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The Falklands from below

Argentina's seizure of the Falkland Islands, a test of honour for Britain that may cost it the Thatcher government, is also a test of President Reagan's peacekeeping abilities.

What is to happen to the great white continent to the south, Antarctica, which has no voters to cast down governments or crowds to wave approving placards in the streets. It may seem trivial to talk about obscure Antarctica, currently a haven for scientists of many nations, its antique sovereignty disputes, in this solemn moment. But the Falklands fiasco has shown how rapidly the obscure far south can be suddenly important. Whether it brings war between Argentina and Britain or a stalemate and negotiations, the dispute has three serious implications for the Antarctic, a region that starts at 60 degrees south latitude, beginning south of the Falklands and South Georgia, the southernmost island taken by Argentina on its weekend spree.

First there is the extreme vulnerability of human settlements in the far south to military takeover. Most of the Antarctic stations south of South America consist of a gaggle of huts nestled against steep black mountains and glacier snouts, the men in bright coloured parkas providing the only colour in a nearly lifeless landscape — except for the thousands of screeching birds — the huts bristle with antennas, but except for a passing ship, the only communication with the outside comes by often poor radio.

The settlements in the Falklands and at Grytviken in South Georgia, different only in that they had real buildings and greener hills, were easily overwhelmed by Argentine forces coming from the mainland a few hundred miles away. It would be harder but not much for a Latin-based military force (or one based in the Falklands) to make the 800 mile crossing of the Drake passage and seize the remaining four British stations there — although such a seizure would be a willful violation of the 1957 Antarctic Treaty that demilitarizes the region, and to which both Britain and Argentina belong. It is unlikely that Argentina would risk the enormous international opprobrium that would follow such a move, but actions in the Falklands remind us how fragile are these sparse southern stations, and how valuable is the Antarctic Treaty.

Indeed, there is a real question as to whether the British Antarctic Survey, which runs the UK's science programme in the Antarctic and until now staged its far-south operations from Stanley and Grytviken, can continue to operate, although it has contingency plans (see page 593). At present, perhaps two dozen British scientists and technical personnel are either being held or are at large on South Georgia — a place whose mountainous hinterland is so impassable that one needs an axe to cut steps in the ice to cross its inland glaciers.

The second implication of the Argentine seizure is oil. According to a report presented in January by Washington energy consultant Lawrence Goldmuntz, the offshore region between Argentina and the Falkland Islands is one of four major "horizons" in the world outside the Middle East capable of producing oil on the scale of the North Sea. Recently, Exxon drilled three wells about midway between the coast and the

Falklands; one was dry, one had gas and one produced 5,000 barrels a day in test drilling. Nearer the Argentine coast, a shell well showed 3,000 barrels a day. So the theory goes, Argentina, beset by economic woes, seized the Falklands to assure supply of a new oil well.

For the most part the oil theory is rubbish. Argentina is very nearly self-sufficient in oil, and by inflaming a dispute to ownership of the Falklands, it would certainly not encourage major oil companies to take out leases. Despite having one of the widest, potentially richest continental shelves in the world, big oil companies have not exactly flocked to do business with Argentina. While its own near-shore shelf and Tierra Del Fuego remain undeveloped, it is hard to justify a push in the unexplored far-off Falklands. Yet the dream of oil wealth may have played a subliminal role in the seizure of the Falklands, and will play a key role in the disposition of Antarctica. Just to the south in the Weddell Sea (claimed by Argentina, Britain and Chile) sedimentary rocks are many kilometres deep while the shelf itself is larger than all of Venezuela. Argentina, West Germany, Norway and even the Soviets have been surveying the geology of the region, to get basic geological data as well as some idea of its oil potential.

The Falklands experience shows that arcane notions of national sovereignty, when combined with the dream of great oil potential, can be an explosive combination. It is easy to laugh at the obscure theories under which seven nations, and potentially several others, claim national sovereignty in Antarctica. It is also easy to dismiss the Antarctic's oil potential as purely hypothetical, as no serious exploration has been done. But the Falklands experience also shows that, nonetheless, the potential for international mischief is great.

The third and most important implication of the Argentine seizure of the Falklands is that it strains international relations at the far south at a delicate moment in Antarctic diplomacy. Argentina itself convened last year the first major international discussion by the 14 Antarctic Treaty powers of how they should dispose of Antarctic minerals — a subject not covered by the original treaty. A second meeting will be held in New Zealand in June, and the list of full parties to the treaty includes many of the key players in the Falkland Islands dispute. After the Buenos Aires meeting, the group showed some promise of being able peacefully to resolve this contentious issue — going as it does, to the heart of the sovereignty dispute. But if Britain and Argentina must use the New Zealand meeting to pound shoes on the table over the Falklands, the result could be disaster for Antarctica.

Clearly, the boundary of the Antarctic Treaty area at 60 degrees south latitude, which in reality is only a windy, stormy sea, should be treated as an iron wall diplomatically by Argentina, Britain and the other Antarctic Treaty nations. Every effort must be made to keep the dispute — no matter where it stands then — from spilling over into the Antarctic question. This will be difficult indeed, but the parties would do well to remember that the Falkland Islands are only 6,200 square miles, about the size of Connecticut or Wales. The Antarctic area, besides comprising an entire continent, one fifth of the world's ocean water by volume, and its largest potential fishery, contains one fifteenth of the Earth's surface. It would be a shame if a dispute over these tiny islands, however serious, were to spoil it.

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