Argentina’s Foreign Policy towards the United States under the Democratic Regime

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between Argentina and the United States since the former's democratic transition in 1983 have entered an altogether new phase. My hypothesis is that this transformation, which has turned both countries from historical foes to strong allies, has become permanent. The transition to democracy in Argentina opened a new phase in bilateral relations. In this new phase, Argentina has moved from an ideological foreign policy based upon the belief that the country was a world power to a pragmatic policy that recognized Argentina's place in international affairs. As a result, relations with the U.S. have improved dramatically. However, this transition has not always been smooth.

A historic animosity has characterized the diplomatic relations between Argentina and the United States. (ESCUDE 1983: 39-52) This animosity derives from opposed political,
economic and cultural interests. As a result, both countries have had quite distinct and occasionally antagonistic perspectives of international politics. Argentina traditionally saw the U.S. as a threat to its aspiration to be the regional South American power. After independence in 1824, Argentina oriented its foreign policy toward Europe, the United Kingdom in particular.

The Argentine elites initiated a “national project” that was based upon the existence of an international regime that revolved around Europe. (PUIG 1988:20) Argentina’s decadence was directly related to Great Britain’s and Western Europe’s decadence as centers of political power.

Instead of finding an accommodation with the U.S. as the new hegemonic international power after World War II, Argentina substituted its political alignment with the United Kingdom for the policy of non-alignment. This policy was consistent with its historical hostility towards the United States. Between 1945 and 1983, Argentina's foreign policy was highly inconsistent. It fluctuated between short periods of alignment with the U.S. and periods of non-alignment. (ESCUDE 1984:58-59)

II. FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE DEMOCRATIC REGIME

It was not until 1983 that Argentina finally began a transition to democracy that consolidated itself. American-Argentine relations can be classified in two main periods, pre-1983 and post-1983. If distrust marked relations between 1983, the transition to democracy set the stage for building the current U.S.-Argentina alliance. Argentina's first post-1983 civilian President Raúl Alfonsín's followed a strategy of strengthening relations with Latin America, Western Europe and the United States. This became the country's main foreign policy objective. (RUSSELL 1988 f:129)

Initially, Alfonsín's foreign and domestic priorities were political and included protecting human rights and democracy, promoting nuclear disarmament and achieving peace in Central America. On these issues Alfonsín took some distance from U.S. policies. However, as his term moved on, relations with the U.S. became his priority. This policy responded largely to Argentina's economic problems and to the need for U.S. support to overcome this situation. Alfonsín’s administration tried to build a stable relation with the U.S. Argentina would not ally itself completely with the United States but it would not follow an anti-American policy either. (RUSSELL 1988 f:130)
Though they recognized the country's place as a member of Western civilization, Argentina's foreign policy-makers established an analytical difference between two levels in the relation with the US. (RUSSELL 1998 f:131) The first referred to the common values and included support for democracy, for human rights and for the market economy. The other one was the rejection of certain U.S. foreign-policy methods. These included the application of military solutions to political problems, as the U.S. did in Nicaragua. (RUSSELL 1988 f:130)

As a manifestation of this dissent with the U.S., Argentina carried on the following policies:
1- Argentina’s participation in the Contadora Support Group that attempted to mediate a peace plan for Central America.
2- Its support for the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua while simultaneously pressuring for its democratization.
3- Argentina’s participation in the anti-nuclear Group of Six.
4- Argentina’s participation in the Non-Aligned Movement.
5- Its negotiation with the Soviet Union on a fishing treaty despite U.S. pressures to desist from such a policy.

Alfonsín's policy cannot be considered as an anti-US policy. It did not differ much from that of some European
countries. Its purpose was not to oppose the U.S. but to promote Argentina's values and interests, and to maintain some degree of autonomy. Argentina considered itself a defender of Western values but differed with the U.S. on the method to implement these. Even when Argentina differed over methods, it tried to take into consideration U.S. concerns. (RUSSELL 1988 f:133) In fact, U.S.-Argentina relations improved significantly under Alfonsín. The significance of Alfonsín lies in that he established the base for the U.S.-Argentina rapprochement that Menem would consolidate. He also began the process of redefining Argentina's state policies and position in the international system. Thus, making Argentina's foreign policy more predictable. In general terms, his relations with the U.S. were good. Argentina maintained some autonomous initiative but from a clear identification with the West and its values. He also formulated a foreign policy attuned to a democratic society, based on respect for human rights, international law, peace and democracy.

III. ARGENTINA'S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE COLD WAR:

CARLOS MENEM (1989-1999)

1. U.S. militaristic policies in Central America during the 1980's were widely opposed by its allies.
The Peronista government of Carlos Menem redefined Argentina’s foreign policy. Menem brought about a radical turn to the country’s foreign policy so that relations with the United States became the main diplomatic priority. When he took over the presidency, the situation that Menem faced was quite different from what it had been when Alfonsín had taken over. Political issues, such as human rights, relations with the Military and the democratic transition, had been crucial for Alfonsín. On the economic front, Alfonsín had been unable to solve the problem of inflation and foreign debt. This situation raised the necessity of giving priority to economic problems, and putting the political problems at a secondary level. When Menem became President, Argentine democracy had consolidated. His foreign policy responded to this reality.

Menem reoriented Argentine foreign policy significantly. He applied a doctrine called "peripheral realism." (ESCUDE 1992:169) According to it, Argentina was a country of no strategic or economic importance to the U.S. Thus, it had no power to challenge the North American superpower. Argentina had historically overestimated its international power, bringing it into a historical conflict with the US that had brought about no benefits to Argentina. Menem's priority was
mending relations with the US. Argentina would benefit politically from a close relation.

The new foreign policy also served the government’s economic goals of promoting development and economic growth by attracting investment and technology, and stimulating foreign trade with developed countries. In this context, Argentine diplomacy under Menem’s government put aside Alfonsín's moralistic policies, adopting a pragmatic approach. (CAVALLO 1989:19)

From this perspective, Menem’s government established five priorities in his foreign policy:
1- Making use of its foreign policy to promote Argentina's economic development.
2- Improving relations with the U.S. as the main world power.
3- Strengthening political and commercial relations with the South American neighbors as well as the process of economic integration, particularly with Brazil.²
4- Strengthening relations with developed countries, in particular with those of the European Community, with the purpose of facilitating Argentine economic development and

² The consolidation of MERCOSUR, the South American Common Market, would eventually increase the international negotiating power of Argentina.
promoting trade and investment.³

5- Creating a space of common Latin American cultural and political identity to promote common goals. (CAVALLO 1989:22)

The administration would complement the pragmatic approach with a normative dimension in the form of Argentina’s support for democracy and peace. In fact, Argentina became a major contributor to U.N. peace-keeping operations in Gaza, Cyprus, Haiti and the Balkans.⁴

Though Alfonsín's administration improved relations with the U.S., it also made an effort to maintain a level of international autonomy. While the Radicals considered relations with the U.S. a very important issue, the Peronistas made these their major concern. Menem tried to focus his efforts on solving its conflicts with the U.S. This policy also formulated a “joint policy agenda” that would take into consideration, not only Argentine interests, but also common interests. Hence, the Argentine government tried to increase cooperation with the U.S. government in various issues that

³. This explains Menem's decision to re-establish diplomatic relations with Great Britain and promoting a more diplomatic approach to solve the Malvinas issue.

⁴, Argentina proposed in the U.N. the establishment of a humanitarian civilian force called the "White Helmets".
were not traditionally considered part of their common relation. These included cooperation in international organizations, space, nuclear energy, drug trafficking, law enforcement and the environment, problems of high priority for the US. (DEPARTMENT OF STATE 1997:3) Menem’s administration applied this approach in the policy towards Cuba before the UN Human Rights Committee. Menem’s policy objective was ending a traditional conflict with the United States generated by pacifist and Third World causes that should not concern and did not benefit Argentina. These included Argentina's participation in the anti-nuclear G-6 and in the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Peronista administration took concrete steps to demonstrate to the U.S. its intention of improving the relations and diminishing tensions. Among the measures undertaken one can mention:

1- Argentina's decision to strengthen relations with the OECD.
2- The end of the Condor II missile project.
3- The retirement of Argentina from the Non-Aligned Movement.
4- The signing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.
5- The decision to join the Club of London. (DEPARTMENT OF STATE 1999:11)

Menem also promoted cooperation with the U.S. on sensitive
political issues. These included restoring democracy in Haiti or serving as guarantor of the Peru-Ecuador peace process. Argentina demonstrated a willingness to take its relation with the US to new levels that included political cooperation and cooperation in the promotion of peace. At the U.N. Argentina became a major U.S. collaborator at the U.N. Menem turned Argentina into one of the main contributors to peace-keeping operations. Argentina's participation in these operations constituted its contribution to U.S.'s efforts in promoting peace. Argentina's participation was closely coordinated with the U.S. This policy also demonstrated an unambiguous policy of support for the U.S. and its Western allies.

Some of these issues, such as the Argentine nuclear program and the Condor II Missile project, had previously generated tensions between both countries. This project involved cooperation with countries that were enemies of the U.S., such as Iraq, and generated doubts about the intentions of Argentina's nuclear and missile technology. The new policy of alignment with the U.S. reached its highlight when Argentina decided to participate in the UN blockade against Iraq. Argentina became the only Latin American country to have

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5. These operations also served the purpose of finding a new role for Argentina's Military.
a role in this operation. This demonstrated the seriousness of Argentina's intention not only to mend relations with the U.S. but also to become a close partner and ally.

According to Menem's view the distant relation between Argentina and the United States had resulted in a situation that had been mutually harmful, but especially for Argentina. The Argentine government attributed this historical distancing to variables such as Argentine neutrality, the Third Position policies, Argentine criticism of U.S. policies in Central America, Argentina's lack of democratic stability and its human rights abuses. These were precisely the motives of conflict that the Menem government tried to correct.

Menem proposed a partner relation, not one of dependency, between Argentina and the U.S. One constant in Argentine foreign policy has been to make Argentina a world power. The Peronista government’s foreign policy attempted to improve Argentina's international position and take it to the highest possible place internationally. Yet this policy recognized, from a "realist" view, that thus far Argentina was not a power. Instead of pretending to be a power on its own, like Peron did, Argentina would join the group of Western allies that, under the US's leadership is major world leaders. This policy was a reaction to previous nonaligned policies that
Menem's administration blamed for Argentina's failure internally and externally. In the end, this policy would allow Argentina, through economic development and in partnership with the West, to enter the First World.

Argentina and the U.S. have institutionalized their alliance. They established a "Special Process of High Level Bilateral Consultations" in 1997. (EMBAJADA ARGENTINA 1997:1) These schemes only occur between very close allies. Menem's efforts culminated in January 1998 when Argentina gained the status of Major Non-NATO Ally of the U.S., a status enjoyed by only seven countries in the world. (CONGRESS 1997:5) Menem established a solid base for what has become the strongest political alliance between the U.S. and a Latin American country. Argentina achieved political partnership with the U.S. It attained a status as a Major Non-NATO Ally but the relation was still too asymmetrical. In the economic realm, Menem fulfilled some of his expectations, at least during his first term in office. Argentina became a major recipient of foreign investments in the world. However, the path toward full economic partnership is still complicated. At the Miami

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6. This status does not establish mutual defense obligations but it gives Argentina benefits such as advanced training and participation in cooperative research and development projects. It also has tremendous symbolic importance.
Summit in 1994, President Clinton and President Menem enthusiastically supported negotiating a Free Trade Area of the Americas. Nevertheless, strong opposition in the U.S. Congress remains a major obstacle to this scheme that would make both countries full economic partners.\(^7\)


The inauguration in power of Alliance president Fernando de la Rúa in 1999 did not affect Argentine-American relations in any essential manner. De la Rúa's foreign policy objectives do not reflect major differences with Carlos Menem's policies. As with Menem, economic and social objectives took priority over political objectives. De la Rúa's administration declared that his government had no intention of introducing abrupt changes into Argentina's foreign policy. De la Rúa continued Menem's objectives of promoting peace, democratization and South American integration. (MINISTERIO DE RELACIONES EXTERIORES 2000:2)

There would be no rationale for de la Rúa to go back to confrontational policies. Argentina has gained a privileged

\(^7\). In response to congressional opposition, the executive's approach has been to support sub-regional integration schemes such as MERCOSUR, South America's Common Market, which will eventually negotiate with the U.S.
status in U.S. foreign policy. Since Carlos Menem initiated the rapprochement with the U.S., both countries have maintained the close relation, even after the respective administrations have changed.\(^8\) The intention of both countries to consolidate their partnership was highlighted by Margaret Albright's visit to Buenos Aires in August 2000.

A second hypothesis of mine is that, for both countries, the alliance has become state policy. The de la Rua administration recognizes that the state policies of both countries have important similarities. Argentine political parties and parliamentarians have reached a consensus in promoting these policies and the alliance with the U.S. (DEPARTMENT OF STATE 8/2000:1)

De la Rúa's government intends to maintain an excellent relation with the U.S. Foreign Minister Rodríguez-Giavarini has pointed to the coincidence in the state policy with regard to human rights, democracy, the struggle for peace and the equal development of citizens. (DEPARTMENT OF STATE 8/2000:1) The end of the Cold War and the consequent change in U.S. foreign policy has facilitated the rapprochement between the U.S. and Argentina. U.S. prestige in Latin America has

\(^8\) Both Clinton and de la Rua maintained the policies of the predecessors.
strengthen itself after the Cold War, when the U.S. turned towards a more effective support for democracy, human rights and civilian authority in Latin America. But the U.S. has to maintain a policy of friendship and partnership to maintain this sympathy. Supporting militarism, complicity with human rights abuses and dictatorships, intervention or coercion would again affect U.S. prestige in the region negatively.

The U.S.’s renovated interest in South America has favored the rapprochement initiated by Argentina. In view of economic globalization and accelerated economic integration, particularly in Europe, the U.S. realized the importance of taking the initiative in this process. This is one reason for this renovated interest since the U.S. looks at the Latin America countries as natural economic and commercial partners.

The North American power is aware of the improvement in its prestige and the consequent possibility of finding political allies among the Latin Americans. Argentina in particular has become an important ally in subjects like the environment, democracy, human rights, the fight against drug traffic and the policy of nuclear nonproliferation. In fact, during Menem’s administration both countries signed treaties in subjects of non-traditional cooperation such as terrorism, extradition, space, atomic energy and commerce. De la Rúa has
continued this policy and has already signed treaties on all these subjects with the U.S. (DEPARTMENT OF STATE 6/2000:1) The U.S. has taken advantage of Argentina’s interest in establishing an alliance to gain its political support in international organizations and in its human rights policy.

In her visit to President de la Rúa, U.S. Secretary of State Albright stated that the United States recognizes Argentina as a leader, not only in Latin America but also in the world. U.S. policy toward Argentina values the country's non-proliferation policy, its high participation in peace-keeping operations and its efforts against global warming. (DEPARTMENT OF STATE 8/2000:3) On political issues, Argentina has acquired a function as a European-style ally, exercising functions such as U.N. peace-keeping, promotion of disarmament, the defense of democracy, the protection of the environment and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

The de la Rúa Government understands that to solve Argentina’s major problems, it needs a close relation with the U.S. The administration has promoted a dialogue with the Americans and proclaims the similarity of interests and values (democracy, hemispheric stability, preservation of peace, rising the levels of economic development, eradication of poverty, fighting organized crime and corruption.)
IV. CONCLUSIONS

There are some variables that have favored this new type of relation:

1. The democratization of Argentina. Democracies tend to have similar values.
2. Argentina's view of itself as a Western country. Argentina has recognized that the U.S. leads the Western world, including Europe.
3. The existence of one superpower. Argentina has no other options left.
4. The evolution of Argentina's political and civic sectors towards more pragmatic, realistic and nonideological positions.
5. The failure of Third-Ways and Non-Alignments.
6. The greater flexibility of U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America after the Cold War.
7. The failure of Import-Substitution Industrialization and the consequent need of foreign aid and investment for development.
8. Argentina's realization that it is not a power.
9. Argentina's defeat in the Malvinas Islands. This event has made the civilian governments realize that the country cannot vindicate its objectives confronting a U.S. ally or without
U.S. support.

10. Increasing interest in both Argentine government and society for American culture and society.

11. The process of economic integration and globalization. The U.S. understands that it needs Latin America as a natural trade partner in this process and that integration with a big market like Argentina is essential for maintaining its economic leadership. Argentina now sees the U.S. and South America, not Europe, as its natural market.

Bilateral relations after the democratic transition have evolved from historical antagonism to the strongest alliance between the North American superpower and a South American country. Both countries perceive great opportunities in their new alliance. This alliance has become state policy for both countries. Argentina believes that it has already paid a high price for its previous policy of non-alignment. Its alliance with the U.S. has given Argentina a privileged position in U.S. foreign policy. The down side of the new relation is that Argentina has lost some of its foreign policy autonomy. Nevertheless, Argentina believes that this policy will bring about new opportunities for development and greater power. In the long term, it could increase its autonomy. Argentina has no other realistic choice since it is under the U.S.’s area of
influence.

The U.S. also perceives the opportunity to gain as an ally one of the most important Latin American countries. It can also gain support in international organizations, especially at the U.N. and end a historical conflict.

All three democratic administrations in Argentina have contributed to the achievement of the current alliance. Alfonsín was responsible for normalizing relations with the U.S. and for proclaiming a coincidence in values. Menem eliminated the areas of major conflict and executed the policies that made the alliance a reality. De la Rúa's has maintained the compromise of consolidating the alliance. All Argentine political forces have accepted the alliance with the U.S. as state policy, a policy that does not change regardless of which party rules in Argentina. The democratic administrations have given Argentine policy towards the U.S. and Argentine policy overall a continuity and a stability that were not present since the 19th century.
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