

By Thomas French

As the wrangling begins in the Britain's new coalition government over the depth and breadth of the necessary cuts to the troubled public purse, amongst the 'big ticket items' often cited as a possible victims are the two new UK aircraft carriers.

In the recent struggles between the forces chiefs over the defence of the future funding of their respective branches the relevance and usefulness of such expensive vessels was cited.

However, the recent discovery of oil near the Falkland Islands highlights the fact that these assertions are misplaced. Although the discovery may not prove economically viable to extract at the present time, and the fact that a weak Argentina is unlikely to try to seize the islands by force again, the situation highlights two key factors: the global reach of British interests and the impossibility of predicting the future course of events.

Despite its decline since the Second World War, the UK remains a great power and has global commercial, financial and political interests to match. These occasionally require the application of military force or the indirect deterrent power of long range capabilities such as aircraft carriers. The fact that the Argentinean junta's ambitions in 1982 were given a psychological and material boost through the scrapping of the Britain's fast jet carriers in earlier years, are a clear example of the latter.

Events such as the discovery of the oil deposits also highlight the fact that despite our best predictions the shape of the world in the future might not match up to what we foresee at the present. The events of 9/11 and the collapse of Francis Fukuyama's theory of 'the end of history' are striking recent examples of this.

The defence of Britain's traditional and resource security in a dangerous world, hungry for a dwindling pot of energy and mineral resources is a powerful argument for the retention of the carriers. Indirect efforts to secure the UK's supply of 'Black gold' now will help keep Britain in the black in future years and are well worth a small splash of red ink now.

About the author:

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