responsible for the Falkland Islands. The MOD’s core budget is separated into seven top level budget holders (TLBs), each responsible for delivering individual military objectives. Within these TLBs, the budget is not routinely allocated to regions. To provide the level of detailed breakdown for each TLBs expenditure in relation to the Falkland Islands would incur disproportionate cost

¹⁶ [Defence in the Media](#), *Defence News*, 6 January 2012

¹⁷ See for example, Con Coughlin, “Defence review: these cuts leave us vulnerable to our enemies around the world”, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2010

deployed into Iraq in 2003;¹⁸ while the stabilisation capability is approximately two-thirds the size of the stabilisation force which is currently deployed in Afghanistan.¹⁹

The decision to cut the UK's carrier strike capability for the next decade has epitomised this debate over grand strategy and whether the UK will be willing, or indeed able, to match the ambitions of the National Security Strategy. For many analysts, the decision represents "a deliberate reduction of the UK's capacity to act unilaterally far from home in the immediate years to come",²⁰ "explicitly lowers Britain's level of ambition for expeditionary operations",²¹ and "questions the navy's global reach".²² The ability of the UK to adequately defend the Falklands has been frequently raised as a concern in this regard.

The MOD sought to address this question in the briefing pack accompanying the SDSR:

Could you still retake the Falklands if they were lost?

Our very capable garrison and ability to reinforce rapidly by air means that we do not expect to lose them in the first place.²³

Dr Julian Lewis MP asked the following question on 14 December 2011:

Dr Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what recent assessment he has made of the level of potential military threat to British sovereignty over the Falklands Islands; what military resources the UK has available to defend the Islands at short notice; what substitute sources of deployable airpower remain in the absence of aircraft carriers; and if he will make a statement; (2) what arrangements are in place to defend (a) UK military assets on the Falkland Islands from attack from (i) airborne, (ii) special and (ii) naval forces and (b) the air link to the Falklands Islands from potential surface-to-air threats from ships operating in international waters.

Nick Harvey [holding answer 12 December 2011]: The Ministry of Defence undertakes regular assessments of potential military threats to the Falkland Islands to ensure that we retain appropriate levels of defensive capabilities to address any such threats.

A range of military assets are deployed in defence of the Falkland Islands, including air defence aircraft, naval vessels and ground forces. These assets are capable of defending themselves and ensuring the security and territorial integrity of the Islands and its population. We also retain the ability to reinforce these assets with additional deployed forces, including air power, if required.²⁴

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence, Gerald Howarth, told the Commons on 26 January 2012:

all the advice that we have received says that the Argentines have neither the capability nor the intention to repeat the folly of 1982 and that the military deterrent we have in place is fully up to the task. I assure my hon. Friend and the House that, in this 30th anniversary year, all of us, as Ministers, are much seized of the matter.²⁵

¹⁸ 46,000 personnel during the combat phase

¹⁹ Currently 9,500 personnel

²⁰ "Arm's length approach sees the UK doing less", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 27 October 2010"

²¹ "Britain lowers its military sights", *IJSS Commentary*, 19 October 2010

²² Christian Le Miere, "Cuts cast doubts over UK navy's global reach", *IJSS Commentary*, 19 October 2010

²³ SDSR Briefing pack, October 2010

²⁴ HC Deb 14 December 2011 c798W

²⁵ HC Deb 26 January 2012 c488

An article in *The Daily Telegraph* in October 2010 observed: “the big test of whether the 2010 SDSR has been a success will come when the next strategic shock arrives. The Falklands War, the first Iraq War, the Balkan crisis, 9/11, the Afghanistan War, were all entirely unpredicted. No one knows what form the next strategic shock will take, only that it will come”.²⁶

Jane’s Defence Weekly has argued:

Although there is a commitment to maintain a ‘broad spectrum’ of defence capability, there is considerably more space given over to the UK’s mutual dependence upon its allies and ensuring greater effect by combining its defence capability with development, diplomatic and intelligence capacity [...]

Nowhere in the SDSR is there any real acknowledgement that the risks of such sweeping cuts means that we may well identify a threat that we no longer have the ability to address.²⁷

The assessment went on to conclude:

A hurried review, driven largely by the Treasury, may have made assumptions about the last wars on the ability of allies to agree – and the efficacy of an ‘arm’s length’ security strategy – that will tightly constrain our flexibility in the coming decade. Such constraints may potentially preclude, as examples, a second Falklands operation or even a similar action to that seen in Sierra Leone.

The UK military may have lost its ability to respond to these without recourse to its allies: fine and good, as long as the threats the country faces remain as they are, do not do anything unexpected and we march in step with all our friends abroad.²⁸

The MOD has stressed that it has the ability to rapidly reinforce its military capabilities in the Southern Atlantic if necessary. The Chiefs of Staff published a letter to *The Times* in November 2010 responding directly to concerns over defence of the Falklands:

We are all acutely aware of our responsibilities (in the Falklands). We have comprehensive defences in place, unlike 1982 - including surface ships, submarines, a well-defended airfield with Typhoon jets and a strong land component with an ability to rapidly reinforce if necessary.

We keep our plans for protecting the Falklands under close review at all times and, while we cannot comment on the detail of those plans, we can assure you they are robust and able to defend against any and all likely threats.²⁹

Following suggestions that there is a shortage of RAF pilots for the UK Libya mission, Operation Ellamy, in March 2011, the MOD issued a statement outlining:

No trained front line pilots are being made redundant and we have enough aircraft and people to carry out all the operational tasks placed on us. There is no shortage of pilots and we are able to cover the Falkland Islands, UK air

²⁶ “National security strategy’s real test will come when the next shock arrives”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 October 2010

²⁷ “Arm’s length approach sees the UK doing less”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 27 October 2010

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ See [letter from the Chiefs of the Defence Staff](#) to *The Times* on 12 November 2010

defence, Afghanistan, training requirements and operations in Libya with sufficiently trained Typhoon and Tornado pilots.³⁰

In June 2011 in a [letter in the Daily Telegraph](#) Admiral Sir John Woodward, the head of the naval task force during the Falklands conflict, warned that defence cuts mean Britain could now do “precisely nothing” to prevent Argentina retaking the Islands. The MOD replied, as they did in October 2010:

Claims that the Falkland Islands could be taken without a fight are completely without substance. The current garrison in the Falkland Islands is much larger in scale and has a greater capability than in 1980, and this together with our ability to reinforce rapidly by air has been maintained as part of the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

We have a far greater presence than previously - not least a well defended airfield with Typhoon aircraft, and are able to respond to any and all threats. We will keep our network of permanent defence joint operating bases, including the British Forces South Atlantic Islands, based on the Falklands Islands and Ascension Island, and maintain regular presence in South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.³¹

The Defence Secretary, Liam Fox, speaking to the UK Reform think-tank on defence issues on 26 June 2011, said:

We have Typhoons already stationed there (Falklands). We have a very clear message that we have both the naval power if necessary, and certainly any intent to ensure that the Falkland Islands are kept free and their people enjoy the liberation we fought so hard for 30 years ago.

The ‘gap’ in the carrier strike capability as part of the SDSR is repeatedly raised by those concerned with the implications for the defence of the Falklands as a result of the Defence review. HMS Ark Royal was decommissioned in 2011, the Harrier combat aircraft was retired and HMS Illustrious, the sole remaining Invincible-class aircraft carrier, is to be withdrawn from service in 2014. HMS Illustrious has been refitted as a helicopter carrier following the withdrawal of the Harrier fleet. The first of the Queen Elizabeth-class carriers is not expected to enter service until about 2020. Until then, the Royal Navy has no fixed-wing carrier strike capability.

The UK National Defence Association (UKNDA) published a report entitled ‘Inconvenient Truths – Threats Justify Prioritising Defence’ in September 2011. The UKNDA says ‘our assessment is that current force levels are inadequate to hold off even a small-size invasion,’ that any reinforcement would be reliant on timely intelligence (which might be too late), and argues ‘once lost, the islands would be very difficult to retake, particularly with no air cover over a task force.’³² The report was compiled by four former defence chiefs³³ and the foreword was written by the Hon Bernard Jenkin MP. One of the authors, Air Commodore Andrew Lambert, was separately quoted in the *Guardian* saying the “British public is not aware of how thin the ice is ... or how bad things could get... (the Falkland Islands were) ripe for the picking”. He also warned that one must benchmark against Argentine capability, since

³⁰ Ministry of Defence, Defence in the Media, 29 March 2011

³¹ [MOD, Defence in the Media, 3 August 2011](#)

³² [Inconvenient Truths, UKNDA, September 2011](#)

³³ Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon, General Sir Michael Rose, Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham and Air Commodore Andrew Lambert

“intent can change overnight”, undermining any reliance on Argentina’s stated non-aggressive approach.³⁴ The UKNDA campaigns for “sufficient, appropriate and fully funded Armed Forces that the nation needs to defend effectively the United Kingdom.”

Admiral (Ret’d) Sir John “Sandy” Woodward, who commanded UK naval forces during the 1982 Falklands war, has argued the Falklands ‘are now perilously close to being indefensible.’ He argues the defence cuts have left the navy in ‘a position from which we are incapable of defending our territory in the south Atlantic’ and warns the “Government is sleep-walking towards disaster”. He warns current plans depend on reinforcements arriving by air at Mount Pleasant, but if that was made inoperable air reinforcement would have nowhere to land and the Navy lack’s an aircraft carrier from which to fly fixed-wing aircraft.³⁵

Lieutenant-Colonel Ewen Southby-Tailyour, editor of Jane's Amphibious and Special Forces, echoes that view. He suggests ‘if Argentina owned Mount Pleasant airfield then frankly they've captured the island.... once you've got Mount Pleasant airfield there's no way that anything flying out of Ascension Island is going to be able to land.’³⁶

Lord West, a former head of the Navy and commander of HMS Ardent during the Falklands war, suggests making it clear to the Argentines when a nuclear submarine is on patrol in the South Atlantic to show Britain’s determination to protect the Falklands following what he describes as ‘aggressive’ moves by Argentina in December 2011.³⁷

4 Argentine defence spending and assets

The Argentine defence budget will increase over the next five years by 0.1% of GDP each year. This means it will increase from the current rate of 0.8% to 1.3% of GDP. *Jane’s Defence Weekly* notes: “if the country’s economy continues to grow at the International Monetary Fund’s projected rate, defence expenditure would increase by an average of USD1.1 billion each year, reaching USD9.2 billion by 2016.” Specific procurements include four new OPV-80 ocean patrol vessels and an amphibious support ship for the navy.³⁸ [Jane's Defence & Security Intelligence & Analysis](#) provides a summary of Argentina’s defence plans:

Argentina does not have any external threats, and its past and consequent public distrust of the military still remains. There is no security imperative for a military buildup except to provide a jobs programme by reinvigorating the near-dormant defence industries. Argentina has more indigenous capability than any other South American country. Increasing production and research would create jobs. The defence technology cooperation agreement with South Africa could lead to new life for these industries in support of domestic needs and possible exports.

Military Assistance

Much of Argentina’s upgrades and equipment are produced by their indigenous industries. They do not have any dominant trade partner when it comes to defence. The country has received some US aid from the International Military Education and Training programme.

³⁴ [“Boost UK defence spending or lose the Falklands”](#), *The Guardian*, 27 September 2011

³⁵ [“The truth is we couldn’t defend anything further than the other side of the Channel”](#), *The Daily Mail*, 15 June 2011

³⁶ [“Can we still defend the Falklands”](#), *the Sunday Times*, 22 January 2012

³⁷ [Call to send nuclear submarine after ban on Falklands ships](#), *Evening Standard*, 21 December 2011

³⁸ [Argentine economy to fuel modernisation plan](#), *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 25 August 2011

The Defence Minister, Arturo Puricelli, has said Argentina “will not make the British occupation of the Islands any easier”, there has been no suggestion that Argentina intends to use force to gain sovereignty of them.

4.1 Argentine assets

A summary of the Armed Forces of Argentina is available in the IISS *Military Balance 2011*. The Armed Forces number 73,100: this includes 38,500 in the Army; 20,000 in the Navy and 14,600 in the Air force. Its assets include:

- 11 principal surface combatants including 5 Destroyers and 6 Frigates
- 3 submarines
- 121 combat capable aircraft

Gareth Jennings, head of the air desk at IHS Jane’s, observes:

while, numerically speaking, the Argentines would be able to field a larger number of aircraft than the UK in any future war, the important thing to remember is that Argentina has not purchased a single new combat aircraft since before the war in 1982... Essentially, it has the same air power it had back in 1982, minus the aircraft that were shot down. They didn't fare too well against the Sea Harriers then and they'd be torn apart by the Typhoons today.³⁹

5 Jane’s risk assessment

Jane’s Intelligence Weekly produces fortnightly security alerts. The alert covering 26 December 2011 to 8 January 2012 included the following on the Falklands

Alert Risk: Negative

Country Risk Rating: Minimal

Watch for: Increasing impatience in London concerning Argentina's renewed sovereignty offensive over the Islands. With UK-Argentina relations now at their lowest ebb since the 1982 conflict, a decision by the MERCOSUR trade grouping to deny port access to Falklands-flagged shipping has further irked London. This comes in addition to increasing Argentine naval harassment of Falklands and Spanish vessels headed for the Uruguayan port of Montevideo. The situation has deteriorated beyond the usual levels of rhetoric, and further escalatory Argentine actions - including the proxy use of ultra-nationalist groups to undertake provocative actions over the holiday season - remain an outside possibility. Nevertheless, a return to military conflict remains remote.⁴⁰

³⁹ “Can we still defend the Falklands?” *The Sunday Times*, 22 January 2012

⁴⁰ Situation Reports, *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, 23 December 2011