

Geopolitical issues in the Southern Cone – A view from Buenos Aires

Wolf Grabendorff 5 May 2016

The new Argentinian government will probably concentrate more on the economic, environmental and security challenges of the South Atlantic, than stressing the Malvinas issue as its main foreign policy priority. *Español*



A child poses for pictures

at the Malvinas war memorial in Ushuaia, Argentina. April 2012. Natacha Pisarenko/AP/All rights reserved

The central geopolitical issue for all Southern Cone countries is the singular relevance of the South Atlantic, because of increasing global demand for strategic natural resources during the last decade and the resurgence of South Atlantic routes as an important means of international communications and trade. The preoccupation that the South Atlantic might therefore become a zone of power projection by extra-regional international actors is shared not only by all Southern Cone countries but also by their African counterparts. The new government in Argentina is considering two opposing approaches to meeting the future challenges of South Atlantic geopolitics. One focuses on keeping foreign powers out of the South Atlantic and strengthening the zone of peace promoted by the UN. An alternative is a new approach to transatlantic trade and security along the lines recently promoted by EU and U.S. think tanks with the concept of “new Atlantic futures”. Given the clear preference of the new Argentine government for reviving North-South relations, a certain openness can be detected in Buenos Aires towards developing the latter concept of widening the transatlantic community to include African and South American partners.

The new government of Argentina is very much aware of the important geopolitical changes underway in the Southern Cone and it wants to ensure that these changes will produce sufficient political and economic benefits for Argentina.

- Obviously, the first change is related to the constantly eroding geopolitical position of Brazil, which opens up an important window of opportunity for increasing regional leadership for Argentina, especially with regard to the systemic shift of economic and political alliances preferred and partly already announced by the Macri government. While the previous Argentine government could in no way compete with Brazil as a regional power in the context of strong South-South relations, the rapid (re)turn to privileged North-South relations of the Macri government will have an important impact upon the geopolitical (im)balance in the Southern Cone. Uruguay and Paraguay, and even Chile, will be looking much more to Buenos Aires for cooperation in foreign policy initiatives, than to Brasilia, well aware that the “return” of US interest in the region has been identified with an immediate approval of Macri’s leadership. The time span and the success of this geopolitical momentum is very difficult to

assess, since it will depend principally on the recuperation of Brazil's political and economic stability. However, given the size of decline of internal legitimacy and external significance of Brazil the bets in Buenos Aires are measured in years rather than months.

- The second change with geopolitical implications can be detected in the new security concept of the Macri government. The immediate declaration of a "security emergency" for the entire country and the implementation of a "shoot down" policy for unidentified aircraft to reduce the impact of drug trafficking has been identified with a strong-arm policy until now unknown in the Southern Cone. The cooperation agreements already signed with the US allowing the presence of US personnel of all relevant agencies to train and interact with Argentine public security forces demonstrates the willingness of the Macri government to become an important ally of the US in the global fight against terrorism and international crime. To what extent the envisioned reforms of the police and the Armed Forces in Argentina will have an impact upon the very strict division between internal and external missions, product of the democratization process after the military dictatorship, is difficult to predict. At the same time, an upgrading of the internal and external security forces in manpower as well as in equipment seems to be under serious consideration by the new government.

The South Atlantic Challenge and the Malvinas Impasse

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- The recent decision of the UN to recognize formally, under the Law of the Sea procedures, an extension of the continental shelf (by 35 % or 1,7 Mio. km²) for Argentina - long sought after by various Argentine governments - will give the Macri government a new legitimacy for its economic and security policies in its area of the South Atlantic. The first incident with a Chinese fishing boat in Mid-March can be interpreted as the beginning of a tougher police with regard to any intrusion in its exclusive zone of the continental shelf. Macri has been in the past very critical of the "strategic partnership agreement" with China, signed by the previous government, but has been otherwise very careful not to irritate such an important trade and investment partner. However, the "national" use of the continental platform, the "recuperation" of the Malvinas and its Antarctic claims will remain the principal priority for Argentine foreign policy, not only because of national identity and undisputed public opinion consensus but also for strictly economic reasons.

- This policy posture might in the future not only affect the relations with China but also especially with the UK, which is considered to further the process of "militarization" in the South Atlantic. Even though Macri has gone out of his way declaring personally that he will seek "a normal bilateral agenda" with the UK, encompassing all issues of interest for both countries, he has stressed at the same time that the Malvinas remain "inexorable Argentine". Even though the new government intends to increase the bi-lateral relations with the UK on all levels, it will not reduce its commitment to reach a negotiation process about the future status of the Malvinas. However, the Macri government is certainly aware that a peaceful solution will only come when Argentina regains its status as an important international actor and reaches influence on worldwide public opinion. The Argentine government has no doubt that many ways of Anglo-Argentine cooperation can be found under the umbrella of "impasse" about the sovereignty issue of the Malvinas. One possibility to avoid further conflict with British economic interest in the South Atlantic could be a split of maritime jurisdiction on an *ad hoc* basis - quite usual in other conflict cases in international law - to allow for joined issue of fishing or exploration licenses, etc.

- The Malvinas problem might also have some effect upon the EU-Mercosur Association negotiations soon to begin, since the EU-Association of "Overseas Countries and Territories" (OCT) includes besides the Malvinas also the British and French sovereignty claims in the Antarctic, thereby ignoring the overlapping claims of Argentina.

From the point of view of the new government, the issues of securing its influence about the exploitation of the natural resources of the South Atlantic; the possible negotiations about the future status of the Malvinas and the projections of its sovereignty in the Antarctic are all part of the same

essential foreign policy posture. While the aims are clearly defined, the necessary strategies to further these goals are still under discussion. The creation of an “Under Secretariat for the South Atlantic” in the Foreign Ministry and the wide UN experience of the new Foreign Minister offer a glimpse how future policy initiatives might be implemented.

Since the geopolitical importance of the South Atlantic is undoubtedly on the rise, international activities of the new government will probably concentrate more on the economic, environmental and security challenges of that zone in general, than stressing the Malvinas issue as its main foreign policy priority. There are two antagonistic concepts for meeting the future challenges of the South Atlantic geopolitical space that complicate any political option. One concept consists in trying to keep the foreign powers out of the South Atlantic and strengthening the zone of peace, as enshrined in the ZOCAWAS treaty promoted by the UN. Another alternative could be to develop a new transatlantic trade and security concept, as recently promoted by EU and US think tanks under the concept of “new Atlantic futures”. Given the clear preference of the new government for reviving the North-South relationship, a certain openness can be detected towards developing the second concept of widening the transatlantic community to include African and South American partners. With regard to the future scenarios in and for the South Atlantic, the Macri government will certainly try to play a leadership role.