

Antarctica and Argentine Geopolitical Thinking¹

Jack Child

*Department of Spanish and Latin American Studies
The American University
Washington, D.C. 20016*

INTRODUCTION

This study suggests that geopolitical thinking in Argentina, as well as in neighboring countries, has strongly influenced Argentine behavior toward Antarctica. Argentine geopolitical thinking has a highly nationalistic tone that views several other states with Antarctic interests as potential antagonists. The analysis presented here runs counter to the prevailing optimistic thinking on Antarctic issues, which stresses the success of the Antarctic Treaty regime and the cooperation that has characterized much of the exploration and scientific study of that continent. As we approach the critical year of 1991 when the Antarctic Treaty is open for review, we must realistically consider a less optimistic perspective, which, while not ignoring past successes, recognizes existing strains and potential conflicts.

SOUTHERN CONE GEOPOLITICAL THINKING

The mental framework of Southern Cone geopolitical thinking, and the impressive flow of magazines, articles, and books that sustain and popularize it, are inadequately known outside of South America. Little of this output is translated or read by European or U. S. scholars and policy makers (Child 1979, 1985; Pittman 1981; Caviedes 1984).

Geopolitical thinking has had a significant impact on the internal development and international relations of the nations of South America's Southern Cone over the past two decades, especially when the government of the country involved has been in the hands of a military regime and a small group of geopolitically oriented civilian supporters. Such regimes tend to focus on historic territorial disputes and grand schemes for national development and expansion. Geopolitical thinking in recent years has increasingly directed its attention to resources, especially energy resources. The perception that areas in contention may contain valuable amounts of oil, coal, or food has thus added to the historic tensions

Few outside observers paid serious attention to the possibility of a major conflict in the region prior to the tragic Malvinas/Falklands war of 1982. Analyses since then have identified a series of interlinked possible conflicts in South America. These include the still unresolved Malvinas/Falklands question; the Argentine-Chilean dispute over the Beagle Channel; competition for influence and control of the South Atlantic; and the historic Argentine-Brazilian rivalry. All of these potential conflicts have a relationship to competing claims in Antarctica as well as to strains that may emerge from resource exploitation in the area.

One may hypothesize that a conflict in the region is likely if one or more nations feel that the following conditions exist: that an historic national claim to territory is being challenged; that there is a time deadline involved; that important energy and food resources are perceived to be at stake; that one has been the victim of territorial losses in the past; that one's historic adversaries are forming alliances; and finally, that recent events have been humiliating and there is a need for a bold and patriotic act to restore national pride and dignity. To a lesser or greater degree, some or all of these conditions hold for each of the Southern Cone nations, and they are especially relevant to the Argentine situation. They also form a strong current in the geopolitical thinking of these nations, and they have an increasingly common focus on Antarctica.

There is a persuasive argument that geopolitical thinking is now on the decline in the Southern Cone as

military regimes give way to a strong push for democratization and a return to elected civilian governments. This argument, however, tends to ignore the fact that geopolitical thinking is closely tied to nationalism and jingoism, which are hardly the exclusive property of military regimes. Further, there is evidence that the military regimes of the 1970s have succeeded in their goal of inserting geopolitical materials into the curricula of national educational systems at all levels, suggesting that geopolitical [end p. 12] thinking will remain a significant force in the Southern Cone for an extended period of time.



Figure1. Argentine stamp showing mainland, Antarctic and insular Argentina

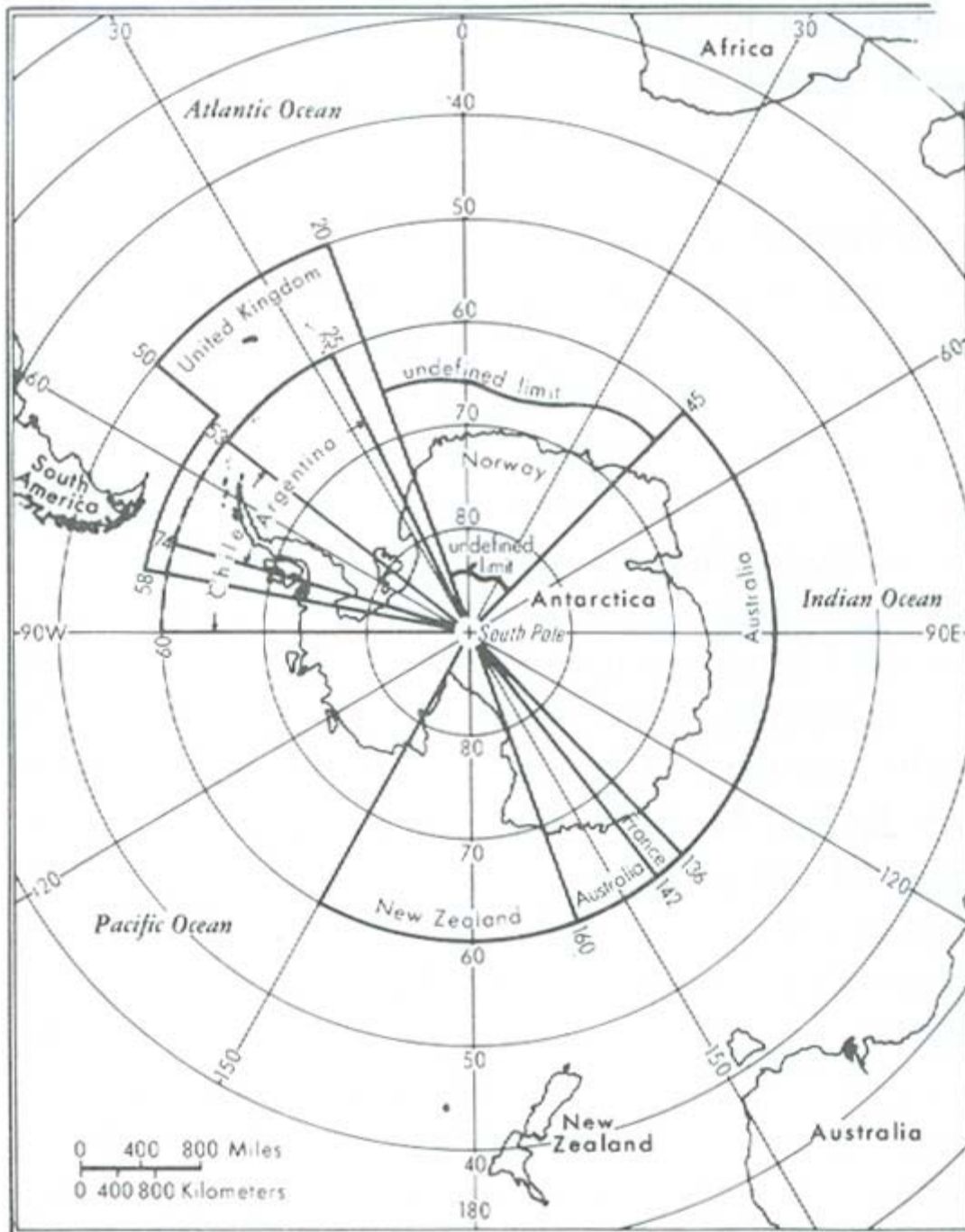


Fig. 2. Territorial claims in Antarctica.

Supporters of the Antarctic Treaty regime also argue that, despite all their differences, the key claimant nations of Argentina, Chile, and the United Kingdom all have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo past 1991 because the Treaty regime is better than the anarchy that might result from its breakdown. These three nations also share a common position against the internationalizing thrust of preserving or exploiting Antarctica for the benefit of all mankind.

Regardless of the eventual outcome, be it a continuation of the Treaty regime, internationalization, or a "new Antarctic order" with a South American sector, geopolitical thinking in the Southern Cone of South America will be an increasingly important factor as we move toward 1991. There is a need to read and analyze geopolitical thinking in the region, both in terms of the common doctrines held by the nations of the area as well as in terms of idiosyncratic national ideas, especially those of Argentina.

ARGENTINE GEOPOLITICAL THINKING AND ANTARCTICA

General

In many ways the analysis of Argentine geopolitical thinking is fundamental to an understanding of how South American geopolitics impact on Antarctica (Fraga 1983, 61). Argentina has been, after all, the most active South American nation in Antarctic affairs, and is, with Chile, the only South American claimant nation. Argentines are taught from early childhood that their nation consists of three interlinked parts: Mainland, Antarctic, and insular Argentina (Figure 1). To accept anything less than all three parts is to betray a sacred trust to the fatherland and to compromise the possibilities of Argentine "greatness" (de la Cruz 1977, 70-71; Asseff 1980, 238-43). A wide range of ideas are used to buttress these beliefs and, among them, geopolitical arguments are of primary importance.

The geopolitical basis for Argentina's Antarctic position is potentially dangerous because of the links to other possible conflicts in the region (most notably the Malvinas/Falklands, the Beagle Channel dispute, and the rivalry with Brazil), and because of the way Argentine, Chilean, and British claims overlap on the Antarctic Peninsula (Figure 2). Because of its resources and proximity to South America, the peninsula is the most valuable portion of Antarctica. Interestingly, it is called the Palmer Peninsula by the British, but "la Peninsula de San Martín" by the Argentines, and "Tierra de O'Higgins" by the Chileans. The strategic and economic significance of the Antarctic Peninsula and the claims issue make it the most likely arena for confrontation, and both Chile and Argentina have taken many steps to strengthen the basis for their claims **[end p. 13]**

Tri-Continental Argentina

A fundamental tenet of Argentine geopolitical thinking that affects Antarctica is the previously stated idea of a Tri-Continental Argentina. As expressed in the writings of numerous Argentine geopolitical authors, there is a coherent geological, political, and geopolitical unity among the three components, which are linked together by the "Argentine Sea" and the islands running from the Malvinas through South Georgia, South Sandwich, South Orkney, and South Shetland to the Antarctic Peninsula (Peninsula de San Martín). The relationship of Tri-Continental Argentina to the South Atlantic is emphasized by naming this portion of the South Atlantic the Argentine Sea and stressing that Argentina must be paramount in this region in order to protect her vital interests. The region was also given the name "Atlantartida" in a 1978 book that argued that Argentine greatness and influence in the world would flow from control of this geopolitical space (Milia 1978, 250). This geopolitical concept illustrates the inter-linked nature of several potential conflicts in the area involving Argentina: The protection of Argentine vital interests in Atlantartida requires expelling the British from the Malvinas/Falklands, the Southern Islands, and Antarctica; it also requires rejecting the Chilean Antarctic and Beagle Channel claims and keeping the Chileans back in the Pacific where they belong; and finally, it means keeping the Brazilians in tropical waters and blocking their dreams of projecting influence in the far South Atlantic and the Antarctic.

The Geopolitical 'National Project'

A constant theme in recent Argentine geopolitical writings has been the search for a meaningful "National Project" that would unify Argentines and permit them to regain their declining prestige and status in the world. Argentina's geopolitical writers have elaborated a number of complex and imaginative schemes in this connection, including ambitious plans to link river systems, create huge artificial lakes, move the national capital inland or south (as was seriously proposed by President Raul

Alfonsín), and transfer large portions of the population to the practically uninhabited southern sections of the country (Villegas 1975; Campos 1975). It is ironic that the only national project that did in fact briefly unite all Argentines was the taking of the Malvinas in April 1982. In the late 1970s and early 1980s some Argentine geopolitical writers were in fact calling for the military invasion of the islands in 1982 or 1983 if peaceful means of recovering them failed. The chauvinistic tone of these arguments, and their links to the Antarctic, were captured by Asseff (1980):

The decisive recovery of the Malvinas, within the deadline which we have established as a course of action (i.e., in the two-year period beginning in January 1981), will nurture the spirit of Argentines. It will be an injection of will and a stimulus for our vocation towards our destiny. It will provoke and move the Nation, marking a new era of honor and progress. It will cement our domination of maritime spaces, it will affirm our rights on the white continent [i.e., Antarctica], it will forge the physical integrity of the country, and it will, above all, elevate the spirit of the Nation, giving it faith in itself (p. 232).

Projecting this geopolitical mindset ahead to 1991, and assuming the British are still maintaining their military stronghold on the Falklands, and that the Beagle Channel issue with Chile remains a sensitive one, it is not difficult to imagine an Argentine national project that would attempt to make good her claim of Antarctic sovereignty.

The Chilean Geopolitical Challenge: Beagles, Bioceanics, and Antarctica

Argentine geopolitical thinking perceives a close relationship between these three Chilean challenges. The 1977 British arbitration award which gave the Beagle Channel islands to Chile was rejected by Argentina and almost brought the two nations to war. The strong Argentine reaction was not so much over the islands themselves as the threat that their possession by Chile posed for the bioceanic principle and Argentina's Antarctic claim. The bioceanic principle, simply stated, holds that "Chile stays in the Pacific and Argentina in the Atlantic." Argentina feared that possession of the islands would violate this principle, would put Chile in the Atlantic, and would seriously undermine Argentine dreams of her tri-continental coherence by breaking the link between mainland Argentina and her Antarctic claim (Child 1985, 77-85; Fraga 1979, 36639). Although the Beagle Channel issue now appears to have been defused by Vatican mediation and the 1984 Argentine-Chilean Austral Treaty, significant nationalistic sectors in Argentina oppose the arrangement and continue to be highly suspicious of Chilean motivations.

The British Geopolitical Challenge: Malvinas/Falklands and Antarctica

The British challenge to Argentine Antarctic interests focuses on the South Atlantic conflict and possession of the Malvinas/Falklands islands. The link [end p. 14] between the islands and the competing Antarctic claims have been explored by Joyner (1980, 467-502) and Child (1985, 112-22), but it is important to stress again how control of the Malvinas/Falklands (and the other associated southern islands) affects each nation's Antarctic possibilities. Although Argentina does not require the islands for logistical support of her Antarctic activities, she does need to deny them to the British and any other nation. For Great Britain the islands are important to her Antarctic claim for reasons that are both juridical (the political relationship between the Falklands Dependencies and Antarctica) as well as logistical (the need for a base of operations near the Antarctic claim). Argentine geopolitical writers consistently link Britain's presence on the islands to the Antarctic claim and argue that Argentina's own claim is weakened as long as there is British penetration of the so-called Argentine Sea. During and after the fighting in the South Atlantic a number of Argentine geopolitical analysts argued that the reason Britain fought over the islands--and the reason the United States backed Britain--was that there was a strong need for a NATO or British-U.S. base in the South Atlantic to protect the trans-oceanic passages and the Antarctic interest of several NATO powers (the United States, Great Britain, Norway, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Belgium) (Zariátegui 1983; Gamba 1982).



Fig. 3. The Brazilian “frontage” theory of Antarctic sectors.

The British-Chilean "Alliance"

In the minds of many Argentine geopolitical analysts the relationship between Chile and Great Britain is suspect and a threat to Argentine interests. Chile's studied neutrality during the 1982 fighting was deeply resented by many Argentines, and suspicions were heightened when a British helicopter mysteriously crashed near the Chilean-Argentine border. The more outspoken Argentine geopoliticians pointed out that Argentina's defeat served the interests of both Chile and Great Britain and that Argentina's strategic problem was compounded by her having to defend her interests on two fronts (*La Prensa* 1983). This suspicion does not seem to include allegations of British-Chilean cooperation in Antarctica, however,

and in fact there are indications of coordinated Argentine-Chilean (rather than British-Chilean) positions with regard to Antarctica.

The Brazilian Geopolitical Challenge

The historic Argentine-Brazilian rivalry, with roots going back 500 years to strains between the crowns of Spain and Portugal, has contemporary relevance in terms of the geopolitical challenge posed to Argentine Antarctic interests by Brazil. This challenge derives from a novel Antarctic sector theory proposed by several Brazilian geopoliticians (Figure 3). The net effect of this theory is to undermine the Argentine (and Chilean) claims to Antarctica by suggesting that six South American nations (including Brazil) should have a portion of a South American sector of Antarctica (de Castro 1976; Azambuja 1981, 36-40). Argentine alarm over the Brazilian theory has been increased by the fact that Brazil has now mounted several Antarctic expeditions in an obvious attempt to strengthen her position.

Geopolitical Thinking and the Antarctic Treaty

Argentine geopolitical writers view the Antarctic Treaty with some ambivalence. There is concern over the way the treaty permits other nation's scientific and political activity in the Argentine sector. On the other hand, working outside of the Treaty in isolation would not serve Argentina's interests, and many Argentine geopoliticians argue that their country's claims have been protected by the treaty. As one analyst put it:

The Treaty is not optimum, but it isn't bad either. It is relatively good. It harms our rights much less than many believe. It is not an obstacle which will stop us from **[end p. 15]** pursuing and deepening our presence and perfecting our titles (Asseff 1980, 242).

Argentine geopolitical attitudes on Antarctic resources are influenced by the fact that, owing to Argentina's self-sufficiency in energy and food, the country has no particularly urgent need to develop them, even if this were feasible. The Argentine emphasis is thus on preserving the environment and keeping others from exploiting resources that she may eventually need.

. This fact also explains Argentina's strong rejection of any "internationalization" approach to Antarctica even though she is anxious to garner Third World support on the anti-colonial Malvinas/Falklands issue. Some geopolitical writers have cautiously suggested that Argentina ought to work in cooperation with selected South American states such as Uruguay and Peru, on Antarctic projects as a step toward greater regional cooperation. These proposals, however, have had limited impact and their authors always stress that they should not be interpreted as backing away from Argentine sovereignty claims (Figueroa 1983, 80; Leal 1983 25- 34).

The prevailing Argentine geopolitical attitude toward the Treaty remains one of caution and of taking all possible steps to facilitate the possible activation of her sovereignty claim. These steps have included colonizing (i.e., establishing permanent civilian family groups on Antarctica), performing various administrative acts including marriages, births, postal and communications activities, and even folkloric performances as a way of bringing Argentine culture to the continent. Some geopoliticians have proposed that the national Penal Code be modified so as to shorten prison sentences by as much as two-thirds for time served as colonists in Antarctica. Others insist that national maps use only the "Argentine" names for topographic features in the region (Palermo 1980, 12-36).

All of these elements of Argentine geopolitical thinking suggest that Argentina is a prime candidate to be the challenger or spoiler of the continuation of the Antarctic Treaty in 1991, especially if internal economic and political conditions in the country are such that a nationalistic rallying cause is sought by the government as an attractive distraction.

NOTE

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