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Soviets Meddle In Falkland Crisis

High-level alarm over Soviet manipulations to exploit U.S. discomfiture in the Falkland Islands crisis triggered a top-secret cable from the State Department last Monday to Secretary of State Alexander Haig. A desperate Haig was in London trying new mediation gimmicks to keep Great Britain, this country's closest ally, out of a shooting war with Argentina, a strong supporter of the Reagan administration's anti-communist policy in Central America.

The gist of the cable: Moscow is showing it cannot keep its hands off the U.S.-British-Argentina triangle and intends to exploit it to the utmost despite its vast overcommitment from Cuba to Afghanistan. The Soviet Union cannot resist poking into fresh trouble when the opportunity arises.

That could mean more than mere friendly Soviet words. If Argentina needs military aid and cannot get it elsewhere, it will buy, beg or borrow from the Soviet Union—and Moscow will gratefully accommodate. The Russians have been working frantically but fruitlessly with Buenos Aires to arrange short-term credit, instead of cash-and-carry, for their massive grain purchases. A Soviet-Argentine arms deal could relieve Moscow of having to pay gold for grain.

The Soviet line has been developing slowly since Moscow's decision to abstain from the U.N. Security Council demand April 3 for "immediate withdrawal" of Argentina from the Falklands. The Kremlin's support for Argentina's position mocks that resolution.

The Soviets belittle Haig's mediation effort, claiming it is part of a U.S.-backed revival of long-gone British colonialism—enough to justify later arms sales to Buenos Aires. Both the United States and Britain, says the Kremlin, are plotting to "plunder" underseas oil around the Falklands. This propaganda line, aimed at damaging the United States in Latin America, could be more lethal than intelligence reports to Buenos Aires by Soviet vessels shadowing the British fleet. Still worse, if Haig's mediation fails and a shooting war breaks out, the Soviets could get a toehold in Argentina—their first ever in South America.

Preliminary work looking toward Soviet-Argentine military cooperation was laid in late 1979. At the height of Argentina's anger over the U.S. military cutoff decreed by President Jimmy Carter's human rights policy, a senior Soviet general and three colonels visited the capital. In a report from Buenos Aires, Tass revealed Soviet aspirations by calling that visit "transcendent."

The perils for the United States in this Soviet intrusion beyond its sphere run deeper in the future. Senior presidential advisers fear that if Argentina is forced to retreat precipitously, an anti-U.S. government more nationalistic than the present military regime may take over. With the Soviet Union then in the forefront as Argentina's new best friend and the United States cast in the villain's role, there arises the prospect of Soviet-Argentine friendship unimaginable before the Falkland crisis. As a bonus, the Soviets might acquire naval ports in the South Atlantic, valuable help for their growing fleet of submarines.

More than just enforcing the Security Council resolution's simple command for "an immediate withdrawal" from the islands, Haig is trying to keep Argentina as an irreplaceable hemispheric ally. In the long run, the United States has more at stake in the Falkland Islands than even the British.