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ARTICLE

Argentina: Security Challenges and the Government Response

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Argentina: Security Challenges and the Government Response

Robert Evan Ellis¹

Summary

In addition to Argentina's profound economic crisis, the nation faces serious security challenges. These include use of the country as a drug transit zone, including cocaine from Bolivia and Peru bound for Europe and marijuana from Paraguay. Such criminal activities have caused violent struggles between groups for transport routes in logistics hubs such as Rosario. The country is also challenged by the secondary effects of such drug trafficking, including addition to the cocaine byproduct "paco," the new synthetic drug "Tussi," and an increasing fentanyl consumption problem, and criminal insecurity accelerated by rising rates of poverty and unemployment. Argentina also faces potential terrorism threats from Hezbollah Islamic and to a lesser degree, from the indigenous fringe group, the Mapuche Ancestral Resistance (RAM). It is also challenged by the depletion of Argentina's maritime resources from Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. Security forces also must provide logistics and other support for Argentina's strategically important Antarctic region, the constitutionally enshrined Argentine claim to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, and should consider the possible wartime exploitation of Argentine territory through China's access to dual use space and maritime facilities. In addressing security challenges, the new libertarian government of Javier Milei has appointed an experienced National Security Minister, and a capable Defense Minister. Together, they must compensate for a generation of underfunding of and constraints on the role of the Armed Forces under prior Peronist governments, despite the current budget crisis. In security, as in other matters, the Milei government has moved away from flirtation with the PRC in defense acquisition and other engagements, and is working closely with the United States and other Western allies to acquire new systems and capabilities, and to expand security cooperation.

Keywords: Argentina, defense, security, organized crime, drugs, weapon systems

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Introduction

In recent months, Argentina captured the attention of the world due to the grave economic crisis facing the country, and for its election of a charismatic libertarian President, Javier Milei, bringing to office a non-traditional personal style, and applying principles of macroeconomic “shock therapy” to address the country’s challenges. Of no less importance, Argentina also continues to be beset by multidimensional security challenges, including use of the country by narcotraffickers as a transit zone for moving cocaine from Peru and Bolivia to Europe, as well as the importation of marijuana from Paraguay. The cocaine shipments, in particular, have fueled violent struggles between criminal groups in logistics hubs key to those movements, principally Rosario. As byproducts of those transits, consumption of “paco,” a cheap version of cocaine has become a problem, as well as consumption of fentanyl, laced into some cocaine transiting the country. Argentina security forces are also challenged to address potential terrorism from the radical Islamic group Hezbollah, and possibly from the indigenous fringe group the Mapuche Ancestral Resistance Movement (RAM). Security forces must also confront depletion of Argentina’s maritime resources by IUU fishing in the nation’s large exclusive economic zone (EEZ), provide logistics and other support to the strategically important arctic region, and consider Argentina’s constitutionally enshrined claim to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, albeit without pursuing a military solution to the problem. In the context of a war between the West and the People’s Republic of China, Argentina must arguably also consider PRC interest in the use of Chinese-operated space facilities and a possible China-operated private port in Tierra del Fuego, for military purposes.

In responding to these challenges, Argentina’s security forces have been hampered by years of underfunding and restrictions on their scope of action by earlier Peronist political movements, rooted in a response to the Argentine left to real and perceived human rights abuses and authoritarian rule during the period of military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. The current Milei government has appointed an experienced

Minister of National Security, and capable Minister of Defense, who are working to rebuild the institutional position and capabilities of security forces, working closely with the United States and other Western partners, and turning away from defense acquisitions and other cooperation with the PRC.

Argentina's Security Challenges

Argentina's principal security challenges cannot readily be separated into foreign versus domestic issues, corresponding to a clear logical division of labor between the Armed Forces and federal, provincial and local police forces and other agencies.

Malvinas/Falklands Dispute

The Milei government, like the prior center-right government of Mauricio Macri, seeks to avoid that the longstanding dispute over the islands, over which Argentina fought and lost a war with Great Britain in 1982, impedes commercial relations and other cooperation. Nonetheless, the duty of Argentina's government to recover the islands is written into its constitution, limiting the latitude of governments of any ideology to negotiate. The sensitivity of the issue was highlighted by a February 2024 visit to the Islands by British Foreign Minister (and former Prime Minister) David Cameron, in which he recognized British and others who died in the war and promised to never relinquish the island's sovereignty as long as the island residents wished to remain British citizens.

On the Argentine side, more than 40 years after the conflict, many of the Argentines with whom the author spoke expressed some distrust toward the British, and continued to prioritize Argentina's claim to the islands.

Narcotrafficking and Transnational Organized Crime

Argentina continues to be harmed through criminal violence, corruption, and addiction due to the country's position as a transit zone for cocaine produced in Peru and Bolivia, and markets in Europe.

Although the Buenos Aires federal district continues to be relatively safe, the surrounding metropolitan area (“cono urbano” is far more insecure. As artifacts of drug transits, consumption of and addition to the cocaine-like substance “paco,” particularly in the “Cono Urbano” of Buenos Aires, and more recently, addition to and overdoses from fentanyl, which is increasingly mixed into cocaine and other products, is a growing problem.

The European cocaine demand has also brought European criminal groups into the country, including the Italian mafia Ndrangheta, which reportedly has a strong presence in Puerto Madero, as well as the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel (principally in Tigre province), Jalisco Nuevo Generacion (CJNG), and Brazilian groups First Capital Command (PCC), Red Command (CV), and *Bala Na Cara*. Argentina’s far ranging international drug connections were also highlighted in 2023 when the family of “Fito,” one of Ecuador’s most wanted gang leaders, was found in Cordoba, Argentina, to which Fito himself apparently planned to escape.²

The struggles among criminal groups to dominate that trade include those in the province of Salta, bordering Bolivia, currently dominated by the Castedo clan, and the river port city of Rosario, in Santa Fe province, a key point for introducing cocaine into commercial ships bound for European markets, in which the Monos criminal gang and its splinter groups continue to hold important positions. In recent years, violence in Rosario has expanded, as a product of the expanded volume of drug shipments moving through the port, and the fragmentation of the groups controlling the area as the government has moved to combat the Monos and other criminal groups there. In March 2024, in response to enhanced prison control measures by the governor of Santa Fe province where Rosario is located, criminal groups stepped up violence with the assassination of two

2 “Detuvieron en Córdoba a familiares de ‘Fito’, el capo narco que se fugó de la cárcel y desató una ola de violencia en Ecuador,” Infobae, January 18, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/sociedad/policiales/2024/01/19/detuvieron-en-cordoba-a-familiares-de-fito-el-capo-narco-que-se-fugo-de-la-carcel-y-desato-una-ola-de-violencia-en-ecuador/>

taxi drivers, wounded a public bus driver, shot at a police station, and burned vehicles in the street.³

Beyond Rosario, drugs from Bolivia and Peru are also shipped to ports further to the south, including those around Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Uruguay, and as far south as Bahía Blanca and Neuquén.⁴

In moving cocaine and other illicit substances to ports for shipment to Europe, traffickers smuggling by land routes generally use the Argentina Route 9 and Route 34 highway corridors, which have become a focus for enforcement. Some drugs are also moved by air, taking advantage of the country's limited capacity for aerial interception, and laws imposing very strict protocols regarding the use of lethal force against aircraft making unauthorized incursions into Argentine airspace.

Beyond cocaine, The Argentine province of Formosa, bordering Paraguay, is an important entry point for marijuana from the latter country. Unlike cocaine, Paraguayan marijuana, however, is destined more for Argentine consumption than international markets.

As a compliment to Argentina as a drug transit and consumption country, its petrochemicals and pharmaceutical industries also makes it producer of precursor chemicals for synthetic drugs and cocaine produced elsewhere in the region. Argentina thus ships precursors to producers such as Bolivia and Peru, as well as receiving their narcotics production.

In the domain of human smuggling, although the Venezuelan diaspora in Argentina is relatively smaller than in neighboring Andean ridge countries, there are still an estimated 400,000 recent Venezuelan migrants in the country, and the notoriously violent Venezuelan prison gang Tren de

3 "Argentina creates crisis committee to stop drug violence in Rosario," La Prensa Latina, March 8, 2024, <https://www.laprensa-latina.com/argentina-creates-crisis-committee-to-stop-drug-violence-in-rosario/>

4 Off-the-record interview with Argentine security expert, February 2024, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Aragua has begun showing up in Argentine prisons.⁵ The operation of the Colombian “Gota-Gota” usurious loan network is also tied to Venezuelans in Argentina.⁶

Hezbollah and Mapuche Terrorist Group Activities

The Islamic extremist terrorist group Hezbollah has long maintained a presence in Argentina, including in the triple frontier region (TBA) where Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay share a border. Lebanese family clans believed to have Hezbollah ties, including the Bakarar and Ihijazi clans, operate in the TBA.⁷ The Bakarar clan is also active in the provinces of Iquique, Catamarca, Salta and Jujuy.⁸

The June 2022 detention by Argentine authorities in Buenos Aires of the Venezuela-operated Emtrasur cargo airliner with Iranian Qods Forces and Hezbollah personnel onboard,⁹ and threats by Hezbollah against Lebanese Christian Argentine journalist George Chaya,¹⁰ were frank reminders of the continuing operation of radical Islamic terrorists in the national territory.

While Hezbollah in Argentina has principally concentrated on a combination of commercial and illicit activities to raise funds for its political and terrorist activities in the Middle East, in 1992 and 1994 it conducted major terrorist attacks against Jewish targets on Argentine soil. In the context of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East involving Hezbollah in Lebanon, the strongly pro-Israel position of the Milei government increases the risk that

5 Interview off-the-record with Argentine security official, Buenos Aires, Argentina, February 2024.

6 Ibid.

7 Josephina Salomon, “Blood Ties and Family Clans Shape Argentina’s Underworld,” Insight Crime, April 22, 2019, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/family-clans-argentina-underworld/>

8 Interview off-the-record with Argentine security official, Buenos Aires, Argentina, February 2024.

9 Luke Peters, “More drama: Venezuelan 747 held by Argentina to be handed to US authorities,” Aerotime, January 8, 2024, <https://www.aerotime.aero/articles/emtrasur-seized-boeing-747-argentina-us>

10 “ADEPA manifestó su preocupación por la amenaza terrorista al periodista George Chaya,” Infobae, June 20, 2022, <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2022/06/20/adepa-manifesto-su-preocupacion-por-la-amenaza-terrorista-al-periodista-george-chaya/>

Argentina could once again become a target of terrorism by Hezbollah or other Iranian proxy groups.¹¹

In the south of Argentina, the radical Mapuche Ancestral Resistance movement (RAM) is a subject of concern for its ties with Mapuche terrorists on the Chilean side of the country's western border, and for potential terrorist incidents in Argentina, including an October 2021 condemnation of the group by the Governor of Río Negro province for the group's association with terrorist incidents there,¹² and more recently, possible ties by the group with wildfires in Chubut. The expression of Mapuche grievances in Argentina was, to some degree, encouraged by the prior Peronist government, which provided Mapuche groups with generators and other capabilities to support their economic needs, but which critics consulted for this work believe could also expand the range of action of RAM away from major towns and highways, for terrorist activities.

IUU Fishing

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, principally by the Chinese deepwater fleet at the limits of, and surreptitiously within, Argentina's extensive maritime Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) continues to deplete the country's marine resources and the livelihood of fishing and other communities depending on them. Satellite imaging of the area shows hundreds of foreign fishing vessels regularly clustered at the limits of Argentina's EEZ. Such vessels routinely turn off their transponders to fish inside Argentina's EEZ as well. A study by Oceana documented 6,000 cases of fishing vessels "going dark" in this fashion to enter Argentina's EEZ between 2018 and 2021 alone.¹³

11 R. Evan Ellis, "Implicaciones de la Guerra Entre Israel y Hamás para el Entorno Estratégico Mundial," Geodese, November 5, 2023, <https://www.geodese.com/2023/11/02/implicaciones-de-la-guerra-entre-israel-y-hamas-para-el-entorno-estrategico-mundial/>

12 "Difficulties in Defining Terrorism: The Case of the Mapuche in Chile and Argentina," Rise to Peace Blog, January 16, 2022, <https://www.risetopeace.org/2022/01/16/difficulties-in-defining-terrorism-the-case-of-the-mapuche-in-chile-and-argentina/risetopeace/>

13 María Fernanda Ramírez and Alessandro Ford, "Plunder and Danger on Argentina's Sea Shelf," Insight Crime, August 3, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/argentina-plunder-danger-atlantic-sea-shelf-iuu-fishing/>

Although Argentina's Maritime Domain Awareness is supported by relatively good satellite coverage of the area, its ability to respond to fisheries violations continued to be impaired by the limited size of the fleets of its Naval Prefecture (Coast Guard), and Navy, which supports it in responding to such claims.

Access to the Antarctic

Access to the Antarctic is of strategic importance for the Argentine government, because of the latter's claims in the region,¹⁴ for support to scientific operations there, and owing to the proximity of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, which Argentina claims. In addition, the Straits of Magellan and the Drake Passage in the area are the only maritime route for transiting between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, making the region a strategic chokepoint for global commercial and military maritime movement should the Panama Canal be closed due to war or other circumstance.

The Antarctic and access to it is poised to become even more important in 2048 when the international treaty governing the Antarctic, including prohibitions on the exploitation of minerals there, becomes modifiable.

For all of these reasons, the Argentine government, led by the Ministry of Defense, is currently expanding its support to access to the region through the improvement of airport and port facilities in the region. Such efforts include expanding a runway at its Petrel base in the peninsula of Antarctica,¹⁵ to overcome limitations during severe weather conditions to the use of Marambio, which is the current airfield used to land in Antarctica by government and scientific missions.

¹⁴ "Antarctica and the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs," Argentina Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Accessed March 13, 2024, <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ar/en/news/newsletter/antarctica-and-argentine-ministry-foreign-affairs>

¹⁵ Susana Rigoz, "Video desde la Antártida: los avances del proyecto Petrel, la nueva base argentina en el Continente Blanco," InfoBAE, August 26, 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/def/2023/08/26/video-desde-la-antartida-los-avances-del-proyecto-petrel-la-nueva-base-argentina-en-el-continente-blanco/>

Risk of Indirect Involvement in a Future Conflict Involving China

In a possible future global conflict involving the People's Republic of China (PRC), Argentina's strategic geography and PRC-operated space facilities could indirectly involve the country in the conflict. The possible closure of the Panama Canal in such a conflict would make the Straights of Magellan and Drake Passage the only remaining southern hemisphere maritime transit route between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans (short of a long transit around the globe in the opposition direction), critical for both commercial and military vessels. Maintaining that passage open against PRC efforts to movement between the Atlantic and Pacific for US warships and resupply vessels destined for the Indopacific would potentially take on strategic importance to the coalition combatting the PRC. The Chinese presence in Argentina's southernmost province of Ushuaia, including a contemplated private Chinese port in Tierra del Fuego¹⁶ (now unlikely to go forward due to such concerns), could facilitate the observation of and possibly attacks against vessels transiting those strategic waters.

In a similar fashion, PRC access to Argentine space facilities, including the Chinese Deep Space Radar in Neuquén, operated by the Strategic Support Force of the People's Liberation Army, as well as the 35-meter China Astronomical Radio telescope (CART) at the Felix Aguillar observatory in San Juan province, and a space radar facility in Rio Gallegos, could potentially be used to locate US satellites for targeting them, or possibly to communicate with Chinese orbital attack weapons sent over the south pole against U.S. strategic targets.¹⁷

The Posture of Argentina's New Government

In addressing Argentina's security challenges, President Milei has named capable Ministers of National Security and Defense, to which he has given

¹⁶ Gonzalo Bañez, "Avance chino en la Argentina: sus motivos ocultos para construir un puerto en Tierra del Fuego," Todos Noticias, June 2, 2023, <https://tn.com.ar/internacional/2023/06/02/avance-chino-en-la-argentina-los-motivos-ocultos-de-su-plan-para-para-construir-un-puerto-en-tierra-del-fuego/>

¹⁷ R. Evan Ellis, "China-Latin America Space Cooperation – An Overview," The Diplomat, February 16, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/china-latin-america-space-cooperation-an-overview/>

relative autonomy and support to overcome accumulated difficulties in their assigned organization's capabilities and standing and to effectively combat Argentina's security challenges.

In the short term, the national fiscal and financial crisis, and the strict austerity President Milei has imposed on the country severely limits the funds available for institutional capacity building, but with the commitment that the restoration of the capabilities of long neglected security institutions will be one of the government's priority items once the nation begins to emerge from the current crisis. President Milei's strong orientation toward working with the United States and other Western democracies in confronting Argentina's challenges, and not with US rivals China, Russia or Iran, also fundamentally shapes his security organizations and the orientation of their leaders.

Argentina's new Minister of National Security, Patricia Bullrich, brings considerable experience to the position, having occupied the same position in the prior Center-right government of Mauricio Macri.

Many of the early imperatives for the ministry have involved the management of protests against the new government's austerity measures, given that blockades of principal roads and production facilities could shut down the economy, deepening the crisis. Nonetheless, the Ministry has also focused on the organized crime threat, including forming a "crisis committee" to address rising crime in Rosario.¹⁸

Bullrich will face important questions regarding how to best use federal forces such as the Gendarmerie to secure Argentina's northern and northwestern borders against illicit drug and other flows, given that past governments deployed a significant portion of federal forces to Argentina's major urban centers to reassure populations perceiving rising insecurity. Bullrich will also face the question of whether reverse the reduction in

¹⁸ "Patricia Bullrich sobre la crisis narco en Rosario: "Es difícil saber cuándo puede aparecer el atentado," Perfil, March 11, 2024, <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/policia/patricia-bullrich-tras-la-crisis-narco-en-rosario-es-dificil-saber-cuando-puede-aparecer-el-atentado.phtml>

national police manpower by prior governments, seeking to evolve the organization into an “FBI”-like structure focused on investigation more than presence.

In addition to addressing the ongoing threat from international criminal groups, the Ministry of National Security has given heightened attention to the question of potential Hezbollah terrorist activities in the country, as well as to IUU fishing, with a focus on the Chinese Deepwater fleet off Argentina’s coast.

Beyond the National Security Ministry, reform of Argentina’s civilian Federal Intelligence Organization (AFI) will also be an important challenge. Under prior Peronist governments, AFI had gained a reputation for collecting information on political rivals of the government, more than for its capabilities against criminal or terrorist threats. Under new Director Silvestre Sivori, and his deputy who brings a background in intelligence, retired Argentine Air Force Coronel Celestino Mosterren, the organization will be challenged to build up its professional reputation, analytical and fieldwork capabilities, and to strengthen coordination with the nation’s military, national police and partner nation intelligence organizations, in order to contribute to the struggle against organized crime, terrorism, and the nations’ other threats.

With respect to Argentina’s Ministry of Defense, new Defense Minister, and Patricia Bullrich’s Vice-Presidential running mate Luis Petri, has been relatively effective in his use of language and symbolism to show the government’s support for the military, including his travel to units, spending New Year’s Eve in the Argentina’s national military college (Campo Mayo),¹⁹ and a January 2024 speech launching an important warship IUU fishing patrol.²⁰

19 “Luis Petri y Cristina Pérez pasaron la fiesta de Año Nuevo junto a la guardia del Colegio Militar,” Infobae, January 1, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2024/01/01/luis-petri-y-cristina-perez-pasaron-la-fiesta-de-ano-nuevo-junto-a-la-guardia-del-colegio-militar/>

20 Federico Galligani, “El Gobierno lanzó un operativo contra los pesqueros chinos que depredan ilegalmente al mar argentino,” Infobae, January 15, 2024, <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2024/01/16/el-gobierno-lanza-un-operativo-contra-los-pesqueros-chinos-que-depredan-ilegalmente-al-mar-argentino/>

At the level of the uniformed military, the Milei Administration retired 22 Army Generals and 19 Navy Admirals (but only one Air Force General) to get to the current leadership. The current head of Argentina's Joint Chiefs of Staff, Brigadier General Xavier Julián Isaac, is well respected, and worked closely with the U.S. previously on the acquisition of F-16 fighters. While for some, the large number of Army and Navy officers retired by the incoming Milei administration were seen as the Administration's effort to remove senior Generals and Admirals tied to the prior Peronist leadership, an alternative explanation is that the retirements were necessary since the prior government had virtually not obligated anyone to retire, making the time overdue for a "house cleaning" to make room for a new generation of military leadership.

In defense policy matters, in the first months of the Milei Presidency, Argentina has already moved significantly closer to the United States, including plans to return to major multilateral exercises such as UNITAS and PANAMAX. Both U.S. Southern Command, through the U.S. Security Cooperation Office in Buenos Aires, and Argentina's state partner, the Georgia National Guard, area already working to ramp up cooperative activities with their Argentine counterparts.

Beyond its strong relationship with the U.S., the Milei government also seeks to rebuild Argentina's security relationships with Europe, including individual countries from which it is looking to buy weapons systems, as well as NATO global partnership, including leveraging its status since 1998 as a Major Non-NATO ally, to have a presence at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).²¹

Argentina also has the potential to play an important role as a constructive voice in multilateral security diplomacy. In addition to its participation in activities such as the Interamerican Defense Board, Interamerican Defense College, the Conference of American Armies and the System of Cooperation

²¹ Off-the-record interview with senior Argentine security analysts, Buenos Aires, Argentina, February 2024.

Among American Air Forces (SICOFAA), Argentina will also host the Defense Ministerial of the Americas (CDMA) in October 2024, bringing together all of the Ministers and other heads of Defense organizations across the region.

The compliment to the Milei government's renewed constructive engagement with Western democracies and multilateral defense institutions, is that it has signaled its lack of interest for the moment in both military purchases from the PRC, and significant military exchanges with Chinese counterparts. Under Peronist governments, these included the sending of students from Argentina's National Defense University (NDU) to a six-month course in China, and the occasional hosting of a Chinese military student at Argentina's NDU in Buenos Aires.

With respect to the Falklands/Malvinas issue, the Milei government has made it clear that it seeks to resolve the issue through diplomatic, not military means, and has sought to maintain a constructive tone with Great Britain for commercial and other collaboration, despite the dispute.²²

Argentina's use of the Armed Forces to support internal security missions continues to be restricted by the nation's Defense Law and Internal Security law, although the prior center-right administration of Mauricio Macri modified language that was interpreted as preventing military support in responding to threats by terrorist groups within the national territory. The Defense Ministry has also deployed forces to provide logistics and other indirect support for securing Argentina's land and maritime borders. Despite high profile operations in the past such as Fortin I & II, Escudo Norte, the Argentine military continues to focus on indirect support, and not on directly detaining persons crossing the border.

In defense acquisition, the Milei government has continued a decision made at the end of the prior governments to buy US-made F-16 fighter aircraft, from Denmark, as an interceptor aircraft to protect the nation's airspace

²² "Cameron, Milei to seek a more 'constructive' relationship between UK, Argentina," EFE, January 17, 2024, <https://efe.com/en/latest-news/2024-01-17/cameron-milei-to-seek-a-more-constructive-relationship-between-uk-argentina/>

against drugs and other threats, complimenting the nation's few remaining operationally available Pampa and A4 interceptors. The purchase of F-16s from Denmark is in lieu of the previous leading candidate, the Chinese FC-1, whose price the PRC had reportedly reduced 40% in 2020, in an aggressive bid to lock Argentina into a contract for the aircraft, and the associated maintenance, parts, and training support that would follow the purchase.²³

Beyond the F-16, the Defense Ministry is also taking delivery on US-built P-3 Orion Maritime Patrol Aircraft from Norway in support of patrolling the vast distances of Argentina's exclusive economic zone.²⁴ The purchase had been authorized by the outgoing government but had not substantially progressed until the Milei administration took control.

Argentina also continues to build out its system of radars for the protection of its airspace against incursions by narcotrafficking aircraft and other threats, leveraging its defense aerospace electronics firm INVAP. Defense analysts interviewed for this work noted that Argentine radar coverage in the north has improved substantially in recent years, but that overall, the country needs approximately 12 more radars to provide full coverage in the south and east, and also looking inward across Argentine territory.²⁵

The Argentine Defense Ministry is further acquiring four Sikorsky SH-3 Sea King helicopters to support operations in the Arctic, as well as two Bell 407 Jet Ranger helicopters to replace the older Aerospatiale A315B Lamas for operations in mountainous areas of the country.

Over the longer term, Argentina is looking at acquiring US made H-60 Blackhawk helicopters from Poland, US surplus stocks, or other sources, to replace its aging UH-1 Hueys, which will soon reach the end of their already extended service lives.

23 Off-the-record interview with Argentine former military officer knowledgeable of the deal, Buenos Aires, February 2024.

24 Jose Higeira, "Argentina buys P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft from Norway," Defense News, September 8, 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2023/09/08/argentina-buys-p-3-orion-maritime-patrol-aircraft-from-norway/>

25 Off-the-record interview with Argentine defense analyst, Buenos Aires, Argentina, February 2024.

Finally, Argentina is also looking to acquire new 8x8 armored personnel carriers (APCs), including possibly the US-built Stryker, to meet its commitment of an armored battalion for the Argentine-Chilean “Cruz del Sur” peacekeeping brigade. Argentina abandoned prior plans to purchase 8x8 APCs from China’s NORINCO over quality issues, then later also terminated a plan favored by the prior Peronist government to buy 6x6 Guarani Light Armored Vehicles from Brazil. It did so both because the vehicle did not fully suit the Argentine military’s needs, and because the financing from Brazil fell through.

While the country does not currently have the funds to purchase a large number of vehicles, it is considering buying a small quantity of Stryker’s from New Zealand, which is currently downsizing its own inventory, leaving the possibility of Argentina purchasing a larger number of Stryker’s later.²⁶ As part of any such deal, Argentina is strongly interested in manufacturing a portion of the vehicles in the country, in its own defense industry facility, if a suitable agreement for doing so could be reached (difficult) with the original manufacturer Lockheed Martin.

Conclusion

Although the nation’s fiscal and financial constraints limit the Milei government’s ability to combat its security challenges through increased resources, its posture and performance on security matters thus far is promising, including its collaboration with the US and distancing from the PRC. More insights will come as the government has time to advance policies against specific security threats, and to reform and steer resources toward security institutions (or not do so). The evolution of President Milei’s security policies in the coming months, under those he has delegated to manage them, will likely provide important insights about those selected leaders and delegated authority, or alternatively, the degree to which the

26 Juan Jose Roldan, “The Argentine Army analyzes the proposal for IFV 8x8 M1126 Stryker presented by the US,” Zona Militar, February 19, 2024, <https://www.zona-militar.com/en/2024/02/19/the-argentine-army-analyzes-the-proposal-for-ifv-8x8-m1126-stryker-presented-by-the-us/>

President himself becomes more involved in security affairs, as the national situation evolves.

Another open question is the future role of Vice-president Victoria Villarruel in security matters, given her considerable knowledge of and interest in them.

The passage of time will change Argentina's security challenges in difficult to foresee ways, from new challenges in organized crime patterns, to possible major terrorist attacks, to economic and political events which could affect the strength, and composition of the government itself.

However Argentina's security challenges evolve, its strategic position in the region, including as one of the region's closest "sincere partners," and the interest of China,

Russia and Iran, in their own partnerships with the country, make Argentina's success in security affairs vital to the U.S. and the hemisphere.

About the author

Robert Evan Ellis is a renowned U.S. academic and public policy analyst specializing in Latin America and the Caribbean. He has extensive experience in security, defense and international relations issues in the region. He has worked in prestigious academic and governmental institutions, such as the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of State. His publications and conferences focus on topics such as Chinese influence in the region, drug trafficking and hemispheric cooperation. He is currently a Research Professor of National Security Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College.