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Argentina and the Ukraine War: Between pragmatism and values

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Abstract

This article examines Argentina's stance regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. During the administration of President Alberto Fernández (2019–2023), Argentina condemned the invasion at the United Nations but maintained a relatively low diplomatic profile and criticised Western sanctions against Russia. However, since President Javier Milei took office in late 2023, Argentina has shifted its foreign policy orientation towards greater alignment with Western powers, leading to a more unequivocal support of Ukraine. As a significant development, President Zelensky responded by attending Milei's inauguration. The evolution of Argentina's position results from a combination of strategic calculation and principles across administrations of different ideological orientations, contradicting simplistic views of the international stance of Global South countries.

1 | FROM CAUTIOUS CRITICISM OF RUSSIA TO ALIGNMENT WITH UKRAINE

Argentina's stance regarding the Ukraine War oscillated between cautious criticism of the invasion under President Alberto Fernández (2019–2023) and a clear alignment with the West's pro-Ukraine position under Javier Milei (2023–present). President Fernández struggled to articulate a clear position due to conflicting perspectives within his governing coalition and his own political weakness. In the end, Argentina voted against Moscow in all war-related resolutions at the United Nations and backed the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, a harsher stance than other countries in the Global South such as Brazil.¹ Nonetheless, and in line with Argentina's diplomatic tradition in defence of non-interference, the Fernández administration criticised Western sanctions against Russia and rejected offering military assistance to Ukraine. Overall, in this period Argentina maintained a low profile and avoided diplomatic confrontation with Russia.

In contrast, President Milei strongly backs Ukraine and sees the war as an opportunity to accentuate

Argentina's turn towards the United States and the West and away from China, Russia, Brazil, and other emerging powers. This is why Milei also rejected an invitation from BRICS to Argentina to become a member of the bloc. Milei's forceful defence of Ukraine raised Argentina's profile regarding the conflict and prompted a historic visit to Buenos Aires by President Volodymyr Zelensky, who attended Milei's inauguration. It remains to be seen if his staunchly pro-West position is sustainable, particularly given Argentina's fragile economic situation, and whether it will translate into a more prominent role for Argentina in international efforts to put an end to the war.

In line with this volume's introduction, this article argues that Argentina's positions on the Ukraine War cannot be explained by a single analytical framework or by a unified view of the state. Rather, the attitude of the Fernández and Milei administrations towards the conflict derived from a combination of domestic and international factors including historical principles, political calculation, and economic necessity (Schirm, 2023). Studying the Argentine case might provide clues about the role of mid-sized countries in the Global South amid a redefinition of the global order.

2 | BEFORE THE INVASION: DEALS, MULTIPOLARITY AND VACCINES

Following the collapse of Argentina's neoliberal experiment in the early 2000s, President Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and his wife and successor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) aimed to diversify Argentine foreign policy through closer ties with emerging powers such as China and Russia. They also favoured stronger regional integration within Latin America, particularly with other left-minded leaders such as Lula da Silva in Brazil and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (Russell & Tokatlian, 2016). In contrast, during this period Argentina maintained tense relations with the United States and voiced its opposition to the US-led global economic order. Argentina's stance in favour of multipolarity and engagement with Global South powers had strong ideological underpinnings but also responded so strategic necessity. In the early 2000s Argentina's economy grew rapidly due to a China-induced commodity boom but became increasingly dependent on Beijing on trade, investment, and financing. In addition, the Kirchners' increasingly interventionist economic policies and a dispute with bondholders of defaulted Argentine foreign debt meant Western businesses were reluctant to invest in the country.

It was in this context that Argentina–Russia relations reached historical heights. Presidents Fernández de Kirchner and her Russian counterpart Dmitri Medvedev signed a strategic partnership in 2008 in Moscow, upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2015 in Buenos Aires, with Vladimir Putin back in the presidency (Dinatale, 2022). On both occasions the countries announced numerous cooperation agreements to stimulate Russian investment in Argentina's oil sector, nuclear and hydropower energy plants, and other infrastructure initiatives. Despite growing political affinity, however, economic relations between the two countries remained limited, and these ambitious projects never materialised (Hutschenreuter, 2022). Bilateral trade peaked in 2013, when Argentina exported goods worth 726 million dollars and imported 1.7 billion dollars' worth of Russian goods, but this represented only 1.12% of Argentine total exports and 2.39% of its imports (Ferreiro, 2022). Overall, Argentina mostly exported commodities such as soybeans and fruit to Russia and imported fuel and machinery ('Comtrade Database', n.d.).

The deepening of diplomatic relations also encompassed Russia's territorial ambitions in Ukraine. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the Argentine government advocated for a peaceful resolution but criticised the double standards of Western powers, which defended Ukrainian territorial integrity while overlooking Argentina's claim over the Malvinas/

Falkland Islands. The islands have been occupied by the United Kingdom since the 1830s, and the two countries engaged in a war over them in 1982 (Gerschenson, 2014; Stuenkel, 2014). In March 2014, President Putin personally contacted his Argentine counterpart to express gratitude for this stance, which diverted attention from Moscow's actions. In return, Kirchner thanked Moscow for its steadfast support of Argentina's position on the Malvinas/Falkland issue (Peregil, 2014).

Argentina–Russia relations cooled off during the centre-right administration of Mauricio Macri (2015–2019), but recovered when *kirchnerism* returned to power in December 2019. In this instance, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner chose to run for vice-president and anoint moderate Peronist Alberto Fernández (no relation) as president.² Only months after the inauguration of the Fernández–Fernández de Kirchner ticket, the irruption of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 provided an opportunity to rekindle bilateral cooperation with Russia. Amid a global scramble for vaccines, particularly in the Global South, Moscow agreed to supply Argentina with 20 million doses of its Sputnik V vaccine, the first of which arrived in late 2020 (Squires & Rudnitsky, 2020). The Argentine government portrayed this as an example of Russian solidarity in times of need, in contrast to the indifference of the United States and Europe.³

On February 3rd, 2022, as evidence of an imminent Russian invasion to Ukraine mounted, President Alberto Fernández landed in Moscow to express his gratitude for the Sputnik vaccines to Vladimir Putin in person. During the bilateral meeting the Argentine president pledged to revive the 2015 comprehensive strategic partnership, while his Russian counterpart stated that the two countries 'shared international approaches regarding the supremacy of international law and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Argentina, 2022). Far from showing restraint in the face of growing tensions between Moscow and the West, Fernández went as far as to offer Argentina as 'Russia's gateway into Latin America'. The meeting and the president's statement were harshly criticised by Argentina's opposition and prompted a private reprimand from the US government (Rodríguez Yebra, 2022).

3 | RESPONDING TO THE INVASION: IDEAS AND PRAGMATISM

Argentina's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 took shape gradually and responded to the simultaneous and occasionally conflicting influence of ideational factors and strategic calculus.

Vice-president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner favoured a more pro-Russian position and wanted the government to condemn what she called the hypocrisy of Western powers that defended Ukraine's territorial integrity but not that of Argentina in the Malvinas/Falklands. President Fernández, in contrast, wanted to strike a middle ground and condemn the invasion while avoiding a total alignment with the West (Actis, 2022).

In the end, a precarious internal compromise was reached: Argentina voted against Russia at the UN and demanded an end to the invasion, but also recognised Russia's security concerns in Eastern Europe and resisted pressures from the United States and Europe to transfer military equipment to Ukraine (González Levaggi, 2022). In addition, the Argentine government welcomed Ukrainian refugees and sent humanitarian assistance.⁴ Overall, Argentina maintained a relatively low profile and focused on promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes rather than condemning Russia, as expressed by president Fernández at the Paris Peace Forum (Fernández, 2022). Argentina's relatively peripheral status in the international system and its geographical distance from the conflict made this strategy viable (Chivvis et al., 2023).

I will briefly explore the ideational and rational sources of Argentine stance on the war using the four analytical categories developed in the introduction to this volume: value-driven approaches, strategic opportunism, varied consequentialism, and pragmatic indifference.

First, starting with a value-driven perspective anchored in constructivism, Argentina has a longstanding tradition as a defender of human rights in international fora, a legacy of the country's tragic history of state-sponsored terrorism during the last military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. These ideas have been a source of prestige and identity for Argentine diplomacy since the return of democracy. Foreign minister Santiago Cafiero referred to this legacy on a speech about the Ukraine War before the UN Human Rights Council in March 2022, during which he asked Russia to cease its offensive and said that Argentina 'had learned to be humanistic through blood'.

Second, if we see the issue from the perspective of the strategic use of norms and values, which the introduction calls strategic opportunism, siding with Russia would have been inconsistent with Argentina's position regarding one of its most fundamental foreign policy priorities, its claim over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands.⁵ In other words, by condemning the unilateral alteration of borders by Russia, Argentine diplomacy was reinforcing its own position vis-à-vis the United Kingdom. But Argentina's criticism of Russia's invasion at the United Nations was strategic in another,

more immediate sense. At the time of the invasion the Fernández administration was in the middle of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the restructuring of a 44-billion-dollar loan contracted during the previous government. The United States is by far the most influential country at the IMF, and the Treasury's support was crucial for the renegotiation to be approved. A pro-Russian stance, therefore, could have jeopardised the deal and pushed Argentina into another debt default (Múgica, 2022).

Third, and moving to rationalist explanations of state behaviour, Argentine opposition to Western sanctions on Russia and in favour of a peaceful resolution of the conflict were at least partially driven by the variegated consequences of the invasion on Argentina's fragile economy. To start, Argentina is a net importer of oil and gas, and the spike in international prices that followed the invasion meant roughly 5 billion dollars of additional government spending in a context of depleted Central Bank reserves and an already high fiscal deficit (Serrichio, 2023). More broadly, any disruption to global trade and financial flows tend to affect emerging markets first, and particularly those with severe economic problems such as Argentina. By 2022, for instance, the foreign currency reserves at Argentina's Central Bank were nearly depleted. Paradoxically, Argentina could have benefited from higher international prices of wheat, which both Ukraine and Russia produce, but a dramatic drought between 2022 and 2023 depressed Argentina's agricultural production (Gilbert, 2023).

Finally, there was certainly an element of rational pragmatic indifference in Argentina's stance. The country is far away from the battleground and, unlike its neighbour Brazil or other emerging giants such as India, it lacks the economic weight and diplomatic influence to aspire to become a leader in the Global South. Given Argentina's acute economic needs, its decision to keep a low profile and avoid antagonising either the United States or emerging powers makes strategic sense.

The Russian government seemed satisfied with Argentina's overall position. In December 2022 former President Medvedev publicly called for the United Kingdom to withdraw from the Malvinas/Falklands, using the Spanish name of the islands. In doing so, Medvedev –vice-president of Russia's security council—denounced the 'hypocrisy' of the UK government, which defended Ukraine's territorial integrity while allegedly violating Argentina's (Clarín, 2022). Around the same time, President Putin called President Fernández to congratulate him for Argentina's triumph in the football World Cup held in Qatar (Galarraga Gorzázar & Díaz Molina, 2022). That Russia did not see Argentina's attitude towards the invasion as hostile was confirmed when Moscow voted in favour of inviting Argentina to become a full member of the BRICS bloc in August 2023 (Fassihi et al., 2023).

4 | CHANGE AND CONTINUITY UNDER JAVIER MILEI

The irruption of political outsider and self-described anarcho-libertarian Javier Milei threatens to upend the strategic calculations and the traditional values described above. An ally of Donald Trump and former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, during the campaign Milei made it clear that he sees the world in zero-sum terms, with a free world of market democracies confronted by an authoritarian and 'socialist' axis. Milei wants Argentina, it goes without saying, to belong to the Western camp. As a result, Milei rejected Argentina's invitation to join BRICS, which had been extended under the presidency of Alberto Fernández, promised to move the Argentine embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and briefly floated the idea of cutting ties with China and President Lula in Brazil because he refused to deal with 'Communists'.

For Milei, it seems that the war in Ukraine is another instance in which there can be no middle ground. He gave Zelensky a prominent role at his inauguration, agreed to transfer two Russian-made helicopters Argentina had purchased in the 2010s to Ukraine and offered to host a peace summit in Argentina under Ukrainian terms. Moreover, the Argentine president is reportedly planning a visit to Kyiv in 2024 (Lejtman, 2024). Nonetheless, one should not exaggerate the change in Argentina's position. So far, the Milei administration has given no indications of supporting sanctions against Russia, nor has it committed to provide additional military assistance to Ukraine.

Focused on implementing his pro-market economic agenda, it is unlikely that the new Argentine government will have much time or political capital to spend on the Ukraine issue (Mia, 2024). Pragmatism and strategic calculus still push towards a relatively detached attitude. So far, it seems, supporting Ukraine has worked as a discursive device to signal Milei's core values and intent to align Argentine foreign policy more closely to the West.

5 | IMPLICATIONS FOR WORLD ORDER

The transition from Alberto Fernández to Javier Milei constitutes what Schirm (2023) would call an ideational-material realignment, meaning a change in the values and material interests that are reflected by Argentine foreign policy. Milei's economic programme of pro-market shock therapy requires a reintegration of Argentina in the global economic order led by the United States. As stated above, Argentina's new president sees the international system in zero-sum terms and wishes to position the country squarely in

what he deems the side of capitalism and democracy. His stance on the Ukraine War follows from that worldview.

At the same time, and again following Schrim's approach, there are societal factors that push towards moderation. The influence of Argentina's powerful agricultural sector, which favours close ties to China, has softened Milei's stance regarding Beijing and could have implications for Argentina's foreign policy more broadly. Further, a poll conducted soon after the invasion showed that 64% of Argentines considered Russia the aggressor but 52% thought Argentina would emphatically support Ukraine, against 42% who favoured neutrality (Infobae, 2022). Polls are only approximations of the public mood, but there seems to be no overwhelming support for a more decisive role by Argentina in the conflict.

Unlike other countries studied in this volume, Argentina is not a leader of the Global South despite being a member of the G20 and the third largest economy in Latin America after Brazil and Mexico. If anything, Argentina's trajectory in the past four decades has been one of economic decline and reduced influence in international affairs. This does not mean the country is irrelevant when it comes to the Ukraine war and its implications for the global order, as shown by President Zelensky's surprising visit to Buenos Aires in late 2023.

This article explored how Argentina's stance towards the war came into being (and changed) as a result of a complex mix of pragmatism and values. The Argentine case dispels simplistic perspectives that insist on cajoling Global South countries into two opposing camps (Spektor, 2023). Even under a convinced pro-market and pro-US president like Javier Milei, Argentina's position will not fully align with that of Western powers. Rather than a recreation of the Cold War, this article suggests a more fragmented and complex international order, where Global South countries –even relatively peripheral ones like Argentina– are able to articulate relatively autonomous foreign policy positions that resist complete alignments with a Western or anti-Western position in order to respond to their domestic interests and international goals.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest.

ENDNOTES

¹ Resolution ES-11/1 of March 2, 2022 (Aggression against Ukraine); Resolution ES-11/2 of March 24, 2022 (Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine); Resolution ES-11/3 of April 7,

- 2022 (Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council); Resolution ES-11/4 of October 12, 2022 (Territorial integrity of Ukraine); Resolution ES-11/5 of November 14, 2022 (Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine); Resolution ES-11/6 of February 23, 2023 (Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine).
- ²The similarities between this arrangement and President Putin's decision to switch jobs with prime minister Medvedev between 2008 and 2012 were not lost on some analysts. See for instance Gonzalez (2020) and Ginsburg (2021).
- ³The vaccine deal eventually fell apart after Russia failed to fulfil the schedule of deliveries, forcing Argentina to turn to other suppliers. See Osborn (2024).
- ⁴Curiously, Argentina also became a destination for Russian pregnant women that did not need a visa to enter and wanted their new-borns to have a non-Russian passport (The Economist, 2023).
- ⁵The UN General Assembly recognised the sovereignty dispute through resolution 2065, approved in 1965.
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