Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Harvey Morris

Factors behind potential White House U-turn on UK's Falklands sovereignty

Argentina has launched a renewed campaign to gain sovereignty of the British-administered Falkland Islands, buoyed by a leaked Pentagon memo that signalled a potential shift in Washington's stance on the South Atlantic archipelago.

President Javier Milei last week called for talks with the UK on the future of the islands, which the two countries fought a war over in 1982. The conflict ended when a British task force ousted Argentine troops who invaded in April that year.

Milei's appeal came as details emerged of an internal Pentagon email that outlined options for the US to punish NATO allies that had failed to support it in its war with Iran.

Reuters reported that among the proposals in a note prepared by Elbridge Colby, the defence department's top policy adviser, was for the US to reassess its diplomatic support for longstanding European "imperial possessions" such as the Falklands.

A subsequent statement from the US State Department reaffirmed Washington's neutral stance on the status of the islands the Argentines know as Las Malvinas. Washington currently recognises the UK's de facto administration of the islands while acknowledging the existence of competing claims.

That assurance did little to calm the mood in the UK, where opposition parties lent their support to the position of the Labour government that sovereignty rests with the UK and that the islanders' right to self-determination is paramount.

Relations under strain

The Falklands question resurfaced just ahead of this week's state visit to the US by King Charles III at a time when relations between the two transatlantic allies are already under strain.

Differences between London and Washington predate the Iran war, in which Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government sparked Donald Trump's ire by denying the use of UK bases for the initial strikes against the Tehran regime.

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At the turn of the year, Starmer avoided either endorsing or condemning the US kidnapping of Venezuela's president Nicolas Maduro, while stressing that the UK played no role in the operation.

He was more forthright, however, in opposing Trump's threats to take over the self-governing Danish territory of Greenland, adding his voice to allies who said such a move would spell the end of NATO.

The Greenland threat was seen as part of Trump's strategy to revive the historic Monroe Doctrine, asserting US hegemony in the western hemisphere, a region that includes European-administered territories, including the Falklands.

Trump's motives

Trump has yet to comment publicly on the Pentagon leak. But given the current state of US-UK relations, might he be tempted to back his Argentine ally Milei in reviving the Falklands dispute?

If so, his motives might go beyond merely spiting his UK ally for its perceived failings over Iran.

His administration has been involved in recent moves to boost Argentina's defence in response to potential competition from China. Additionally, it may not have escaped Trump's attention that the first major project to exploit the Falklands' offshore oil is about to launch.

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Washington has supported Milei's efforts to persuade the UK to lift an arms embargo on weapons with British components being sold to Argentina in order to allow it to modernise its air force.

Argentina last year took delivery of six second-hand American F-16s, transferred from Denmark, under a deal secured during the Biden administration. The US was reported to have urged the UK not to stand in the way of the sale.

Just as likely, UK strategists agreed with their US counterparts that the F-16 deal was the least bad option to counter overtures from China, which sought to become Argentina's weapons supplier of choice, a role that would challenge US supremacy in the Western Hemisphere.

Another bone of contention

Another bone of contention for Argentina over the Falklands is the issue of oil resources in South Atlantic waters.

Offshore production is due to begin in 2028 after the self-governing Falklands authority approved plans by Israel's Navitas Petroleum and Britain's Rockhopper Exploration to develop the so-called Sea Lion field, 130 miles to the north.

Buenos Aires has condemned the project, which targets a potential 900 million barrels of oil, as unilateral and illegitimate.

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Given President Trump's tendency to covet other people's oil, whether Venezuela's or Iran's, it is a factor that cannot be ruled out in any determination he might make on altering his administration's current stance on the Falklands.

For the time being the status quo prevails, despite Trump's otherwise strong practical and political support for his ideological partner President Milei.

King Charles and the fate of the island home

The Argentine leader has until now adopted a relatively moderate attitude towards the Falklands/Malvinas dispute, arguing for negotiations to press his country's claims.

In his successful 2023 election campaign, he even angered his country's military veterans with his gushing praise for the free market policies of Margaret Thatcher, the UK prime minister who dispatched the British task force in 1982.

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At the start of the Thatcher government, there were tentative moves to resolve the sovereignty dispute in order to cut the costs of supporting the islands.

A UK decision to reduce the frequency of routine submarine patrols may have persuaded the Argentine military junta to make its fatal move in 1982.

Since the war, successive UK governments have firmly reasserted a sovereignty claim to

the once uninhabited islands that goes back to 1833.

That position was reinforced by a 2013 referendum in which 99.8 per cent of islanders voted to remain a British territory. The 3,500 population are predominantly locally born British citizens.

Milei's deputy, Victoria Villarruel, demanded at the weekend that even these native-born "Kelpers" must go back to Britain if they feel they are English.

The Kelpers and their compatriots will be trusting that King Charles will plead their cause if the fate of their island home comes up during his private conversations this week with President Trump.