

CHINA IN ARGENTINA:

A CASE OF NEOCOLONIALISM
IN PROGRESS





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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	06
Resumen Ejecutivo	08
Introduction	10

The reasons for the Chinese influence 11

Political links

Economic affinities

Diplomatic relations

The role of federalism

The problem of corruption

Economic dependence

A Happy Association 2.0? 23

Food: a pillar of relationships?

On the margins of the law: the case of fisheries

Global importance of lithium

Mining

Infrastructure: telecommunications, energy and transportation 30

Huawei and 5G technology

Energy production

Road investment

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Communication strategy _____ **34**

Media cooperation

The role of diplomacy

Disinformation war in the making

Defense, security and geostrategic interests _____ **38**

Military cooperation

Aerospace industry

Projection to Antarctica

Final thoughts _____ **41**

References _____ **43**

Executive Summary

Argentina is one of the countries in the Western Hemisphere where the Chinese party-state has entered most strongly from an economic, diplomatic, and political point of view. This report seeks to explain the reasons for this and analyze its potential risks for national and hemispheric security.

In this sense, this study proposes to critically assess the relations between China and Argentina, considering some areas where bilateral ties translate into a relationship of mutual dependence. Such is the case of oilseed exports, in which Argentina is a critical supplier to satisfy the consumption level of this product among the Chinese population.

Despite this, most directions from which the Chinese government has increased its presence in Argentine territory involve risks to Argentina's security, sovereignty, and the entire region. The Asian giant has, in fact, some strategic interests that motivate it to enter the South American country aggressively. The most worrying are those related to the exploitation of lithium reserves, illegal fishing activity on the Atlantic coast, the installation of a space base in Neuquén –whose territorial control corresponds exclusively to the People's Liberation Army–as well as access to Antarctica for defense and mining purposes.

The Chinese party-state has managed to exploit a series of situations and structural problems in Argentina, including the federal organization of the State, which has been exploited by Chinese businessmen, officials, and other interest groups to gain access to the provinces without the agreement of the national government. This fact explains the numerous infrastructure works in the provinces, characterized by acts of corruption and opaque management of resources.

This report also considers the ideological closeness of some currents of Peronism with the Chinese Communist Party. It also ponders the economic crisis that has forced the government of Alberto Fernandez to seek financing options in capital from the Asian giant, ignoring even the rules and institutions of the international financial system.

The conclusions of this study point to considering the Chinese issue as a significant problem for the next government of Argentina (2024-2028). It invites the reader to rethink the numerous links with the Asian giant regarding a democratic governance model that respects the rule of law and seeks opportunities in bilateral trade beyond the agro-export model.



Resumen Ejecutivo

Argentina es uno de los países del hemisferio occidental en donde el Estado-partido chino ha penetrado con mayor fuerza desde un punto de vista económico, diplomático y político. El presente informe busca exponer las razones de lo anterior, así como analizar sus potenciales riesgos para la seguridad nacional y hemisférica.

En este sentido, el presente estudio propone llevar a cabo un balance crítico de las relaciones entre China y Argentina, considerando que existen algunas áreas en donde los lazos bilaterales se traducen en una relación de dependencia mutua. Tal es el caso de la exportación de oleaginosas, en donde Argentina funge como un proveedor de suma importancia para satisfacer el nivel de consumo de este producto entre la población china.

A pesar de lo anterior, es manifiesto que, la mayoría de los flancos desde los cuales China ha aumentado su presencia en territorio argentino, implican riesgos para la seguridad y la soberanía no solo de Argentina, sino de toda la región. El país asiático tiene, en efecto, algunos intereses estratégicos que lo motivan a irrumpir agresivamente en el país sudamericano. Los más preocupantes son aquellos relacionados con la explotación de las reservas de litio, la actividad pesquera ilegal en el litoral atlántico, la instalación de una base espacial en Neuquén –cuyo control corresponde en exclusivo al Ejército Popular de Liberación–, así como el acceso a la Antártida con motivos de defensa y explotación minera.

Para ello, el Estado-partido chino ha logrado instrumentalizar una serie de coyunturas y problemas estructurales de Argentina, entre los que destaca la organización federal del Estado, aprovechada por empresarios, funcionarios y otros grupos chinos de interés para acceder

a las provincias sin concierto del gobierno nacional argentino. Por este hecho es posible explicar numerosas obras de infraestructura de carácter provincial, caracterizadas por actos de corrupción y un manejo opaco de recursos.

Otros elementos considerados por el presente informe son la cercanía ideológica de algunas corrientes del peronismo con el Partido Comunista Chino. También se considera la crisis económica que ha obligado al gobierno de Alberto Fernández a buscar opciones de financiamiento en capitales provenientes del China, ignorando, incluso, las reglas e instituciones del sistema financiero internacional.

Las conclusiones de este estudio apuntan a considerar la cuestión china como un problema de primer orden para el próximo gobierno de Argentina (2024-2028). Invitan a replantear los numerosos vínculos con el gigante asiático en función de un modelo de gobernanza democrático y respetuoso del estado de derecho, buscando, asimismo, áreas de oportunidad comercial más allá del modelo agroexportador.



CHINA IN ARGENTINA: A CASE OF NEOCOLONIALISM IN PROGRESS.

INTRODUCTION

Argentina, one of the largest countries in Latin America, possesses vast energy resources, including lithium, gas, and shale oil reserves, as well as silver, copper, and uranium mineral deposits. In addition, the South American nation is one of the few nuclear energy producers in the region and a world leader in producing foodstuffs such as soybeans and their derivatives.

In addition to raw materials and an enormous territorial extension, Argentina has strategic access to Antarctica and a waterway connecting the goods of five countries. The above has turned the South American country into an important target for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which seeks to influence the area through strategic investments, state institutions, military-repressive power, media, and narrative distribution networks.

Added to this is the severe economic crisis the country is currently experiencing under the government of Alberto Fernández, who has been unable to deal with the high levels of inflation – over 160 percent – and the poverty suffered by more than half of the Argentine population. These domestic economic constraints have forced Argentina to yield more and more to China and to position itself in the yuan axis, which today constitutes a trade and reserve currency in defiance of the US dollar.

In the following, we will show how the various agreements signed with the People's Republic of China in the areas of defense, trade, and communications, among others, threaten Argentine sovereignty, putting at stake not only national security but also regional and hemispheric security.

THE REASONS FOR THE CHINESE INFLUENCE

POLITICAL LINKS

In Argentina, China reached the degree of penetration outlined above for political, ideological, and economic reasons. Regarding the political and ideological reasons, the link with China served the government of Néstor Kirchner to build an alternative to the relationship with the United States. After the 2001 crisis, a robust anti-imperialist sentiment was generated toward the United States, which is associated with the IMF and other international financing institutions.

Of course, the war in Iraq also fueled the anti-American sentiments at the time. All this happened in a framework where the narrative of the Kirchnerist government (2003-2015) recovered the epic of the struggle of the 70s in Argentina, marked by the pro-Cuban gesture, the terrorist violence of groups such as Montoneros, and the strong anti-imperialist sentiment against the US.

In this regard, it is worth recalling the mistreatment suffered by former US President George W. Bush in November 2005, when he was in Mar del Plata at the IV Summit of the Americas. At that event, consensus was not achieved among all the countries to sign the FTAA in a historical framework characterized by the regional alliance between Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela, with a robust ideological alignment with Cuba (Rosemberg, 2023).

It is important to mention that Fidel Castro gave a massive speech on May 26, 2003, lasting two and a half hours, on the steps of the Law School of Buenos Aires, as a special guest at the inauguration of President Kirchner, which took place the day before (Telam, 2013).

This was the context in which the bilateral relationship between China and Argentina grew. Likewise, the formation of the BRICS in 2008 accelerated the Asian country's relationship with Brazil – Argentina's first historical trading partner – increasing, consequently, the dialogues with Buenos Aires. This happened while the rest of the countries in the region were undergoing similar processes.

For all these reasons, China emerged as an alternative to build international ties with a new power from the “Global South,” avoiding, on Argentina's part, interaction with the United States in diplomatic and governmental terms. It is worth mentioning that there was no visit by a US president to Argentina until Barack Obama did so in 2016 when President Mauricio Macri was already exercising the highest political office (Ámbito, 2016).



ECONOMIC AFFINITIES

Regarding the economic reasons, it should be noted that, in 2004, when former Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Argentina, the country was in default with the IMF, private creditors, and other international financing organizations.

In that context, Argentina's only possibility to receive funds was China, which allowed the Asian country to gain power within the Argentine political establishment. At that time, it was speculated that China would offer an amount of US\$20 billion (La Nación, 2022a).

Finally, years later, a country-country framework agreement was signed that included projects of symbolic value, such as the rehabilitation of the Belgrano Cargas railroad (Centro de Despachantes de Aduana de la República de Argentina, 2014), whose route covers more than 1,400 km and transports cereals and oilseeds from Salta to the port of Rosario, cargoes that are mainly exported to China.

In the eyes of public opinion, the initiative to recover, together with China, a train of strategic value, such as the Belgrano Cargas, was contrasted with the initiative to close railway lines throughout the country during the 1990s, promoted by Argentine President Carlos Menem. This happened at a time characterized by the alignment with the United States. Likewise, the Belgrano Cargas project was part of the so-called "Train Diplomacy," with which China accelerated its arrival in many countries at the beginning of this century.

In this way, the construction of the Atucha III nuclear power plant was also added to the bilateral agenda, given President Kirchner's support to the Argentine atomic industry, contributing to the completion of Atucha II – which has been halted since 1982 – and the re-invigoration of the development of nuclear energy and the sale of technology.

For all these reasons, China, in many cases, was seen as a valid option to recover sovereignty and detach itself from Washington's geopolitical interests.

It is worth mentioning the support that China received locally from businessman Franco Macri, one of the most important businessmen in Argentina and the Southern Cone – father of former President Mauricio Macri. Franco Macri was responsible for bringing the automotive company Chery to Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, thus accelerating the relationship.

Likewise, he was the business promoter of the Belgrano Cargas railway project, the arrival of the CMEC company, and the Atucha III nuclear project in Argentina. This project boosted CNNC's entry into the country as its partner and many others, supporting the participation in the Argentine market of groups such as CITIC (sale of rolling stock, trading, energy), CHEC (sanitation), CREC (civil works), YINGLI (solar power), HIGER (lithium), POWERCHINA (dams), BYD (electric cars), CRCC (railway projects and acquisition of rolling stock), DATANG (4G), among others.

The Chinese relied on Francisco Macri because, being a multi-millionaire, he offered them a first-class platform to enter the country, with class, luxury, and contacts that they would not have obtained in such a short period. They were also able to enter critical projects with his guidance.

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Argentina was the first Latin American country to trade with China, which began in the 1960s. It was also the first country with which the recently replaced Chinese Foreign Minister, Qin Gang, communicated after being anointed by Xi Jinping last January (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship, 2023). Likewise, the two countries declared 2022 “the Year of Friendship and Cooperation between China and Argentina,” signing bilateral financing and investment agreements for 24 billion dollars.

In January 2023, Argentina hosted the Forum of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which seeks to exclude the US from regional forums. CELAC has organized a triennial ministerial conference with China, thus becoming a space that offers a whole menu of options to Xi Jinping’s government.

On its part, the Peronist Party has a broad level of contact with the Chinese Communist Party. Political meetings are held between both parties – Juntos por el Cambio also held some – and there is a fluid exchange in different levels of the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Power between the two countries, which exceeds the political and also reaches public education – universities – with Chinese and Argentine delegations visiting both countries – especially before the pandemic. However, the activity recovered in recent months (Piscetta, 2020).

Within this ever-closer bond, there have been some striking situations. For example, during his visit to Beijing in February 2022, Fernández told Xi Jinping in a meeting that if “he were Argentine, he would be a Peronist” (La Nación, 2022b), marking the ideological alignment that the Argentine president assumes exists between both parties, as did other Peronist leaders (Infobae, 2021).

Thus, the current Argentine president has actively sought closer ties with China. After the 2023 primary elections and before the general elections next October, Fernández will make a farewell tour of the Asian country with his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Francisco Cafiero, and the Minister of Science and Technology, Daniel Filmus.

The Argentine Foreign Ministry will prepare the work agenda for those days when Fernández and his Foreign Minister will be assured of their retirement as lobbyists for the Chinese government. Likewise, Minister Filmus will discuss, among other things, issues related to 5G, nuclear energy, and defense armament.

As an example of the positive reception of China by the Argentine political establishment, it is worth explaining that the National Congress has a Friendship Group with the People's Republic of China, composed of representatives of different political forces, which carries out an agenda of comprehensive institutional rapprochement with the Asian country.

Among other elements of the current political game that enable and reinforce China's presence in Argentina, it can be mentioned that the presidential candidate for the party La Libertad Avanza, Javier Milei, recently declared that, if elected president in the next elections of October 22, 2023, he would "cool" bilateral relations with China because it is a communist country (Pagina 12, 2021). Thus, focusing his geopolitics strongly linked to the United States and Israel.

This would imply a definitive paradigm shift since the other majority parties, Unión por la Patria – Peronism, center-left – and Juntos por el Cambio – center-right – have used China as a wild card according to the need of the case.

Although the relationship with China has been mainly linked to the Peronist party, having developed between 2004 and 2015, Mauricio Macri's government (2015-2019) signed binational agreements for 35 projects with China (Dinatale, 2018). However, some contracts signed between the Argentine and Chinese states were revised during his term. Similarly, Macri participated, for example, in the One Belt One Road summit in 2017 in Beijing (Pogoriles, 2017).



THE ROLE OF FEDERALISM

The fact that Argentina is governed by a federalist system opens up better and greater windows of opportunity for China to quickly negotiate with regional and local actors. In fact, most of Argentina's provinces, large cities, and municipalities have signed twinning (sister city) agreements with their Chinese counterparts.

On the other hand, local organizations such as the CFI (Federal Investment Council), which comprises representatives of the Argentine provinces, have an International Relations department with a team dedicated to China, where projects and financing lines with that country are articulated. However, it should be noted that the provinces' indebtedness must be authorized by the central government and be included in the following year's budget. Likewise, much of the Chinese financing contemplates a sovereign guarantee, which can only be offered by the Executive and must be negotiated by the Ministry of Economy.

At the same time, several provinces, such as Santa Fe, where COFCO's ports are located, have a government official responsible for relations with the People's Republic of China. Similarly, Cordoba, which promotes the bioceanic corridor, has its own Council for Strategic Linkages with the People's Republic of China (Government of the Province of Cordoba, 2020). And the Argentine province of La Rioja even has a House of La Rioja in Shenzhen (El Independiente, 2017).

This federalist character is clearly reflected in oceanic projects such as ATACALAR, based on the para diplomacy exercised by the provinces, which seeks to group several of them, as well as Atacama – Chile – to have direct dialogue with China as a macro-region (González, 2021). In this way, the Chinese government seeks to negotiate its interests beyond the dialogues conducted with the federal governments.

THE PROBLEM OF CORRUPTION

The issue of corruption in the political and economic elites makes it easier for China to do business. It is considered that the binational agreements with China undermine the institutional quality and legal security of the signatory countries, also preventing international tenders (Saavedra, 2023). At the same time, these agreements tend to condition a series of projects to be carried out by Chinese companies without any competition.

Therefore, it is understood that China uses a so-called “geostrategic corruption” in Argentina (Gamarray & Popova, 2023). The case of the Néstor Kirchner and Jorge Cepernic dams could be considered a reference for this phenomenon.

It should also be noted that, for the construction of the dams mentioned above, the Chinese company GEZHOUBA joined in a U.T.E. – Unión Transitoria de Empresas (Transitional Union of Companies) – with the local company Electroingeniería, whose owner, Gerardo Ferreyra, was preventively imprisoned for a mega case of corruption in public works (Infobae, 2019).

Another case of geostrategic corruption is that of the Sierra Grande iron ore mine, concessioned to China for 100 years, despite the paralysis in which the concessionary company, MCC, keeps it. This is because the production or logistics costs exceed what they would obtain as profit (Río Negro, 2019).

ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE

Since 2001, Argentina's bilateral trade with China increased from US\$2.3 billion to US\$26 billion in 2022, mainly in food and energy exports. On the other hand, investments from the Asian country total US\$13.1 billion in sectors such as energy, mining, transportation, and agriculture.

Likewise, most of the 62 loans Chinese commercial banks granted to Latin American countries between 2007 and 2021 went to Argentina. China issued US\$17 billion in loans to the country between 2005 and 2022 and around US\$30.6 billion in currency swaps. In addition, the South American nation is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

As of 2020, swaps became guarantees that denaturalize the meaning of reserves for the Central Bank of Argentina. Their use has expanded year after year, both for bilateral trade and for payments to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Likewise, these instruments seek a progressive yuanization of the Argentine financial system – to the detriment of the dollar – which makes possible, at the same time, triangulations to trade with sanctioned economies such as Iran and Russia.

The financial clauses established by China are secret, unlike those established by the IMF, the World Bank, or the Inter-American Development Bank. In this sense, data such as the actual rate at which the Argentine government took the Chinese funds – to be paid within three years – are still unknown.

Likewise, Chinese banks have spread in the country as partners of other banking entities to finance projects for provinces and municipalities in acquiring LED lights for public spaces or heavy machinery and security

technology, among other services. This happens in conjunction with Brazil, which guarantees the works and credits taken by Argentine companies, municipalities, or provinces through its National Development Bank.

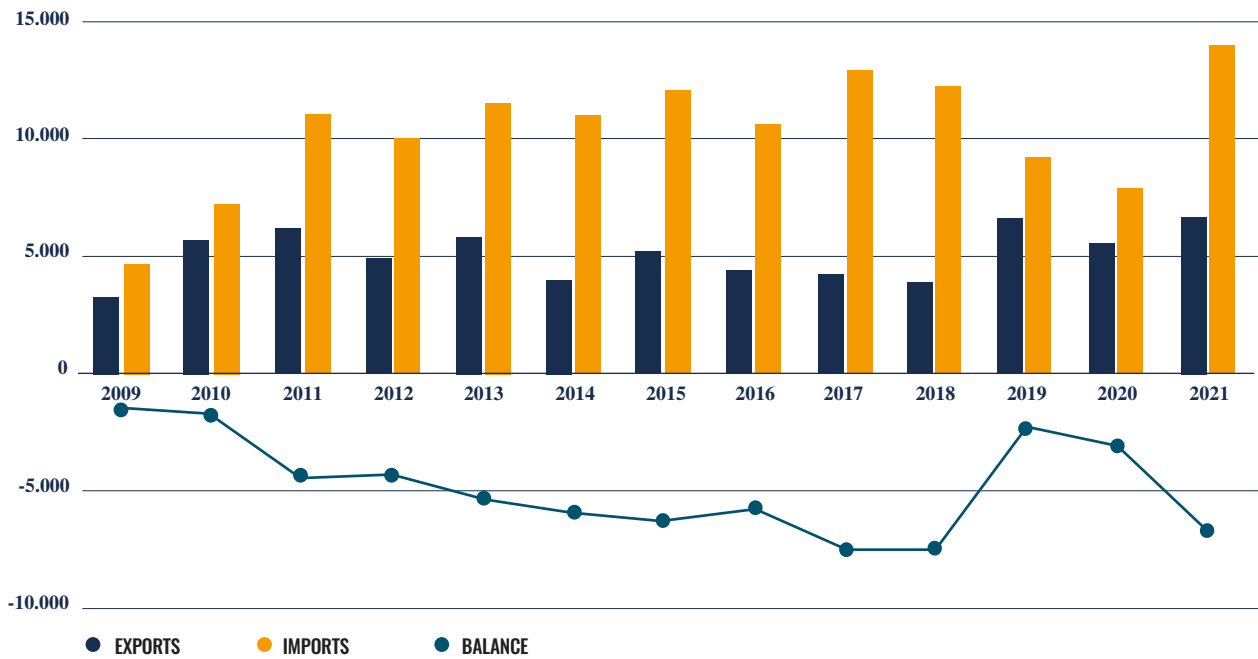
In the last few weeks, the current Minister of Economy and presidential candidate of the ruling party, Sergio Massa, who has visited several countries looking for resources to reach the elections without devaluing the Argentine peso and without interrupting international trade, traveled to Beijing to extend the swap with China. In this way, the minister managed to activate the fifth and last tranche of the 5 thousand dollars that the Asian country agreed with Argentina in December 2022, waiting for a later trip to negotiate a new agreement.

It is worth mentioning that approximately 90% of the operations with SIRA, a mechanism managed by Massa to withhold imports into Argentina from China, are being carried out in yuan and not in dollars, thanks to a flexibility mechanism that allows operations already planned to be exchanged in Chinese currency in its US counterpart. Massa announced the above through Twitter while accompanied by the Chinese ambassador in Argentina, Zou Xiaoli, and by business people and importers of Chinese products in different areas.

In addition to being classified as unfair trade and generating maximum dependence on China, such practice will complicate Argentina's accession to the OECD, as planned by the opposition in the event of taking office on December 10. Likewise, the growth of operations in yuan has forced importers to look for new clients to pay in that currency.

ANNUAL EVOLUTION OF EXPORTS, IMPORTS AND BILATERAL TRADE BALANCE ARGENTINA-CHINA (2009-2021)

(EXPORTS IN FOB VALUE, IMPORTS IN CIF VALUE IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)



A HAPPY ASSOCIATION 2.0?

For China, Argentina is a supplier of raw materials and an importer of industrial goods. Several authors see in this relationship an expression of neocolonialism, the reproduction of the unequal relationship that Argentina maintained with the United Kingdom during the agro-export model.

The arguments are varied and include the bilateral trade deficit, direct investments made by Chinese capital oriented exclusively towards the exploitation of natural resources, connectivity infrastructures, and the South American country's dependence on the sale of food to China.

The Argentine agro-export model, developed between 1880 and 1930, was based on a commercial relationship and a political alliance between Argentina and Great Britain, informally called Happy Association. Although this model shaped Argentina's future, it was criticized by the nationalist left since it placed the South American country in a position of dependence on the British island.

As we shall see, Argentina's current trade relationship with China is also complemented by political solidarities and results in a situation of dependency. However, the critical voice of the left is not observed on this occasion.

FOOD: A PILLAR OF RELATIONSHIPS?

China is currently consolidated as the second destination of Argentine agro-industrial exports. In 2019, 4.3 million tons of soybeans – 80% of Argentine exports in this product – and 163,954 tons of oils from the same plant were exported to the PRC, representing 4% of oil sales abroad.

Last year, the same happened with 4.9 million tons of these oilseeds, valued at 2.9 billion dollars. Likewise, 2.3 million tons of barley were exported for 654 million dollars and 1.7 million tons of sorghum for 458 million dollars, among other products.

Argentina is essential for China in this sector since the production of oilseeds, fats, and oils is concentrated in a few countries. In the case of soybeans, Argentina, Brazil, and the United States account for 91% of Beijing's imports. In other words, if China fails to obtain soybeans from the Land of Silver, it would have only two potential exporters left, one of which is the United States, with which it has problematic relations.

To this, we have to add a seasonality factor, due to which the harvests in the United States are six months apart from those in Brazil and Argentina, giving the US a monopoly on soybeans between August and October each year, while the South Americans have a monopoly on soybeans between March and May. These factors make Argentina and Brazil two critical suppliers for China, even more than the oil suppliers. On the other hand, the Sino-Argentine trade dynamics result from the cooperation generated by Presidents Mauricio Macri and Xi Jinping, as well as the policy of opening up to the world that began four years ago.

At that time, Argentina managed to enter the Chinese market, in addition to the products already mentioned, beef, sheep, and pork – whose imports had been suspended in 2015 – as well as fruits such as cherries, citrus fruits, fresh blueberries, and dried peas, tangerines, fractionated and bulk honey (Ámbito, 2019).



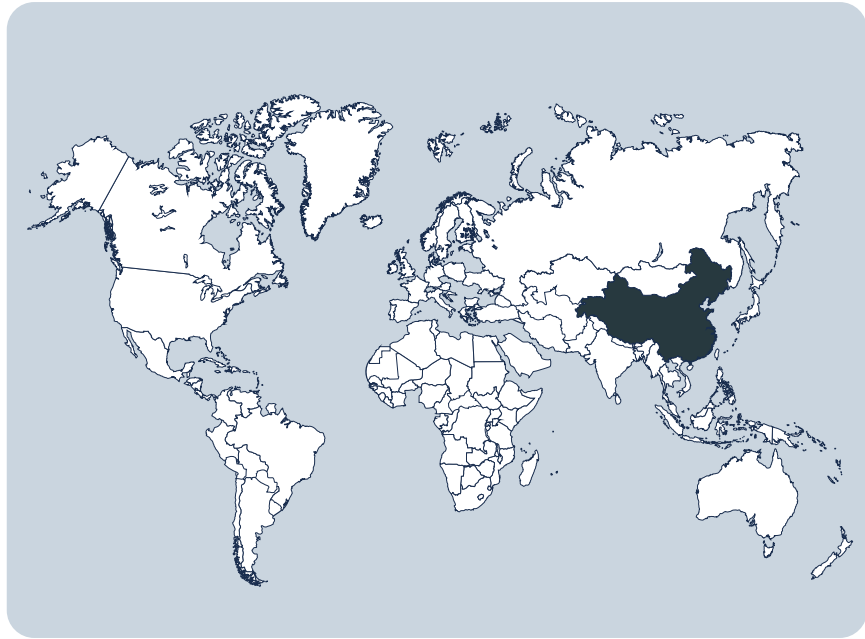
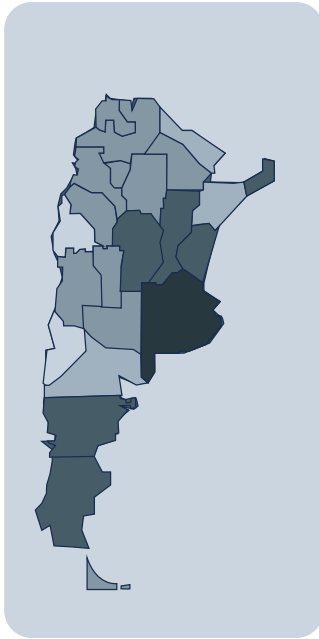
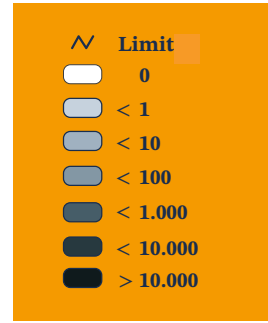
As mentioned above, Argentina is a global leader in the trade of soybean by-products such as oil and flour. However, the Chinese company Cofco International has become an important player in this field in the last few years after purchasing 100 percent of the companies Nidera and Noble Agri in Argentina.

Cofco International has a total installed processing capacity of 20,500 tons per day in Santa Fe and Buenos Aires, which positions it among the firms with the greatest potential to crush soybeans and transform them into flour and oil. With 13.4 million tons between grains and derivatives, Cofco had the highest volume of external sales from Argentina in 2018, which meant an income of around 3.6 billion dollars.



FIGURE 1: ORIGIN AND MAIN EXPORTS TO CHINA FROM ARGENTINA (2018).

(MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)



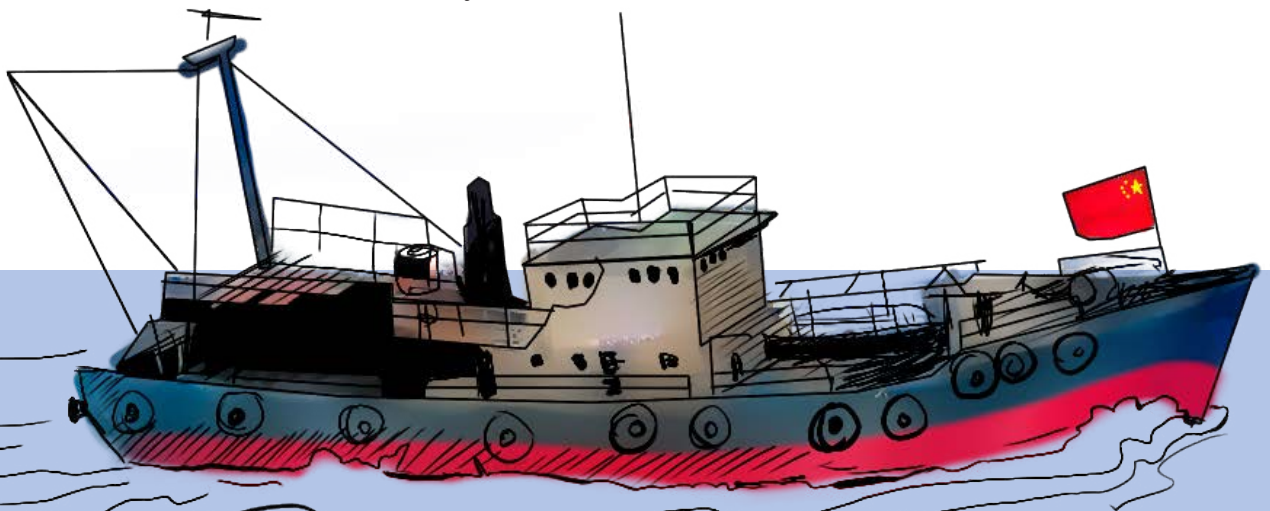
RK	DESCRIPTION	DOLLARS	% DOLLARS	THOUSANDS OFKG NET	%THOUSANDS OFKG NET
1	SOY	USD 1.313.216.580,00	31%	3.394.677	58%
2	BEEF MEAT	USD 765.097.521,00	18%	183.622	3%
3	RAW OIL	USD 610.357.458,00	15%	1.273.494	22%
4	CONFIDENTIAL	USD 489.649.382,00	12%	394.838	7%
5	SEAFOOD	USD 440.583.562,00	10%	90.517	2%
6	SOY OIL	USD 107.153.755,00	3%	162.380	3%
7	BIRD MEAT	USD 98.456.357,00	2%	49.978	1%
8	PREPARED SKINS AND LEATHER	USD 64.903.465,00	2%	23.819	0%
9	PEANUT OIL	USD 53.287.666,00	2%	49.395	1%
10	UNPROCESSED TOBACCO	USD 31.074.080,00	1%	4.990	0%
11	DIRTY WOOL	USD 28.927.495,00	1%	4.621	0%
12	WINE GRAPE	USD 24.018.262,00	1%	4.753	0%
13	REST OF FAT AND OILS	USD 22.116.130,00	1%	66.548	1%
14	FISH	USD 19.583.127,00	0%	8.291	0%
15	PROCESSED WOOL	USD 18.099.555,00	0%	2.861	0%

ON THE MARGINS OF THE LAW: THE CASE OF FISHERIES

Between 2018 and 2021, approximately 800 vessels crossed Argentina's exclusive economic zones (EEZs) for IUU fishing – illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing according to FAO's 2001 International Plan of Action – costing the South American country US\$2.6 billion in lost revenue, according to a report by the Financial Transparency Coalition (Infobae, 2022).

Argentina has become a significant target for Chinese IUU fishing on the Atlantic coast and the high seas near or within EEZs. These activities could have a military purpose, as vessels cross borders and work in alignment with PLA maritime militias. Such actions would be impossible without logistical assistance at the Port of Montevideo, which, in recent years, has become dependent on Chinese shipowners. Illegal fishing activity on the Argentine Atlantic coast has also depredated endangered species such as mollusks, krill, and cetaceans. This could contribute to the worsening of global famines, exacerbating economic losses and sustainability risks in the region.

At that time, Argentina managed to enter the Chinese market, in addition to the products already mentioned, beef, sheep, and pork – whose imports had been suspended in 2015 – as well as fruits such as cherries, citrus fruits, fresh blueberries, and dried peas, tangerines, fractionated and bulk honey (Ámbito, 2019).



GLOBAL IMPORTANCE OF LITHIUM

Argentina, the fourth largest lithium producer in the world, has become a key player in the supply chain of China, the global leader in the production of lithium compounds. Thus, in 2021, 42% of Argentina's lithium exports went to China.

Likewise, in 2022, Chinese giants in processing this raw material, such as Zijin Mining and Ganfeng Lithium Co., invested more than one billion dollars in the South American nation (Perfil, 2023). Currently, they are in advanced talks with provincial governments, national universities such as La Plata University – led by pragmatic Kirchnerist officials – and the national government to install a refining and battery production plant for electric vehicles with tax exemptions.

With the discovery of new reserves in Patagonia, as well as in the northern provinces of Argentina, China has deployed, to perfection, all its mechanisms for co-opting elites through invitations to governors and ministers, business people, opposition politicians, and members of the press.

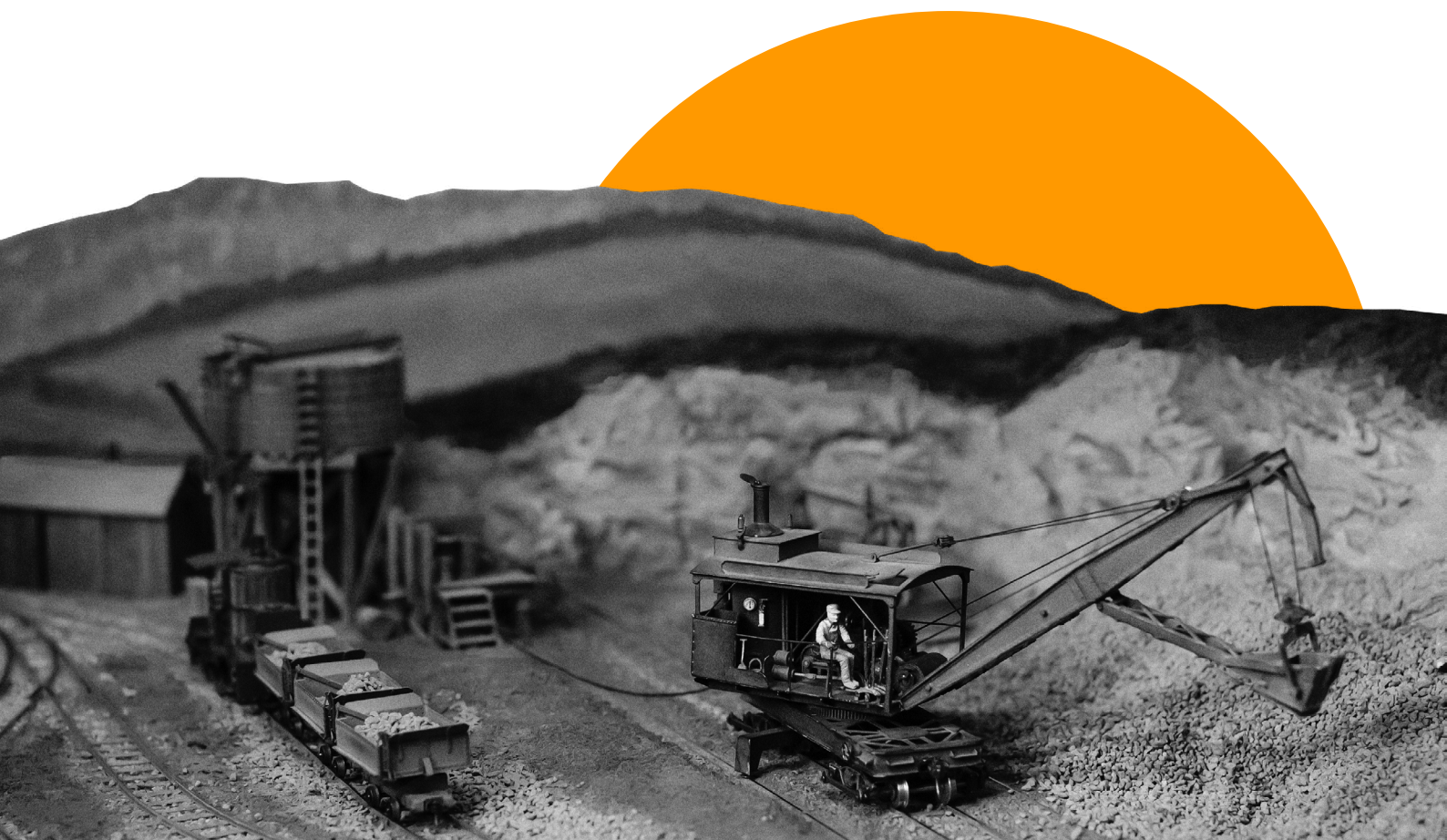
Events such as the above are favored by the Argentine federalism enshrined in the National Constitution. Under this, the control of natural and mining resources corresponds to the provinces, which, with low institutionalism and no capacity for accountability, make it easier for Chinese transnationals to deploy practices such as environmental depredation, corruption, and violations of the social and labor rights of their workers.

MINING

In June 2017, Shandong Gold, thanks to an investment of US\$960 million (Reuters, 2017), managed to take 50% of the Veladero gold and silver mine in the province of San Juan. In conjunction with Barrick Gold, the Chinese company seeks to exploit the resources present there to the maximum and refloat the binational Pascua Lama project.

At the same time, Shanghai Potash Engineering is considering investing 1.5 billion dollars in potassium mines in Mendoza (Desarrollo Energético, 2019), taking up again the Potasio Río Colorado project, whose exploitation was terminated in 2013 by Vale mining company. All this is because China is the largest consumer of potassium in the world: it imports 50% of what it needs.

Likewise, Jiangxi Ganfeng Lithium plans to disburse US\$675 million in the operation of two salt flats and construct two lithium carbonate plants in Salta and Jujuy.



INFRASTRUCTURE: TELECOMMUNICATIONS, ENERGY AND TRANSPORTATION

HUAWEI AND 5G TECHNOLOGY

While Argentina has taken steps to decentralize access to 5G spectrum bidding, Huawei has obtained permits from the state-owned telecommunications company – ARSAT – to operate within the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, where 50% of Argentina’s population is housed.

In March 2023, Huawei held its Cloud Latam Partner Summit in Buenos Aires. Huawei Cloud has only two “national regions” in Latin America, one of which is in Argentina. These regions are operated by entrepreneurs with no experience in communications, who nevertheless find symbiosis with the ruling party, both on their boards of directors and with local partners.

Regarding cybersecurity, Argentina’s national strategy pays dual tribute to the democratic Budapest Convention, signed in 2018, and to the autocratic Beijing Convention. Regarding this, Argentine decision-makers from the government and the current opposition argue that any actor to whom concessions are handed over, be it the Chinese or the US government, will end up carrying out espionage actions.

According to this, it would be preferable not to lose sight of the encryption issue and to welcome China with open arms, as it is the only country currently investing in 5G. In this sense, the mistake of local decision-makers is not to appeal to other technologies – such as 6G – or to wait until 4G has coverage throughout the country.

In fact, it has been a miracle that the 5G has not been fully tendered to China, when the government and the current Minister of Economy, Sergio Massa, at the end of last year evaluated it as a possibility to obtain fresh funds for the elections in 2023. Meanwhile, the current government is postponing requests and pressures from the US to provide waivers and partial payments to the IMF.

ENERGY PRODUCTION

In February 2022, the state-owned China National Nuclear Corporation signed a contract with the Argentine government to build the Atucha III nuclear power plant for US\$8 billion. This includes a reactor with Chinese Hualong-1 technology, developed to compete with the US-made Westinghouse AP1000. The revamped project has recently stalled over contract details but could move forward in the coming months. Argentina counts on in-house technology to develop it.

Likewise, Chinese capital would finance the totality of the Atucha III Nuclear Power Plant, located in the Buenos Aires town of Lima. If completed, this plant would be the fourth one in Argentina – the others are Atucha I and II and Embalse – with a power of 745 megawatts.

Concerning other energy sources, the Los Meandros Wind Farm in Neuquén, in charge of the Chinese multinational Envision Energy, stands out, with an investment of approximately US\$140 million to generate 75 megawatts of power. The Eastern company also won the first round of bids for three other smaller wind projects, two in Buenos Aires of 50 and 10 megawatts and the remaining one in Cerro Alto, Río Negro, of 50 megawatts.

Also noteworthy are the Condor Cliff and La Barrancosa hydroelectric dams. These works in Santa Cruz have already made 21% progress in excavation and 13% in filling the dams. The projects are carried out by a consortium formed by Electroingeniería, Hidrocuyo, and the Chinese company Gezhouba Group Company Limited. The total investment would amount to approximately US\$4.5 billion.

Photovoltaic solar energy projects have also been promoted, such as Caucharí, in Jujuy, which is led by the Chinese company Shanghai Electric Power Construction Co. Ltd (SEPC). It involves an investment of 390 million dollars, 85 percent financed by China and 15 percent by the government of Jujuy.

ROAD INVESTMENT

Two large Chinese firms are financing investment projects in the Belgrano Cargas and San Martín Cargas railroads, part of the backbone of the Nation's railway networks.

In the Belgrano Cargas project, the Chinese company Machinery Engineering Corporation granted the Argentine government a loan of US\$2.47 billion, later increased to US\$4 billion. It is intended to quintuple the amount transported by the current railroads, from, more or less, 847 thousand tons in 2015 to 4.4 million by the end of 2023.

This means a significant step forward in the strategic and financial definition of the project. The measure was published in the Official Gazette through Decree No. 162/21, signed by President Alberto Fernández, the head of the Cabinet of Ministers, Santiago Cafiero, and the Minister of Transportation of the Nation, Mario Meoni. Said decree involves works and concessions to Chinese capitals in Santa Fe, as well as in Chaco, Jujuy, Salta, Tucumán, Gran Rosario, Mendoza, and NOA, area of the Lithium triangle (Ministry of Transportation, 2021).

Likewise, the Chinese company Railway Construction Corporation Limited signed a contract to renew 1,020 kilometers of tracks of the San Martín Cargas railroad in the section that goes from Mendoza to the ports of Rosario and Buenos Aires, passing through the south of Córdoba. In addition, the Asian company promoted the construction of 220 kilometers of track between Rufino and Santa Teresa in Santa Fe.

For its part, the freight train that passes through the south of Córdoba, still in its first stage, involves an investment of US\$1.089 billion. Its objective is, once again, to increase cargo volume fivefold, from the current 1.5 million tons to 3 million tons in 2025 and 8 million tons in 2030.



COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

MEDIA COOPERATION

The Belt and Road Initiative includes a section on media cooperation between national entities and others linked to the Chinese Communist Party. In this sense, agreements have been created that include access to channels such as China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Xinhua, as well as collaboration with public and private media in Argentina, which are intended to be nurtured with the official narrative of Xi Jinping's government.

In addition to the multiple agreements in force between the Xinhua news agency and the Ministry of Communications of Argentina, others stand out with the Spanish edition of the People's Daily and the China Daily. Although these agreements and the resulting content span the political spectrum, some cases of media cooperation appear to be based on ideological sympathies of the national left with the Chinese Communist Party. For example, CGTN content broadcast by the Venezuelan news agency TeleSUR reached leftist audiences in Argentina.

The pro-Chinese media network also includes those that serve the diaspora community, estimated at some 200,000 inhabitants. These media operate in Mandarin and usually cooperate with the government of the PRC, being dominated by pro-Beijing editorial lines. Friendly local voices, such as the bilingual magazine Dangdai, are proof of this.

The magazine mentioned above has as one of its most prominent collaborators the economist Gustavo Girado, appointed in June 2022 by the Argentine Foreign Ministry as Advisor and Consul General in Beijing. This operator of Chinese interests in Argentina acts together with Gustavo Ng and Néstor Restivo – founders of Dangdai – in a process called by several specialists as “China-zation of the relations between both countries” (Dangdai, 2022).

However, China's economic influence on some Argentine media has managed to set the latter's agenda. Although a small sector of local journalism – critical and pluralistic – has reported on scandals involving China in organized crime, environmental issues, labor disputes, or corruption cases, most editorial boards and journalists have opted for self-censorship.

Ricardo Ricas, founder of the Association of Foreign Correspondents, former Xinhua correspondent in Argentina, a person of extreme confidence of Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, and Nobel Peace Prize winner for denouncing the forced disappearances during the last military dictatorship in Argentina, stands out on this point. Ricas, from a double standard, promotes anti-American attitudes, silencing, on the other hand, criticisms against the Chinese regime and its human rights violations.

As such, the national media that cooperate with their Chinese counterparts seem to have avoided intervening in critical coverage, even hiding the efforts of civil society to roll back Beijing's influence in the Argentine information ecosystem. These media avoid talking about human rights, and it seems to be politically incorrect to hold the Chinese government responsible for its abuses.

In short, the ownership of large news networks and the lack of regulation to ensure transparency and accountability have undermined the development of sustainable and independent media in Argentina. Low journalistic expertise on China, combined with the Chinese Communist Party's continued efforts to co-opt influential political and academic voices, have created vulnerabilities to media influence from China.

THE ROLE OF DIPLOMACY

Since the Chinese embassy in Argentina maintains close ties with various media groups, academics, political leaders, and digital influencers, its activity also stands out within Beijing's communications strategy.

Thus, in 2020, the Chinese embassy registered a Twitter account – today X – managing to increase its interactions on social networks to reach local audiences more directly. Similarly, on the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations, it held a virtual media forum with senior Argentine officials in 2021.

It has also published dozens of bylined articles, given interviews to local media, and conducted briefings to disseminate Beijing's preferred narratives on particular issues.

Chinese diplomats in Argentina promote China's supposed achievements in green development, economic growth, poverty alleviation, and narratives of international solidarity against foreign interference in domestic affairs, supporting Argentina's claims to the Malvinas Islands. Similarly, various government officials, including Argentina's ambassador to China, Sabino Vaca Narvaja, criticized Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan more than the Asian officials themselves (Lejtman, 2022).

Chinese state-party propaganda has regularly emphasized the close ties between the Chinese Communist Party and the ruling Justicialist Party while promoting the deepening of bilateral relations. An example of this was the video tribute that a Chinese state channel made on the occasion of the historic understanding between the parties mentioned above.

In addition, China provides thousands of university scholarships to Argentines and other Latin Americans. It promotes academic exchanges among its citizens in Argentine universities with whom it signs agreements, even advertised on WeChat – the largest social network in that country – which include language learning agreements in various branches of the Confucius Institute.

On the other hand, the People’s Republic of China has paid members of the Argentine media structure to visit the Asian country, seeking to generate affinities to position Beijing’s image and narratives in the South American partner.

In this regard, public opinion surveys in Buenos Aires found that, in general, the capital’s residents have a positive image of China but lack familiarity with it. Favorable impressions of the Chinese government declined during the post-pandemic period, although most continued to support increased bilateral trade.

In another survey, about half of respondents had no confidence in Xi Jinping’s ability to do the right thing on issues of global impact, and a similar proportion had negative perceptions of his government’s human rights record. In the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, China was seen in the academic universe as the major geopolitical counterweight to the United States.

DISINFORMATION WAR IN THE MAKING

Another node in the overall communicative strategy of the Chinese party-state is found in disinformation campaigns, a counterintelligence mechanism that seeks to generate confusion in decision-making.

Investigators have found limited evidence of Chinese cyber troop activity in Argentina, with suspicious accounts amplifying Beijing-controlled media publications.

Likewise, an extensive pro-China propaganda network, tracked by the research firm Graphika, reached Argentine audiences in early 2021 and was unknowingly amplified by influential national actors.

DEFENSE, SECURITY, AND GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS

MILITARY COOPERATION

In 2015, China and Argentina finalized several defense cooperation agreements, including purchasing and co-production of fourth-generation fighter aircraft, acquiring 100 assault amphibious vehicles, and five warships. Also, the construction of a space facility to exchange satellite images under Chinese military control was formalized.

Regarding equipment, Argentina's proposal for a military budget tender for Chinese JF-17 fighter jets stands out. We should also mention the recent conversations between the Chinese embassy and the Argentine Ministry of Defense, to acquire military vehicles from the Asian country with a value of US\$664 million manufactured by the North Industries Corporation.

AEROSPACE INDUSTRY

Argentina's agreements with the Chinese military have not been limited to defense cooperation. This synergy also advances in areas such as the aerospace industry, where the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has gained access to four Argentine space facilities:

- 1) Far Space (Neuquén),
- 2) Río Gallegos (Industrial Park),
- 3) China-Argentina Radio Telescope (Los Leoncitos, San Juan) and, in the same region,
- 4) San Juan Satellite Laser Ranking.

Among the above, however, stands out the Far Space base, a 500-hectare facility recently ceded to the Chinese government for the next 50 years to which Argentine authorities do not have permanent access. On the contrary, it is a base operated by the PLA itself through a subsidiary, which uses a 16-story antenna capable of intercepting US satellites, space activity, and encrypted communication.

Agreements of this nature call into question the sovereigntist discourse of actors such as Agustín Rossi, former Minister of Defense and current Chief of Cabinet in Argentina, who, during the pandemic, rejected US support to update the national Armed Forces through the acquisition of airplanes, tanks, weapons, and technology. All this was done under the pretext of not being dependent on the United States. At the same time, and paradoxically, under Rossi's orders, the Secretary of International Defense Relations signed agreements favorable to China in similar matters.

PROJECTION TO ANTARCTICA

In December 2022, the governor of Tierra del Fuego, Gustavo Melella, signed a memorandum of understanding with the China Shanxi Chemical Industry Group, linked to the Chinese Communist Party, and HydroChina, intending to build a petrochemical facility for the production of fertilizers, as well as a multipurpose port that would allow access to Antarctica and potentially become a PLA naval base (Government of Tierra del Fuego, 2022). An example of this is the equipment of the Antarctic stations, used by China to improve the accuracy of its intercontinental ballistic missiles and open alternative trade routes.

Other Chinese interests in Antarctica are in the possible installation of the Digital Silk Road marine internet cable, which, although it would connect via Chile, contemplates alternative connections in South Africa and Patagonia. In the latter case, the Chinese optical fiber would need the Antarctic bases and the sponsorship of CONICET, the Argentine science and technology agency that the Asian nation has already financed in the project mentioned above.

On the other hand, mining in Antarctica is a matter of interest for China, which intends to take possession of the mineral resources present there through the Antarctic Treaty, which establishes that, in 2048, the regulation against mining on the white continent could be rejected, subject to the agreement of the parties involved.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Given its gravitation in the world economy, the relationship with China will be one of the most relevant challenges for the next Argentine government. As mentioned above, this relationship seems to be based on a very specialized trade pattern reminiscent of the old paradigms of the agro-export model. Although this interpretation is quite well supported by public opinion, it is worthwhile to make a finer analysis and consider the complexities surrounding the new international economy as a product of a global crisis.

In this essay, we seek to propose an alternative calculation methodology that yields less catastrophic data on Argentina's balance of payments concerning bilateral trade with China. While the trade surplus with the Asian country lasted from 2002 to 2008, with specific improvements in 2007 and 2008, negative trade balances only appeared in 2009 and 2010, but only slightly and for particular reasons – drought in 2009 and trade conflict in 2010. It was not until 2011 that the trade deficit became a cause for concern.

With the above data, we do not intend to deny some pernicious aspects of the relationship with China but rather to shed light on a sensitive issue, to integrate a better perspective of the commercial exchange with that country.

Historical experience shows us that favorable international prices will not last forever and that, in any case, we will always be at the mercy of a bad harvest, such as that of 2009 or 2023. The best alternative to this scenario is to take advantage of the bonanza to change our bilateral trade pattern with China.

This pattern shows a positive evolution that simply reflects the excellent momentum of Argentina's terms of trade. However, it does not lead us to conclude that the relationship between China and Argentina is entirely favorable to the South American country, even more so if we consider the damage in matters related to institutional and democratic quality, governance, access to information, respect for the law, and, finally, the capacity for sovereign national decision making, such as the damage to Argentina's historical prestige in the respect for human rights.

A relevant topic in this paper was Argentina's dependence on soybean exports to China. We can draw two conclusions from the overview of the structure of Chinese imports. On the one hand, Argentina achieved a strong presence in food supply, primarily through soybean and its derivatives, positioning itself among the three leading suppliers, together with Brazil and the United States. Thus, we can qualify Argentina's relationship with China as a "double dependency," placing the South American country in a more comfortable position than many of the oil exporters to the Asian country.

However, the weakness of Argentina's position lies in that more than 75% of its exports to China are foodstuffs, half of them soybeans and their derivatives. For this reason, trying to export other products with higher added value is necessary. Although the task is difficult, it is not impossible since access to the Chinese market is far from limited, both by product and origin.

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