



Argentina y la Reconstrucción de su Política de Defensa

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Limited rearmament, alignment with the United States and strategic centrality of the South Atlantic

Executive summary

Argentina is undergoing an incipient phase of reconstruction of its defence policy after approximately four decades of divestment, doctrinal deterioration, material obsolescence and loss of operational capabilities. Javier Milei's government has introduced a relevant political change: defense is once again visible on the national agenda, the role of the Armed Forces has been symbolically revalued and concrete military acquisitions have been initiated, including the 24 F-16 fighters acquired from Denmark, the Stryker Armoured Vehicles and the P-3 Orion Maritime Patrol Aircraft for surveillance of the South Atlantic.

However, the process is based on an extremely weak base. Argentina allocates approximately 0.45-0.50% of GDP to defense, well below the South American average, and about 90% of the military budget is consumed in salaries, pensions and retirements, leaving only a residual margin for training, maintenance, fuel and acquisitions.

The strategic core of the Argentine problem lies not only in the lack of armaments, but in the absence of a clearly articulated national defence strategy. Without a strategic framework comparable to the national security strategies of other countries, military purchases risk responding more to political opportunities or international alignments than to coherent capacity planning.

The decisive space for Argentina remains the South Atlantic. There the Malvinas question converges, the Antarctic projection, the interoceanic sea routes, the fishing resources, the offshore energy potential and the presence of international fleets. In this context, the relationship with the United States has become central: Washington sees in Argentina a potential partner in its hemispheric strategy against China, while Buenos Aires seeks to recompose minimum capacities without provoking a direct confrontation with the United Kingdom.

Four decades of deterioration: the real starting point

Argentina's defence is not simply in a phase of pending modernization, but in the face of an almost foundational reconstruction. The deterioration accumulated since the end of the military dictatorship has affected simultaneously the personnel, material, doctrine and infrastructure. During the 1960s and 1970s, Argentina retained a military structure relatively comparable to that of other Western countries, with a Navy equipped with strategic planning, an Air Force of considerable volume and a doctrine aligned with the parameters of the Western Cold War.

From the 1980s onwards, this ecosystem began to deteriorate. The modernization programs were interrupted, the relevant acquisitions were reduced and much of the equipment became progressively obsolete. By 2023, Argentina continued to operate, in many areas, with material and technological concepts inherited from the 1980s.

This deterioration was not only budgetary. It also had a political and ideological dimension. For decades, a relevant part of the ruling elites maintained a relationship of distrust, if not hostility, towards the Armed Forces, derived from the historical trauma of the dictatorship and the conflict between military and revolutionary movements in the 1970s. That relationship

blocked the construction of a state defense policy and made military investment a politically uncomfortable issue.

This idea, installed for years in academic and political sectors, justified the reduction of military spending on the assumption that Argentina lacked relevant threats. The result was a country with vast territory, extensive maritime façade, strategic resources and Antarctic projection, but with insufficient military capabilities even for basic tasks of aerial surveillance, maritime control and sustained presence in spaces of national interest.

Milei and the change of attitude towards the Armed Forces

The government of Javier Milei has introduced a change of orientation more symbolic and political than structural, although not irrelevant. The first transformation has been the public recovery of the prestige of the Armed Forces through greater institutional presence, military parades and an explicit speech of recognition.

This symbolic dimension matters because the Argentine defense policy has been conditioned by a traumatic relationship between civil power and the military world for decades. The recovery of institutional legitimacy is a precondition for any serious process of modernization. However, symbolic change does not itself solve material weakness.

The second transformation has been the beginning of a limited re-equipment process, especially significant because it takes place in a context of strong fiscal adjustment. The government itself has insisted on the idea that “there is no silver”, which makes each acquisition a political and strategic signal.

Specific acquisitions: F-16, Stryker and P-3 Orion

The most relevant purchase so far is that of 24 Danish F-16 fighters, with a cost of approximately 300 million dollars. These are aircraft recently used in NATO missions and represent the most serious attempt in decades to recover a credible air combat capability.

The operation also has a clear geopolitical dimension. The acquisition of the F-16s was made by avoiding British components, which allowed to circumvent the restrictions derived from the London veto. There is, strictly speaking, no NATO veto on Argentine rearmament; the fundamental restriction comes from the United Kingdom, which can block Western military systems when incorporating British components.

Progress has also been made in the incorporation of Stryker Armoured Vehicles, aimed at modernizing mechanized units of the Army. Its strategic value lies not only in the number of vehicles purchased, but in the sign of doctrinal and operational alignment with US standards.

The third relevant acquisition is the P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft, intended to strengthen the surveillance of the South Atlantic. This purchase is particularly consistent with the real needs of the country: Argentina has one of the largest maritime facades in the hemisphere, faces illegal fishing challenges, lacks sufficient naval presence and must project surveillance towards the Malvinas area and Antarctica.

Together, these acquisitions do not by themselves transform the regional military balance, but they do mark a change of trend. Argentina is not undertaking an offensive rearmament, but trying to recover lost minimum capabilities.

The role of the United States: strategic opportunity and risk of dependence

The relationship with the United States has become the main external axis of Argentine defense policy. Washington has shown interest in strengthening ties with Buenos Aires for reasons that exceed political affinity with Milei. Competition with China, the growing value of the South Atlantic, access to Antarctica, the security of maritime routes and South American regional stability have returned to Argentina some strategic relevance for the United States.

The current cooperation is based on two pillars. The first is political: Milei's explicit alignment with Washington facilitates bilateral relations and reduces ideological frictions. The second, most important in the long term, is bureaucratic and strategic: US military and defense agencies see Argentina as a potential partner within a hemispheric architecture of containment of Chinese influence.

This translates into facilities for military transfers, flexible technological authorizations and technical cooperation. The case of the F-16s is illustrative: it is not just a purchase of material, but a partial reintegration of Argentina into Western defence circuits.

However, this approach poses a dilemma. Closer cooperation with the United States may represent a historic opportunity to rebuild capacities, but an unconditional alignment with Washington could limit Argentina's strategic autonomy. There is a risk that certain acquisitions will respond more to the logic of geopolitical alignment than to a strict assessment of the operational needs of Argentine territory.

China and competition between major powers

China's presence in Argentina has expanded over the last few years into strategic sectors of the economy, including agricultural trade — especially soy—, port and logistics infrastructure, lithium mining, energy and technology.

For the United States, the reconstruction of the defense relationship with Argentina is part of a broader hemispheric logic. It is not just a question of modernizing Argentine capabilities, but of preventing China from consolidating structural positions in critical areas: ports, maritime routes, strategic minerals, telecommunications, energy and indirect access to Antarctica.

However, Argentina cannot afford a purely binary foreign policy. Its economy needs markets, finance and investment. China will continue to be a relevant trading partner, especially in agriculture, mining and infrastructure. Therefore, the strategic issue will not be to choose between Washington and Beijing in an absolute way, but to define which sectors should remain under a national security logic and which can be managed under ordinary trade parameters.

The challenge for Buenos Aires is to prevent China's economic dependence from conditioning its strategic decisions, without unnecessarily breaking trade relations that remain relevant to its macroeconomic stability.

South Atlantic as a centre of strategic gravity

The South Atlantic constitutes the central geopolitical space for Argentina. It converges practically all the relevant dimensions of its defense policy: sovereignty, natural resources, sea routes, fishing, hydrocarbons, Antarctic projection and dispute with the United Kingdom over Malvinas.

The importance of the South Atlantic has increased for several reasons. First, the Antarctic continent acquires increasing strategic importance in a context of competition for resources, polar science, maritime routes and logistic presence. Second, the exploitation of fisheries and energy resources in southern waters generates considerable economic interests. Third, the presence of international fishing fleets poses challenges of maritime control that Argentina is not in a position to fully manage with its current capabilities.

The surveillance of the Argentine maritime space requires means of patrol, sensors, sustained naval presence and interagency coordination. The acquisition of the P-3 Orion must be understood in this context: it is not a secondary purchase, but one of the decisions most aligned with the real geographic needs of the country.

Malvinas: sovereignty, resources and Antarctic projection

The Malvinas question remains the structural core of the Argentine strategic problem. It is not just a territorial dispute, but a conflict that affects the control of maritime resources, the exploitation of offshore hydrocarbons, the projection on Antarctica and the control of bioceanic routes.

The British presence on the islands is not limited to the control of the island territory. It also involves surveillance capacity, regional military projection, control over adjacent maritime areas, fishing concessions and energy exploration.

Argentina's current policy seems to be oriented towards maintaining the claim of sovereignty, but avoiding permanent rhetorical confrontation. This approach starts from a pragmatic reading: decades of confrontational rhetoric have not produced substantive advances.

A relevant thesis is that the final resolution of the conflict will hardly occur only between Buenos Aires and London. Washington will be, in one way or another, a decisive actor, since the United States maintains strategic interests with both the United Kingdom and Argentina.

This does not mean that the United States will easily press London. The Anglo-American relationship remains structurally profound. But it does imply that any serious Argentine advance in the Malvinas question will require a combination of capacity reconstruction, patient diplomacy and accurate understanding of the triangular balance between Buenos Aires, London and Washington.

The fundamental conclusion is clear: without a credible defence capacity, Argentina lacks effective instruments to turn the claim of sovereignty into meaningful negotiation.

Budget problem: unsustainable structure

The biggest internal obstacle to Argentine military modernization is not only the low budget, but its composition. Approximately 90% of defense spending is spent on salaries, pensions and retirements. Only the remaining 10% is available for training, maintenance, fuel and acquisitions.

This creates a paradox: Argentina maintains relatively large armed forces in terms of personnel, but with very low operational capacity. The country has about 105,000 military personnel, while the Air Force, with some 21,000 personnel, operates only a few dozen aircraft.

The current model is hardly sustainable. The alternative would be to evolve towards smaller, more professional, better equipped and more operationally available armed forces, following models closer to contemporary Europeans.

This change, however, requires politically costly decisions. Reforming staff structures, pensions and internal culture means altering consolidated institutional balances for decades. The modernization process cannot be limited to buying equipment; it must transform the budgetary and organizational architecture of the Argentine defense.

Region, neighbours and South American cooperation

The South American environment should be the first strategic circle of Argentina. Cooperation with Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and other neighbours is essential in matters such as maritime security, illegal fishing control, Antarctic cooperation, route surveillance and regional stability.

Brazil appears to be the most relevant regional partner for any long-term Argentine strategy in the South Atlantic. Argentine-Brazilian cooperation could be articulated around maritime surveillance, defense industry, Antarctic projection and diplomatic coordination vis-à-vis extraregional actors.

However, ideological dynamics between governments have historically hindered the continuity of regional projects. Each change of political cycle usually alters priorities and paralyzes initiatives. Defense requires longer time horizons than electoral cycles, and that has been precisely one of Argentina's major weaknesses.

Structural problems of Argentine defence policy

Argentina does not lack strategic potential. It lacks a system capable of converting that potential into effective national power.

The main obstacles are the absence of a long-term vision, the politicization of foreign and defence policy, the lack of institutional continuity between governments, the budgetary inadequacy and the disconnection between defence, industrial development, energy, technology and natural resources.

A modern defence policy cannot be reduced to military acquisitions. It must be integrated with industrial policy, energy policy, technological security and maritime strategy. In the case of Argentina, this is particularly evident: lithium, offshore energy, fishing, Antarctica, sea routes and Malvinas are part of the same strategic map.

The country therefore needs a national strategy that articulates military capabilities, diplomacy, economic development and territorial presence; without such integration, purchases of material will remain necessary but insufficient.

Final rating

Argentina has begun a limited but significant process of rebuilding its defence policy. The acquisition of F-16 Danes, Stryker and P-3 Orion vehicles represents a clear sign of a change of cycle. It does not amount to an integral modernization, but it does break with decades of material neglect and institutional discredit.

The alignment with the United States opens important opportunities in terms of technology transfer, military cooperation and hemispheric repositioning, but it also poses risks of dependence if it is not integrated into its own national strategy.

The Argentine centre of gravity will remain in the South Atlantic. Falklands, Antarctica, maritime resources, illegal fishing, offshore energy potential and British presence define the country's true strategic dashboard.

The challenge is not simply to buy more weapons. It is to rebuild a strategic culture, reform an unsustainable budget structure, professionalize capacities, sustain investments during several governments and link defense with national development.

Argentina has geography, resources and potential relevance. What it does not yet possess is a defense policy capable of turning those assets into effective strategic power.