



INSTITUTO PORTUGUÊS DE RELAÇÕES INTERNACIONAIS
UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA

WORKING PAPER 3

The International Dimensions of Democratization: The Case of Argentina

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Introduction

Argentine politics are usually described as eccentric or, at least, unconventional. This is so for a number of reasons. From an economic perspective, Argentina was a rich country that went all the way from wealth to bankrupt in less than seventy years –between 1930 and 2001. From a social perspective, it has always had the most developed middle class and the most educated population in Latin America, a region where strong middle classes and universal education are extremely rare. From a political perspective, it saw the emergence and predominance of rather autochthonous political movements, which included Peronism as the most relevant and elusive example. From an international perspective, it was the country in the Western Hemisphere that most frequently opposed American foreign policies apart from Cuba –although it never sided openly with either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. Argentina was also the most economically developed and one of the least politically stable country in Latin America, a paradox that was first explained by O'Donnell in the 1970s (1973). In spite of all these particularities, the cycles of Argentine politics since 1930 can be matched with the international developments taking place at the time. This chapter argues that both the frequent democratic breakdowns and the processes of re-democratization that followed were linked to international factors, which were present as either causes or consequences or both of the domestic moves.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it describes the cycles of political instability in Argentina from 1930 to the present, tracing their relations with the international context. Second, it analyzes the democratization process that took place during the 1980s in order to single out the international factors that had an influence upon it. Third, it examines the ways in which the renewed Argentine democracy has affected its international environment, especially focusing on the region where it is embedded –the Southern Cone of South America. This section is historically intertwined with the previous one, but I opted for separating them for analytical purposes. The chapter ends with a brief conclusion.

International Context and Political Cycles in Argentina

Argentina underwent six *coups d'état* between 1930 and 1976. The literature usually conceives of them as the outcome of internal rifts that opposed rival civil-military alliances against one another. To be sure, none of the coups was due to a direct intervention of a foreign power, as was frequently the case in Central America; neither an indirect but strong involvement, such as the American support to the ousting of Chile's Allende, took place. And yet, the cycles of regime instability in Argentina can hardly be understood without reference to the international context: the sequence and substance of the coups tightly accompany the events that were taking place in the world and, more clearly, in the region.

The first two coups were rooted in nationalistic, proto-fascistic movements. In 1930, the leaders of the takeover had in mind an anti-liberal, corporatist

organization of both state and society, much as Benito Mussolini had for Italy and Getúlio Vargas would have for Brazil some years later. Likewise, the military officers that took power in 1943 did so in rebellion against the alleged pro-Allied stance of the governing coalition and its presidential candidate, Robustiano Patrón Costas. The aftermath of both coups would be unexpected: in the first case, the nationalists were soon overridden by the liberal wing of the rebels, who governed until 1943 through electoral fraud but under a constitutional coverage. In the second case, the revolution was swallowed by its own son: Juan Domingo Perón, the man initially chosen to garner mass support for the dictatorship, became a popular leader and the founder of one of the most lasting political movements in Latin America. These later developments notwithstanding, the timing of the democratic breakdowns was parallel to the global decline of liberal democracies and the rise of nationalistic movements undergone during the interwar period.

The following two coups were of a different nature. Both were oriented against the new hegemonic movement, Peronism, and legitimated themselves as the forces that would combat the tyranny of Perón to restore full authority to the Constitution. In both cases, the military were divided and inner struggles prevented them from accomplishing their plans. In 1955, the president that ousted Perón and forced him to exile was displaced after only two months in power, given his allegedly soft stance against Peronism. In 1962, the putsch failed even before being consummated: internal divisions and lack of coordination left the leaders of the coup out in the cold, as the constitutional succession was cleverly carried out after the resignation of the civil president and before his military would-be successor could take the oath of office. These two coups were justified under a liberal disguise, which pointed to the United States and its foreign policy toward the Americas as the beacon of the anti-authoritarian –in the world– and anti-Peronist –in Argentina– forces.

The two final coups were, once again, of a very different kind. This time, they would not aim to restore the traditional society or the desecrated Constitution. Instead, the objective was to uproot whole political practices and sectoral groups and to transform the Argentine society into a newly crafted, authoritarian polity that stick with the West –although not with its values of human rights and the rule of law. Remarkably, the military coups that overthrew two constitutional governments, the first in 1966 and the second in 1976, were inserted into a regional wave of analogous bureaucratic-authoritarian coups. The former was anticipated by the 1964 coup that put an end to a convulsive period of democratic government in Brazil; the latter was preceded by the almost simultaneous coups that ousted the democratic presidents of Chile and Uruguay in 1973. Not only the time frame but also a number of crucial policies implemented by the new governments were coincident. Stemming from an ideological proximity among the military forces of the Southern Cone, the dictatorships aimed to implement similar economic policies and, especially, developed a plan for coordinating their fight against terrorism and its alleged source, communist subversion. Most particulars of this plan, named Condor Operation, have not been yet fully accounted for given its clandestine nature; however, its very existence proves that regime change in the region was not an isolated phenomenon with exclusively domestic roots. To the

contrary, contagion was a mechanism at work, and cooperation among supporters and officials of the authoritarian regimes gave the Latin American dictatorships a shape that resembled a network rather than an archipelago.

The previous account should not lead to deception: the dictatorships of the Southern Cone were at least as rivals as they were allies. Nationalistic political traditions, old-fashioned military formation, territorial disputes and economic tensions frequently cut across the common authoritarian goals of the military governments, which gave rise to serious conflicts that were, sometimes, very close to end up in open war. This was the case of the Argentine-Chilean conflict over the Beagle canal, which led to the deployment and accumulation of troops on both sides of the Southern border that separates the two countries. In December 1978, only the intervention of the Pope through his personal envoy, Cardinal Samoré, prevented the hostilities from breaking up. Such a schizophrenic relation between the dictatorships can be understood in two ways: on the one hand, it means that the military governments regarded the national interest of their countries as conflictive, at least regarding foreign policy; on the other, it indicates that the same governments perceived the threats that jeopardized the stability of their domestic regimes as common; hence, they were eager to cooperate in the area of internal security. Whereas foreign policy drove these countries apart, domestic policy, i.e. the purpose to preserve the authoritarian regimes, held them together. In the Southern Cone,ⁱ the awareness of a shared political destiny for the domestic regimes would be transmitted from the dictatorships to their democratic successors: if, in 1980, all six countries were under authoritarian rule, in 1990 they were all democracies – or were well advanced into the process of democratization.

International Factors that Supported Democratization

The Argentine path from military rule towards free elections can be divided into three phases. The first started in mid-1981, when President Roberto Viola decided to soften some restrictions forbidding party activity and further –albeit minor– steps were taken aiming at liberalizing the regime. The second went from the ousting of Viola by hardliner Leopoldo Galtieri in December 1981, who intended to halt the opening of political participation to the civil society, to the military defeat to the British at the Malvinas/Falklands war on June 14, 1982. The last phase was presided over by General Reynaldo Bignone. It consisted of an accelerated process that, starting with modest liberalization, moved on through the call to national elections, the development of a free electoral campaign, the victory of the party most inimical to the dictatorship, and the inauguration of a democratically elected president in exactly one year and a half. Although only the middle phase is usually acknowledged as the one in which international factors impinged on the democratization process, there are reasons to believe that also the other two were influenced by the international context and the intervention of foreign actors.

In the first phase, and even before the initial moves towards liberalization, it is well documented the pressure that top officials of the American administration, and the American Congress itself, exerted on the military

government regarding the issue of human rights after 1977 (Brown 1985: 99-100). What is not so well known, though, is the significance that the international networks of human rights organizations had in preserving the life of top political activists. They did so by conferring public, international visibility to the potential victims of repressive policies, thus raising the cost of the government should it decide to incarcerate or abduct a keynote figure. As difficult to gauge as this factor is, the crucial matter is that the international protective umbrella was so perceived by the involved actors, giving them motivation and a larger –if still little– room to maneuver than they would have had otherwise.ⁱⁱ More important, it might have eventually saved their lives.

The second phase was triggered by an indisputable international phenomenon and unfolded according to its evolution: the Falklands war. These Southern islands had been disputed by the British and the Spaniards (succeeded by the Argentines after independence in 1816) since more than two centuries before, and they were in hand of the British since 1833, after being seized from an Argentine military garrison. Argentina had renewed its diplomatic claim to the islands in 1964 before the United Nations, without obtaining any concession from the British, who claimed sovereign rights over the territory. A violent showdown had never been seriously considered by any of the parties. This would change soon after the ousting of General Viola.

In early 1982, the government was facing growing unrest due to deep economic trouble: inflation was soaring, output was declining and wages were plummeting (Rock 1987). The unions were gathering support against the official policies and street revolts appeared increasingly out of control. The military Junta decided to seize the islands in order to galvanize its domestic front by deflecting public anger towards a foreign enemy. Grasping a minor excuse, Argentine troops landed on the islands on April 2, 1982. Initially, the plan seemed to work: the invasion was almost bloodless and the Argentine people rallied behind its government. The strategy of the Junta was based on two main assumptions: that the United States would not interfere in a quarrel between two allies, and that the British would opt not to fight a war for such a meaningless and distant target.ⁱⁱⁱ These miscalculations were later joined by others mistakes, including a defective combat strategy, poor military training and successive diplomatic blunders. As a consequence, the Argentine field commander ended up by signing an unnegotiated cease-fire, euphemism for unconditional surrender, on June 14 –just 72 days after the invasion. More than six hundred Argentines died in the conflict; the regime that had sent them to war would not survive much longer.

The consequences of defeat for the Argentine dictatorship now appear clear; yet, they are not linear but twofold. On the one hand, the ignominious outcome helped to bring down the regime by definitely weakening the hardliners and igniting a palace crisis, as a consequence of which the three military branches split up and the Army had to run the government first, and manage the transition later, in isolation. On the other hand, the military adventure provoked the withdrawal of support to the regime from both the American government abroad and the public opinion at home. This implied that two factors, acknowledged by the literature as favorable to democratization, were present:

they were, as Whitehead (2001) has called them, control and consent. The former implied that the dominant power in the Western hemisphere would no longer back up an unreliable dictatorship that had attacked its most loyal ally, which sent an encouraging signal to the democratic forces; the latter meant that domestic support for the government was not available anymore in the wake of the parallel economic and military catastrophes. The regime was doomed; democracy, however, had not been born yet.

After a first phase of failed liberalization and a second phase of aborted authoritarian re-emergence, the third phase of the transition opened up the proper democratization process. Throughout this period, international influence was not always evident but manifested itself in two ways. Upon the military government, influence was exerted on the negative, as mounting pressure from the international –especially Western– community demanded prompt, free and fair elections in order to accept Argentina back from its status of semi-pariah state. Upon the opposition forces, influence was exerted on the positive, mainly through the example that was taught by the transitions to democracy that had taken place a decade before in Southern Europe. In particular, the trial of the Greek colonels and the Spanish “Pacto de la Moncloa” were a lasting inspiration for the democratic leaders that were about to take power (Alfonsín 2004).

All over 1983, the weakness of the government augmented proportionally to the popularity of the presidential candidate of the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), Raúl Alfonsín. The UCR was a traditional Argentine party proud of its autochthonous origins and idealistic philosophy; moreover, most of its greatest leaders usually took pride for not having been ever abroad. To the contrary, Alfonsín was pragmatic and open-minded and considered himself and his party as natural partners of the social-democratic family of world parties. He was well connected with foreign leaders, both politicians and human rights activists, and was regarded by them as a modern, democratic leader. The downside was that he was not expected to win: Italo Luder, the candidate of the Partido Justicialista (PJ), represented a party that had won every fair election since its appearance in the 1940s, and was the frontrunner in the view of most observers. He stood closer than Alfonsín to traditional nationalistic positions and, in particular, to the outgoing government: this was evidenced by his refusal to abolish the preventive amnesty to all military personnel decreed by Bignone should he be elected president. For its part, Alfonsín voiced his rejection to the self-amnesty and even went a step forward when he denounced a secret pact between the military and the labor unions, the latter of which were closely linked to the PJ. Finally, on October 30, 1983, the elections were held under close international scrutiny. Alfonsín garnered 52% of the vote whereas Luder stopped at 40%. The unambiguousness of the result and the lack of authority suffered by the government led to an anticipated power transfer. On December 10, 1983, Alfonsín inaugurated a democratic period that would become the longest in Argentine history.

Although Alfonsín was sworn in office beyond any controversies and enjoyed both constitutional legitimacy and wide popular support, the democratic transition was not over with his inauguration. Alfonsín himself would recognize it, as he openly called his administration as “a transition government” (Alfonsín

2004). The new regime was in place because of the power vacuum generated by the military collapse after Malvinas, not by having won the battle against the old one. Its strength had still to be forged, and many antagonists were just encroached, waiting for their time to come; among them, large sectors of the military themselves. The degree of democratic consolidation would be tested by a series of putsches that took place between 1987 and 1990. In order to survive, the regime needed to show that it was not isolated from the international community but, on the contrary, that Argentina would be segregated by the outer world should a coup be successful.

The first uprising was launched during Easter Week 1987. A group of military rebels led by Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Rico took control of a few headquarters, denying the right of the Judiciary to prosecute military officers for alleged crimes committed during the last military regime. The rebellion was formally driven by a sectoral claim, namely the right of the lesser officers not to be disturbed for accomplishing orders given by their superiors. However, the consequence of yielding to their claim was evident for anyone who knew a bit of Argentine history: every administration that had previously acquiesced to military claims had had to face successive, incremental demands that eventually ended up in a coup. The problem was that the military officers that declared their loyalty to the civil authorities were not disposed to open fire against their comrades. In order to succeed, the constitutional authorities could only resort to the non-violent, united support of the domestic and international fronts, as no help could be expected from the armed forces. The rebellion was finally put down, but the government was obliged to make concessions for which the incumbent party would pay a significant price. However, and most important, the democratic regime was safe.

In January 1988 history replicated itself. Aldo Rico, taking advantage of a lenient house arrest, took the lead of a second rebellion; the government was unable to obtain the acquiescence of the loyal forces to repress the rebels, and a negotiated agreement was needed to put an end to the mutiny. Although Rico was confined again, the general impression was that the government was incapable of keeping the armed forces under control. This impression was confirmed by the revolt of Villa Martelli, in December 1988, led by the charismatic Colonel Mohamed Seineldín. Once again, the administration put down the insubordination without having –or better, without being able– to shoot a firearm. By then, it was clear that the military rebels had neither domestic nor international support, but it was also evident that the democratic authorities lacked the capacity to discipline the armed forces. Only two years later, after PJ's Carlos Menem won the 1989 election and succeeded Alfonsín in the presidency, would a fourth revolt be violently crushed by the loyal officers. This event, dated December 3, 1990, would mark the end of the transition: the rules of the game were now definitely constitutional and democratic, and there was no more room for uncertainty regarding who held the monopoly of violence. After sixty years of regime instability, two factors had helped to consolidate democracy: the unity of the main political forces in the domestic arena, and the unrestricted support to the constitutional authorities granted by the foreign powers, especially the regional neighbors and the United States.

International Effects of Democratization

When Argentina returned to democracy in 1983, it still had to face either unsolved conflicts or grave tensions with three countries: Chile, Brazil and the United Kingdom. At the same time, it badly needed to regain honorability as a member of the world community, what meant restoring friendly ties with the United States. The new administration understood that a peaceful reintegration in the international scenario was not only an end in itself, but also a means to downplaying the significance and influence of the military at home. Alfonsín's strategy developed around three main pillars: bilateral peace with Chile, regional integration with Brazil and multilateral diplomacy with the rest of the world. This section briefly explores these issues.

Chile

The relations with Chile were strained because of three main reasons: the human rights issue, the pro-British position adopted by the regime of Pinochet concerning the Falklands dispute, and the persistence of the border conflict about the Beagle channel (Escudé and Cisneros 2000). As the former was a domestic matter and the second was the indirect consequence of a problem regarding a third country, the question of the Beagle turned out as the hottest topic of the bilateral agenda. Alfonsín went as far as to define it the “number one priority” of his administration (Passarelli 1998: 241).

The first step to solve the conflict was the signature by the foreign ministers of a Declaration of Peace and Friendship, a compromise that expressed the intention to reach a fair and honorable solution exclusively through peaceful means. The ceremony took place at the Vatican on January 23, 1984, barely two months after the democratic inauguration in Argentina. The treaty would find detractors on both sides of the Andes, but the political scenarios were different: whereas nobody doubted the capacity of Pinochet to enforce the agreement, Alfonsín had to face the hostility of the main opposition party, the PJ, who was only one senator short of the majority in the upper chamber –the body with the constitutional responsibility of approving international treaties.

In order to overcome the nationalistic obstruction, Alfonsín and his foreign minister, Dante Caputo, decided to resort to a popular consultation –usually called referendum, although it was not binding for either the executive or the Senate. Among the reasons for this strategy was the intention to project the image of the Argentine government as reasonable and respectful of international agreements (Russell 1990: 54-55). Such an image, besides making a clear cut with the wretched impression left by the dictatorship, was considered to become a supporting asset for the official initiatives towards global disarmament and, also, for negotiating the future of the Falklands when the time came. Certainly, the rationale behind the electoral call was the conviction that the people would cast a positive vote and that, were it not for such explicit support, the agreement may have sunk in the Senate. This complex entanglement shows how Alfonsín resorted to a domestic policy option, namely

the referendum, in order to get support for a foreign policy that would, in turn, reinforce his position vis-à-vis other domestic and international actors. And, as Alfonsín saw it (quite correctly), in those troubled times the strengthening of his administration was directly related to the consolidation of democracy.

The referendum was held on November 25, 1984. With a turnout that exceeded 70% in a non mandatory election, which is unusual in Argentina, the vote in favor of the peace agreement outnumbered the opposition by more than 4 to 1. Two years and a half after having massively supported the assault on the Falklands, the Argentines were ready to express their stand for democracy and for the peaceful resolution of international conflicts. On November 29, 1984, the foreign ministers went back to the Vatican to sign the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, as foreseen by the Declaration signed ten months before. The agreement fixed the limits between the two countries in the disputed zone and established the procedures through which future disagreements would be settled. In addition, a commission was created with the aim to foster economic cooperation and develop projects of physical integration. Yet, the Treaty needed to pass the test of the Argentine Senate: after a heated discussion, it was approved by just one vote of difference. Notwithstanding the close result, the mutual ratification of the Treaty, in May 1985, meant the end of a historical rivalry between the two countries that dated back to the 19th century. Since the return of Chile to democratic rule, in 1990, the bilateral relations have become ever stronger, albeit minor skirmishes that have gradually diminished over time.

Brazil

Different from those with Chile, the historical relations of Argentina with Brazil had been distant rather than hostile. If war with Chile was likely to detonate in at least two occasions during the last hundred and fifty years, in 1898 and in 1978, the last war with Brazil was fought on the same side and ended in 1870. The reciprocal mistrust between the two countries developed as pretended mutual ignorance. The border between them was as clearly delimited as politically neglected, physical connections were mostly absent, and commercial and investment interdependence were virtually nonexistent. The inauguration of the new democratic regimes, undergone over a time span of shortly two years, would permanently change the nature of the bilateral relation. Building upon the axis constituted by Argentina and Brazil, the most successful process of regional integration ever in Latin America would come to light: the Southern Common Market, commonly called Mercosur.

The process that led to the foundation of Mercosur was launched by mid-1980s, when the transitions to democracy began. Democracy would become one of the main goals as well as an indispensable supporting condition for the regional agreements. However, the first steps had been taken in 1979, under the military presidencies of Jorge Videla in Argentina and João Figueiredo in Brazil. That year both countries, together with General Ströessner's Paraguay, signed a trilateral agreement regarding the Paraná basin. This agreement settled many disputes on the use of water resources, including the inconveniences and

perceived threats to Argentina that would have been created by the construction of the giant Itaipú dam (Lafer 1997).

The Falklands war ushered in a second crucial stage: the building of confidence and the emergence of a shared self-perception as regards world politics (Lafer 1997; Oelsner 2003; Peña 2003). In that occasion Brazil assumed a position that, despite its reluctance to support the use of force, explicitly endorsed Argentina's right to the islands. Such a stand was in harmony with most of Latin America except Chile; but it was all the more significant because Brazil was not only the mightiest Latin American power, but also Argentina's traditional rival.

Only by mid 1980s did the new democratic leaders set off a third stage, which ultimately gave rise to lasting cooperation ranging from economic matters through such sensitive issues as atomic power. Elected in 1983 and 1985 respectively, both Argentina's Raúl Alfonsín and Brazil's José Sarney decided to engage in a process that would have been unlikely to succeed without their strong commitment. In 1985, they signed the Declaration of Foz de Iguazú, which laid the bases for future integration and created a High Level Bilateral Commission to foster the process. The crucial Argentine-Brazilian Integration Act was endorsed in July 1986 in Buenos Aires, setting the Integration and Cooperation Program (PICAB). As widely acknowledged later, this agreement constituted a turning point in the history of relations between these two countries, and in fact can be seen as the embryo of Mercosur. Within the frame of these broader treaties, Argentina and Brazil signed twenty-four bilateral protocols with the purpose of improving trade between 1984 and 1989. The change was substantially due to the role the newly appointed democratic presidents had decided to play in the regional scenario. Arguably, neither the globalization pressures nor the bare democratization process would have sufficed to overcome the secular distrust between Argentina and Brazil. The agreements were so far as to include military cooperation and the mutual inspection of their nuclear installations.^{iv}

In 1988, the Treaty on Integration, Cooperation and Development was signed. Conceived of as the culmination of a process of mutual recognition and confidence building, it turned out to be just another step into the next phase of the new relationship. Towards the end of 1990, Argentina and Brazil signed an Agreement on Economic Cooperation that systematized and deepened pre-existing commercial agreements. That same year, representatives of both countries met with Uruguayan and Paraguayan authorities, which expressed their willingness to participate in the ongoing integration process. The result was an agreement to create a common market among the four nations. On March 26, 1991, the Treaty of Asuncion established the Mercosur. This was an outcome of the regional process of democratization, although it was not a necessary one.

Excursus: On How Democracy Paved the Way for Regional Integration

The rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil could not be taken for granted. There were little incentives to change the traditional pattern of mutual indifference. Therefore, to account for the new moves toward regional cooperation it is necessary to understand the new democratic context, institutional resources and personal dispositions that drove and shaped the process.^v

The first Argentine-Brazilian agreements were built upon political rather than economic reasons –albeit they sought economic cooperation as main instrument (Baptista 2001). The goal to protect the newly inaugurated democracies led their leaders to try to reduce external threats in order to diminish the domestic role of the military. Consequently, the private sector had little –if some– influence along the first stages and commercial agreements were but a political instrument to get the neighbors closer and to discourage attempts at fostering rivalry. Carlos Márcio Cozendey, former Director of the Mercosur Division at Itamaraty, explicitly supported this view as he stated that, “the process initiated in 1985/86 had a clear political motivation that was manifest in the direct intervention of the presidents; but the instruments utilized in order to accomplish the political goals were commercial” (Cozendey 2000).

Despite the widespread consensus about the purposes underlying the first moves, some disagreement has been raised about the motivations that kept the process in motion. On the one hand a key protagonist, Dante Caputo, affirms that Brazil has always conceived of Mercosur as a platform for an enhanced insertion in the political and international arena, whereas Argentina usually held a double standard, seeking Brazil for commercial ends while aligning with the United States in political and military issues (Caputo 2001). On the other hand, a likewise crucial actor such as José Graça Lima –former Brazilian undersecretary of regional integration– presents a more tempered view on such divergence, as he believes that “there were mainly political reasons behind the search for a rapprochement between two countries that had undergone a certain level of confrontation until a short time before” (Graça Lima 2000).

Regardless of the divergence between Argentina and Brazil concerning the utility of the association, the main protagonists acknowledge the primacy of (democratic) politics. Alfonsín remembers that, “when President Sarney and I launched together the process of integration, the political meaning of the project was very clear” (Alfonsín 2001: 3). The vision of the economy as instrumental to such a project was also clear: “President Sarney liked Argentina, understood its needs and was ready to make significant gestures... His first measure as president, in 1985, was precisely to import 1,3 million tons of wheat in order to reduce the commercial deficit that Argentina was running vis-à-vis Brazil” (Alfonsín 2001: 4).

Partly due to the subjectivity of the actors, who tend to present a magnified version of their personal role, it is hard to find out where the idea of strengthening ties between the two neighbors originated. Peña (2001) believes it possible that the Argentine-Brazilian conversations between the newly elected

presidents began with Alfonsín and Tancredo Neves, previous to the inauguration of Sarney. Unfortunately, Neves lived not enough as to manifest what his view was concerning regional integration, but his legacy was clear as regarded good vicinity with Argentina. Brazilian scholar Monica Hirst, unlike other Brazilian observers, considers that the initiative “was rather Argentine than Brazilian, but Sarney got rapidly enthusiastic about it” (Hirst 2001). She reckons that there were some objective conditions that fostered the process, but locates them on political grounds (i.e. democracy), timing, and personal dispositions rather than on the economy. She remarks that the initial economic conditions were terribly bad to support integration, so it should come as no surprise that the first advances took place in the area of foreign policy. This fact would long shape the integration process, whose matrix continued to be politicized and highly dependent upon the presidents ever since.

Julio Sanguinetti, the first Uruguayan president after the military rule, underlines the importance of regime change for the rapprochement between the newly inaugurated authorities. As he describes it, “the democratization process of the 1980s generated an atmosphere of proximity among countries, and of solidarity among the democratic leaders that were emerging after the period of military rule” (Sanguinetti 2001). Strengthening the ties between the neighboring countries was also a historical and personal mandate: Sanguinetti took pride to vow that, in his case, “integration, as a concept, is the homily of a lifetime”. His claim cannot go overlooked, as his regional vocation is widely recognized as a significant push towards increasing cooperation in the Plata basin. As Alfonsín (2001: 3) acknowledged, “the accession of Uruguay to Mercosur was an outcome of the intelligent impulsion of President Julio Sanguinetti”.

The feeling of a shared cause among the presidents was crucial. Sanguinetti (2001) recalls that, with Alfonsín, “there was a natural empathy that came from the time of the fight against the dictatorships, when we first met; and afterwards we found Sarney, with whom we had no previous relationship but who soon became a pleasant surprise to us”. Also according to Sanguinetti (2001), Sarney won his colleagues respect “because he made a great effort to understand the culture of the Rio de la Plata, to learn and give his speeches in Spanish when he visited our countries, and because he was a man of culture with remarkable historical knowledge and an open mind”. Led by Sanguinetti, Uruguay would accomplish a key function in the relation between Argentina and Brazil. In his words, “our role was to articulate (the relation between Argentina and Brazil), a sort of hinge”. As a hinge, this buffer state would mediate and moderate the tensions as they arose. He understood “the presence of Uruguay as a catalyst, something that conferred the negotiations between Argentina and Brazil a multilateral character.” The trilateralization of the negotiating process was acknowledged in the Declaration of Alvorada, signed in Brasilia in April 1988 by the presidents of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. The Declaration established the conditions for the incorporation of Uruguay to the integration project. Finally, the ousting of Paraguay’s General Stroessner in 1989 and the rise to the presidency of Andrés Rodríguez, a military officer decided to lead his country towards democracy, set the stage for the closure of ancient rivalries and opened the door for lasting regional cooperation.

The United States and the United Kingdom

In addition to settling its neighboring disputes and launching an ambitious process of regional integration, democratic Argentina faced the need of reconciliation with the two world powers with which the relations had been strained during the last years of the dictatorship: the United States and the United Kingdom. This process had two clear stages: the first started with Alfonsín in 1983, signaling the end of all resort to violent means in order to reach a political goal; however, the relation with the United States would remain cordial but distant, and diplomatic relations with Britain would not be restored as the British did not accept to discuss the sovereignty issue. The second stage started with Menem in 1989, and was characterized by a much closer association with the two countries that, eventually, would give place to a tight alignment with the United States and to the restoration of diplomatic relations with Britain.

In 1983, the new democracy was at a crossroads. No matter how much it advanced in any area of domestic or international politics, in order to “reposition the nation in the world arena” the administration needed to define its relations with the United States (Tulchin 1996: 169). To be sure, Alfonsín and Caputo aimed to restore the relations with the hemispheric power, which had been damaged by the Falklands war and by the country’s international meandering. However, they attempted to show an independent stand, supposed to allow Argentina to develop a foreign policy based on universal principles rather than national interests, which led to intermittent confrontational postures vis-à-vis the United States. An eloquent example of the search for a principle-based autonomy was the creation, in 1984, of the Group of Six, an awkward grouping that brought together such dissimilar countries as Argentina, Greece, India, Mexico, Sweden, and Tanzania. The Group had the goal of campaigning before the nuclear powers in favor of disarmament and against nuclear proliferation, advocating the transfer of military resources to social development. The evidence that not all the members of the group were wholly democratic was never frankly addressed though, and it limited the moral impact of the endeavor. Neither was the fact that the international arena is not constituted by newly-born domestic regimes but by national states whose historical continuity is presupposed; therefore, Alfonsín’s best intentions and outstanding prestige were never enough to overcome the burden of Argentina’s past, including its long authoritarian history and changing alignments.

In 1989, the new administration produced a dramatic turnabout. Menem, seconded in the foreign ministry by Domingo Cavallo first and Guido Di Tella later, decided to put an end to all remaining disagreements with the United States and to adopt a foreign policy that was called “realist” by the administration and “yielding” by the opposition. In the words of a specialist in the area, “whereas the Alfonsín government sought to distance itself from the United States to show itself independent and autonomous, the Menem government... attempted the reverse: to show itself in league with the United States, its fate linked to that of the United States” (Tulchin 1996: 169). This policy was made of both rhetoric gestures and concrete concessions. Among the

latter, two are remarkable: the deactivation of the project to develop a missile that could be used with military ends, the Condor II, and the decision to send two naval vessels to join the blockade of Iraq in 1991. In this way, Argentina was dissociating itself from neighboring Brazil and Chile, who not only carried on with their projects to build missiles based on domestically developed technology but also refused to send troops to the Gulf. In fact, Argentina was the only Latin American country in doing so, and the decision was made by the Executive without even consulting with the Congress. After 1999, once Menem was gone, Argentine foreign policy continued to twist and turn as presidents passed. By 2004, if democracy is firmly in place and war seems impracticable, the country has yet to define a steady pattern of dealing with America –and, henceforth, with world affairs.

Somehow surprisingly, the relations with Britain have not been as twisted as with the United States. However, this was rather due to the unmodifiable stance of the British rather than to the definition of a stable, bipartisan policy on the Argentine side. As a matter of fact, the official position of Argentina regarding the assertion of its rights over Malvinas changed greatly from Alfonsín to Menem, but the rigidity of the counterpart prevented domestic changes from making any difference. The consequences of this rigidity were tough for the new democracy: as Tulchin (1996: 180) suggests, the failure of the Alfonsín administration to move the British from their intransigent position reduced the political space available to the government. The Falklands issue was a constant thorn on the democracy's back, as it contributed to feed the claims of the nationalists on the left and on the right and arguably emboldened the rebels led by Aldo Rico in Easter 1987. Notwithstanding the later strategy of "being nice" that minister Di Tella developed towards the islanders, the British never accepted to discuss the crucial issue of sovereignty. To some extent, this intransigence was sidelined by the Menem administration when it accepted to restore diplomatic relations and to negotiate all other issues while putting the sovereignty issue under an "umbrella", meaning the freezing of the debate around this key issue while accepting to negotiate on other areas. In this way, the democratic regime proved itself capable to deal with the bitterest and most sensitive issue of its foreign agenda without risking its stability or legitimacy before the public opinion. If the consolidation of a democratic regime has any meaning, it may certainly be applied to a country where democracy has overcome several putsches, endured multiple government turnovers and undertaken dramatic reversals of its most sensitive stakes in the international arena.

Conclusion

After two decades since the last process of democratization took off, the Southern Cone has undergone two historical turns. At the domestic level, its larger countries enjoy today a degree of democratic stability never attained before; at the international level, they have developed such strong ties among them that the likelihood of a military conflict in the region seems completely eradicated. Regional integration is an unaccomplished endeavor yet, but a security community is already in place for the first time in history (Oelsner

2003). Has democracy fostered peace and cooperation or was it the other way around? As argued above, the most proper answer is that they have reinforced each other. The transformation of rivalry into cooperation was an outcome of policies undertaken by democratic governments, whose stability was, in turn, supported by the peaceful transformations of the intra-regional relations. Hence, Mercosur can be understood as a democratic creature, but also as a democratic creator –or, at least, protector.

The international context shaped the Argentine transition in many ways. Most factors acknowledged by the democratization literature were present, although not all of them developed at the same time or had the same influence. To begin with, the end of the dictatorship was provoked, if not by the direct *control* of a foreign power, by a disrupting *event* (Schmitter 2001: 35) brought about by a defeat at an international war. *Contagion* was also an evident occurrence, as signed both by the simultaneousness with which most countries in the region went democratic and by the processes of cooperation and mutual democratic reinforcement on which they decided to engage. Complementarily, domestic *consent* and popular support to democracy was widespread for the first time since 1930, as it included Radicals and Peronists, elites and masses, domestic businessmen and foreign investors. Such a consensus was the consequence of the twin catastrophes, both military and economic, produced by the dictatorship, which had fed the perception that an authoritarian government was ill-suited to rebuild the country's hopes. Finally, *conditionality* was a lighter but constant presence, especially during the critical moments of the military putsches. By making clear that Argentina would become an international pariah should an authoritarian reversal take place, international actors such as governments, firms and NGOs greatly contributed to turn the domestic relation of force in favor of the democratic players.

The effects of the Argentine democratization over the international context, transmitted through the remaking of the foreign policy, were as important as the reciprocal effect. The most relevant outcomes were the pacification of the relations with Chile and the solution of all remaining border disputes; the rapprochement with Brazil and the establishment of Mercosur; the restoration of diplomatic relations with Britain; the improvement of relations with the United States; and the resolute positioning of Argentina into the western, democratic, and capitalist camp. Today, Argentina still faces daunting challenges, especially regarding economic reconstruction and social reparation; however, unlike most of the last century, democracy is assumed as a condition and not an obstacle for tackling such challenges.

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Notes

ⁱ The Southern Cone is made up of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and, if considering political rather than geographical links, Bolivia.

ⁱⁱ In particular, human right activists believed that this was the reason why Alfonsín had been spared by the dictatorship (personal communication with Aldo Etchegoyen, bishop of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Argentina and human rights activist, in 1982).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Hastings and Jenkins (1983) and Cardoso, Kirschbaum and van der Kooy (1983) for more extensive accounts on the Falklands war.

^{iv} Along with the main Treaty the presidents signed a Joint Declaration on Nuclear Policy (*Declaración Conjunta sobre Política Nuclear*). For further developments on nuclear cooperation, cf. Hirst and Bocco (1989).

^v The following account regarding the relations with Brazil and the creation of Mercosur draws on Malamud (2003).