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ARGENTINA LOOKS TO GO NUCLEAR

- *Latin America's Nuclear Leader Appears Headed toward Weapon Capability*
- *Argentine's Wonder: Would Thatcher Have Dispatched the Falklands Task Force if Galtieri Had Had the Bomb?*
- *A Nuclear Threat could Key a Reconquest of the "Malvinas"*
- *Nuclear Program in Argentina is Under Total Control of the Navy*

Reports from Buenos Aires indicate that defeat in the Falklands war has prompted the Argentine military to make an ominous decision with grave implications for world peace: to develop a nuclear weapons capability. The motivation for this arises out of a series of conclusions that Argentine strategists have come to after non-stop meetings since the Falklands defeat. They are known to believe that the confrontation with Great Britain would have evolved far differently--and more favorably for Argentina--had they been able to threaten the deployment of nuclear weapons at that time.

According to this view, had Argentina boasted a nuclear weapons capability in April, 1982, and had it made known that it would use it against the British fleet, the conflict's outcome would have been different. For one thing, the British may have abandoned any notion of retaking the islands by force. And even if they had not, and ignored the Argentine warning by sending the fleet forth, Argentine strategists believe they stood to gain from the encounter. By staging a demonstration or, if need be, actually using the bomb against the British armada, Argentina would not only have efficiently eliminated the major threat to the garrison on the "Malvinas", it would also have forced the British into making a hard decision: either to escalate the conflict by launching a nuclear strike on the Argentine mainland, or to withdraw and accept a negotiated settlement that would have favored Argentina's claim resulting from its occupation of the principle island.

In the Argentine perspective, "nuking" a large naval task force on the high seas during a state of war as a tactic of last resort could be defended as a justifiable defensive act on the part of a weaker and seriously threatened

state confronted by a nuclear-equipped adversary backed by a super-power (in this case, the United States). On the other hand, a British nuclear retaliation against the undefended Argentine mainland, with the collateral civilian casualties and non-military destruction this entails (particularly since the focus of hostilities was centered some 600 miles off the coast), would be far less justifiable on both military and moral grounds. The Argentines believe that this view would be shared by a majority of the international community, which already had demonstrated its general predisposition towards the Argentine claim in a number of regional and U.N. resolutions.

--Another Attack on the Falklands?--

Even if flawed, this analysis by Argentina's military command may yet serve as the basis for developing a similar strategy for another attempt at re-occupying the islands. Since Argentina has not formally renounced hostilities with Britain, and since it is in the midst of a tremendous rearmament drive (all of the equipment lost in the war has been replaced, and additional military hardware has been purchased in quantity), this proposition is not that far-fetched.

This is particularly true if we consider the character and technological capabilities of Argentina's nuclear program, and its record of non-compliance with international non-proliferation agreements.

Argentina has the most advanced nuclear program in Latin America, with two operational commercial reactors, two reprocessing labs, an enrichment plant, several research reactors, and ample domestic uranium reserves. Few of these facilities are under international safeguards, and the country's military just does not have to answer to any civilian authorities or political parties. In fact, Argentina is not a full party to the non-Proliferation Treaty, the Treaty of Tlatelolco (creating a nuclear-free zone in Latin America), and a number of other arms control agreements. For years it has maintained the right to "peaceful" nuclear explosives, although this is widely recognized as tantamount to de facto weapons capability.

An additional cause for concern is the fact that the Argentine National Atomic Energy Commission (CNEA) is entirely under the control of the Argentine Navy, which has in the past shown itself to be the most bellicose of the nation's armed forces and is hungry for redemption since it was the prime mover for the Falklands invasion and suffered the greatest loss of prestige over the defeat. Thus, despite the scheduling of elections in October which will return the government to civilian rule, it is certain that the nuclear program will continue to operate according to military criteria unhindered by political constraints.

Recent British-Chilean diplomatic initiatives resulting in a closer relationship between these traditionally friendly nations has added momentum to the Argentine drive for nuclear weapons. The sale of British weapons to Chile (including bombers and a destroyer), British support for the Chilean claim in its territorial dispute with Argentina over the Beagle Channel islands, Chile's silence during the Falklands war, and recent discussions over the awarding of landing rights to British aircraft at the airstrip in Punta Arenas, Chile, near Tierra del Fuego, have heightened Argentine concern over the negative status quo confronting them in the South Atlantic, and their need to redress it.

--Nuclear Program is Popular--

The Argentine population is broadly supportive of both another attempt to retake the "Malvinas" and the development of nuclear weapons. Both are widely perceived as the best means of reestablishing the country's badly tarnished national pride. The decision to develop nuclear weapons will therefore count with popular support, even if more rational elements of the nation's political leadership view the whole process as madness.

For these reasons, then, the chances of Argentina developing nuclear weapons in the near future is considerable, as is the chance that it will attempt to use their availability to oust the British from the Falklands. Given the irresponsible nature of the Argentine military, the probability that Argentina will soon be a member of the world's nuclear club poses a serious problem for the international community, and only a last-minute attempt at re-opening diplomatic negotiations over the Falklands may avert this from becoming a dark reality in the near future.

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