

FALKLAND ISLANDS: DRILLING OF DISCORD

A few weeks before the 30th anniversary of the Falklands War, the South Atlantic islands are again the subject of tensions between the United Kingdom and Argentina.

A British colony since 1833, this archipelago of 200 islands has been claimed by Buenos Aires for 179 years. The Falkland Islands, about 7,500 miles off the British coast and 300 miles off the coast of Argentina, control access to the South Pacific and Antarctica. This latent conflict is not just about the principle of sovereignty over a territory, but also the struggle for access to energy resources.

WAR OF THE FALKLANDS OR OIL WAR?

In 1982, the ruling military junta in Argentina launched an attack to regain the islands. From April 2 to June 14, 1982, the conflict between Argentina, under General Leopoldo Galtieri and the UK, under Margaret Thatcher, cost the lives of 635 Argentinean and 255 British soldiers. Argentina did not win back sovereignty of the islands. Relations between the two countries improved over the next twenty years, only to deteriorate again in February 2010.

If nationalism caused the conflict in the 1980s, it is "black gold" and mineral resources that are driving renewed tension in the twenty-first century. On February 20, 2010, the British government authorized an oil exploration campaign north of the Falklands, led by Desire Petroleum Inc. It found that the reserves of the Falklands are potentially as important as those of the North Sea, i.e. 60 billion barrels according to the British Geological Survey Office. In the 1970s, prospecting campaigns had detected the presence of oil, but at less than 20 dollars a barrel at that time, the fields were of no economic interest. With a barrel of oil now trading above \$100, extraction has become profitable. Besides oil, this research has also revealed the presence of nickel, copper, manganese and cobalt.

ARGENTINA DENOUNCES MILITARIZATION OF CONFLICT

In the coming weeks, the Royal Navy will deploy destroyer *HMS Dauntless* to relieve the type 23 *HMS Montrose* frigate. The arrival of *HMS Dauntless*, the second in a series of six modern Type 45 destroyers, is seen by Buenos Aires as a provocation against the modest armed forces of Argentina, with its aging Navy and air fleets. The detachment of Prince William in the Falklands, to complete his training as a helicopter pilot in the Royal Navy, is also seen as provocative. Argentina has also accused the United Kingdom of sending a nuclear attack submarine to the South Atlantic. In response, the British describe the arrival of *HMS Dauntless* as routine relief. As for the attack submarines, their deployment is obviously never disclosed.



The *Ocean Guardian* platform, owned by Desire Petroleum Inc.

HMS Dauntless



A planned inspection visit of the islands by British parliamentarians from the Committee on Defence in March 2012 is unlikely to ease the tension. With more than 1000 soldiers in a population of 3000 inhabitants, the relative military presence in the Falklands is particularly high. Therefore, Buenos Aires, speaking through their Foreign Minister, has filed a formal complaint to the Security Council of UN on February 10 denouncing the militarization of the region. The European Union is also involved in the crisis since being invited by the UK to express its "concern" to Argentina. Indeed, on February 27, two British cruisers were denied docking in Ushuaia by the Argentine port authorities, after stopping in the Falklands. Unlike thirty years ago, Argentina now has many allies from a diplomatic standpoint. It has been endorsed by the Rio Group, formed by 32 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, which denounce the attitude of the British. Moreover, Argentina has convinced its economic partners in MERCOSUR (Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Chile) to ban vessels flying the flag of the Falklands from entering their ports. This action is more symbolic than economic, since the Falklands have only 25 boats. It marks an incipient regionalization of the conflict, which so far was bilateral.

While the issue of sovereignty remains at the heart of the dispute, the ownership of energy resources poses a new challenge. At the dawn of the 30th anniversary of the Falklands War, Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner can put pressure from the international community on the United Kingdom.