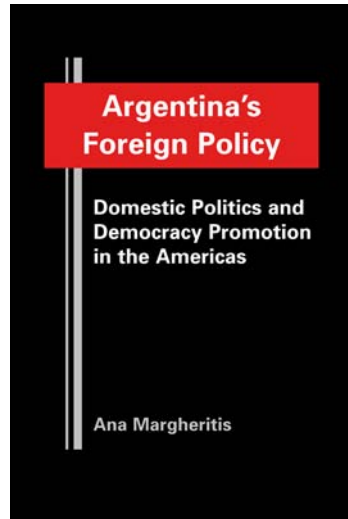


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Argentina's Foreign Policy: Domestic Politics and Democracy Promotion in the Americas

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1

Introduction

Argentina was hit by an outbreak of swine flu in mid-June, 2009. The virus spread fast, but the government acted slowly. It avoided confirming the number of cases and refused to take drastic measures that would have entailed postponing elections, which had been moved up four months to avoid further impact of the international economic crisis on the national economy and increase the chances of the governing party to win. By the end of the month, the country had the third-highest death rate due to swine flu in South America. Criticisms arose, blaming the government's neglect for the deterioration of the situation. However, the result of the June 28 elections (which were unfavorable to the current administration) remained the focus of the national political discussion. Special sanitary measures were progressively taken, mainly at the local and state level, as the peak of the outbreak was expected in early July. Simultaneously, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner planned on traveling to Washington to attend a special meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) to discuss the coup in Honduras.

Despite criticisms and claims that she should be more concerned with the Argentine health emergency, she not only attended the meeting (also chaired by the Argentine Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was very active in the negotiations) but also took part in another trip to El Salvador, where a small international mission supported ousted President Manuel Zelaya's failed attempt to return to Honduras. The decision to announce a (purely cosmetic) cabinet reshuffle was postponed until her return. Why would she give priority to, and become personally involved in, a foreign and distant issue? Why would she alienate domestic constituencies when they felt particularly vulnerable to a relatively unknown disease, awaited immediate decisions, and the party in government was in disarray because of the electoral defeat? How does democracy promotion abroad advance Argentina's national interest? To answer these questions, we have to look at foreign policy in the context of some country-specific domestic political dynamics.

Elections and the loss of legislative majority do not necessarily cause a governability problem in most countries. Presidents may govern, and do so well, even with an adverse congress. Negotiation and compromise are a natural component of the dynamics of any democracy. This does not seem to be the case in Argentina, where an electoral defeat acquires an unusual magnitude. The government's candidates, led by former President Néstor Kirchner (Cristina's husband), had repeatedly resorted to fear and traumatic memories to portray elections as a choice between them and a return to the past, thus turning a regular mid-term electoral act into a dramatic contest that would indicate the viability of a few candidacies for the next presidential election. Thus, the results immediately led to discussions about a (real or potential) crisis, governability capacity, and whether Mrs. Kirchner would leave office before the end of her constitutional mandate. The executive's reaction was to minimize the defeat and divert attention to other issues, particularly the democratic breakdown in Honduras.

By all accounts, the Argentine electorate's message in June 2009 was one of discontent and frustration with the Kirchners' inability to listen, establish a productive dialogue with the opposition, and compromise when facing dissent. The couple in power represents well the stereotype of personalistic, patrimonial, and quasi-authoritarian leadership; their style has been deemed "political autism." This time, their inability to adapt, change, and respond to social demands came at the price of creating political uncertainty; fomenting doubts about the fate of democracy at home; and losing votes, the leadership of the party, and probably a good chance at the 2011 presidential elections. It was precisely right after this that Mrs. Kirchner insisted—without explanations and against the recommendations of advisors and international diplomats—on playing a high-profile role in defending democracy in Honduras. As if such commitment abroad would help her to exorcise the ghost of democratic instability at home.

This behavior is not new in Argentine politics. Former presidents of different orientations have resorted to symbolic acts, especially in times of crisis when their own stability was at stake. Presidential involvement in foreign policy has been a constant. Democracy promotion has been a salient issue in all administrations' agendas since 1983. In comparison with other Latin American countries, Argentina has been among the few most activist actors in multilateral efforts to defend and promote democracy in the Americas. Thus, the issue behind the anecdotal episode above is: Why do some nation-states commit to regional efforts that apparently do not affect their national interests? Why and how do they engage in political actions that do not seem to have clear immediate

rewards and beneficiaries? What can we learn from Argentina's unprecedented involvement in democracy promotion in the hemisphere?

Answers are not obvious, as is often the case with politics in Argentina. To explain the paradoxes and ironies of Argentine politics, policies, and development history in general is always an intellectual challenge. I personally have trouble finding theories that fully account for those paradoxes, as well as other cases to compare with and draw general lessons from. I also find it annoying that what has to be explained is always one more crisis, example of instability, failure to achieve certain goals, or the reversal of positive trends. Democratization and economic opening have brought significant and positive changes in the last twenty-five years (Levitsky 2005, among others), but Argentina is still a conflict-prone society with serious problems to overcome in order to improve the quality of its democratic institutions and practices and attain sustained economic growth.

When it comes to foreign policy, the questions usually focus on apparently contradictory behavior that has at times isolated the country from the rest of Latin America and the international community. This behavior has put it on the verge of futile wars (in 1982 actually leading to one) and made it swing between cooperation and confrontation with the United States, coupled with neglect of its ties with its neighbors and the rest of the region—its eyes always on Europe where Argentines feel they belong. An apparently contradictory and inconsistent foreign policy behavior shaped Argentina's reputation as an erratic and relatively unpredictable international actor—the adjectives going, in fact, from pariah to wayward to unreliable partner. In addition, I have also been puzzled by the recurrent reference by Argentine presidents, public officials, and others to the need for a new foreign policy that “correctly” re-situates the country within the international system, at once and forever.

In this particular policy realm, existing theories and studies do not help much either. Again, academic works fall short of explaining this case. Surprisingly, most accounts have neglected the connections between domestic politics and foreign policy; particularly, the interplay of critical junctures and certain decisionmaking mechanisms has been ignored. The studies by Argentine authors offer mostly descriptive, legalistic, and normative accounts. North American specialists in international relations have paid little attention to Argentina, as well as to cases of unconsolidated and less developed democracies in which both politics and economics are in a transitional stage.

This research project avoids the recurrent theme of Argentina's long reputation as an erratic actor in international affairs and tries to avoid the

trap of the old discussion on policy continuity/change and national identity—although this is documented in the next chapter to provide the necessary background and briefly commented on in the conclusions. In fact, a preliminary survey of the 1983–2007 period pointed out some important lines of continuity across administrations in terms of the country's positions and actions, though slight variations and nuances exist and require explanation (see, for instance, Tulchin 1998); it also showed an increasing activism involving issues that were not traditionally part of the foreign policy agenda and in which the payoffs are not evident, such as democracy defense and promotion in the Americas even in remote countries and, apparently, in inconsequential instances (from the point of view of Argentina's national interest). Moreover, in comparison with other Latin American countries, Argentina stands within the activists' camp as one of the strongest supporters of the defense of democracy regime, always at the most interventionist end of the spectrum when it comes to multilateral efforts and the OAS actions (Bloomfield 1994).

The fact that these foreign policy actions require material and symbolic commitments but do not generate immediate gains and clear beneficiaries, and seem not to affect directly the national interest, makes this case puzzling from the point of view of traditional international relations theories, and raises the question of why Argentina has lately engaged so actively and consistently in democracy promotion abroad. Hence, Argentina is taken here as a case of a country whose foreign policy neither reflects national interest considerations nor responds to interest group dynamics, and a case in which domestic instability does not correlate with conflict/war in the way the literature expects, but with cooperation and international institution-building. This study builds upon a within-case analysis to inductively identify the mechanisms that have led Argentina to exhibit such behavior.¹

The analysis mainly focuses on the relation between domestic politics and foreign policy, though the approach to the incorporation of domestic variables implies a departure from most foreign policy analyses.² Rather than focusing on formal institutions or other factors usually emphasized (e.g., the level of fragmentation of the party system, interest-group, public opinion, bureaucratic agencies), this project incorporates contextual elements and the president as key decisionmaking units, and assumes a broader notion of the state that pays due attention to the specificities of states in the developing world, namely the demands they face in highly unstable contexts that pose serious governability problems and often put the legitimacy and credibility of various political regimes in doubt. This was the case of

Argentina in the contemporary period.³ Governments of different orientations had to deal with recurrent critical situations and prove their credentials almost constantly. This study shows that in unstable policy contexts, foreign policy may acquire a highly symbolic content that serves elites to manipulate issues, make ideological appeals, and emphasize rhetoric over content in their attempt to strengthen their position and build up consensus. Also, those are contexts in which the impact of informal institutions and extraordinary mechanisms of decisionmaking is usually more accentuated than in stable and consolidated democracies,⁴ leading to a political dynamic that differs from the assumptions of the pluralist model.

This case also challenges the assumption that regime vulnerability is associated with policy inconsistency and the inability to make substantial commitments, as well as the comparative studies focusing on cases in which internal conflicts and legitimacy crises were correlated with intensely hostile foreign policy initiatives and even war. Argentina has gone through almost constant economic and political instability during the last two decades (including, among other things, several coup attempts, hyperinflationary episodes, financial crises and foreign debt default, social unrest, riots, political violence, and interrupted presidential mandates). Yet, foreign policy has shown some important lines of continuity across administrations and embodied serious commitments to the peaceful resolution of conflict and cooperation leading to the formation of international regimes.

Thus, this book is an attempt to explain such behavior. There is no intention here to provide a comprehensive analysis of Argentine foreign policy but rather to elaborate a detailed account of a relatively unexplored foreign policy area. Narrowing down the analysis to the regional political dimension of foreign policy implies a challenge and a trade-off. The challenge is to show that this relatively underestimated and under-researched policy area can teach us something about the motivations of less developed and unstable democracies to engage in the resolution of international problems that apparently do not affect their national interests, do not relate directly to the demands of specific domestic groups, and do not offer specific tangible rewards in the short-term. A trade-off between a deep understanding of this complex case and a parsimonious, generalizable account is made here in favor of the former, under the assumption that this is the way to capture the nuances of multi-causal phenomena and answer the why and how questions. In short, there is no attempt to provide generalizations or theory testing, but to suggest new variables and causal mechanisms about processes we know little of and inspire further comparisons with other policy areas

and cases. Some comparisons are actually explored in the conclusions; they confirm that the findings also complement well other studies on Argentina's foreign policy in the realm of international security and migration. The comparison with another case is undertaken in the last chapter of this volume with reference to Brazil.

Putting aside normative considerations and other controversies about democracy promotion policies (e.g., the true motivation of international intervention in some cases, the effectiveness and actual results of those initiatives, the model and quality of democracy that is being encouraged, etc.), three instances in which democratic practices are a key, central issue have been selected: the encouragement of respect for human rights and political liberalization in Cuba, the responses to several politico-institutional crises that interrupted the electoral mandate of over a dozen presidents in South America, and the building up of peace and democratic institutions in Haiti. These are not taken as cases but as instances of democracy promotion in which Argentina's commitment and activism are to be explained; they also serve to present and structure the evidence, in hopes that the reader finds this more interesting than a traditional chronological account revolving around what each administration did.

The selection of these three instances is mainly based on their relevance in terms of the substance of the issue (i.e., what they represent within hemispheric democracy promotion policies, what they can tell us in terms of timing, actors involved, strategies, etc.). They also allow for an exploration of the research questions at different moments and across various administrations and critical junctures. The geographic dispersion permits us to compare involvement in situations that entail diverse costs and repercussions. Although the initial motivation of international intervention in these three instances might arguably not have been democracy per se, the three issues have been at the center of the democracy promotion discussion in the inter-American system and posed the most serious challenges to the members' commitment and capacity to intervene (both nation-states and international organizations alike). Argentina has maintained high activism in the three of them over the years, despite domestic controversies; this sheds light on the thread linking policies across administrations since 1983, as well as on eventual changes in the degree of involvement or emphasis in times of crises and transitions.

The research strategy is based on tracing the policymaking process that led to the decisions to consistently and actively engage in these three instances of democracy promotion since 1983. For each of the three instances above, the following questions were explored. First, what

was the role of the executive power in the decisions that determined when and how to become involved in democracy promotion? In terms of variables, this refers to the level of presidential involvement in foreign policymaking, ranging from high to low depending on personal involvement in the decisionmaking process versus delegation. Second, what was the impact of political cooperation and previous engagements with neighbor countries in encouraging further cooperation in this policy area? This refers to the intensity of engagement in regional (multilateral) endeavors, which may oscillate among intense, moderate, and low, depending on the level of activism in international negotiations, adherence to international norms and agreements, deployment of resources, and rhetorical acts. Third, whether, and how, domestic instability affected foreign policy decisions. The variable here is character of the policy context, defined as the situational (social, political, and economic) conditions within which policymaking takes place; the variation ranges from crisis to transition to stability, and it is assumed as an intervening variable that might reinforce the effects of the other two independent variables.

There is no attempt to quantify the main variables. The assessment of the intensity of involvement and the critical character of some junctures, among other things, reflects subtle degrees of qualitative variation and is made on the basis of historical records, also verified by oral testimonies. The relative weight of the three variables is assessed on the basis of the evidence but not quantified. The data comes from more than two hundred secondary sources of all sorts, complemented with thirty-five in-depth interviews. Although a full investigation of other cases exceeds the goals of this study, framing the analysis in the regional⁵ (hemispheric) context was a deliberate choice that opens several possibilities for further research on other cases, multilateral cooperation, and the role of middle and small states in international organizations, and also adds policy relevance to the study.

This volume argues that democracy promotion has become an issue that facilitated the instrumental use of foreign policy to attain domestic goals, a practice that is relatively common across countries but, as this case indicates, it may become more intense and persistent in highly unstable domestic contexts where rebuilding or maintaining political authority and legitimacy in times of crises and/or transitions very often takes priority over other goals. In other words, adhering to a principle that enjoys widespread international consensus, defines and embodies an ideological position, and touches on sensitive domestic issues and traumatic collective memories has been a safe device for incumbents to show policy consistency while building up credibility and capacity to

attain the overriding (domestic) goal of maintaining governability in dire times.

The theoretical and policy implications of this argument are threefold. First, contrary to what the existing literature predicts, this case shows that a highly unstable context does not necessarily lead to more erratic or aggressive behavior. Instead, it may provide incentives for governments to make strong commitments in their foreign relations and accept the costs and restrictions that come with them in order to gain credibility and governability capacity at home. This, in turn, contributes to greater respect for international commitments, the search for peaceful ways of resolving regional crises, and further development of regional cooperation and international norms. Second, this case speaks of the need and relevance of exploring the political dimension of foreign policy. Although foreign policy is always a tool to achieve domestic goals in any state, the empirical evidence provided in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 suggests that highly sensitive and symbolic foreign policy actions may be crucial for some states because they can be used instrumentally to recast power relations and supporting coalitions, (re)build institutions, and strengthen governability in highly unstable and transitional contexts. Third, this case highlights the various motivations states have when engaging in multilateral endeavors. Argentina's involvement in regional crusades to defend democracy illustrates the fact that less developed states in a highly interdependent environment pursue more than power and relative gains; rather, they are often concerned with the kinds of rewards that only come from cooperative games: image, reputation, and identity building. Their participation in multilateral endeavors is driven more by the intention to address domestic needs than to reduce uncertainty and transaction costs.

Thus, while the findings complement some of the insights of the literature on democracy promotion (particularly, those that emphasize domestic politics explanations) and the studies on middle states' use of symbolic actions with resonance within domestic politics to reinforce policies and discredit other alternatives, the conclusions also involve a departure from traditional foreign policy assumptions about the instrumental character of foreign policy, the impact of regime vulnerability and highly unstable contexts, and nation-states' motivations and goals. The conclusions also summarize the interrelated effects of the three relatively unexplored explanatory variables (policy context, presidential involvement, and engagement in regional endeavors) and further elaborate on their implications in terms of a possible redefinition of Argentina's erratic identity in international affairs.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 situates the research questions in a historical and regional context in order to provide background information about the case and highlight the significance of the issue. It explains how Argentina has reached its erratic national identity in the international system and provides examples of both continuity and change in its foreign policy orientation. It shows the importance of the country's relations with major powers and the connection between foreign policy and development ideas and strategies. It also highlights that the most recent democratic period has generated more incentives to maintain certain lines of continuity across administrations, although this has happened in the context of recurrent political and economic crises at the domestic level. The impact of these crises is analyzed, along with the implications of different styles of presidential leadership on their resolution. This is crucial information to make sense of the evidence presented later on and to understand the main argument of this book. The last section of that chapter refers to the historical evolution and current state of the inter-American system, with special emphasis on the recent normative and institutional developments aiming at the defense and promotion of democracy in the hemisphere. These elements are necessary to understand the increasing influence of the regional context on member states' foreign policy.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical discussion through a critical examination of what we know about the subject and what we are still missing. It expands several of the ideas above. It is closely related to the historical developments presented in the previous chapter but, seeking clarity and coherence, it is presented in a separate chapter. Existing explanations are looked into in an overview that incorporates academic literature in both English and Spanish. The analysis is both informative and critical. It aims at diffusing insights from studies that are not widely translated and read, underlining, at the same time, various theoretical influences, contributions, and gaps. Background studies on Argentina's foreign policy, alternative approaches to foreign policy, and the most recent literature on democracy promotion and middle states' foreign policies are reviewed. Their contributions and pitfalls are presented, as well as their applicability to our understanding of cases of less developed and unstable nations like Argentina. Building upon that review, the last section presents the analytical and methodological approach used in this volume.

The following three chapters gather the empirical evidence. They revolve around three major instances of democracy promotion policy within the Inter-American system. They have their own internal rationale, as they differ from one another, and can be read separately.

Chapter 4 explores the sources of Argentina's stance on democracy promotion in Cuba since 1983. It mainly focuses on the country's annual voting at the UN Human Rights Commission, while also using some other sources of evidence to relate it to different foreign policy actions and compare it to other Latin American countries' behavior. This chapter shows that Argentina's stance on this issue has oscillated in the last two decades between non-interference and demands for political liberalization. The slight variation across administrations is largely related to domestic issues rather than external pressures or demands. No doubt external influences (mainly, that of the United States) played a role, but there have been domestic political factors—namely, the concern with domestic stability, building credibility for reformist policies, and gaining legitimacy and electoral support—that determined presidential choices, even if that implied coping with dissent and opposition within the cabinet, congress, or the governing party. In all circumstances, the symbolic character of the Cuban question has served governments well in dire times.

Chapter 5 focuses on a set of episodes that put democracy at stake in South America: the interruption of seventeen presidential mandates due to impeachment, forced resignation, social uprisings, military coups, or other reasons. This triggered serious institutional crises and the need for domestic and international actors to respond to these (often confusing) episodes. This chapter first presents the evidence about the recent crises that have taken place in Paraguay, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Brazil, with particular emphasis on the role of the inter-American community in general and Argentina in particular in their resolution. Overall, the evidence lends support to the argument that involvement is determined by the extent to which crises in neighboring countries might affect the situation at home in terms of the government's image, credibility, and capacity to deal with governability problems. The modality and intensity of involvement varies more than in the cases of Cuba or Haiti. This is largely determined by the high uncertainty surrounding some of these cases and the character of the regional cooperative mechanisms used to cope with each institutional crisis. International cooperation plays a larger role here than in the Cuban question and leads to a more salient function of foreign affairs officials in the negotiations. However, the president still plays a key role in making ultimate decisions and appointments. His position in foreign decisionmaking facilitates the adoption of a pragmatic action in each case that adapts to the circumstances as each crisis unfolds, instead of requiring a pre-determined policy design; it also accounts for some

apparent contradictions and inconsistencies within and across administrations.

Chapter 6 addresses one of the most dramatic and interesting instances of defense of democracy in the hemisphere: the building up of peace and restoration of democracy in Haiti. The issue is analyzed in the broader context of Argentina's involvement in Central America during the entire period under consideration. The core of the chapter focuses on the country's role in the multilateral efforts to restore peace and democracy in Haiti. Since 1991, this issue has been on the agenda of all administrations and was particularly significant between 2005 and 2007. However, aside from humanitarian concerns, it is not evident why Argentine governments would allocate increasing resources to a relatively distant and, from Argentina's national interest point of view, apparently inconsequential conflict. The explanation suggests that this has not been the result of direct foreign pressure, ideological considerations, or an autonomous goal in itself, but rather a strategy that proved functional to other goals, such as building credibility for a new policy orientation, crafting supporting coalitions, or redesigning relations with domestic actors (e.g., the military). Critical junctures marked the urgency of these domestic needs and placed them at the top of the governmental agenda. Once again, this instance of democracy promotion shows that the foreign policymaking process revolves around the executive power, thus allowing the president to neutralize opposition and shape the timing and character of the outcome. This is also the instance in which the impact of regional cooperation is most evident in terms of altering the cost/benefit calculus of activism versus inaction and redefining relations with neighbor countries on the basis of common interests and strategies.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings and lessons. It elaborates the main argument further by pointing out the interplay of the explanatory variables. It also speculates on the implications of these findings and ideas for old and novel controversies about Argentine foreign policy in general. Drawing on secondary sources, the last section of this chapter applies the main argument to the case of Brazil. The discussion of similarities and differences with Argentina illustrates the potential applicability of the analytical framework proposed. The chapter closes with a reference to the main empirical and theoretical contributions of this study.

Notes

¹ Continuity is defined here the maintenance or persistence of the same general policy orientation or guiding principles over time. Consistency refers to the uniform application of, and adherence to, those principles in each instance. The case of Argentina shows that there may be policy continuity across administrations (e.g., activism in democracy promotion, commitment to regional cooperation) and also some inconsistencies and ambiguities (e.g., in the way governments dealt with some political crises in the region).

² This does not imply an underestimation of the influence of external actors on foreign policy but an attempt to shed light on the least explored dimension of foreign policymaking. The reasons to focus the analysis on the relationship between foreign policy and domestic policy are explained at length in Chapter 3.

³ For details, see, among others, Torre (1997).

⁴ Informal institutions are defined as “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels” (Helmke and Levitsky 2006, p. 5). Several works suggest that informal institutions shape the way presidentialism works in Latin America, either by increasing concentration of decisionmaking power, patrimonialism, and discretionary exercise of the role or by limiting presidential action.

⁵ For lack of better terms, I use the word regional here as comprising several subsets of international relations: the one that links countries of the Latin American Southern Cone (mainly, MERCOSUR members), the broader one that encompasses all South America countries (and often involves Mexico in key negotiations), and the most comprehensive and formalized one, extending to the whole hemisphere, known as the inter-American system. I indicate explicitly over the course of the text which subset I am referring to.