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Argentina’s Strategic Game Facing China’s and U.S. Interests

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Abstract

The interests of the great economic and military powers determine – and even condition – many of the dynamics and decisions of medium-sized countries such as Argentina and will continue to do so within the framework of a certain margin of autonomy that these States can acquire through intelligent actions. In this sense, it is possible to redefine a foreign and national defense policy based on the prevalence of a strategic culture that does not necessarily share the guidelines and preferences of the country that concentrates the greatest world power, with all that this implies. This article analyzes the strategic cultures, threat perceptions, and behaviors of both the People’s Republic of China and the United States in Argentina in order to understand the actors involved.

Keywords: Argentina, People’s Republic of China, United States, Strategic Culture, Foreign Policy.

Introduction

After the economic and institutional crisis of Argentina in 2001, a change in its foreign policy began to accentuate in relation to the United States (which already had great limitations in the strategies of influence in the area of national defense, but not so in the economy) and the People’s Republic of China (which already showed great growth and political and economic expansion never before seen in Latin America and the world). This ideological and political shift of the Argentine leadership was reflected not only in its foreign policy, but also in its national defense policy and in many of its other domestic policies. On the one hand, this shift was based on the experiences lived in the 1960s and 1970s in Argentina with the establishment of a neoliberal model and the Monroe Doctrine that prioritized US interests and generated numerous adverse effects in Argentina. On the other hand, the world witnessed with amazement the progressive development of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a country with an emerging economy and in a process of global power building, which represented an opportunity for international financing,
access to new consumer markets, and the establishment of an alliance with Argentina through shared visions and interests, as well as a higher level of political autonomy, including in the field of defense.

The Sino-Argentine bond began to be built with a multidimensional and integral character, but with greater emphasis on the economic. In the short term, the South American country was economically activated due to access to new consumer markets for primary and agro-industrial products, job creation, access to international credit and investments, among other economic improvements, including the possibility of building a hard balancing in defense in order to reduce and change U.S. influence in the country. However, the United States sees the advance and consolidation of Chinese power in Argentina and the region as a growing threat to its interests.

In this context, this article analyzes the strategic cultures, threat perceptions and behaviors of both the PRC and the United States in Argentina in order to understand the actors involved. Likewise, by considering the international relations (dynamic and interdependent) that influence Argentine politics to varying degrees, the relationship between national defense strategy and policy is defined, as well as the main characteristics of the new Sino-Argentine alliance and the US response to it.

The strategic culture of the States and the definition of their foreign policy

Within the sphere of international relations, part of the behaviors, perceptions and norms of countries are explained by the concept of strategic culture, which contributes to structuring the behavior of states on issues such as: (1) the importance assigned to the use of military force in international politics, (2) sensitivity to external threats, (3) civil–military

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relations, (4) strategic doctrine, or (5) the model of international insertion adopted.\(^2\) In this regard, it is important to emphasize that although a State may possess several strategic cultures, one will always predominate within the ruling sector and the elites of intellectual decision-makers, particularly at a certain historical moment. In turn, this strategic culture will be systemically linked to structural pressures, foundations and ideologies in force.

Currently, there is a great deal regarding the meaning of strategic culture, its behavior and measurement, its function as a variable within research, the relationship with strategy and planning, among others. The truth is that beyond all the questions, strategic culture is a frame of reference to identify probable trends referring to the lines of action and relatively static beliefs of actors that define the internal and external policy of a State. In this regard, foreign policy consists of both a content and a process:

The first is a set of lines of action normatively oriented by certain principles or guiding objects. These lines of action are acts and “not acts”, in the understanding that the omission of acting can also build a policy. And these lines of action are emphasized through laws, agreements, treaties, etc. It constitutes a policy cycle, crossed by negotiation and the political game of the actors, ranging from diagnosis to evaluation, through inclusion in the agenda, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation; these processes are crossed by different instances of negotiation and debate.\(^3\)

Considering these concepts, during the last decades there has been a debate about what kind of relationship Argentina should have with the United States (including the level of autonomy, the need – or not – to seek other


Argentina: A change in its foreign policy

Foreign policy is based on the analysis and diagnosis of both internal and external of a given scenario of a country, in which current or potential problematic situations, intervening actors (ideologies, cultures, power, etc.) and possible lines of action that may affect the interests and objectives of the State in question are identified. Based on these facts or perceptions, agendas, strategies or public policies aimed at avoiding, reversing, establishing or consolidating certain objectives will be defined and implemented. In this context, certain lines of action will be formulated and developed, influenced by the strategic culture of each actor, the internal and external conditions, resources, or freedom of action, among other variables. Therefore, the determination of a foreign policy takes particular characteristics according to the regional and global environment to which it is directed and the strategic culture of decision-makers. Some scholars argue that the international system strongly determines or conditions the foreign policy of States, while others think of a mutual conditioning between the system and its environment.4

In the case of Argentina, after the restoration of democracy in 1983, the ruling political class progressively changed part of the bilateral relationship with the United States in terms of defense and security, but not in the

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economic sphere, until the socioeconomic and institutional collapse of 2001. While dependence on international funding agencies continues to date, Argentina’s domestic policies have taken a different course than those defined by U.S. political sectors. In addition, Argentina is committed to establishing and consolidating a multidimensional strategic alliance with the PRC (particularly the Kirchnerist governments) which is a matter of concern for the United States as there is a perceived power dispute and a growing threat in its traditional Latin American area of influence.

To understand this change in Argentina’s foreign policy, Canadian political scientist Kalevi Holsti points out that the objective of restructuring foreign policy in developing countries is to affirm the country’s autonomy, control transnational processes, destroy the survival elements of colonialism and/or escape from the hegemonic state. Consequently, since 2002, there has been a change in the ideological positioning of Argentina’s political efforts under an attempt to break with old patterns of behavior of dependence and subordination to the interests of the United States in defense matters, materialized through specific actions such as the strategic definition of a new national defense policy.

In this sense, it is valid to emphasize that the national defense policy and the strategy are intimately related since the first identifies what should be defended, while the second establishes the possible paths to follow to achieve the political purposes defined in order to preserve the vital interests of the State. Consequently, the strategy applied to national defense can be defined as:

Actions, attitudes and institutional measures of a strategic nature, decided and implemented by the national government and aimed at preventing or facing different types of situations of risks, conflicts or threats, potential or effective,

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that come from State aggressions of external origin that endanger the territorial integrity and the capacity of self-determination of the State and that require the use of the Armed Forces, in a deterrent or effective way.\(^6\)

In this regard, the Argentine internationalist Ezequiel Magnani emphasizes that the bridges between national defense and strategy are so narrow that it is almost impossible to think of the former outside the latter. Therefore, the Strategic Directive of Defense Policy is an aspect that is linked to strategic resolutions of a political nature, where the leaders of a country determine the preservation of specific national assets with respect to the perception of external threats in a given international environment.\(^7\) In this context, Law 23554 on National Defense aims to permanently guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Argentina (including its territorial integrity and its capacity for self-determination), as well as the protection of the life and freedom of its inhabitants against external threats of State origin, in where the Armed Forces will be in charge of this mission. These aspects were redefined after the dark national experience of military intervention in internal security and the establishment of State terrorism (1976–1983) promoted by the United States - through the Monroe Doctrine - to prevent the advance of communism in Latin America, in alliance with Argentine military and social sectors that promoted this line of action.

**New strategies in Argentine national defense**

The new national leaders, from Alfonsín onwards, were building and implementing national policies that establish the clear separation between national defense and internal security, in addition to the effective political leadership of the Armed Forces. These objectives have been achieved progressively, but with some effects that responded to the establishment

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of the neoliberal political-economic system promoted by the United States, since the mid-1970s has been the two efforts of then President Carlos Menem (1989–1999):

The reduction of the offensive capacity of the military instrument, participation in international arms control regimes, and the establishment of measures of mutual trust and transparency coincided with the neoliberal ideology of reducing state functions. In the same way, those initiatives harmonized with the advice of peripheral realism, aimed at aligning with the political-strategic requirements of the superpower, focused on a reliable and predictable Argentina.⁸

Therefore, it can be said that since the restoration of democracy to the present, Argentina has failed to accommodate the deployment of its military instrument, and to prioritize its naval and land capacity in its acquisitions of material means.⁹ Some specialists argue that there is a delegation of Argentine military capacity due to low budgets. The delegation, in the first instance, was to the Security Defense Council¹⁰ and, more recently, to the PRC. This change in foreign policy and a new system of alliances in political-military matters shows the prevalence of an Argentine strategic culture that sought to move away from US strategies and interests, but without breaking current diplomatic relations (collaborating in the fight against transnational crimes through competent internal security agencies and not of the Federal Federations), while relations with regional and extra-regional actors are strengthened, ensuring their autonomy.

In this sense, the Sino-Argentine rapprochement has generated commitments such as: (i) agreements and exchanges between the foreign service institutes of both countries that involve joint work in the areas of legislation and diplomatic training;¹¹ (2) the decision of the Joint Defense

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¹⁰ Marina Vitelli, “América del Sur: De la Seguridad Cooperativa ...”
Commission to implement the agreements reached and which was defined as a “Permanent Strategic Political Dialogue Mechanism” to institutionalize a cooperative working consultation process, while maintaining the cohesion and political coordination of the various instances of bilateral dialogue existing between the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the General Staffs of the Armed Forces and the agencies under the Ministries of Defense;\(^{(3)}\) (3) the Antarctic Treaty (of 2017) to cooperatively execute projects in scientific, technological and logistical matters, using the ports of Argentine Patagonia for the necessary logistical support; (4) the Framework Agreement for the Peaceful Use of Outer Space (2015) which included the construction, establishment and operation of the Aerospatiale Base A in Neuquén, a Chinese station on the that Argentina does not carry out any type of audit or control and that it has generated the reaction of the United States by pointing out that satellite espionage actions could be carried out on other countries in this station; and (5) the agreement (of January 2022) that will allow the construction of another station in the province of Córdoba, under Chinese management, in order to develop the Beidou geolocation system, which seeks to compete with the American GPS.

These agreements began in the Kirchnerist period in Argentina and both Macri and current President Alberto Fernández have given them continuity. As can be seen, Argentine foreign policy has taken a turn with respect to dependence on US interests to build a stronger link with the PRC.

**China: A Brief Approach to Its Defense Culture**

The PRC, through its multidimensional alliance with Argentina, has managed to access internationally relevant geostrategic spaces. Such as the installation of the aerospace plant in Neuquén, the Antarctic Agreement or the progressive incorporation of Argentina into the Silk Road Project (land, sea and digital) give it competitive and unique advantages within the South Atlantic, with projection to space and Antarctica. In military matters, progress has been made in numerous agreements, but so far the

\(^{(3)}\) Ibid., 226.
political-military scenario for joint action has not been generated due to the perception of some threat to Argentina or the region. However, the PRC (framed in its strategic culture and foreign policy) is not – for the moment – belligerent in Latin America beyond the concerns of the United States, which sees China as a great global competitor.

Considering the values and philosophy of China’s strategic culture, some principles can be mentioned within its current policy, such as referring to the power factors held by Yan Xuetong and his proposal of “ancient Chinese thought, modern Chinese power.” This proposal identifies key aspects for the construction of the modern power of the PRC, which is composed of both hard power and soft power, highlighting the possibility of the rise of a power to the hegemonic powers. While the factor of military power is highlighted as a necessary element, Chinese culture and philosophy (focused on millenary values) does not conceive of armed confrontation as a solution for the resolution of conflicts, but, rather, as a defensive positioning in the face of existing threats. A clear example of the above is present in the thought of the strategist Sun Tzu, who argued that those who are experts in the art of war manage to subdue the enemy without giving battle, capturing the enemy cities without assaulting them and seize the enemy state without prolonged campaigns.

Another fact is that it does not seek to demonize the enemy beyond considering itself an ancient culture with moral and ethical superiority over the others. Therefore, it could be said that for the PRC peace is an objective and military preparation represents a safeguard to its interests and its national pride, prioritizing diplomacy and negotiation. In this context, there are individuals who see the rise of China and its greater presence in Latin

America as a possibility for the construction of a multipolar geopolitics, handing over ideologies, and that the strategic triangle Latin America – the United States – China can generate cooperative dynamics not necessarily conflictive.¹⁶ However, there are others who view with considerable concern the economic and military development of the PRC, coupled with access to geopolitical spaces with global relevance, and support the idea of a probable armed confrontation with the United States, whose winner will be the only one with the ability to establish a global hegemony.

**United States: Building a Real Enemy?**

For its part, the United States has a long history of influence in the design and implementation of many of the public policies of Argentina and other countries, including its strategic culture on the use of the military apparatus and its mission in the world with a character of vindication (fight against evil) almost messianic of its narratives to legitimize armed actions on a global scale. Although the United States maintains a strategic culture of a more defensive nature, it can be corroborated that during the twentieth century it has been the country that has intervened most directly and indirectly in armed conflicts and in different scenarios; highlighting the legacy of the Gulf War received by the Obama-Biden formula, added to eight years of uninterrupted war that the country faced until the arrival of Donald Trump to power in 2017.¹⁷ In this regard, Dr. Thomas Mahnken argues that the United States remains the international leader because of its trajectory, appreciating a continuity in its conduct supported by its strategic culture, which – beyond the differences between Democrats and Republicans – is guided by the liberalism and the defense of universal values that govern all foreign policies and that has been focusing for the last decades on limited military interventions.¹⁸

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¹⁶ Patricio Narodowski, and M. Federico Zapata, “América Latina y el ascenso Chino. ...”
¹⁸ Johnson, Kartchner and Larsen (Eds.), Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction..., 60–84.
In addition to the Asian advance in what the United States considers its traditional zone of influence, the Biden administration has redefined its strategic approach through official documents and speeches in which it states that it is essential to recover the traditional spaces of power in Latin America to contain the Chinese threat. To this must be added that the United States continues to be the only power (military, diplomatic, political and economic) considered as a key actor in any conflict that breaks out in the world.\(^\text{19}\) This does not mean that the strong rise of the PRC – even more so in its areas of interest and related to its security – is not a cause for concern and, consequently, occupies more weight within the US political-military strategic planning. In this sense, Dr. Héctor Saint-Pierre points out that threats do not exist in themselves but depend on the perceptual structures of those who conceive them and that are – in part – determined by their geopolitics, history, natural wealth, capabilities, vulnerabilities, among other variables, which is why The United States regards the PRC as one of them.\(^\text{20}\)

Compared to other foreign actors, the activities of the PRC’s hard or military power in Latin America are quite limited, so it does not currently pose a security threat to the United States in the region. However, from a strategic and prospective approach, one of the options is for the PRC to continue to grow militarily in Latin America, including the possibility that the aerospace base in Neuquén will play a role adverse to US interests, which would constitute a real threat to the United States.

To be sure, the United States strives to preserve and increase its power, preserve its sovereignty, and protect its national interests, from a position of both military and economic strength, and through the cautious use of diplomacy.\(^\text{21}\) Consequently, the issue of national security is central and above any objective. Under this perspective, the US Senate approved an increase in the defense budget for 2022, valued at 768 billion dollars, which

\(^{19}\) Narodowski and Zapata, “América Latina y el ascenso Chino. ...”
\(^{20}\) Saint-Pierre, “La identidad estratégica de América del Sur ...”
\(^{21}\) Gámez, “Fuentes de cambio en política exterior: ...”
reflects the new policy of the Biden administration, conceiving the PRC and Russia as a threat.

The increase in this budget is focused on Asia-Pacific, but without neglecting Latin America, which although it is not the central focus of its strategic planning, it is part of the security rings of the United States. Therefore, a strategy of monitoring and containment against the PRC is necessary, especially considering that the US Department of Defense published in its annual report of the year 2021 that the PRC seeks to become a global nuclear power and has been growing not only in the traditional areas of military disputes, but also in space. Likewise, this document emphasizes that the country led by Xi Jinping is consolidating its military diplomacy (through various agreements and new communication channels) in order to develop its military relations in Europe and strengthen military exchanges with countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the South Pacific.

In that sense, the possible Chinese attack on the island of Taiwan, as well as the consolidation of the alliance between the PRC and Russia in the Pacific region are scenarios that currently worry the Pentagon. To this is added the statement made by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence of the United States in April 2021, in which it is stated that the Popular Liberation Army “will continue to integrate space services – such as reconnaissance, positioning, navigation, synchronization and satellite communications – in its weapons and command and control systems to erode the U.S. military’s informational advantage.” This statement came at a time when the PRC began to develop technologies to destroy satellites and in which Argentina is involved.

Argentina in the context of the dispute over the militarization of space

The PRC officially designated space as a new domain of war in its 2015 defense white paper. So they expect space to play a significant role in future conflicts by enabling long-range precision attacks and denying their adversaries the use of command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems. For its part, the United States has expressed its concern about the advance of the Asian giant and has identified the countries it considers allies and functional to Chinese interests:

The Department of the Space System [of the Strategic Support Force (FAE) of the PRC] it operates at least eight bases, including those whose main missions are the launch, tracking, R&D and operation of satellites vital to China's C4ISR architecture. The Fae operates tracking, telemetry and command stations in Namibia, Pakistan and Argentina. The Fae it also operates Yuan Wang space support ships that track satellite launches and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

Although the PRC and Argentina emphasize that the Neuquén aerospace plant is used for scientific and peaceful purposes, the truth is that the largest military power in the world thinks otherwise, identifying it as a threat, a situation that generates many more questions than certainties and will continue to do so.

Conclusions

The interests of the great economic and military powers determine – and even condition – many of the dynamics and decisions of medium-sized countries such as Argentina, and they will continue to do so within the framework of a certain margin of autonomy that they can acquire through intelligent actions. In this sense, it is possible to redefine a foreign and

26 Ibid., 65–66.
national defense policy based on the prevalence of a strategic culture that does not necessarily share the guidelines and preferences of the country that concentrates the greatest world power, with all that this implies. Although in their speeches and official documentation both the PRC and the United States define themselves as peaceful nations with merely defensive military strategies, the truth is that both have been growing militarily and economically, increasing their rivalry. Therefore, it highlights the thinking of Thomas Mahnken, who argues that there are substrates of strategic culture that can change if the context changes, generating a change of thought and doctrines (including the nuclear arsenal). 27 Consequently, Argentina must reflect and consider – within this new strategic course – the threats and opportunities generated by external interests and disputes within its own territory. Finally, it is in the field of “ideas” where the true source of power rests and it is there that the great challenges arise, the alternatives that do not imitate ideologies, as well as the opportunity is to design and practice a potentially autonomous project, different and bold. 28

About the author:

María Ana Leal is a bachelor in Social Communication and a master in Formulation and Development of Public and Private Strategies in the Universidad de Nacional de Córdoba, as well a master in Strategy and Geopolitics in the Escuela Superior de Guerra del Ejército Argentino. Furthermore, she holds a diploma in Financial, Social, and Cultural Rights by the Universidad Morón. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in Political Science in the Universidad de Nacional de Córdoba.

27 Johnson, Kartchner and Larsen (Eds.), Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction..., 60–84.