

The Slipping Linchpin: The Evolution of Sino-Argentinian Relations and their Effect on American Hegemony in the Western Hemisphere

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With one-fifth of the world's total area and nearly one-third of the world's population, China and Latin America and the Caribbean are crucial forces for world peace and stability.

- President Xi Jinping¹

There has been a marked rise in Chinese governmental interest and action in Latin America over the last four decades. Since the introduction of China's Open Door Policy and the cessation of its political isolationism in the 1970s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has rapidly spread out through the international community, exerting an often-alarming degree of soft power.² Whereas hard power seeks to express itself through military might, coercion, or forced financial ruin, soft power attempts to win over the hearts and minds of the populace and assumes a more popular and persuasive approach with the intent to push a shared agenda – integrating rather than compelling.³ In the case of the PRC and Latin America, this generally manifests itself with an infusion of Chinese capital to effectively buy the support of the Latin states. Driven by immense capital growth, technological advancement, and information distribution, the PRC's ability to influence the global economic structure, and thereby project its soft power into the region, has grown substantially over the past decade and is too formidable to ignore.⁴ Due to disregard for this growing stake of the PRC for this period, whether negligent or purposefully, the United States (US) and its allies have allowed a dangerous accumulation of power that has reached a precipitous tipping point that it may prove unable to stop or reverse.

Much as the Portuguese did in their Indian Ocean colonization during the Age of Exploration, the Chinese have adopted similar economic lines of effort to exert their dominion over regions of the world. It is poignant to note that this form of informal empire is linked to and thrives under soft power techniques. Unlike Portugal, however, the PRC is at the pinnacle of economic competition and technology. Thus, the PRC is unlikely to be outcompeted at this stage, and is not limited by the logistical issues that plagued pre-globalized imperial powers. As

such, the PRC has fostered what is tantamount to a sustainable modern-day trading empire, wherein, without the need to fire a single shot outside of their claimed territorial region, it has garnered *de facto* and – where contractual obligations have been invoked – *de jure* control over copious swathes of the world, and thereby can exert their will and agenda. The PRC's expanding economic foothold does not appear to be slowing anytime soon within the realm of Latin America. Argentina has become a key target for the extension of the PRC's sphere of influence and represents the precipice on which the region is balanced, trending away from the US and its interests. Chinese integration and domination of Argentinian economic and political realms threaten to shift the balance of power within Latin America, grant the PRC hegemonic influence in the Western Hemisphere, and ostracize relations with the US within the region.

The PRC's sustained economic growth over the last four decades and its meteoric rise as one of the world's leading economic powers has threatened to damage the economies of Latin American states which did not have the burgeoning manpower, nor the expanding markets needed to keep pace with the PRC.⁵ What originally appeared to be an externally forced revolution, in which markets attempted to restructure to remain competitive in the early 2010s, has evolved into a full-blown subjugation of Latin markets by the Chinese. The PRC is dependent on external raw material resources and energy products, much of which they import from Latin American states, to feed their industrial economic machine.⁶ Furthermore, due to the vast areas of non-arable land within China, from the Gobi Desert to the mountainous Himalayas, the PRC is reliant on other breadbasket states for food security, with Argentina being notable as an agriproduct exporter. Understanding their food and resource insecurity, the PRC took steps to ensure continued access to these assets.

Arguably this should have placed the Latin American markets in a higher bargaining position. However, undifferentiated commodities such as agriproducts and, specifically, cereals, are available from other regions that the PRC is economically involved in, namely African states. Argentina had already learned the lesson of attempting to force such commodities sales at untenable international rates in the years following the Second World War when President Juan Domingo Perón instituted his first Five Year Plan.⁷ Between 1948 and 1952, Argentina entered into an economic crisis that was exemplified by a fifty percent decrease in import capacity (funds available per annum for importation and exportation without government intervention or manipulation); essentially, a metric of the poor health of the economic machine of Argentina.⁸ The fiscal irresponsibility of Perón's government, during all three of his terms, cast long shadows that Argentina's economists were not soon to forget. Rather than

succumb to economic insignificance, many states embraced trade deals and partnerships with the PRC, effectively enabling Chinese puppeteering from across the Pacific and forfeiting much of the bargaining power implicit in having a surplus of exports. As such, the PRC has created a pecuniary interdependence from many states in Latin America, whereby exportation to China buoys their economies and a potential withdrawal of Chinese funds may likely lead to collapse. While this implies a parasitic relationship, those Latin states' economies were generally bolstered to a certain extent due to Chinese interaction.⁹ However, it is important to note that this translated to a growth in economic infrastructure and processes, and that much of Sino-Latin American trade is characterized by trade deficits that negatively impact the Latin market.¹⁰

Argentina remains one of the last states within Latin America to not be fully intertwined with the Chinese economic machine, with Chinese trade accounting for only 14 percent of Argentina's total annual trade as recently as 2019.¹¹ However, this will not last for long, as the PRC is actively courting Argentina to become a major trade partner. As one of the eponymous ABC states of Latin America – Argentina, Brazil, and Chile – known for their strong economic and political power projection, Argentina is a desirable prize for the PRC. To emphasize these states' importance, Argentina was ranked third for gross domestic product in 2021, with Brazil being first and Chile fourth, and as the second strongest military power, after Brazil, in 2022.¹² Both Brazil and Argentina have substantial landmasses, and all three states have valuable exports and resources that interest the PRC. Furthermore, before the advent of the Organization of American States (OAS) after the Second World War, the US often conducted international relations actions through these three states, as evidenced by the joint mediation conference of the Ecuadorian-Peruvian War in 1942, thus demonstrating their importance on a hemispheric, if not global, stage.¹³ Argentina, Brazil, and Chile were also driving actors for the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance of 1947, the Rio Treaty, that was the precursor and impetus for the founding of the OAS, exemplifying their political salience in the region.¹⁴ Thus, it is advantageous for the PRC to secure integrated relations with these three states, all of which have a long history of economic and political ties with the US. Whereas the US used to be a more prominent trade partner than the PRC with the ABC states, the Chinese have surpassed the US in economic standing, starting with Chile in 2007, Brazil in 2009, and Argentina in 2013.¹⁵ Considering the PRC's soft power tactics, this predisposes them to a higher position of influence in the region – likely at the expense of the US, especially as the PRC has not and does not look likely to stop infusing moneys and investment capital into Latin America.

Currently, the PRC is Chile's number one trade partner, representing 34 percent of total trade, making the two states inextricably tied. For Brazil, a member of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa Economic Bloc (BRICS — a multilateral international economic organization), the PRC represents 28 percent of their total commerce.¹⁶ As of September 2022, Argentina has made official overtures to enter BRICS, something that will contractually link the state to the PRC.¹⁷ Chinese perception of contract law, with respect to international relations, is that all parties are equal members and equally obliged to the legal ramifications of multilateral decisions.¹⁸ In other words, the PRC expects decisions that are agreed upon by BRICS to be binding and adhered to by all members. Thus, if the PRC, the largest economic force within BRICS, can push Chinese-favorable policies, the expectation would be that all other member states would follow through with those decisions. With all three of the influential ABC states formally tied to the Chinese economy, the PRC's hegemony of the region will be far more secure and far more likely to interrupt and block the US' influence in Latin America. Thus, Argentina represents the linchpin for the PRC's economic dominance and foothold in Latin America.

American policymakers and senior leaders, both political and within the military, have keenly focused their efforts on other regions of the world over the last twenty years, namely Southwest Asia. As the PRC expands and ramps up its militarization while the conflicts in the Middle East deescalate, the National Defense Strategy (NDS) released in March of 2022, has explicitly called for a shift in focus to the Indo-Pacific as the primary and dominant theater of concern for future conflict, with the PRC being a substantial peer threat.¹⁹ It is important to acknowledge that the 2022 NDS was not the first time this transition to the Indo-Pacific was called for, with the 2012 NDS referring to a “necessity [to] rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region” and the 2018 NDS directly acknowledging a need “to deter [PRC] aggression in . . . the Indo-Pacific,” and fostering a “free and open Indo-Pacific” while still focusing on other regions of the world.²⁰ Thus, the past ten years demonstrate that the US has been slow to act in focusing its effort towards the PRC and Indo-Pacific, placing it well behind the power curve for upcoming potential conflicts.

The 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS), released in October, further acknowledges that the PRC has the will and means to reshape the Indo-Pacific in an effort to expand its sphere of influence; leveraging it to become the world's leading power.²¹ However, the insidious nature of Chinese influence within Latin America cannot be overlooked, especially with its proximity to the US. The growing sentiments, specifically between the PRC and Argentina are noteworthy and disturbing, with American strategy lagging behind its designated pacing threat.

This article demonstrates just how severe a threat the PRC can be by establishing a lasting foothold in Latin America, and how it is to the US' peril to continue to allow these actions to go unopposed.

Origins and Sympathies: Shared Experiences, Polity, and Funds between the PRC And Argentina

Si usted fuera argentino, sería peronista (If you were Argentine, you would be a Peronist).

-President Alberto Fernández to President Xi Jinping²²

It is important to acknowledge that President Fernández of Argentina has openly stated that President Xi would be a Peronist if he was an Argentinian. Peronism is an ambiguous yet poignant aspect of the Argentinian political identity that dates to the political machinations of Juan Domingo Perón, who was president of Argentina from 1946 to 1955, when he was deposed and exiled, and again from 1973 until his death in 1974. Originally a populist movement that synthesized aspects of both individualistic capitalism and collectivist socialism, as well as integrating aspects of autocracy and working-class movements, Peronism has devolved heavily since Perón's death; so much so that political scientists and historians have difficulty encapsulating and classifying modern Peronism on the political spectrum.²³ However, as Peronism is and has been the dominant political system within Argentina, in some form or another, for more than seventy years, this comment from President Fernández to President Xi should not be dismissed and should raise hackles in military and political leaders within the US. It is also noteworthy and demonstrative of their close relationship that President Fernández was one of the first global leaders to publicly congratulate President Xi on his October 2022 reelection for an unprecedented third term as President of the PRC.²⁴ Claiming that President Xi would be a Peronist, while in actuality being more ambiguous than President Fernández intended, creates a fraternalism between the two states that ties the foreign power of the PRC to the most deeply embedded political precepts of Argentina, and should not be taken lightly.

Peronism, as both a term and a party affiliation, has significantly changed in Argentina since its inception in the 1940s and 50s. While originally representing Perón's Justicialist movement and having a somewhat defined ideological base, the term Peronism is now applied to all aspects of the political spectrum with a heavily muddled ideology.²⁵ Although Argentina is not currently a single-party state, unlike the PRC, most of the extant parties, regardless of left or right position on the political spectrum, claim to be Peronist in their nomenclature or their

affiliation. This means that whether a citizen votes conservatively or liberally, they likely are voting for a “Peronist” candidate regardless of party. The ideologies of Peronism have devolved and decentralized, but the idea of Perón and Peronism continues to drive votes, with nostalgia, sentimentality, and feelings leading to ballot success rather than platforms and legislation.²⁶ Therefore, politicians of all types utilize the Peronist name to ensure election and maintain incumbency. Peronism and Perón are inextricably Argentine and have become a leading modern identity within the international community.

Empathizing and establishing kindred sentiments on this level between Argentina and the PRC only further expose Argentina to the PRC’s influence while further disconnecting US influence. Fernández’s state visit to the PRC in February 2022 demonstrated a fraternal and genial relationship between the leaders of the PRC and Argentina, as well as a shared understanding of each other’s state and goals. In that visit, President Fernández thanked the PRC for its help during the Coronavirus pandemic and pledged further economic interaction, stating a continued commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and officially requesting consideration for Argentina’s entry into BRICS.²⁷ Perhaps most concerning, President Xi heavily implied a connectedness and similitude between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Peronist/Justicialist government of Argentina.²⁸ Such state visits and official communiques grant insight into the relations between these two states and are useful for predicting the impact of future bilateral relations between them. The unfortunate reality is that the closer Argentina gets to the PRC, the more influence the PRC will have in the region. Whether or not this will affect US-Argentinian relations, either with negative actions or simply a chilling of relations, is yet to be seen. However, the current bilateral trade agreements that exist between the US and Argentina, which have been renewed over the last decade, would be a likely target for the PRC to remove, either through eliminating the protection of free trade agreements (targeted against the US), high protective tariffs, or simply outbidding and out investing the US.²⁹

The government of the PRC does not represent true communism and whether it ever did is up for debate. While it officially espouses an iteration of Marxist-Leninist ideology, for all practical purposes the PRC is an autocratic single-party state, in which the controlling party does not observe the goals of communism and instead utilizes a synthesis of authoritarian capitalism combined with militant nationalism.³⁰ The bottom line is that the CCP exists to maintain its control over the people and the state. As such, in its modern form, the CCP has evolved into a more straightforward bureaucratic autocracy. This is in line with Argentina, which is not truly Peronist anymore. In fairness, Peronism and its

progenitor, Justicialism, has always been at its core a system designed to maintain governmental control through the appeasement and placation of the populace. Popularity, rather than fiscal responsibility, idealism, or efficacious foreign policy, has been used as the primary means of maintaining a hold on the government, i.e., populism.

Along these lines, the PRC is popular with populist states in Latin America, as its “communist” revolution origins grant it a historical position as a “leader of the developing world” and advocate for the working people.³¹ As Perón found his original success with the *descamisados* lower and working classes, it logically follows that Argentina, fueled by nostalgia for the Perón years, would find similarity and empathy for states that espouse, regardless of their actions, support for the working man.³² From his exile in Spain, Perón publicly sympathized with the Chinese revolution and the Maoist government, likely affecting public support for these Chinese movements even while in absentia.³³ When Perón returned to Argentina and reclaimed the presidency in 1973, he established bilateral trade relations and extended political overtures with the PRC, as he sought to establish more friendly relations with global socialist states.³⁴ Argentinian popular support for the PRC was also further engendered during the 1960s and 1970s when the Chinese supported the Argentinian claim to the Malvinas Islands in the United Nations General Assembly.³⁵

The Peronist state originally sought to maximize resources and production, not for profit but for the benefit of “all the inhabitants of [Argentina],” through the guidance of the government.³⁶ This was eerily similar to the CCP’s stated desire, in their centennial press release, to “[develop] the productive forces to meet the people’s expectation for a better life.”³⁷ Furthermore, the founding principles that Perón espoused, namely anti-imperialism, populist nationalism, and workers’ rights, among others, somewhat align with that of the PRC as an autocratic state devoted to non-imperialist national security, with strong militant nationalism, and a socialist working class. When examining the growing relationship between the PRC and Argentina, it is necessary to analyze the historical and political origins that allow for a mutual understanding within the current zeitgeist.

While the political effects of the Peronist system should not be overlooked in the linkages they enable for the PRC, it would be imprudent to not examine Peronism’s effect on the Argentinian economic situation. Many economists argue that Perón’s fiscal irresponsibility as president has cast a long shadow on Argentina that has persisted into their modern economy.³⁸ Between 1950 and 1980 this mismanagement manifested itself with 12 years of recession due to negative gross domestic product growth, and three years in which positive gross domestic product growth did not outpace population growth rates.³⁹ While the

Argentinian economy experienced a resurgence in the 1990s and early 2000s, the damages of these three decades were still apparent. In 2022, economists predicted Argentina was at risk of exceeding 60 percent inflation by the end of 2022.⁴⁰ In reality, 2023 exceeded these predictions with inflation rate soaring past 100 percent.⁴¹ As such, Peronist fiscal irresponsibility has created an Argentine vulnerability to Chinese loans and economic ties that the PRC has been more than happy to exploit through investing. This is just another example of Chinese execution of dollar diplomacy, in which their infusion of investment funding has directly garnered political capital.

Between 2005 and 2021, Argentina received an influx of over seventeen billion dollars of Chinese investment funds, funneled from both the China Development Bank and the China Import-Export Bank.⁴² Moreover, demonstrating a massive increase in dedicated funds, the BRI agreement that Argentina signed in February of 2022 obligated approximately twenty-four billion dollars of Chinese funds for financing and investment over the next five years, representing more than a four times annual increase in funding.⁴³ The PRC is also significantly outperforming the US in overall traded capital with Argentina, with the PRC importing more than thirteen billion dollars and exporting six billion dollars in 2021, compared to the US' six billion dollars in imports and five billion dollars in exports.⁴⁴ This represents a positive linear increase in overall trade for the PRC with Argentina over the last decade, excluding market decline due to COVID-19 in 2019 and 2020.⁴⁵ This ramping up of investments and trade is commensurate with the greater focus that the PRC has been placing on Latin America over the last decade, and is telling for future plans for the region and Argentina.

Argentina becoming more invested in the PRC's BRI grants the PRC more agency to deepen Sino-Argentinian interdependence and economic interconnectedness, thereby helping secure raw materials and foodstuffs. Further infusions of capital and economic integration with PRC assets will likely edge out support from other entities such as the US or the International Monetary Fund (IMF), whose loans come with, at the surface, heavier stipulations and regulations.⁴⁶ The current Argentinian administration has plainly expressed a want to divorce itself from the IMF's loans, seeing PRC funds as a means to accomplish this.⁴⁷ These sentiments are only exacerbated by the debt of more than forty-five billion dollars owed to the IMF, as of the start of 2022.⁴⁸ The combination of rampant inflation, economic discord, and easily attained PRC relief funds grants the PRC a desirable position from which to win over and influence Argentina.

ABC Dominion: Argentina as the Linchpin of Chinese Hegemony

The People's Republic of China harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit, even as the US remains committed to managing the competition between our countries responsibly.

- The White House, 2022 NSS⁴⁹

The PRC sees Argentina as such a desirable ally since it represents a key geopolitical domino for the rest of the Latin American region. Thus, the PRC is focusing much of its efforts in Latin America on Argentina in order to eventually influence the entire region, thereby rewriting itself as the regional hegemon. Among other efforts, the PRC has made use of Argentina's status within Latin America to lobby within international agencies, affect foreign policy, and influence economic and social issues. The PRC scored a major victory when Argentina rededicated itself to the BRI in February 2022, as this guaranteed direct PRC involvement in perpetuity. With Argentina's overtures requesting to join the BRICS economic bloc, the PRC has established a tangible advantage in growing Sino-Argentinian relations and, thereby, Latin American influence.

The PRC has taken steps to be present in international organizations of Latin America, garnering observer status in the OAS.⁵⁰ While only being an observer, the PRC makes an effort to be an active member of the OAS and thereby, influence and lobby the politics of the region.⁵¹ Per the OAS's Department of External and Institutional Relations, observer status grants several unique and noteworthy benefits, including insight into country needs (and their potential vulnerabilities), as well as "direct engagement and visibility [with the] 34 member states," a forum for lobbying, and facilitates cooperation for observers without a "presence in...the Western Hemisphere," thus granting a legally-protected, political foothold.⁵² Argentina is a major voice within the OAS, and having the proximity and access that observer status sanctions grants the PRC a useful tool for affecting Chinese influence.

The PRC has taken steps not only to create bilateral treaties and agreements with states like Argentina but has also made efforts to influence the global order. This behavior is befitting of a state that wishes to be a dominant superpower, as the PRC continues to insert itself into international agencies and discussions regardless of provenance or logic for their involvement. A great example of this behavior is the Chinese claim of being an "Arctic" or "near-Arctic state" and its

designs on establishing an Arctic Silk Road, despite having no bordering territory on the Arctic Ocean or Circle.⁵³

Besides being involved in international agencies, the PRC is also influencing Latin American foreign policy through its action and insertion into the region. Argentina, like Brazil and Chile, recognizes Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.⁵⁴ Namely, Argentina acknowledges the concept of the PRC's territorial integrity and the "One China Policy," in which Taiwan is seen as a rogue Chinese province, rather than a sovereign state. The Argentinian position is colored by its experience during the Falklands War, seeing much the same relation between the arguments of Chinese-Taiwan and Argentine-Malvinas sovereignty.⁵⁵ In this instance, the US is at a disadvantage, as US-Argentinian relations were strained by American support for the United Kingdom's (UK) claim to the Falklands (Malvinas), with the US supplying materiel support to the British war effort.⁵⁶ It is important to note that the issue of the sovereignty of the Malvinas Islands is still current, and was discussed as recently as the November 2021 Regular Session of the OAS. In this session, a declaration was adopted stating that the question of sovereignty was a "matter of enduring hemispheric concern," in the vein of global decolonization, and that the OAS must "continue to examine the question of the Malvinas Islands...until a definitive settlement has been reached."⁵⁷ This also demonstrates that the relationship between the UK and Argentina still suffers from some contention.

The PRC issued a public affirmation in February 2022, conspicuously on the same day that Argentina officially joined the BRI, stating they supported Argentina's claim to full sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands, which was quickly denounced by the UK.⁵⁸ From the outset, it would appear that this is the PRC's rebuke of extant sentiments relating to the Monroe Doctrine, as at its core the PRC is integrating itself into Western Hemispheric issues and politics and usurping power that was traditionally held by the US. This integration and transformation into a de facto Western Hemisphere hegemon is a callout to the international community, serving to announce that the Chinese government has the influence and power to take action in the region regardless of international castigation or support; not an ideal situation in the US' backyard.

The continuation of the Malvinas Islands issue into the present day, and the PRC's support of Argentinian sovereignty claims, almost guarantees that the Argentinian government would support the PRC should a hot conflict break out over Taiwan. Although the US does not currently support any action that would usurp the current status quo of the "One China, Two Systems" structure, the historical parallelism is noteworthy and disserves the US' position when negotiating with Argentina. In fact, 25 of 33 Latin American states, recognize the Chinese claim to Taiwan.⁵⁹ It is difficult to know how Argentina's support would manifest

itself in the event of an active conflict relating to Taiwanese sovereignty, whether through financial or military support or by publicly denouncing the US. However, their position will likely sway other states in the region; not because Latin America is a monolith, but because of the historical strength and voice that Argentina projects in the region, especially if Brazil and Chile follow suit. This further emphasizes the benefit that securing Argentina, whether diplomatically, militarily, or economically, represents to the PRC and why the US should be taking steps to prevent or mitigate Sino-Argentinian alliances.

Seeking to join BRICS and rededicating Argentina to the BRI will have far reaching economic effects on the rest of Latin America. One example of this will be in the fishing industry. Argentina's sinking of illegal fishing vessels, namely those from Chinese fishing fleets, has been the practice from 2016 to the present within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in their territorial waters.⁶⁰ With over three thousand nautical miles of fishable coast and a rich fishery, the Argentinian EEZ is a valuable asset for Latin America, and until now Argentina has protected this resource by serving as its unofficial gatekeeper. However, with a deeper investment in the BRI and integration into BRICS, it is likely that what was once seen as illegal fishing will then become tolerated, likely affecting neighboring states. There will also likely be secondary effects if Argentina stops policing illegal fishing, such as non-sustainable harvesting which could lead to the collapse of one or more fisheries. With fishing being the most common occupation in Latin America, and with fish being a valuable source of food for numerous countries, the possibility of upsetting the fisheries could have lasting, dangerous effects on the region.⁶¹ Many Latin American states also benefit financially from exporting fish and marine foodstuffs to the PRC. If the PRC were to increase its "domestic" harvesting of fishes in the region, by taking advantage of its extractive economic practices and cutting out the middleman, then it could force Latin American states to become more dependent on the PRC, as the capital that those resources represented would evaporate from the region's economic system.⁶²

Socially, another facet that should be considered is the growing population of Chinese expats that now live in Argentina. While this number hovered around two hundred thousand as of 2018, there has been a steady flow of new Chinese citizens emigrating to Argentina since the 1990s, with a major increase following the addition of Argentina to the PRC's "Approved Destination Status" list for tourist destinations.⁶³ Chinese expats within Latin America number more than the combined amount living in Europe, Africa, and Oceania.⁶⁴ Their population makes up the fourth largest demographic of immigrants within Argentina, and the largest non-Latin American group of immigrants.⁶⁵ A growing population of native Chinese within the borders of Argentina, as well as other Latin states,

could engender support for the PRC from the inside and help further drive a wedge between the US and the region, especially in the realm of foreign policy. Argentina is recognized as the easiest state in the world to become a naturalized citizen, having no testing or language requirements and only mandating a two-year residency period.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Argentina recognizes dual citizenship and all naturalized citizens over 18 have the right and responsibility, compulsory by law, to vote. With an ever-growing Chinese population, domestic politics may eventually be affected internally by the citizenry in support of the PRC. As Argentina is demonstrably one of the most influential and powerful states of Latin America, its position on future geopolitical conflicts is noteworthy and likely could affect the stances of other states in the region.

Argentina has demonstrated that it is much more in synchrony with the PRC than the US would likely desire, magnified by its desired entrance into the BRICS bloc and its previous integration into the BRI. While the US currently maintains a bilateral relationship with Argentina, especially benefiting from a trade relationship, it is growing clear that the PRC's sphere of influence has not only permeated Latin America but has started to fully envelop it. Expanding hegemonic influence into the Western Hemisphere is an important step in fulfilling the PRC's perceived destiny as *the* world's power, in line with their one-hundred-year strategy.⁶⁷

Evolving Relations: The Future for the US, Argentina, and the Western Hemisphere

The [DoD] will act urgently to sustain and strengthen deterrence, with the People's Republic of China (PRC) as our most consequential strategic competitor and the pacing challenge for the Department.

- US DoD, 2022 NDS⁶⁸

The US and Argentina have been politically involved since 1823, just a few years after Argentina gained its independence from Spain. Since that time, the two states have had enduring diplomatic and commercial relations, generally with a positive outlook; except for interventionist attempts to reduce Perón's position and the US' actions in the Falklands War during which relationships were strained. However, there has never been a period, especially since the introduction of the Monroe Doctrine and the reinforcement of the Roosevelt Corollary, that such contentious extra-Hemispheric influence has threatened to drive a wedge between the two. It is uncertain how PRC influence will degrade this relationship, whether through increased tariffs, diplomatic degradation, or other unknown actions.

In the interim, cracks are starting to appear in US–Argentina relations. Efforts to resolve the ongoing crisis in Venezuela offer a case study of these fracture points. The US’ action with the Lima Group, an international group of Latin American states designed to reinstate democracy in Venezuela, as well as the public support of Venezuela’s interim president, has strained tensions with Argentina in recent years. Argentina has subsequently withdrawn its interests from the Lima Group as of March 2021, being the first to depart from the intergovernmental agency.⁶⁹ It is poignant to recognize that their withdrawal was swiftly followed by Mexico, Saint Lucia, and Bolivia, with Peru intending to depart the group but stopping due to a change in administration, further demonstrating Argentina’s political influence on the region.

While the position between the US and the PRC should not be seen as a zero-sum game, and the US is well beyond such Cold War era containment policies, it should be unsettling for American decision-makers to see the insidious division of values being created between the US and Latin American powers such as Argentina. Such discord, while small when isolated, is worrisome in the aggregate and should be of concern to US strategists. Regardless of not being a zero-sum game, economists are beginning to forecast a trend of an “us versus them” dichotomy, in which future trade agreements will either be with the PRC or the US, but likely not both.⁷⁰ American political culture operates on two- and four-year increments, as administrations change, and new representatives are elected to office. However, the PRC has plotted a century-long, enduring strategy to gain prominence. As such, the US tends to be behind the power curve, as transitory politicians must spend time establishing their agendas and learning their position before enacting change or policy. The US must embrace a longer-term planning process, similar to persisting efforts against the USSR that transcended Cold War presidencies or to the newly introduced “Long-Term Strategy of the US” for emission reduction by 2050, if it hopes to compete with the PRC in the coming years and overcome the limitations of the election cycle.⁷¹

Latin America will decide who controls the Western Hemisphere, and the US and the PRC are competing over whose rule sets will govern that half of the world. Argentina is an integral piece of that fight. While it is unclear what exactly will come from the PRC’s insertion into the affairs of Latin America, it is abundantly clear that the onus is on the US to strategize for and prevent the loss of Latin America before it is no longer possible to recover that foothold—Argentina should be a crucial piece in that calculus.

It is very telling that the US is behind in its approach to Latin America when examining the most recent NSS and realizing that there is no section dedicated to strategically tackling the PRC’s interests in Latin America, and only one

reference to the US intention to “protect [the Western Hemisphere] against external interference or coercion...from the PRC.”⁷² While this reference may seem enough, it would be beneficial for the NSS to dedicate specific attention to the Hemisphere and provide specialized guidance related to the region, as the lines of effort for countering the PRC elsewhere are likely different than those that would and should be employed in Latin America. The US strategy needs to match the paradigm shift that has occurred now that the withdrawal from the Middle East has occurred, and the transition is not happening fast enough. All other NSS references to the Western Hemisphere were regarding humanitarian requirements or democratization. SOUTHCOM’s March 2022 address to Congress stated that “The PRC continues to...expand... influence in [Latin America] and challenges US influence” and that “without continued modest investment...PRC influence...could soon resemble the...predatory influence [seen] in Africa.”⁷³ Despite this impassioned call for action, the NSS is lacking direction in relation to Latin America, demonstrating again that the US is behind the power curve when addressing PRC action in the region. The SOUTHCOM vision is to “ensure the Western Hemisphere is secure, free, and prosperous,” but when guidance from the NSS is ambiguous or not present, it is difficult to see the strategic plan that the US has in place to accomplish that vision.⁷⁴

One course of action to limit Chinese influence over Argentina, and thereby Latin America, is to continue to maintain strong military education links with their officer and enlisted corps. While the citizenry and the military still have a somewhat tenuous relationship in Argentina with residual wounds from decades of coups and juntas, and more recently, the Dirty War of the 1970s and 1980s, with a 2017 survey showing only fifty percent of the populace had trust in the military,⁷⁵ the political-military complex is in a much stronger position, with heads of state, since President Carlos Menem in 1991, seeking to rectify the negative feelings by granting pardons and reintegrating military leaders into the political process and discussion.⁷⁶ Regardless of popular sentiments, senior civilian leadership within Argentina is still influenced by military leaders, and thus, it is worthwhile for the US to be involved in the professional education of future generations of these military members. The US Air Force Academy (USAFA) has done this to some extent, hosting its annual International Week, where it invites professional military cadets from around the world for a week of camaraderie, international cooperation, and relationship building, with Argentinian cadets participating frequently.⁷⁷ However, the PRC is taking identical measures, inviting Argentinian cadets to their International Cadets Week, for the last eight years, at the PLA University of Science and Technology.⁷⁸ Furthermore, in November 2021, the PRC’s Ministry of National Defense stated publicly that it intends to conduct more joint exercises

with Argentina and intends to “expand cooperation in high-level exchanges [and] personnel training...to push the relationship between the two militaries to a new level.”⁷⁹ Thus, the US must take additional steps to expand military cooperation and professional education opportunities to Argentina if it hopes to usurp the favorable position that the PRC has fostered.

USAFA should also further expand links with Argentina through its international cadet program, where a foreign cadet attends the Academy from basic training to graduation and receives formal military education within the US. Between 2013 and 2022, USAFA has hosted one hundred and thirty international cadet graduates, eleven of which have been from Latin American states, a mere eight percent, and none of which have been from Argentina.⁸⁰ Not only should the Academy correct this by inviting Argentina to participate in the program, taking cadets from the *Escuela de Aviación Militar* (School of Military Aviation), but they should increase the number of cadets participating from Latin America in general, as a way to engender military cooperation and understanding. This will only serve to expand US influence and practices and instill mutual reliance.⁸¹ Additionally, the US should continue to foster military materiel trade agreements, such as the sale of twenty-four Beechcraft T-6 Texan II training aircraft in 2018, and look to broker further novel arrangements with Argentina to solidify mutual connections.⁸² If the US does not provide materiel sales such as these, it is highly likely that the PRC will instead.

As this article has addressed, there are various concerns related to the growing Sino-Argentinian relationship that the US should consider. There are numerous actions that the US should take to either divorce Argentina from the PRC or strengthen the US-Argentinian relationship. The PRC’s capital is one of the strongest holds that it has available over Argentina, so offering less restrictive loans, and lobbying the IMF to do the same, could help prevent further Argentine indebtedness to the PRC. As previously discussed, it behooves the US to integrate with the Argentinian military, conducting more joint exercises, offering professional military education, and generating defense pacts, while also continuing to have Argentina purchase military materiel to build a defense reliance between the two states. The PRC is a master at propaganda and as such, the US must seek to dispel misinformation as well as provide its own information campaigns underscoring the negative drawbacks of alliances with the PRC, whether military, political, or economic. Finally, the US should work with the UK to re-examine the issue of Falklands/Malvinas sovereignty, especially as this point has historically damaged the relationship between the US and Argentina, and mediate a solution between the UK and Argentina. Being the agent to broker an amenable solution would go a long way to generate goodwill towards the US in Argentina.

While the PRC is a threat that the US should be preparing and strategizing for, it is necessary to look at what damage can be wrought by Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere and not just the Indo-Pacific region. This is a glaring hole in the perception of the US' threat salience that must be addressed sooner rather than later. Just because the PRC is geographically separated from Latin America does not mean that it cannot make use of and become a key player in that region. While the situation is less than desirable for the US' position in Latin America, it is not beyond repair. However, it will require dedicated strategic planning, early intervention, and prevention instead of reactionary decision-making. The longer the US waits to act, the less likely a proactive solution will be viable. □

There cannot be two suns in the sky, nor two emperors on the earth.

- Confucius⁸³

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