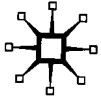


LATIN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICIES
BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND PRAGMATISM

Edited by
Gian Luca Gardini and Peter Lambert

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LATIN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICIES

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CHAPTER 5

ARGENTINE FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE KIRCHNERS: IDEOLOGICAL, PRAGMATIC, OR SIMPLY PERONIST?

ANDRÉS MALAMUD

INTRODUCTION

Argentina under the Kirchners has become a puzzle for foreign observers. Neither as heterodox as Chávez and Morales nor as orthodox as Lula and Bachelet, the presidential couple are nonetheless vocal members of the contemporary shift to the left in Latin America. Are their policies to be understood as informed by an ideological program or rather as a pragmatic approach wrapped in high-toned rhetoric? Foreign policy is an area relatively prone to the divergence of words from deeds, given its aloofness from public scrutiny and the little direct impact it has on citizens' daily lives—especially in countries that are of lesser international importance. Yet, a third interpretation is possible: foreign policy may not be internally coherent, either ideologically or pragmatically, but rather expresses domestic struggles, reflex actions, and even personal moods. Thus, foreign-policy subordination to short-term domestic concerns (*cortoplacismo interno*) could explain a great deal of the Argentine puzzle.

To attempt a periodization of contemporary Argentine foreign policy requires more imagination than method. Indeed, over the last eighty

years the policies flowing out of the Casa Rosada have been at least as many as the presidents themselves. Although in most countries foreign policy tends to be less politicized than domestic policies, and thus more durable, this has not been the case in Argentina. Foreign-policy changes have occurred in the wake of both regime change and administration change—even if the incumbent party did not change—but also under the mandate of the same president. The most conspicuous case was the rapprochement of de facto president Leopoldo Galtieri with Fidel Castro and Yasser Arafat in the context of the Falklands/Malvinas War, after six years of courting of the Western powers. However puzzling this may appear, the Peronist pendulum is even more striking. In ten years, a Peronist administration may evolve from autarkic and militant anti-Americanism to actively seeking American investment in strategic national resources such as oil (as Perón's did between 1946 and 1955) or the other way round (as when overtly pro-American, pro-market reformer Carlos Menem, 1989–1999, was succeeded by such staunch critics of neoliberalism as Néstor Kirchner, 2003–2007, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner since 2007). To pin down what is behind such volatility it is more important to understand Argentine politics than policies. This is tantamount to saying that foreign policy has been mostly determined by domestic rather than international factors.

Upon a background of barely professionalized state bureaucracy and leader-centered party politics, Argentine presidents have traditionally enjoyed a wide room for maneuver—especially in times of crisis. The Kirchners used this latitude to put foreign policy to the service of two goals: solving fiscal urgencies and gathering electoral support. The former dealt with substance and sought foreign partners, whereas the latter revolved mainly around form and targeted domestic audiences. Remarkably, both were frequently self-defeated by a tactless leadership style, which became the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy under the Kirchners' administrations.

This chapter scrutinizes Argentina's foreign policy vis-à-vis four key foreign actors, namely Brazil (and South American regional blocs), Venezuela, the United States, and the International Monetary Fund, in order to gauge the extent to which it can be explained by recourse to ideology, pragmatism, or rather domestic hiccups.

This chapter shows that the main objectives of the Kirchners' foreign policy have been to garner electoral support at home and to obtain financial assistance abroad. The former has been pursued through ideological and combative rhetoric, the latter through pragmatic international alliances. In order to make means meet ends, collective agency has been as significant as individual agency: the historical flexibility of the Peronist

party, compounded by the leadership skills of Néstor Kirchner, made it possible to dissociate words from deeds and to play discursive brinkmanship, while abiding by all relevant international norms. This move was helped by the limited professionalization of the foreign service and the subordinate role played by ministers under the Argentine constitutional provisions, which leave foreign-policy decisions exclusively in presidential hands. Finally, the emergency situation created by the economic collapse of 2001 gave legitimacy to the Kirchners' claim to change and to their appeal of leading Argentina in a new direction.

OVERVIEW OF THE KIRCHNER ADMINISTRATIONS

Between 1930 and 1983, Argentina experienced half a century of political instability and economic decline. Political instability manifested itself in six overt coups d'état and at least as many *coups de palace*. In that period, only three out of twenty-three presidents completed their pre-established mandate: Agustín Justo, Juan Perón, and Jorge Videla. The fact that all three were military officers—although not all came to power through a military coup d'état—suggests how difficult it was for civilians to stay in office. In 1983, however, a new democratic regime was successfully inaugurated, which would remain unbroken until the present. Yet, political instability continued by other means.

In the twenty-six years that followed, the Justicialist Party (PJ or Peronism) governed for nearly eighteen years while the Radical Civic Union (UCR or Radicals)—alone or in coalition—ruled for about eight. The performance of both parties differed significantly: while the PJ was able to complete all of its constitutional mandates (1989–1995, 1995–1999, and 2003–2007), the Radicals failed to complete any of theirs (1983–1989 and 1999–2003). Because of this, Calvo and Murillo speak of the “new iron law of Argentine politics,” whereby “non-Peronists are able to win presidential elections but are unable to govern until the end of their terms in office.”¹

When Néstor Kirchner, the Justicialist governor of the small province of Santa Cruz, arrived to the presidency in May 2003, he faced two important issues. First, Argentina was still recovering from the 2001 collapse that had left the country broken and its political system in shambles. Second, he had won the election with a scant 22 percent of the vote, the lowest percentage ever, and was unable to legitimize his victory through a runoff as the front-runner, Carlos Menem, had already stood down fearing a landslide defeat. Kirchner's mandate seemed to begin under inauspicious circumstances and in turbulent times. However, soon after taking office, he surprised everybody by standing up to vested powers,

including the military, the Supreme Court, the business associations, and even his own protector, Eduardo Duhalde, who had decisively promoted Kirchner's candidacy while serving as interim president.

Following four years of soaring economic growth and strong political dominance, Cristina Fernández was elected to replace his husband in 2007. Although there were expectations that she would be more institutionally minded, instilling diplomatic softness where rudeness had predominated, it did not happen. Instead, relations with the United States were embittered by an awkward incident involving illicit Venezuelan money, and a harsh domestic conflict arose only three months later when the farming associations took to the streets in protest against a tax reform.

Unlike Brazil, whose foreign policy throughout the twentieth century was known for its coherence and remarkable continuity,² Argentina's foreign policy underwent three different periods over the same century. First, from 1880 until the interwar period, it followed three main orientations: "Europeanism, opposition to the United States, and isolation from the rest of Latin America."³ Second, following the Second World War, the paradigm entailed nonalignment vis-à-vis the United States, support for Latin American integration without doing much to construct it, opposition to the establishment of supranational organizations that would curtail Argentine autonomy and development, implementation of a development strategy oriented toward import substitution, the introduction of reforms to the international financial and economic institutions in the interests of developing countries, and diversification in terms of trade links irrespective of ideology.⁴

Third, in the aftermath of the Cold War, Peronist president Carlos Menem introduced a radical departure from the existing policy orientation. So-called automatic alignment or pragmatic acquiescence was premised on a number of related factors, including the subordination of foreign policy to the political and strategic interests of the United States, the definition of national interests in economic terms, acceptance and support for the basic rules of the free market (and possibly neoliberal) international economic and financial order, and economic integration.⁵ The arrival of the Kirchners gave a new twist to an already twisted history.

As Margheritis explains, "Apparently contradictory and inconsistent foreign policy behavior shaped Argentina's reputation as an erratic and relatively unpredictable international actor—the adjectives going, in fact, from pariah to wayward to unreliable partner."⁶ This foreign behavior has included different kinds and degrees of turns, ranging from small adjustments to dramatic policy shifts. Remarkably, such a pattern has been due to policy inconsistencies not only between political parties but

also within them. The most striking volte-faces are exhibited by the PJ, a political organization rooted in the popular classes and oriented toward power, but almost completely bereft of a coherent ideology.

The PJ is a party created from above. Its founder was Juan Perón, a military officer who, holding a key executive office, attempted to build a popular base of support to promote his political goals. Consequently, the party doctrine, language, and organization were pervaded by a hierarchical temperament. Hierarchy meant a predisposition toward command and obedience, but it did not imply any substantive content. Hence, the internal fluidity of Peronism facilitated sharp and often contradictory programmatic shifts such as those undertaken by Menem in the 1990s and Kirchner in the 2000s. This was due to the tendency of the Peronist bosses to follow office-holding leaders: as the authority of the party bodies is rarely taken seriously, "control of the state means control of the party."⁷ The province and patronage-based nature of Argentine political careers further potentiates this effect;⁸ as would soon become apparent, party flexibility would allow for a rapid reversal to a nationalist, populist, and antineoliberal program.

In order to evaluate Argentine foreign relations under the Kirchners it is reasonable to focus on the key allies and enemies as defined by the administration. Whereas Brazil/Mercosur and Venezuela stand out among the former, the United States and international financial institutions, such as the IMF, are prominent among the latter. In all cases, however, hidden nuances and mixed policies have usually been as significant as, and sometimes more significant than, official rhetoric.

FOUR KEY FOREIGN-POLICY ISSUES UNDER THE KIRCHNERS

RELATIONS WITH BRAZIL AND MERCOSUR

Once a pragmatic approach to regional integration, Mercosur has gradually become more ideologically loaded as its effectiveness dwindled over time.⁹ Although the Argentine government has continued to support the project at the discursive level, its substantive strategies have been much less constructive and were guided by material interests rather than ideological motivations. Those material interests are rooted in domestic considerations and have promoted protectionist policies as a response to social pressures or fiscal needs; international calculations were less influential in Argentina than they were in Brazil.¹⁰ Thus, whereas ideology-based rhetoric called for integration, interest-based policy hindered it. While it comes as no surprise that concrete policies were oriented toward

economic gains, less obvious is that the rhetoric also served a pragmatic purpose, as it was directed toward securing electoral returns. The plea for regionalism is popular in Latin America, explaining the Kirchners' rhetorical support regardless of their lack of effective action.

Nowhere is foot-dragging more evident than in the negligence with which Mercosur member states have implemented, or rather failed to implement, the decisions made to upgrade their common institutions. To start with, the organization lacks a budget; with the exception of a small fund established in 2005 to appease Paraguay and Uruguay, all expenses are supported in equal parts by every country. Second, there is no supranational authority, even less a regional executive office such as the European Commission. Third, there is no effective system of dispute settlement: although an ad hoc mechanism was created in 1991 and a permanent tribunal replaced it in 2006, both mechanisms combined have issued only twelve rulings in eighteen years—as a reference, the European Court of Justice issues around 500 rulings a year, and even at the age of Mercosur it used to issue between 30 and 80 per year. And yet, the most blatant case of noncompliance concerns the decision to set up a permanent parliament. According to the foundational protocol signed in 2005, a decision regarding demographic representation had to be taken by the end of 2007, and direct elections were to be held before the end of 2010; as of 2010, the decision had not been taken and direct elections had been held only in Paraguay, with all evidence suggesting that no other country would follow suit in due time. Massive implementation gaps and inoperative institutions reveal the pragmatic nature of Mercosur, as its advocates wave the flag of regional integration—as long as it is popular—while systematically shirking on regional commitments. In this, to be fair, it should be said that Argentina's strategy is no different from that of the other member countries'.

Brazil is Argentina's main trade partner and key regional ally. Argentine leaders and diplomats alike see this partnership as based on an equal footing. Therefore, any time Brazil hints at affirming itself as either a regional leader or a global power, Argentine foreign-policy moves closer to the United States—or other circumstantial allies such as, more recently, Venezuela—in order to restore the regional balance.¹¹ This ambivalence, or pendular game, recedes in good times and surges during economic hardship, independent of the party in government. In the 1990s, Carlos Menem was one of the Mercosur founders while simultaneously aligning his country with U.S. foreign strategies. Likewise, in the 2000s, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner cultivated an excellent relationship with the Lula administration, while simultaneously striking a close alliance with the Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez.

Argentina has consistently opposed one of the Brazil's most-cherished foreign-policy goals: to obtain a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. In 2004 a high level committee submitted to the UN Secretary-General a proposal that called for the admission of new permanent members, after which four countries jockeyed to obtain the seats: Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan (G-4). Notably, however, a larger group was formed to oppose the proposal and advanced instead the introduction of semipermanent membership. First called the Coffee Group and later renamed Uniting for Consensus, this group brought together the regional rivals of the G-4, including Argentina, Italy, South Korea, and Pakistan and effectively prevented the aspiring Security Council members from selling their bid on behalf of their respective regions.¹² Though not a surprise, the fact that the Brazilian main regional partner was, at the same time, one of its staunchest opponents was a heavy blow to its image as regional leader. Overall, Argentina holds similar political ambitions to Brazil and nurtures recurrent economic grievances toward it, which have given place to protectionist spasms and hindered further integration.

The domestic sources of Argentine regional policy are even clearer vis-à-vis Uruguay, as the so-called pulp mill conflict reveals. The conflict, which concerned the construction of a paper-processing plant by a Finnish company near Fray Bentos, a small Uruguayan town, severely strained relations between the two countries. Lying some 30 kilometers from the Argentine city of Gualeguaychú, a popular tourist resort area on the bank of the Uruguay River, the installation is of significant economic importance to Uruguay, representing the largest foreign investment ever. In April 2005, resident and environmental groups blocked one of the three international bridges that connect the two countries, protesting against the installation of the pulp mills. The protest gained political and diplomatic significance as senior Argentine political figures began to support the protest against the presumed environmental damage that would be produced by the mill's operations and the alleged violation of an agreement regulating the use of the river. During the last days of his presidency, Kirchner backed the protests on environmental grounds. The fact that his administration had done nothing to treat the highly polluted river that surrounds Buenos Aires, on whose shores millions of people live, speaks to the authentic reasons behind the official position: not to alienate potential voters or provoke demonstrations. If the causes were domestic, the consequences were international: in October 2008, after Kirchner had been succeeded by his wife, Uruguay announced that it would veto his candidacy to become the first permanent secretary-general of the newly formed Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). The new mill, which had begun to operate in November 2007, became the

subject of a protracted and increasingly hostile dispute that was arbitrated by the International Court of Justice in The Hague. The appeal of both countries to the Court testified to the feebleness of the Mercosur dispute-settlement institutions as much as to the unfulfilled promises of South American integration. In 2010, after the Court had issued a balanced verdict and José Mujica had succeeded Tabaré Vazquez as Uruguayan president, the Uruguayan veto was lifted and Néstor Kirchner was finally elected as the first Secretary-General of UNASUR. A few days later the blockade of the bridge was ended.

RELATIONS WITH VENEZUELA

Foreign relations between Venezuela and Argentina became closer after Néstor Kirchner took office. Lacking much-needed foreign credit, the newly elected President turned to the oil-rich Bolivarian Republic for help, the only country that would buy Argentine state bonds, while the rest of the world still viewed with distrust the ability of the new government to overcome the default on its debt. Taking advantage of oil revenues, President Chávez seized the opportunity to forge a strategic alliance. Venezuela went on to become Argentina's most significant financial supporter. As of early 2007, for example, it had purchased US\$4,250 million in Argentine debt bonds. At the behest of the Argentine government, Venezuela provided US\$135 million to leading Argentine dairy producer SanCor to ward off a takeover by the American financier George Soros. The total loan, as in other cases, is being repaid with SanCor exports of milk powder to Venezuela. Chávez's foreign aid has not only helped to bail out Argentina, improving its finances and standing among creditors, but it also helped Kirchner to develop his economic program. However, this seems not to be the only way Chávez provided financial support to his friends. In August 2007, during the Argentine election campaign, Venezuelan businessman Antonini Wilson flew to Buenos Aires on a chartered flight with Venezuelan and Argentine oil officials and attempted to bring in a suitcase with about US\$800,000.¹³ The detection and confiscation of the money at customs control triggered an international scandal.

During the Néstor Kirchner administration, Argentina signed more international agreements with Venezuela (62) than with any other country. After Venezuela came Chile (41), Bolivia (39), Brazil (22), Ecuador (19), and Paraguay (17), with just 10 with the United States. What is more, Cristina Kirchner signed roughly the same amount of treaties with Venezuela (61) in the first year and a half of her administration,¹⁴ which eloquently reflects the level of affinity and interaction between the Bolivarian and the Peronist administrations.

Relations with Venezuela were characterized by incoming financial assistance and outgoing political support. Plausibly, family resemblances between Bolivarianism and Peronism fostered reciprocal understanding, but they did not determine foreign alignments or policy outcomes. It was mutual benefit rather than ideological proximity that brought both countries ever closer, although—unlike other South American countries such as Bolivia or Ecuador—Argentina never came to be seen as a follower, even less a client state, of Caracas.

RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES

Acting on moves previously hinted at by his predecessor, Eduardo Duhalde, President Néstor Kirchner suspended the policy of automatic alignment with the United States and moved it closer to other Latin American countries. Argentina withdrew its support for the resolution of the UN Commission on Human Rights that criticized the human rights situation in Cuba, and in the 2006 United Nations Security Council election for a nonpermanent seat, Argentina supported the candidacy of Venezuela over Guatemala, the candidate favored by the United States. In November 2005, at the Fourth Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata, most of the discussion was focused on the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), and marked a clear split between the countries of Mercosur, plus Venezuela, and the supporters of the FTAA, led by the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Such tensions notwithstanding, the United States and Argentina got along on the two topics that were at the top of their respective agendas: international security, especially regarding Iranian support for terrorist attacks, for the United States and support in negotiations with international institutions and debtors' clubs for Argentina.¹⁵

The Néstor Kirchner administration led reinvigorated attempts to prosecute Iranian figures for their alleged role in the July 1994 bombing of the main Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, issuing arrest warrants for several Iranian officials. Among them were former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, accused of ordering the attack that killed 85 people and injured more than 200. When one of his key domestic allies—former street activist Luis D'Elia—suggested that U.S. and Israeli pressure was fueling Argentina's pursuit of Iran, he was promptly forced to resign from his government post.¹⁶ This was, perhaps, the only issue in which Buenos Aires was closer to Washington than to Caracas, but it was a crucial one for the United States. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner continued her husband's policy: during the speech she gave at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2009, she had harsh words for

Iran, accusing it of complicity in the 1994 attack and restating Argentine demands for the extradition of Iranians wanted by Interpol for the bombing.

In terms of debt relief, the Kirchner administration sought and found American support from the early months of its mandate. Within a month of his inauguration, President Kirchner had received the secretary of state Colin Powell and the economy minister Roberto Lavagna had met with the U.S. deputy secretary at the Treasury Department, John Taylor.¹⁷ Argentina was facing deadlines to pay up millions of dollars with international lenders in the following months, and the IMF's head, Horst Köhler, was a harsh opponent of any concession on the part of the creditors. U.S. pressure was key in convincing him to offer Argentina more flexible financial requirements. In true Peronist fashion, pragmatism affirmed its primacy over ideology and the administration got its way.

If relations with the only world superpower were stormy but functional during Néstor Kirchner's term, they were widely expected to improve as Cristina's inauguration came closer. However, unforeseen events undermined hopes of an improved relationship; during the first days of her presidency, Argentina's relations with the United States deteriorated as a result of the *maletinazo* (suitcase scandal), which had occurred a few months previously. A Venezuelan-American citizen, Guido Alejandro Antonini Wilson, had tried to enter Argentina in August 2007 carrying US\$800,000 in cash in his suitcase, without declaring it to customs, having traveled on a flight chartered by the Argentine government. In December, a United States assistant attorney made allegations before a Florida court that such money consisted of illegal contributions for Cristina Kirchner's presidential campaign. Some of the allegations were proven and several individuals received a prison sentence after a widely reported trial. The Kirchners, as well as Venezuelan president Chávez, called the allegations "a trashing operation"¹⁸ and accused the United States of a conspiracy orchestrated to divide Latin American nations. On December 19, 2007, the Argentine government restricted the U.S. ambassador's activities and limited his meetings to Foreign Ministry officials, a treatment generally reserved for hostile countries. However, on January 31, in a special meeting with Cristina Kirchner, the U.S. ambassador in Argentina declared that the allegations "were never made by the United States government,"¹⁹ thus cooling down the dispute.

In sum, the Kirchners' relations with the United States were mixed and variable but not bad overall. They were marked by a degree of tacit reciprocity, in the form of low-profile Argentine support for the "War on Terror" in exchange for U.S. support in foreign-debt renegotiation, but also by the Argentine rejection of the Free Trade Area of the

Americas (FTAA) negotiations and the occasional scandals that punctuated this period. With an eye on their domestic audiences, the Kirchners retained their rhetorical gestures. Yet, aware of their country's financial fragility and of the shared interest of the United States in bringing the Iranian-sponsored terrorists to justice, they were able to step back from open hostility and maintain bilateral relations.

RELATIONS WITH THE INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND

Argentina's relation with the International Monetary Fund has been stormy and superficially contradictory under the Kirchners. Both presidents voiced harsh criticisms of the IMF for its responsibility for the 2001 economic collapse, and strove to reduce its influence on the Argentine economy. They did this not by refusing to serve the national debt, but by doing exactly the opposite. In December 2005, Néstor Kirchner ordered the treasury to repay Argentina's nearly US\$10 billion debt to the IMF, a significant gesture in moving Argentina away from external conditionalities. Once again, strong rhetoric against a target portrayed as the Argentine people's greatest enemy was accompanied by concrete actions that were not hostile but of mutual convenience. Commentators related this to the behavior of the Argentine national bird, the *tero*, which sings in one place but keeps its eggs in another, with the aim of diverting the attention of potential predators—or, in this case, electors. Such a pattern is a Peronist trademark.

By celebrating its regained freedom from the IMF while fully canceling its debt, the country that had arguably given more grief than anyone else to the world's lender of last resort—and also the one in which the IMF had made its most costly mistakes—gained applause at home and in Washington.²⁰ Argentina's decision was followed by other countries in the region, notably Brazil and Uruguay.

When the global financial crisis erupted in 2008, Cristina Kirchner declared that it would have little impact on the Argentine economy. However, Argentina was hit by the crisis, and the cycle of several years of high-rate growth turned slightly negative in 2009, which led in October 2009 to a further volte-face by the administration. During a visit to Istanbul, the economy minister Amado Boudou declared to the Argentine national press agency that the head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, was correctly "interpreting the sign of the times," and further remarked that Argentina was "on its way back into international credit markets."²¹ The official argument was that the IMF was rectifying previous mistakes and moving back to the position maintained by Argentina; yet, the underlying reason of the policy reversal was that

Argentina's economic surplus had been dried out by the crisis at the same time as Venezuela had run out of cash for financing large countries. Consequently, the Kirchners decided that the need for funds justified inviting the IMF back to visit Argentina. Once more, financial pragmatism prevailed over ideological stance; skillful rhetoric accomplished the mission to hide the fact from view.

CONCLUSIONS

As with any public policy, foreign policy is rooted in the broader realm of domestic politics. Hence, its main goal is for the ruling officers to stay in power.²² In times of war or severe international turmoil, continuity in power depends on ostensibly external factors. In times of peace, however, domestic factors are paramount and foreign policy recedes to the background, thus becoming just another means to gather and retain internal support—or to achieve external resources that serve such goals. If this rationale holds true, it does so even more when it involves Peronism, a mass movement whose essential feature is not a substantive agenda but its fondness for power.

During the Kirchner administrations, ideological claims have been discursively pushed forward but not implemented at a later stage. The Kirchners had two main goals: abroad, to ensure the continuing access to financial supply for the public sector; and domestically, to broaden their base of political legitimacy and electoral support. In a nutshell, it all comes down to money and votes. Other objectives related to foreign policy, such as securing energy supplies, improving relations with non-financing partners, expanding foreign markets, gaining international repute, or consolidating economic integration, were either downplayed or utterly neglected.²³ The Kirchners developed a pragmatic behavior in order to accomplish the previously mentioned goals: their policies were oriented toward the first one, money; and their rhetoric was aimed at the second, votes. As they eventually ran out of both around Cristina's middle-term, this strategy could be labeled—with the benefit of hindsight—as short-term pragmatism. They made recourse to two means that only apparently contradicted each other: a combative rhetoric and a few crucial alliances with foreign actors.

Brazil and Mercosur were top priorities according to the public position of both Kirchner administrations. However, gradually but determinedly, Argentina substituted Venezuela for the United States as a preferred balance *vis-à-vis* Brazil. Likewise, regional integration gained a great deal of discursive support at the same time as it receded on the ground. By mid-2010, Mercosur had stalled and there was no prospect

of any relaunch or for it to be superseded by a successful alternative. UNASUR, for its part, only functions as a discussion forum. As diplomatic relations are still tense between Bolivia and Chile and between Colombia and Ecuador, and ties between Colombia and Venezuela worsen over time, the UNASUR founding treaty has been ratified by less signatory countries than it requires. The dominance of rhetoric over action seems to be a regional feature.

Venezuela has become Argentina's most publicized foreign partner under the Kirchners. However, this fact can only partially be explained by recourse to ideology. Indeed, there were two practical reasons for the Kirchners to get closer to Chávez: they sought external legitimacy to garner support from progressive parties and civil society organizations at home, plus they badly needed financial assistance in the context of exclusion from world financial markets. If the former presents the slight possibility of ideological influence, the latter was definitely pragmatic.

Regarding Argentina-U.S. relations, they underwent ups and downs at the rhythm of a handful of scandals and associated rhetorical excesses—which were mostly dependent on Argentine domestic processes. However, issues of mutual interests were workable in areas of maximum concern for each country: security with regard to the United States, and debt relief with regard to Argentina. The Kirchners never courted Iran—as Lula and Chávez did—and the United States never withdrew support to Argentina when it had to negotiate with third countries or international financial organizations.

Finally, the Kirchners never got tired of repeating the classical Latin American mantra about the IMF being the main actor to blame for the nation's economic misfortunes. Yet, not only was Argentina one of the main countries to pay off its debt with the IMF, but it sold a rekindled relationship in 2009 as a triumph over the “old” IMF and of a “new” financial architecture of global governance. Seemingly, necessity trumped ideology but not rhetoric.

Néstor Kirchner's foreign policy was marked by his personal imprint. However, elements of continuity with his predecessor are visible. If the “substance and style of his foreign policy ought to be seen in light of the priority he gave to domestic policy matters,”²⁴ his predecessor Duhalde also made crucial decisions “thinking more of the internal electoral process than of his country's relations with the United States.”²⁵ In contrast, it can be argued that the administration of Cristina Kirchner has allowed a slightly greater space for ideological concerns. The fact that her performance has declined, as economic indicators, image polls, and electoral results unequivocally show, might suggest that pragmatism pays better than ideology.

The Kirchners' foreign policy can be uncontroversially depicted as personalist, based on short-term planning, and principally pragmatic rather than ideological. Shortsightedness was due to a focus on domestic objectives, to which foreign policy was all but an instrument.

Unlike Brazil, whose self-perception as a predestined great power and whose professionalized diplomatic bureaucracy has conferred its foreign policy with a long-term coherence, Argentina's ruling class has never reached a consensus or instilled a significant level of professionalism in handling its relations with the outer world. If Brazilian foreign principles have been universalism, autonomy, and grandeur,²⁶ Argentina's have often been particularism, oscillation between isolation and subservience, and self-importance rooted in a glorious past rather than any promising future. Notably, such volatility has not only taken place across different party administrations but especially across (and within) Peronist administrations, reflecting Perón's own dramatic policy changes. In sixty years of Peronist foreign policies, the only element of continuity has been its subordination to internal goals, whether financial or electoral, and rejection of an ideological program or a permanent definition of the national interest. For the Peronist leadership, foreign policy has been just domestic politics by other means.

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