

Falkland Islands**Milei dials up Argentina's claim to Falklands**

Domestic politics, oil drilling and UK-US tensions drive libertarian leader to amp up sovereignty dispute



The UK fought Argentina for more than two months to retain control of the Falklands in 1982 © Cherylramalho/Dreamstime

Ciara Nugent in Buenos Aires

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Argentina's libertarian President Javier Milei is returning his country's claim to the Falkland Islands to the centre of the political agenda, as tensions between the UK and US create an opportunity for his struggling government.

Milei, an avowed anglophile and fan of Margaret Thatcher, has thawed relations with London since taking office in 2023, opening new channels of dialogue and even plotting a visit to the UK.

That approach has sparked accusations from Argentina's leftwing Peronist opposition that Milei is soft on the country's claim to the British overseas territory, which remains its most powerful national rallying cry.

But as Argentina's economy slows and Milei's popularity dips, his close ally Donald Trump has created an opening for him to fight those attacks.

The US has historically recognised de facto British rule while remaining neutral on the sovereignty dispute. But on Monday, the US president suggested that stance was "one of many" foreign policy positions under review. Then, on Thursday, he told GB News the UK was "not the same country it was" when it repelled Argentina's 1982 invasion of the islands.

Milei has announced an unusual televised address on Thursday night to "share details" on "diplomatic progress" on the islands, which he described this week as "the most important and sacred cause we have as Argentines".

Trump's comment was well-timed for Milei, who is up for re-election late next year and whose government's approval rating stood at 38 per cent in July, down from 52 per cent in January, according to pollster Casa Tres.



President Javier Milei attends a ceremony to honour victims of the Falklands war © Agustin Marcarian/Reuters

“It’s the butterfly effect: Trump says some empty words there and it generates an earthquake here,” said Sergio Berensztein, a political consultant in Buenos Aires. “Milei badly needs good news to reinvigorate his leadership, and these comments are a resource he can’t afford to not use.”

A British Foreign Office minister responded to Trump’s comment by saying the UK “remains unchanged” in its position that the Falklands are a British overseas territory.

The Falklands have long been core to Argentine identity, appearing on posters and graffiti across the country.

But the South American country is experiencing a moment of particularly strong nationalist sentiment in the wake of this summer’s football World Cup. A bitterly fought semi-final against England ended with the victorious Argentine players lifting a fan flag reading “the Malvinas are Argentine”, using the Spanish name for the islands. The move triggered Fifa sanctions.

Those passions helped fuel large protests in August that forced the government to withdraw legislation to relax Argentina’s restrictions on foreigners owning land. Protest leaders had accused Milei of being a “traitor” and “wanting to sell the country”.

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Donald Trump says the US is reviewing its position over the Falkland Islands © Reuters

The Falklands' first commercial oil project, which is set to start production in 2028, has also increased pressure on Milei to show progress in the dispute.

Milei is facing a potential 2027 electoral challenge from his estranged vice-president Victoria Villarruel, a pro-military activist for whom the Falklands are a flagship issue.

Foreign minister Pablo Quirno on Monday insisted that their “diplomatic” approach to the islands was more effective than that of Peronist governments, which he suggested was “protest for the sake of protest”.

“We need more concrete diplomatic actions . . . to defend ourselves from unilateral actions by the UK to exploit our natural resources,” he said.

Milei's increased dialogue with London has yielded few concrete results so far. A 2024 agreement to re-establish direct flights from Argentina to the islands has yet to be implemented.

Separate informal talks between defence officials, through which Buenos Aires hoped to lift the UK's restrictions on British arms sales to Argentina, have stalled amid repeated leadership changes at Milei's foreign ministry, which needed to give approval for the talks.

Milei also has yet to schedule a visit to London that his officials began discussing this year.

Trump's comments—which came in response to reporters' questions—could be designed to pressure the UK over policy disagreements around Nato, after a US state department memo leaked in April proposed the islands as a source of leverage over London.

The state department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

But hope has also grown in Argentina of a more fundamental shift in US policy amid Trump's intensified engagement with Latin America and rising tensions with China.

Fabián Calle, of the Argentine Council on International Relations, said the US wants more “stability and predictability” in the south Atlantic, whose proximity to Antarctica and the Magellan Strait gives it strategic importance.

“Great Britain cannot police the south Atlantic . . . it lacks the necessary clout for a bipolar world where China is projecting its presence across the global sea,” he said, calling for US-brokered talks between Argentina and the UK.

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