

Mar 3 2012

Argentina's foreign policy in Kirchner's second term

Xiomara Vargas-Aponte

By Federico Merke

Since the return to democracy in 1983, Argentina's foreign policy has been tied to the changing patterns of its political system and development model. In the 80's, the main problem was the country's democratic stability and the political control of the military. Foreign policy reflected these concerns, seeking to increase regional cooperation to strengthen democracy and seeking to diminish conflict hypotheses to reduce the weight off the military. In the 90's, the aim was more focused on state and market reform, leaving aside state interventionism and protectionism in order to move to a strategy of openness, stability and privatization. Foreign policy became in part a strategy to secure domestic changes and to project Argentina as a "normal" country fully integrated to the world. The 2002 crisis put an end to the political and economic cycle. Foreign policy was again a manifestation of this domestic transformation. Nestor Kirchner sought to regain presidential power, recover state power, and put Argentina back into the South American concert. Foreign policy reflected these changes, seeking enhance Argentina's autonomy from the International Monetary Fund, adopting a position rather distant from the United States and rebuilding ties with South America, particularly with Brazil's Lula and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. The 'return' of the state, however, placed natural resources back again in the agenda. Uruguay and Bolivia entered through this window, the first starting a conflict with Argentina over the installation of a pulp paper mill on the banks of the Rio Uruguay, the second becoming simultaneously a problem (for its political instability) and a solution (for its rich gas resources).

But there is more than this. Hardly ever foreign policy is only the result of domestic determinants but it is rather knotted to changing regional and global arrangements. Former President Raul Alfonsin (1983-1989) carried out his foreign policy during the hard years of the Cold War. Latin America was still struggling to keep up its model of import substitution industrialization. Further, different dyadic conflicts were still up and running. By contrast, President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) met with another world order led by a triumphant United States. The region embraced neoliberalism as the prevailing paradigm; security issues went down, the market and regional integration went up. Last, Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) witnessed a less optimistic landscape regarding trade openness, deregulations and privatizations. He saw as well a region critical of the US unilateral turn after 9/11.

What we have then is, first, that domestic politics plays a crucial role in shaping Argentina's foreign policy. Second, the economic model adopted also has shaped the international strategies adopted by Argentina. Third, global and regional changes, particularly vis a vis the US and Brazil, also explain the turns of Argentina's foreign policy. Upon these initial observations it is easier to understand Cristina Kirchner's foreign affairs. Her first term sought somehow to put an end to those issues which had begun under President Nestor Kirchner, such as negotiating with Uruguay over the pulp mill conflict or strengthening UNASUR. Less flexible and more principled than her husband, Cristina Kirchner started then to adopt her own style of foreign policy, based on speeches and gestures of broad symbolic value. She also sought to recover some lost ground in the region since the 2002 default. The uncompromising stance of Argentina against the coup in Honduras clearly reflected this direction. CFK's address at the FAO Summit on Food Security held in Rome on June 2008 also showed her principled standing, pointing to the protectionist policies of developed countries as the structural root of the food crisis. So did the blockade, along with India, of the Doha Round meeting in Geneva on July 2008. Add to this Argentina's reluctance to repay its debt to the Paris Club, a decade-overdue debt to Western creditors.

On a different account, human rights ranked very high in Argentina's diplomacy, particularly at the UN bodies charged to deal with them. Indeed, Argentina's votes at the UNHRC show a very consistent pattern. Overall, the country votes almost always in favor of human rights. It does not matter whether it is about condemning Israel or Iran or North Korea. It does not matter whether it is about civil and political rights or they refer to economic, social or cultural rights. Argentina's standing principles seem to be much less affected than those of Brazil or South Africa, more likely to condemn Israel and vetoing resolutions against Iran or Libya, more likely to support second and third generation rights than first generation rights.

At the regional level, Argentina's relation with Brazil is plagued with issues pointing in different directions. On the one hand, Brazil and Argentina share a firm support for MERCOSUR and UNASUR, want to keep the US out of the region's conflicts and Brazil supports Argentinean sovereignty claim on the Malvinas/Falkland islands. On the other hand, however, trade disputes have become a daily concern, with industrial lobbies pushing for retaliation and trade officials blaming past each other. So far, political dialogue came hand in hand with commercial divergences.

So what to expect for her second term? CFK's views on the current global scenario seem to not have changed much. Neoliberalism, according to her view, is going through a severe crisis and Argentina is placed, somehow naively in the official narrative, at the vanguard of those countries which have successfully managed to overcome its crisis. Unipolarism is going

down, multipolarism is up, with China, India, Russia and Brazil rising steadily and contesting liberal international institutions, European protectionism and American double standards. All these mean good news for Argentina. It also means that the relation with Washington will no longer be the central concern for its foreign policy. It also means that international financial organizations have lost leverage and are much more concerned on how to put Europe back in motion than how to put pressure on intermediate states like Argentina.

With this view in mind, CFK won a second term with the best election turnout since 1973, when President Peron got a third term. Opposition parties got a reality shock from which they have not yet risen and so foreign policy is not in their radar, unless hotspots like Malvinas/Falklands get back into the public agenda. This means that CFK will enjoy plenty of room not only to decide what to do but also to decide which issues shall be taken up and which problems are to set aside.

Although the political landscape appears relatively safe, the economic situation presents some clouds on the horizon. The inflation rate remains high, salary discussions abound among trade unions, subsidies are being cut, the dollar exchange is more controlled and trade policy has become clearly more protectionist. Yes, Argentina will continue to grow, but not at the same pace as it had done in recent years. Add to this the absence of reliable statistics and the picture works in favor of losing more credibility at home and abroad. The Economist's recent piece on Argentina ("Don't lie to me, Argentina") and its decision not to publish official inflation figures mirrors this. Thus, foreign policy will again be tied to the negative externalities of Argentina's domestic scenario. Trade disputes with Brazil, the US and China will continue to grow and foreign investors will find it difficult to understand a Kafkaesque bureaucracy ready to undo yesterday's decisions.

The political front also looks sharp and risky. The 30th anniversary of the war against Britain will dominate the agenda. CFK has taken up the issue and will look forward to reach a global audience soon, be it at the UN or the London Olympics, getting a BRIC statement or even counting on Sean Penn's support for the cause. But it takes two to tango, and CFK has found a good partner in London ready to engage in a tit-for-tat interaction. It is clear that David Cameron, as well as CFK, have used the conflict as a sideshow while both governments take tough decisions for cut spending. But there is more than simple distractions. CFK has become combative in rhetoric and in action since 2010 when she decreed that all vessels in direction to the Islands from Argentina would have to obtain a special permit. This was a reaction to British firms plan to drill for oil in the waters surrounding the Islands. Later on, Argentina successfully managed to get regional support in denying access to vessels flying the Falklands flag. David Cameron accused Argentina of practicing colonialism and decided to send a Royal Navy destroyer to the islands.

Although the official position was that this maneuver was a routine, the timing suggests that it was also a signal of deterrence. Also, the presence of Prince William on the island seemed to be a way of showing that the Crown is still interested in maintaining its old jewelry.

What is next? The direction of the Argentine strategy is not clear. Argentina could put some material pressure on the Islands only with regional support, but power wanes down beyond regional levels. Here enters soft power and the very legitimacy of Argentina's claim. If CFK wants to see the issue discussed at a global level a whole effort of agitprop will be needed. Argentina's position can be sounder, but the memory of international society possesses more images of the 1982 war than of the 1833 British invasion. The very origins of the conflict are grey indeed and the grey color has turned into black and white positions which preclude any negotiation.

Beyond trade and the Islands, there is not much to expect as foreign policy hotspots. CFK will continue with her Latin Americanist stance and do what she can to reduce the US presence in the region. This will be done by further strengthening UNASUR and the recently created Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and claiming they are the legitimate bodies to address regional problems. Alas, Argentina is still far from having a grand strategy of foreign policy. Add to this the recent decision to take trade policy out of the Foreign Affairs Ministry and what we have is economics and politics marching out uncoordinated, to say the least. Beyond principled positions at global agencies, short-term thinking will dominate foreign policy. It may be effective in winning domestic support but it will not stop Argentina punching under its weight in the global ring.

Federico Merke is a Lecturer at Universidad de San Andrés, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

This entry was posted in [Argentina](#), [Bolivia](#), [Brazil](#), [democracy](#), [Foreign Policy](#), [history](#), [IDEAS Blogs](#), [international relations theory](#), [Latin America](#), [Liberal Interventionism](#), [Liberalism](#), [political situation](#), [power](#), [power game](#), [Special Relationship](#), [United States](#), [US-Latin American Relations](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).