

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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Number 77 • Fall 2004 • \$7.00

It was the rise of a theory of accommodation to Western leadership that led Argentina in the 1990s to renounce—like Brazil—its nuclear program and ratify the NPT after the Cold War. The author of the accommodative theory, Carlos Escudé, was at the time the decisive foreign policy advisor to the reformist Menem government. In his theoretical work, he had amended classical realism: He found it was inconsistent to view the global system as a mere anarchy among equally sovereign “units”, when in fact it was an “imperfect or incipient hierarchy.” It had rules, including discriminatory roles in rule-making and rule-taking. Peripheral states could either rebel against the rules, as do rogue states, or they could work within the rules to advance broader national interests. The resulting theory, dubbed “peripheral realism”, enjoined governments in the periphery to follow the true national interest: make their countries attractive terrain for investment and social advancement rather than join in the global power politics game, which only served psychological interests. Thus the renunciation of the nuclear option was in Argentina’s true national interest. At the same time, submission to global norms by *some* peripheral countries imposed an obligation on the great powers to uphold the norms against violators. Otherwise those who complied freely would suffer relative loss.

The achievement of Escudé and Menem was the heroism of reason. It subordinated the temptations of power politics to a careful estimation of true interests. But it was inadequately appreciated by the United States, where theorists remain uncomfortable with hierarchy and have accordingly done little to consolidate global norms.

Today this achievement is in danger of being undone, owing to a Brazilian government ideologically hostile to the global hierarchy. As a candidate, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva had attacked the unfairness of the two-tiered structure of the NPT. As president, his government blocked portions of the requisite IAEA inspections of a uranium enrichment plant in Resende. The standoff threatened by early 2004 to reverse the worldwide momentum on non-proliferation. Escudé thus wrote to me in April:

Brazil’s gesture lends itself to imitation by Argentina, because it caters to nationalist feelings that are counterproductive, but which notwithstanding generate electoral gains. If a country refuses to allow IAEA inspections today, tomorrow it may be exporting strategic nuclear material to rogue states that wage war. And what few people realize is that Argentina has much more indigenous nuclear technology than any rogue Middle Eastern state. It has recently produced and sold a nuclear reactor to Australia, a relatively advanced country. If Argentina’s technology is good enough to find a niche in the Australian nuclear market, can you imagine how tempting it would be for Syria or Iran to buy off corrupt Argentinian politicians, and in addition provide them with the pseudo-nationalistic excuse that they are improving the country’s trade balance?

As things stand presently, populist leaders hoping to gain short-term electoral profits have no reason to abide by U.S. leadership. On the contrary: it is politically profitable . . . to defy the United States. To prevent this, power of enforcement *vis-à-vis* the diverse rules that make a globalized world viable in diverse realms (security, finances, etc.) must be demonstrated.

—Ira Straus