

The syndrome of disproportion in Argentine foreign policy

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During the celebrations of her Bicentenary (2010), Argentina has been often portrayed as a country isolated from the world, whether by its own decision or actions or due to the practices of others. It is important to distinguish the intention of moving away or not intervening in international affairs — a policy of isolationism — from the practice that produces a (perhaps unwanted) result of foreign isolation. In this case, isolation is the consequence of policies by foreign actors withdrawing the country from contact and communication, or punishing it for certain actions. It can also be a result of the lack or loss of international relevance or of the indifference of others.¹

It is worth making these distinctions because Argentina, unlike the United States of America, never made isolationism the doctrine of its foreign policy. However, throughout the century it expressed two forms of isolationism of diverse content: one political and the other economic. The first adjusted more appropriately to what is understood as isolationism in matters of international relations. A foreign practice of non-political involvement that does not mean a disinterest in developing ties of a different nature with the world.

This way of relating internationally was characteristic of the first long cycle of the foreign policy. During all those years, the ruling class of Argentina avoided political alliances and commitments that could affect its economic ties with the world, particularly with Europe, where the country had to seek, as Alberdi pointed out: “not its political allies, but commerce and navigation treaties”. An attitude — as he clarified — that could not be understood as “barbaric and Paraguayan isolationism” but rather as a position of independence, of reserve in politics and of abstention from leagues and treaties. The Argentina of the first cycle incarnated, in its own way, the same isolationism George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had proposed for their country: “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations — entangling alliances with none”. Unlike the American, the Argentine isolationism of that time lacked a sense of mission, but had — as did the former — a clear practical sense: the defence of material interests, the implementation of which was essentially in Europe.

¹ Readers are invited to refer to the bibliographical dossier on Argentina at end of volume.

Argentina's political isolationism worked magnificently while the world was at peace. World War I put it to the test for the first time, but the governments of Victorino de la Plaza — a conservative — and later of Hipólito Yrigoyen — the first radical president — protected it in the form of neutrality, a natural response to these circumstances imposed by the country's main economic interests of the country. To this material aspect, Yrigoyen would add an ethical component; a characteristic of his convictions and of his particular vision of international relations. During the most critical phases of the war, he remained firm in his defence of neutrality despite pressure from Washington, the sinking of two Argentine ships by German submarines and serious diplomatic conflicts with Berlin, and despite his Congress being mainly against and the public opinion being more and more inclined to declare war on Germany — particularly after the United States of America entered the conflict in April of 1917. Once the war had concluded, the principled attitude of the president left Argentina out of the League of Nations, against the opinion — once again — of a large part of the society and of his own party, where he found a particularly strong opposition by Alvear — his ambassador to Paris. When he had to govern Argentina, Yrigoyen's successor could not break the Congress' opposition to incorporating it into that international forum — as was his intention.

The emphasis on ethics and the nations' equality also lead Yrigoyen to oppose the ratification of the ABC Pact, an agreement signed in May 1915 in Buenos Aires by Argentina, Brazil and Chile with the purpose of facilitating a peaceful solution to the disputes that could arise among the countries of the hemisphere. The Pact endorsed an emerging and productive process of trilateral cooperation that had had its maximum expression in a joint peace initiative to mediate in an existing conflict between Mexico and the United States of America in 1914. Their non ratification — even by Brazil and Chile — ended the alliance between the three countries and the idea of rescuing it to constitute a force in the struggle for peace and stability in Latin America, particularly in South America, was intermittently left up in the air since then. Yrigoyen considered that the Pact situated Argentina, Brazil and Chile in a position of superiority before the rest; the other countries did not hide their concern regarding an agreement that could lead to the formation of an influential alliance in the region, and saw it as an initiative that has its place within the framework of the Pan American policy favoured by Washington, something he most certainly disliked.

The opposition to Pan Americanism was the hemispheric arm of Argentina's political isolationism of the first cycle, which — for different reasons — went on beyond its conclusion. In this case it had to do with opposing ideas of continental solidarity that would compromise the margin of the country's international action and with fighting tooth and nail to defend the principles of non intervention and self determination. This policy was

expressed consistently and with a certain arrogance from 1889 onward and in a challenging way in the 1930s, to reach its highest point in Argentine neutrality during World War II. Many factors influenced this decision that was maintained against all odds almost until the end of the war; but there is no doubt that it fed on political isolationism in its purest form and on nationalist components of the most recent tradition. Under strong pressure from Washington, diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions were the foreign response to Argentina's conduct, the greatest punishment received by the country in the century. From 1942 onward, Roosevelt's government showed that it was not going to tolerate rebellions: it harassed the country economically with numerous measures that were applied with varied intensity — that would gradually weaken and end by 1949 — and pressured the Latin American and European nations for them to withdraw their ambassadors accredited to Buenos Aires — a request that was obeyed by most of them. Great Britain, always more contemplative with Argentina because of its need for Argentine products, especially beef (40% of their consumption during the years of the war), also gave in to their main ally's requests and withdrew their ambassador on 8 July 1944, eight days after the United States of America.

From that date onward, Argentina was diplomatically isolated from the world, despite having broken its ties with Germany and Japan on 26 January that year, and its economic ties with the Axis countries being practically interrupted during the years of the war. Both Washington and Moscow wanted more from Argentina: a clear commitment to the allied cause and a declaration of war on Germany and Japan. The refusal by Farrell's government to give in to such pressures led to Argentina being deliberately excluded from the Inter-American Conference on Problems of War and Peace that met, at the initiative of the United States of America, from 21 February to 7 March 1945 at the Palace of Chapultepec in Mexico City. It was also almost excluded from the Conference of the United Nations, celebrated in San Francisco from 25 April to 26 June 1945, in which the UN was created and the pillars of the post-war world order were established. Argentina came beleaguered to an international occasion of enormous importance. Good fortune in politics played in their favour this time, as the differences between Washington and Moscow regarding the members that should form the new organisation as founders opened the doors for them to be accepted into the Conference on 1 May 1945, after an intense debate in which Argentina received the approval of the United States of America and Great Britain and firm support from the Latin American countries. This long and sinuous process was marked out by secret missions, equally secret agreements between the Foreign Office and President Roosevelt, disputes in the State Department about the treatment that Argentina should receive, deliberations in the Yalta Conference between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin — always the hardest on the 'fascist state' of Argentina — and, incidentally,

great discrepancies in the country. The declaration of war on Germany and Japan on 27 March 1945, in which Perón had a decisive role, was only supported by a heterogeneous minority: the radicals, socialists and conservatives were against, the army resisted, the aeronautics sector was divided and the navy was in favour of belligerency — as were the communists and the greater part of the industrials. This majority — and also diverse — opposition at such a critical moment for the country, and almost at the end of the war, is the best proof of the power that political isolationism still had in Argentina in the mid 1940s.

Just as World War I had challenged the liberal political isolationism, the crisis of 1930 facilitated the emergence of the second form of isolationism of the century, the economic one. The war had shown that the good could possibly not live forever and the crisis confirmed what until then had been unsettling suspicions: Argentina lost markets due to Europe's and the the United States of America's protectionism and traditional sources of supply (a way of isolating it) and tried to protect itself with barriers to trade and the development of the substitutive industry (a way of isolating itself). This is the starting point of Argentina's economic isolationism — imposed at first and intentional later — and which lasted until the 1960s. The internal and external circumstances that supported this protectionist and 'redistributionist' economic policy are explained convincingly in Pablo Gerchunoff's essay that constitutes that volume and it is not worth continuing on this matter here. I do, however, want to emphasise that the shutdown of the economy had its correlate in a foreign policy based on defending the principles of non intervention and self determination, that renewed the dogma of peace for a world marked by the East-West and North-South polarities. Peace had been defined by the men of the Generation of '80 as a condition for foreign trade; now it emerged as a condition for economic development and for the survival of humanity in the face of the threat of a nuclear holocaust. The scenario of the Cold War and the growing interdependencies turned obsolete the formula conceived by those who governed the Argentina of the first cycle — to protect it from the external inclemency — and called for other formulae. The Argentina of the second post-war period opted for an 'independent' foreign policy — of a defensive nature — that brought it closer to certain claims of the Third World for considering them appropriate and pertinent, and often separated it from the United States of America due to different interpretations of the causes and conditions of economic development and the source of political and social struggles in Latin America and in the South in general. The analysis that prevailed over the need to work in favour of the détente in the East-West conflict and over the problems of underdevelopment determined a great part of the constant themes in the foreign policy of the second cycle. Argentina was not politically isolationist or isolated from other countries for its practices and it played, in short, what in Latin America was

the game of the moment.

There were those who considered this form of relating with the world inappropriate and accused them of being isolationist, indirectly indicating that they were not with the West. This criticism is important because in it is the earliest emergence of the theory on Argentine isolationism as a characteristic and harmful trait for the country. Another arguable way of establishing 'facts' about the Argentina of the second centenary that contributes to promoting national failure mania. The theory — very poor and short in historical perspective — was revived in recent years by the debate Kichner's foreign policy has sparked, and particularly the foreign alliances it has favoured. Thus far, I have tried to show in which aspects and up to what point Argentina was isolationist, and when and why it was isolated from the world — for reasons of their own or of others. In a few stylized lines: it was isolationist in the political sphere and open in the economic sphere during the first cycle (a conduct that surely the entire centre-right would praise, with minor criticism) and it was partly isolated due to the protectionism that followed the crisis of 1930; it was partly isolationist in the economic sphere from the decade of 1930 and up to the 1960s, and internationally active — although defensive — from the mid 1940s until the Process (a practice, in this case, that would be understood and favoured by the centre-left spectrum and the nationalist sectors, with equally minor criticism). It was only isolated politically and punished economically in the first half of the decade of 1940 (as a consequence of the neutrality in World War II, a position that divided the country until the end of the conflict). I will now go on to speak of Argentina's second situation of political isolation, which was not as serious as the one it went through during World War II and which had no significant impacts in the economic plane.

The Process never had a vocation of isolationism; it was interventionist and militant in its international missions. Its activism earned them few and contemptible partners and it closed political doors: those of the United States of America with Carter and of most European countries. With Reagan it could have coexisted well, but the Falklands got in the way. Videla had territories that were increasingly banned, but Martínez de Hoz was well received nearly everywhere — in some places even with red carpet treatment. Here one can speak of political cornering and solitude and of economic accompaniment and closeness, a situation that shows the complexity of this world and the diversity of actors and boards that it consists of. Pinochet could have told a similar story. The Process was also difficult within its borders in the Southern Cone due to the differences with Brazil and Chile. Its violations of human rights also ended up entangling its relations with Mexico and Venezuela. So, it had to look elsewhere for company and even understanding; the scope closest at hand for this task was the Non-Aligned Countries Movement, despite the military's ideological opposition to the philosophy and

objectives of this forum. The dictatorship found in the NAM ears that were willing to listen to its version of the 'dirty war' that included an anticolonial and anti-imperialist touch, in tune with the language that prevails in the Movement. It spoke of the imperialist and unacceptable intervention of powerful countries against the nations of the 'misunderstood' South, an unsuspected advance of the same discourse it would use to criticise the Western countries after the defeat of the Falklands.

After the years of the Process, the message of Argentina's international reinsertion brought by Alfonsín now made sense. Also the idea of changing its international image, which had been seriously harmed by violations of human rights and the Falklands conflict. It was not in Alfonsín's or Menem's disposition to be isolationist. Each in their own way, in very different contexts and with different priorities and credentials, they travelled the planet from top to bottom. Argentina filled up with foreign leaders and high-level authorities and the two presidents were invited to carry out state visits in numerous countries. The government of Alfonsín combined defensive and offensive policies, especially to look after the young democracy; Menem's was the paradigm of offensive policies, in a world already distinguished and dominated by the optimistic visions of liberal thought in the fields of economy and international politics. Both committed the country through agreements and international regimes voluntarily handing over spaces of sovereignty in the management of the public policies on human rights, defending the democracy, international safety and the development of sensitive technologies, particularly in the nuclear field. Both participated actively in the defence of democracy and peace in Latin America. Argentina increased to an unprecedented degree its participation in the UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPK), a policy inaugurated in 1958. Very much in line with the tendency of the 1990s, Argentina was by far the greatest provider of troops to the UNPK in all of Latin America. In summary, one cannot talk of isolationism in this stage of foreign policy permeated with different orientations.

(Translated by Clara Tilve)

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