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ARGENTINE NAVY NO MATCH FOR BRITISH ARMADA

--GEN. GALTIERI APPARENTLY READY TO FIGHT TO LAST SAILOR

--BRITISH VICTORY COULD SPUR CHILE TO PRESS CLAIMS AGAINST OIL-RICH  
BEAGLE CHANNEL

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Great Britain seems determined to force a direct military encounter which Argentina is ill-prepared to meet. A British victory could well embolden Chile to press its own territorial claims on the Beagle Channel against its eastern neighbor.

The British First Sea Lord revealed yesterday a battle plan which calls for the imposition of a cordon sanitaire around the Falkland islands to prevent resupply of the Argentine invasion force. British strategists are apparently hoping to avoid a costly land war by focusing on a quick naval campaign designed to cripple Argentina's navy and air force.

The majority of the sophisticated ships in the British fleet are either new or have been refurbished extensively. A source familiar with British military capabilities told COHA that logistical support for the armada should not prove an insurmountable problem. British supply ships will avoid air attack by stationing themselves out of reach of Argentina's A-4 short-range aircraft which have no real air-refueling capability.

Argentine naval power is based on a collection of WW II-era ships, supplemented by a small number of relatively more modern acquisitions. The centerpiece of the Argentine fleet is an aging aircraft carrier, formerly the H.M.S. Colossus, which Britain sold more than 21 years ago. The other main components are an old U.S.-built Brooklyn class cruiser, two British-built type-42 destroyers, a pair of modern French-built corvettes, two fast attack craft and four submarines, as well as other miscellaneous ships. During a 1980 war scare with Chile, independent analysts estimated that the Argentine navy would last scarcely three days against the naval forces of Chile.

As the British fleet approaches the region of conflict, the Argentine army is expected to engage in a new round of jingoistic slogans and

proclamations of national determination. However, if Britain successfully avoids a land war, high-level Argentine naval officers will probably have little enthusiasm for a fight to the last sailor. If Argentina suffers a major naval defeat at the hands of the British, the Chilean government of Gen. Augusto Pinochet may also conclude that the time is ripe for a little saber rattling of its own over the issue of the Beagle Channel.

Chile and Argentina have locked horns for more than a century over the three tiny Beagle Channel islands of Lennox, Nueva, and Picton, located to the south of Tierra del Fuego in the Strait of Magellan. Argentina claims the islets, but Chile in its defense cites a 1978 ruling by an international arbitration panel and a Papal mediator's 1980 recommendation, which were both in its favor. Argentina has rejected the two decisions.

The three islands have enormous economic significance because of potentially rich oil resources in the area. Argentina has made a series of promising discoveries in the southern Tierra del Fuego while Chile has found oil at the eastern entrance to the Strait. In 1981, the Chilean government announced that national oil production had increased 25 percent over the previous year, largely due to wells in Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, and the Strait.

One knowledgeable Argentine source told COHA that Gen. Galtieri may have decided that he could afford to accept the decision of the Papal mediator once the Falkland Islands had been annexed. Negotiating from a position of strength, he could then force Chile to recognize Argentina's status as a transoceanic power and its separate claims to resource-rich Antarctica. That preliminary assessment is likely to change, because the Argentine navy is no match for the British armada now steaming towards the South Atlantic.

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