The Geopolitical Issues of the Southern Cone

By Vincent Lofaso,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs

Abstract

The Southern Cone of South America includes Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and the southern portion of Brazil. This area was settled mostly by Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian immigrants beginning in the mid 1800's. Many German and Eastern European immigrants followed the Spanish, while the Portuguese and the Italians came later on. The official languages of Spanish, Portuguese and even Portuñol are complemented in rural areas by large Italian, German, and Eastern European speaking populations. American influence in the Southern Cone has been relatively weak due to barriers such as the Amazon rainforest and geographic distance. In general, Northern European migrants emigrated to the United States, while many Southern and Central European migrants settled south of the Amazon rainforest.

The Amazon Rainforest and the Andes Mountains are the geographical barriers that physically separate the Southern Cone countries from the rest of Latin America. In fact, during World War II, some of the dictatorial regimes in the region, such as Argentina and Brazil, cut off ties with Continental Europe. Many Nazi officials such as Erich Priebke, Adolf Eichmann, and Josef Mengele fled to the Southern Cone after the Second World War. Even Croatian Dictator Ante Pavelic who established the Croatian Liberation Movement that still exists today had connections with Argentine President Juan Peron. History has shown that the Southern Cone nations were friendly to fascist regimes in continental Europe (Germany, Italy, and Spain).

Since the establishment of democracy in Argentina in 1983, with the election of Raul Alfonsin after Argentina’s defeat in the Malvinas War, democratic institutions have increased economic cooperation and enhanced regional security. Even African nations across the Atlantic such as Namibia, Angola, and South Africa, have worked with Latin American nations to increase interstate relations. The idea of regionalization in Latin America is entering a new phase where there is a core group of historical rival countries that have put their differences aside. The geography of the Southern Cone countries has affected how states conduct foreign policy and controlled their international behavior as it relates to economic and security issues. Since the collapse of dictatorships in Argentina and Chile, the Southern Cone has been a liberal and free market entity within the Latin American region.
The South Atlantic Challenge: A Buenos Aires Point of View

The South Atlantic is a region that has consistent international attention because of its vast amount of natural resources and creative pathways for communications and trade. The new Argentine government led by Maurico Macri has proposed two actions to increase its presence in this competitive region. According to Wolf Grabendorf of Open Democracy, “one focuses on keeping foreign powers out of the South Atlantic and strengthening the zone of peace promoted by the UN. An alternative is a new approach to transatlantic trade and security along the lines recently promoted by EU and U.S. think tanks with the concept of ‘new Atlantic features.’”i “New Atlantic features” refer to today’s economic, environmental, and security challenges. Brazil’s political and economic position has opened a new window of opportunity for Argentina to exert its influence as an important regional player that can cast its power over the Southern Cone region. Fellow South American counterparts, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay are starting to look towards Buenos Aires for foreign policy negotiations instead of Brasilia because of Brazil’s new instability.

The new security notion by the Macri Administration, especially its relationship with the United States, has important geopolitical implications. It is beginning to work closely with the United States and has already signed cooperation agreements allowing the United States to interact with security forces on the war against terrorism and crack down on international crime. When U.S. President Barack Obama visited Argentina earlier this year, he aimed to strengthen ties with South America’s third largest economy, and cooperate with Macri on defeating the Islamic State. The Macri government will soon gain more power on the security policies of the South Atlantic. According to Grabendorff, “the recent decision of the UN to recognize formally, under the Law of the Sea procedures, an extension of the continental shelf (by 35 % or 1,7 Mio. km²) for Argentina - long sought after by various Argentine governments – will give the Macri government a new legitimacy for its economic and security policies in its area of the South Atlantic.”ii

The foreign policy towards the Malvinas Islands will undoubtedly affect Argentina’s relationship with Great Britain now that Great Britain has boosted its presence in the South Atlantic. Even though the Argentine government has proposed normalized relations of national security and sovereignty for the Kelpers (Malvinas residents), they are not willing to give up the islands and let foreigners decide on their future. However, some observers believe that if Argentina increases its involvement within the international community, then a peaceful solution to the Malvinas dispute could be reached in the near future. “The Argentine government has no doubt that many ways of Anglo-Argentine cooperation can be found under the umbrella of “impasse” about the sovereignty issue of the Malvinas.”iii Both sides want to avoid another conflict that would be catastrophic to expanding relations for upcoming generations. In his United Nations General Assembly speech, Mauricio Macri showed interest in creating dialogue with Great Britain, “to solve the two century sovereignty dispute amicably (Falklands, South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands and the surrounding maritime spaces)”iv
Chilean Naval Power in The South Pacific

Chile is an Andean country that is on the rim of the Southern Hemisphere. Its stable politics and rising economic growth have made it a strong player in the Southern Pacific. Chile’s strategic advantages include over 3,000 miles of coastline and the Straits of Magellan which, “like the Panama Canal, connect the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans for trade and create pathways for sea routes.” Chile has a powerful navy with similar capabilities compared to other Pacific powers such as Australia and New Zealand. Although Chile has over 60 surface ships, it lacks long lifting capabilities, aircraft carriers, and national security facilities compared to Australia or the United States.

Throughout the international community, Chile has stood out as a rising Latin American power for national security. It hosted the 2015 UNITAS Summit that was attended by eleven countries including Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, and the United States. Chile even participates in bilateral exercises with Asian navies in the Western Pacific, as well as with Australia and New Zealand. The purpose of the UNITAS Summit is to conduct training exercises that protect the security of Latin American States in accordance with United States foreign policy. Even though the Navy and the Air Force remain behind the Army on defense spending, they conduct regular multilateral exercises and maritime, combat patrols. Chile has actually been working with the U.S. Southern Command and the Pacific Command to increase cooperation in the region. Chile’s Navy should be welcomed by everyone in the South Pacific as a strategic geopolitical partner. Many countries that are expanding their presence in the area, like India and the United States, are cooperating with Chile to ensure peace and security throughout the Pacific.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is another geopolitical issue for Chile. The agreement would come as a significant boost for the Chilean economy- and increase trade throughout the Pacific. Further; Chile will benefit in terms of increased stature among its peers in Latin America making it a role model for the region. The geopolitical theatre of the Southern Pacific is becoming more important than ever now that India and China, two great powers, are increasing their presence in the Southwest Pacific. On the contrary, Chile is looking to develop its soft power presence in the Eastern part of the Polynesian triangle, Chile’s South Pacific possessions.

Chile does have some challenges to face when it comes to the TPP deal. One of the challenges is trying to expand military presence and increase trade in the region without disturbing the indigenous Polynesian natives. A second challenge would be the reaction of the international community including China and India on Chile’s growing presence as a strategic geographic partner in the Pacific and Latin America. If Chile can continue to cooperate with the international community and bolster its economic and defense growth, then it would be welcomed as a serious player in the Asia-Pacific and in Latin America as well.

Uruguay: A Nation Squeezed Between Latin American Giants

Uruguay is a small country of around three million people squeezed by Argentina to the south and Brazil to the north, but the country does weigh a punch in Latin America. For Uruguay, being located in between two great powers like Brazil and Argentina is beneficial because it allows them to compete in the international
community and develop better diplomatic relations with larger countries. It also allows them to facilitate trade and production through the economy as well as providing security for a fairly small nation. Both Uruguay and Brazil understand the importance of stabilizing peace, security, and democracy throughout the region. “Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Uruguay’s Jose Mujica on July 30 signed cooperation agreements on defense, science, technology, energy, river transportation and fishing with the hope of accelerating political and economic integration between these two neighboring countries.”

Lula also mentioned that Brazil and Uruguay should work together stating that, “within the framework of UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) we hope to deepen our mutual understanding in order to create a common vision of defense and security for the region, consolidating South America as a zone of peace and democracy.” Uruguayan entrepreneurs believe that their strong relationship as a member of MERCOSUR, could increase the Oriental Republic’s reputation for regional integration. In some ways, Uruguay is caught between its two large neighbors and finds it difficult to shine. Uruguay’s commitments to openness, peace, excellence, human capital development, and security are factors that many countries can hope to live up to and contribute to Uruguay’s reputation as “el país corajudo” — the plucky country.

Brazil is the elephant in the room and many economists have seen Brazil turn to protectionism regarding industrial products. Brazil is in economic turmoil. Unemployment has increased, a president has been impeached, and a number of Brazilians are unhappy with the interim Temer Administration draw back on social programs aimed at fostering culture, helping women, and providing health services. The world is hoping that Brazil will eventually rectify the economic crisis. Because Uruguay is on the Atlantic side of the continent, in between Argentina and Brazil, many Uruguayan entrepreneurs believe that their strong relationship as a member of MERCOSUR, could increase the Oriental Republic’s reputation for regional integration. In some ways, Uruguay is caught between its two large neighbors and finds it difficult to shine. Uruguay’s commitments to openness, peace, excellence, human capital development, and security are factors that many countries can hope to live up to and contribute to Uruguay’s reputation as “el país corajudo” — the plucky country.

Conclusion

The Southern Cone is a diverse area with a great amount of economic and political potential. The Southern Cone countries have developed economies similar to the European system and have conducted more trade throughout the region and the world. Because of the Southern Cone’s geographic location, this region has the potential to live up to its political and economic expectations. The Southern Cone has demonstrated a transition in the ideological stance of political elites across the region from a state-centered worldview dominated by domestic politics, to a worldview in which democracy, the rule of law, liberalism, free markets and regional cooperation structure the political agenda. A return to geopolitically determined conceptions of interstate relations would deeply hamper economic integration strategies and revive the latent threat of a return to military rule across the region.

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“Brazil, Uruguay See South America as Peace Zone” July 31, 2010 Latin American Herald Tribune http://www.laht.com/article.asp?ArticleId=361499&CategoryId=14090