The rhetoric on the sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (or Malvinas), an Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom disputed by Argentina since the XIXth century, has recently grown up as the 30th anniversary of the war of 1982 approaches. In February, the Argentinean Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hector Timerman, asserted that the defence of British sovereignty is «the last refuge of a declining power». Last year, the President at Casa Rosada, Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, stated that Britain «continues to be a crude colonial power in decline». David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, responded that Argentinean claims are «actually far more like colonialism». Fernandez de Kirchner found these words expression of «mediocrity and stupidity». The Falklands dispute – and its related sub-issues – is the only, but influential, source of disagreement which affects the relationship between the two countries.

The United Kingdom supports its stance on the principle of self-determination, sanctioned by the Article I of the United Nations Charter. William Hague, the British Foreign Minister, recently wrote on «The Times»: «only the Islanders can be the masters of their future». In other words, the Islands will remain a British Overseas Territory until their inhabitants will wish to be so. This firm belief embodies a strong historical continuity along Her Majesty’s Governments. With an own legislative assembly and a local government, Falklanders recognise themselves as British citizens.

On the contrary, Buenos Aires’ claims are rooted mostly on two ideas. Firstly, when Argentina obtained its independence from Spain in 1816, it would have inherited the Islands, at the time under the (already contested) Spanish colonial control. However, this principle, known judicially as *uti possidetis*, is rarely applied by international law, and only in presence of incontrovertible evidence (e.g. soldiers holding the military occupation of the territory). This was not the case. Secondly, the Falkland Islands are 300 km away from the Argentinean coast, and for Buenos Aires this territorial contiguity is determinant. Beyond its idealistic rhetoric, the control over the Islands would allow Argentina to exploit their natural resources, especially since rumours on rich hydrocarbon deposits in the South Atlantic waters are growing. Ambassador Sir Mark Lyall Grant, the British representative to the United Nations, has sarcastically replied that on the basis of territorial contiguity «Canada could claim sovereignty over Alaska».

In 1982, the Argentinean government, squeezed by internal pressures and in search of internal legitimation, suddenly invaded the Falklands in order to satisfy the long-standing appetites of its public opinion. British troops allotted on the Islands were unprepared to fight, and the invaders easily seized them. Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, responded vigorously, and Her Majesty’s Armed Forces, supported by a powerful nationalist commitment, were able to re-establish the *status quo ante*.

Thirty years later, Britain has implemented the lessons learned. History demonstrated that Argentina is not a reliable and peaceful counterpart to debate the Falklands issue with. Notably, when amending the Constitution in 1994, the Argentinean Parliament included a clause claiming the sovereignty over the Islands: «the recovery of these territories and the full exercise of sovereignty […] are a permanent and unrelinquished goal of the Argentinean people». London was forced to change its reactive posture into a deter-
rent one. In the aftermath of the war of 1982, a notable garrison of naval, air and land elements was deployed in the Mount Pleasant Complex, roughly 50 km from the capital, Stanley. Nowadays the mission consists of an infantry unit, four Eurofighter Typhoons, support helicopters, Rapier surface-to-air missiles and a standing naval commitment, which provide a support vessel and a destroyer (or a frigate). At times, a nuclear-powered submarine navigates in international and territorial waters around the Islands.

This February, Buenos Aires has denounced the British «militarization» of the South Atlantic, visibly trying to take political advantage from the routine replacement of the frigate *HMS Montrose*, assigned to patrol the Islands, by the destroyer *HMS Dauntless*, a ship of a higher class. Adopting a similar perspective, Fernandez de Kirchner and her Government labelled as “conqueror” the Duke of Cambridge, Prince William, who begun a six-week training tour in the Islands. Argentinean allegations exaggerate. They suggest, though, an important reflexion about British military posture down there. On the one hand, the *Strategic Defence and Security Review*, endorsed by the Government of David Cameron in 2010, decreed considerable cuts to the defence budget. Many analysts questioned whether these cuts are compatible with the maintaining of expeditionary capabilities, potentially necessary to protect Falklanders. On the other hand, over the previous five fiscal years, the military expenditure for preserving the deterrent posture increased from 65 to 75 million pounds. Would this trend be sustainable in an age of austerity? The Ministry of Defence suggests that the safety of the Islands will not be endangered, and that there is no reason to revise the current deployment. But in a letter sent to «Daily Telegraph», Admiral Sir John Woodward, former chief of naval task force during the war of 1982, noticed that in this situation Britain risks to do «precisely nothing» to prevent Buenos Aires re-taking the Falklands.

Probably, 2012 will not test the security of the Islands. It is hard to predict a renewal of armed hostilities. Does Buenos Aires really have an interest in transforming a war of words in a war of arms? Christina Fernandez de Kirchner enjoys a strong popular support. In last October, she won the Presidential election with 54% of the votes casted; in February, «the guardian» has reported that, according to the latest polls, she can count on a 70% support. The Argentinean economy, characterized by a heavy visible hand of the State, is growing steadily by 9% per-year. Fernandez de Kirchner does not need any new source of legitimation and she does not have to face any immediate internal pressure to settle recurring to a diversionary aggressive external activity. National military expenditure is stable since 1997, at a very low 1% GDP (or less), and up to now there is no sign of mobilization. On a quality level, the Armed Forces are weak as they were in 1982, and the current posture of Britain should be enough to prevent any aggression.

As already said, Great Britain is cutting its military spending. It has converted the sole remaining *Invincible*-class aircraft carrier, the *HMS Illustrious*, into a helicopter one. The first aircraft carrier of the new *Queen Elizabeth*-class will enter into service only in 2020. It is a priority, therefore, to avoid any military operations very far from home, especially meanwhile the expensive mission in Afghanistan is reaching an end. Indeed the Libyan crisis has signalled a great risk of over-stretching for British Armed Forces, raising deep contrasts between the military and the Government about the limited resources employed. No one in London has an interest to fuel the Falklands dispute. David Cameron has no interest: he has recently re-taken the lead in the polls in the wake of the veto about a new European treaty and has other foreign policy priorities (such as the Middle East or North Africa). And, once again, British military assets currently deployed at the Falklands guarantee a sufficient deterrence against Buenos Aires’ ambitions.

In sum, it is extremely unlikely that Argentina would be able (and willing) to exploit concretely the “window of opportunity” opened by the strategic reorganization of the UK. Beyond the rhetoric, the 30th anniversary of the Falklands war of 1982 should not reserve military surprises. Let alone a new armed conflict.