

# Argentina Applies for NATO Partner Status: A Geopolitical Realignment?

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*Argentina's application for NATO partnership status has to be understood in the context of the country's historical and geopolitical alignments, as well as its identity and relationship with Global North partners. In this paper, I consider the motifs of Argentina's application, the context of Argentinian geopolitical realignment, and the impacts that it will have on Argentina's foreign relations and extant foreign policy challenges.*

## I. Introduction

On April 16, Argentina formally submitted its application to be one of NATO's Global Partners, a group of countries institutionally cooperating with the alliance, without officially joining it. The Argentinian bid for institutional ties with NATO lies at the crossroads of geopolitical realignment, interior base-building, and attempts to solve problems of the country's situation in the international system. It is important to analyse this decision's internal and global context and possible consequences, as it highlights significant facets of a major Latin American country moving toward the Western alliance for ideological reasons. First, the historical trajectory of U.S.-led military partnerships will be presented. The traditional geopolitical alignment of Argentina will be analyzed, followed by an outline of various detectable motivations for the application decision in the Latin American context, and then possible outcomes will be presented.

## II. U.S. Military Alliances and Latin America

South America is and has been considered to be the primary influence zone of the United States since the inception of independent states in the Western Hemisphere. However, this did not mean that the „Northern Colossus“ was fast to organize systemic partnerships with Latin American states. The institutional structuring of the South American states as members of the U.S. alliance began in the first years of the Cold War when the United States extended military alliances to almost every corner of the globe. The Bagdad Pact, the ASEAN, and NATO were formed in these years, organizing the post-war world in U.S.-friendly blocs. Latin America got the system of the „Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance,“ known as the Rio Treaty, a mutual defense pact that, in 1947, did not come close to the level of NATO cooperation. It was mainly used as a pretext for anti-communist intervention across Latin America, especially by the United States. Under the charter of this treaty, Latin American states seldom participated in cooperative security operations. Given the geographical isolation and the consequential kinetic security of the continent, there was no apparent need to organize against an outside foe in a traditional military sense.

Thus, the adherence and reference of these treaties mostly remained a tool for Latin American states to strengthen their alliances with the United States. This goes for the question of NATO, too. While the coalition was born to enhance U.S. bonds with Europe, it eventually grew out of its region-specific roots, especially after the end of the Cold War. With the coming of the unipolar moment, leaving behind its specific focus on confrontation with the Soviet Union, it was geopolitically less charged to seek ties with the eminent alliance of the global North. After 9/11, the organization also grew to embrace formal ties with countries outside of its geographically defined area. This raised the question of the relationship of NATO to Latin American nations. These countries always wrestled with the question of their geopolitical boundaries and identities in relationship to the West and their giant northern neighbor, the United

States. Thus, in the wake of the birth of the “Partners across the Globe” programme between NATO and Middle Eastern countries,<sup>1</sup> the issue became a potential tool in Latin America for demonstrating alignment with the United States or the rejection of its domination by denouncing it, which was also a popular callword across the continent with the rise of the left-wing governments of the Pink Tide trend of the 2000s.

### III. Latin American States and NATO Partnership in the 21st Century

Colombia was the first country to seriously raise the question of formal ties to NATO since the formation of the alliance. The country is an old partner of Western nations: it became the only Latin American country to send soldiers to the Korean War<sup>2</sup> – in fact, this remained the only direct pro-Western participation of Latin American countries in Cold War conflicts. The country was a recipient of huge amounts of U.S. aid since the 1980s, first for the prosecution of the Drug War, then against the rising tide of the uprising of the FARC, a left-wing group.<sup>3</sup> The cooperation going back decades was obviously an important argument for the formalization of NATO ties. The other were the rising tensions within the Inter-American system in the 2010s due to the renewed influence of extra-hemispheric powers in the region. Colombia still has ongoing tensions with Venezuela and Nicaragua, both of which sought closer ties with Russia and China in security cooperation.<sup>4</sup> The country, by the late 2010s, recovered from its catastrophic civil war with the FARC. Overall, the partnership's formalization demonstrated its exceptional ties to the West and its newfound stability and capability as a strong regional player while creating a deterrent against its rivals in the region.

A similar pattern can be observed in the case of Argentina regarding the role of NATO partnership as a declaration of geopolitical identity and direction. However, the historical trajectory of the two countries is vastly different. While Colombia is a long-running partner to the traditional Western alliance, Argentina followed a totally different path. The country has defined itself as a major power in South America since its independence. While it built strong ties with Europe, not the least through a huge influx of European immigrants and economic partnership with the United Kingdom, it guarded its independence jealously throughout centuries. In the 20th century, this also meant diverging from the path of traditional Western allies. Argentina was one of the last countries to declare war on the Third Reich in 1945, giving in to acquire U.N. membership after the war. Although ideologically hybrid, the regime of Juan Domingo Perón was the first country to build formal relations with the countries of the Soviet Bloc.<sup>5</sup> And while Perón himself was persona non grata after his removal in 1955, the idea of non-alignment reached across the political spectrum. One of the bloodiest – defined by many as “right-wing” - dictatures of Argentina, the regime of Jorge Videla was a key country in breaking the grain embargo of Jimmy Carter against the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> On top of the non-aligned foreign policy making, Argentina also clashed with Western nations and their allies on several occasions in different conflicts. In 1978, the country almost went to war over the control of certain Southern Atlantic territories with Pinochet's Chile, a key U.S. ally. War was averted just with the intervention of the Holy

See.<sup>7</sup> Another well-known conflict was the short but bloody clash with the United Kingdom over the Falkland/Malvinas islands in 1982. After the coming of left-wing Kirchner-Fernández governments in the 2000s, the country became part of the emerging Global South coalition to reorder the world after the passing of the “unipolar moment.” In summary, Argentina followed a path diverging from Western interests in war and peace equally for many decades. The fact that Milei is courting NATO partnership is a pivotal turnaround in the historical geopolitics of his country.

#### IV. Javier Milei’s Western Turn

The pivot toward the West fits in the presidency of the radical libertarian-conservative politician. Milei promised a transformation of civilizational scale at his inauguration. He characterized the whole 20th-century Argentinian history as a failed experiment and promised to This is a supposed return to the classical liberal path left in 1916, during the presidency of Hipólito Yrigoyen, when Argentina took the first of its many steps toward a redistributive political system, away from classic Western liberal capitalism. He promised harsh austerity measures and transforming the society into a libertarian one while strengthening the country’s institutions. He is still in the phase of carrying out his austerity program ever since, with fairly good results. In strengthening the country’s institutions, the new president tries to centralize the Argentinian state, structuring all state-level spending in the hands of the federal government.

His “Omnibus Bill”, a huge pack of laws which was supposed to deliver all the laws for the radical pro-market, conservative transformation, failed in Congress in February, but the project of transformation is still ongoing, if in a relatively slower pace.

In a broad sense, the return to the Western fold is another step on this road. Javier Milei sees the geopolitical guarantee of pro-market libertarian-conservative transformation in Western alignment. The application for NATO partnership is a crucial decision, but only one among many. Milei started to push back against Chinese influence in Argentina well before his election to the presidency, apparently seeing the connection with the survival of the Perónist, Pink Tide governments of the past and the Chinese economic influence. Since his inauguration, he has been aggressively courting Western attention geopolitically. He offered old Soviet-era helicopters for Ukraine in February,<sup>8</sup> a rare move among Latin American nations. Argentina voted staunchly in favor of Israel and Ukraine in U.N. meetings.

In April, the U.S. took a radical step toward Argentina with the approval of the sale of a batch of Danish F-16 fighter planes to Argentina, which, if settled, will radically renew and even augment the strike capability of the Argentine air force. Following this, on April 18, the application for being a NATO Global Partner was officially submitted, by Secretary of Defense Luis Petri<sup>9</sup>. All this happened all the while Milei repeatedly criticized the “woke” strains of Western mainstream politics, building strong ties with

conservative forces across Europe and the United States. In this sense, the Biden administration found a spot for realist foreign policymaking in handling Argentina. This also sheds light on the convergence of geopolitical forces, which made Milei's step toward Western alignment and NATO partnership a move taken at a favorable moment.

## V. Milei's Decision in Latin American and Internal Context

Milei takes his radically pro-Western moves while Latin America, among other Global South countries, is moving away from Western orbit. First, their neutrality toward the Ukraine war and then their opposition toward Israel's military response to Hamas's mass terror attack of October 7 signifies that Latin America right now is distancing itself from Western goals. For a comparative perspective, I highlighted the entry of Colombia into a NATO global partnership as a choice of Western alignment in the 2010s. Now, Colombia's case highlights not only the potential but also the pitfalls of the relationship between Latin American countries and the global North. In 2022, the first in the country's history, a non-establishment left-wing candidate, Gustavo Petro, won the presidential elections. Already on his first appearance at the UN general assembly in September 2022, he criticized the alliance as an instrument of imperial domination and imperialist war, all the while the NATO-supported Ukrainian army clashed with the Russian invasion forces in the Donbas in crucially important battles. He reaffirmed Colombia's status as a global partner of the alliance in May 2023, but all the while, he is still searching for inroads with non-Western geopolitical forces. He expressed interest in BRICS membership in April 2024,<sup>10</sup> and he broke up relations with Israel following the invasion of Gaza by the Jewish state after the October 7 terror attacks.<sup>11</sup> He is also searching for closer ties with Maduro's Venezuela. Last year, this did not carry as much geopolitical baggage, as the United States was also searching for rapprochement with its old enemy, Caracas.<sup>12</sup> The U.S.-Venezuelan relations since then turned sour once again,<sup>13</sup> and thus, Venezuela is a toxic relationship in the eyes of the West. Overall, Colombia is equivocating on its Western commitment, apparently. In this environment, the United States must show that it can easily find new partners in the hemisphere to signal strength for Colombia and generally for anti-U.S. forces across the Western Hemisphere. In Argentina, moreover, several strategic projects of the PRC are located which makes it a target of even higher importance for Western influence-building. One is a deep-space tracking station, and the other is a possible dual-use port close to the Magellan Strait.<sup>14</sup> Turning and keeping Argentina on the Western fold could stop more Chinese projects from developing and even closing current ones if Milei is that self-confident.

For Milei, the NATO partnership is not just important for his political project. The partnership with NATO is an important tool for him to build the country's institutions,

thus making them much more supportive of his political project. When the Argentine Secretary of Defense officially submitted the partnership application to NATO, he emphasized only one aspect on Twitter: the strengthening of Argentinian capabilities through NATO partnership. This delineates Argentina's primary goal with the partnership: much closer Western cooperation, the opportunity to buy innovate weaponry and get Western technological support. Argentina's armed forces in the field of high technology quite lag behind. The country is one of the last operators that still keep the venerable A-4 Skyhawk, an attack plane designed in the late 1950s, in service given that they lack the opportunity to buy new ones. As of now, Argentina is slowly emerging from economic chaos but has a long way to go. The F-16 deal was a first step, and with the NATO partnership, Argentina hopes to acquire military equipment much more easily.

## V. The Malvinas issue, MERCOSUR tensions, and the prospects of the partnership

Beyond the renovation of security supply channels, there is a long-running – however, symbolic – strategic problem that Argentina has faced for decades. This is the question of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, the group of small rocky islands off the coast of Argentina in the South Atlantic that were in the spotlight of world attention during their 1982 Argentine invasion. The issue of the islands enjoys an outsized symbolic importance in Argentinian politics. There is a consensus in Argentinian politics that the islands belong to Argentina by rightful ownership. Reclaiming them is a matter of national self-worth. Milei, as a pro-Western politician, has to face this problem while separating himself from the approach of the Fernández-Kirchner Perónists, who emphasized a classic “anticolonial” and non-aligned foreign policy. The pro-Western governments of Argentina since the 1980s all tried to promote cooperation and dialogue with the United Kingdom as a tool for concessions vis-à-vis the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> This was most pronounced during the terms of Carlos Menem in the 1990s and Mauricio Macri after 2015. Menem acquired the title of “Major Non-NATO Ally” from the Clinton administration of the United States amid rumors that he sought U.S. support in its relations with the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the rapprochement with Western military alliances is a well-known tool for progressing the Malvinas issue. Now, in the aftermath of Brexit, it may be even more probable that Macri also sensed an important opportunity on his hands. In the aftermath of Brexit, the UK pushed for a more pronounced global network, working out bilateral agreements in almost every corner of the globe. Thus, Argentina was also a prospective target of the new UK opening policy, but by the time the Brexit process was finalized, Macri's government was defeated during the elections of 2019, and the more traditional, confrontational approach of Perónists prevailed.

With the NATO partnership, Milei followed the path of becoming a trusted partner of Western powers, thus following the dialogue in the Falklands again, as Menem, by getting closer to the Western powers, especially the United States. An interesting consequence of this is the tilting military balance in the South Atlantic. With the mentioned F-16 deal, Milei not only offers development of the army but seriously augments Argentina's strike capability. Since the construction of Mount Pleasant Airbase in the Falklands/Malvinas in the late 1980s, the UK stages four fighter jets there, to deter Argentine invasion.<sup>17</sup> With the disappearance of supersonic capabilities from Argentinian arsenals, this small but high-quality force meant credible deterrence. Now, however, the F-16 planes are almost a match to the quality of British Typhoons and in superior numbers. The United States must carefully balance offering Argentinians support and reassuring UK interests in the South Atlantic.

However, the international edge of Milei's NATO partnership and rearmament is not primarily about the issue of the Falklands, but a possible renewal of intra-continental competition. Argentina's primary partner, the other great power of MERCOSUR, is Brazil. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by the competition of the two countries. By the 1980s, the contest was settled, and the economic-political primacy of Brazil passed peacefully into the regional system. With the Treaty of Asunción in 1991, the MERCOSUR was formed, and since then Brazilian-Argentine cooperation has gone along without major conflicts. Milei initially criticized MERCOSUR, and his alignment in geopolitical conflicts is far from that of Lula's administration. The relationship between the two countries is still cordial. Argentina supports MERCOSUR-China trade talks,<sup>18</sup> and Lula tries to represent his anti-Western geopolitical stances less forcefully. Therefore, there is still a level of tension between them. Argentina's NATO partnership application emphasizes independent foreign policy-making and confrontation with Brazil much more forcefully than it weighs on the Falklands issue.

Besides the impact of NATO partnership on Argentinian internal situation and external relations, the effect of this step on NATO must be considered as well. For the time being, all the above could only be seen as a symbolic step without concrete offers to NATO. When the Colombians joined into partnership in 2019, their counter-insurgency proficiency and experiences in special operations were emphasized by some as possible resources to share with NATO allies. Argentinians have not participated in a war since 1991, when they joined the Gulf War coalition.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned, their heavy weaponry is seriously worn out and in the process of replacement. Currently, Argentina can rather offer trading opportunities for Western armament providers<sup>20</sup> than being a source of useful skills and resources for NATO.



Considering all the named aspects, the step toward a formal NATO partnership for Buenos Aires is an important step in today's geopolitical environment. Countries of the Global South are widely regarded as being geopolitically lost by Western influence. Latin America, a borderland of cultural identities, is especially important in this process. Presently, Milei's pro-Western project is stepping back into the mindset of being an unapologetic Western ally, a potentially watershed moment in Argentinian history. In this sense, Javier Milei brings back pre-1916 times as promised. The bilateral relationship between Argentina and the UK and Argentina and Brazil will be impacted by these processes as well. Given that the negotiation of a partnership is just taking its very first formal steps, these are considerations of possible scenarios, not concretely predictable processes. The pro-Western turn of Buenos Aires needs to be evaluated again in the future, taking into account the stability of Milei's presidency and its possible long-term effects on Argentine strategic and geopolitical thinking, political culture, and geopolitical alignments.

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## Endnotes

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