

Strained UK-China Relations: China Affirms Support for Argentina in Disputes Over Falkland Isles

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New tensions are emerging over the legitimacy of British rule over the Falkland Islands. In a joint statement with the Argentine president, Xi Jinping declared that China supports Buenos Aires’ sovereignty over the islands’ territory. In response, the UK’s foreign minister published a statement reaffirming British sovereignty, starting a war of words and narratives over this old and controversial topic, which still seems far from any final resolution.

Last week, Argentine President Alberto Fernandez visited Beijing in order to attend the Winter Olympics. On the occasion, Fernandez met with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, and a broad dialogue took place about several issues relevant to both countries. The most important result of the meeting was the release of a joint statement, in which the Chinese government said it supports the Argentine sovereignty over the territory of the Falkland Islands – a South American island area dominated by the UK and historically claimed by Argentina.

The case generated deep fury in the British government. Chinese support for Argentine claims about the Isles sounded unacceptable to London, leading government officials to publish several pronouncements repudiating the joint attitude of the Chinese and Argentine presidents and reaffirming British sovereignty over the Falklands. The British Foreign Minister, Liz Truss, for example, wrote the following words in one of her webpages: “We completely reject any questions over the sovereignty of the Falklands. The Falklands are part of the British family and we will defend their right to self-determination. China must respect the Falklands’ sovereignty”.

Responding the words of Truss and other politicians and media agencies, the Chinese Embassy in London issued a new document reaffirming its unconditional support for Argentine sovereignty over that disputed zone. With this, new tensions arose, with the legitimacy of British rule over the Falkland Islands being questioned once again.

In fact, British dominance in that region has always been controversial. The territory is

located within the Argentine coastal zone, but in the 19th century the British began to invest in a strong policy of occupation, turning most of the local people into British citizens, which later came to 'justify' the UK's claims in this regard – which has never been accepted by Argentina. In the early 1980s, the situation reached the extreme of tensions. At the time, the Argentine military invested in a military intervention with the objective of regaining control over the region, but, after a two-month war, the London's forces obtained their victory, making UK's sovereignty over the territory official.

In fact, there are many reasons for a government to defend Argentine dominance in the Falkland Isles – called “Malvinas” by the Argentinians. The very fact that the zone is located within the Argentine national territory is a very strong argument, for example. However, the biggest curiosity in this case is the advanced degree of Chinese involvement. Chinese foreign policy is guided by a trade agenda, in search of global partners for economic cooperation projects. With this, the country avoids getting involved in major international controversies or disputes involving two or more states. In general, for China, it is enough that there are mutual commercial interests in order to establish a bilateral partnership.

It is not a typical attitude for China to engage in foreign territorial disputes, but the country not only issued a declaration of support for Argentine sovereignty in the islands but also reiterated its support after the actions of British officials. This kind of attitude is interesting, considering the Chinese internationalist tradition, but can easily be explained if we remember some recent events involving China and the UK.

Since it leaved the European Union, the UK has been trying to invest in new markets around the world and has combined its commercial strategy with a policy of automatic support for US international plans. As a result, the British government has adopted aggressive measures in Asia and the Pacific to combat Chinese influence. One such measure has been the attempt to restore colonial ties in Hong Kong.

British politicians created, for example, a law that facilitates the process to get a permanent visa in case of Hong Kong citizens. As a result, a wave of mass emigration was initiated, with risks of harm to the local demography. All these factors directly affect China's interests and motivates the country to develop response measures. In this regard, taking a position in historical territorial disputes and defending the interests of its partners (China and Argentina are nations with great bilateral partnerships in various areas, mainly agribusiness) really seems to be one of the tactics used by Beijing today.

It is still too early to say to what extent the position taken by China will represent some political force for the nations chosen as partners, however, this is undoubtedly an interesting step in strengthening south-south cooperation. Beijing's message is simple: if the West continues to interfere in China's internal affairs with its dissident territories, the Asian country will be also willing to use its power and influence to act contrary to its enemies in their respective internal affairs.

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