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Rethinking US Interests in the Western Hemisphere

*Abraham F. Lowenthal*

---

Soviet Policy in Latin America:

Some Implications for the United States

*Jaime Suchlicki*

---

Third World Debt: Toward a More Balanced Adjustment

*Richard E. Feinberg*

---

Progress in the Democratic Revolution in Latin America:

Country Assessments, 1987

*Thomas D. Anderson*

---

Thinking about the Next Revolution:

Lessons from US Policy in Nicaragua

*Matthew Soberg Shugart*

---

Technology and Armed Conflict in Central America

*Ronald H. McDonald and Nina Tamrowski*

---

Review Essay

Argentina: The Search for Rational Foreign Policies

*Aldo Vacs*

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Book Reviews

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Books Received

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ARGENTINA: THE SEARCH  
FOR RATIONAL FOREIGN POLICIES

*La Argentina: ¿Paria internacional?*, by Carlos Escudé. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial de Belgrano, 1984. 165 pp., paper.

*La Argentina vs. las grandes potencias (El precio del desafío)*, by Carlos Escudé. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial de Belgrano, 1986. 273 pp., paper.

THE ANALYSIS OF Argentina's international relations and foreign policies has been a field that Argentine specialists as well as policymakers have failed, with few exceptions, to address objectively. The simplistic nationalism which permeates many aspects of Argentina's political culture has been exacerbated in this field, leading to a self-righteous approach that largely preempts the possibility of a rational analysis of Argentina's position in the world and a balanced discussion of the controversial issues faced by the country and the foreign policies implemented by different administrations.

The self-perception of Argentina as a potential, or actual, great power — "Argentina potencia" — that has been, however, unfairly treated by the rest of the world (superpowers, great powers and neighboring countries alike) is a basic premise that most Argentines come to share from primary school onward. That this kind of perception may have explosive consequences when used by a faltering government to deflect public attention from domestic economic and political problems and to gain popular support became clear in 1978, during the Beagle Channel confrontation with Chile, and then, in 1982, with the Falklands-Malvinas crisis. The transition to democracy generated more propitious conditions to reassess the main tenets of this approach, which ignored the reality of Argentina's declining position in the world, its relative weakness, and the lack of solid foundations (diplomatic, economic, military and juridical) for several of its most aggressive and unrealistic foreign policy initiatives.

These two books by Carlos Escudé are representative of an emerging attitude which tries to analyze objectively some central issues involved in the formulation of Argentina's foreign policies in the past, and to establish the basis for a more pragmatic approach in the future. To a large extent, these essays are addressed to Argentine readers by an Argentine author who challenges the validity of some traditional assumptions which have resulted in the implementation of misguided foreign policies with consequences highly negative for the long run. At

the same time, non-Argentine specialists can profit from reading these essays because they provide a fascinating, though highly critical, study of the origins and evolution of the misperceptions and myths that have affected the development of contemporary Argentine foreign policies.

The first book, *La Argentina: ¿Paria Internacional?*, sets the tone of the inquiry by adding an interrogation mark to the title of an article written by Charles Maechling, Jr., in 1981, which denounced the Argentine military regime and recommended the avoidance of friendly relations until democracy had been restored.\* In the first essay of this book on human rights and political sovereignty, Escudé responds to the question of the book's title by reminding his readers that, in a country such as Argentina, the governmental violation of human rights inevitably results in international condemnation and the relegation of the country to the condition of an isolated pariah. The most interesting aspect of Escudé's analysis is his attempt to place it in the context of a pragmatic consideration of the characteristics of US "moral imperialism" and its implications for a country such as Argentina that, due to its low strategic priority and long history of tense relations with the US, becomes a favorite target of human rights policies. The pragmatic conclusion is that, even if ethical considerations are left aside, it is in the national interest of Argentina to respect human rights in order to avoid situations that can only result in repeated interference in its domestic affairs by foreign powers, with a consequent erosion of its political sovereignty.

The two other essays included in this book, as well as those presented in the second part of *La Argentina vs. Las Grandes Potencias*, study the relations between Argentina's political culture and its foreign policies, focusing on the Argentine perceptions of territorial sovereignty, the characteristics of Argentine territorial nationalism and the relationship of Argentine rights to the Beagle Channel and the Falklands-Malvinas. These essays represent a serious attempt to inject rationalism into Argentine foreign policy debate by eliminating some of the most blatant myths and misperceptions concerning the alleged territorial losses suffered by the country in the past and the absolute rights of Argentina over territories effectively occupied by Great Britain and Chile, or subject to multiple claims, as in Antarctica. The essays correctly emphasize the dangerous consequences brought about by this unrealistic approach which leaves

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\*Maechling, Jr., Charles (1981), "The Argentine Pariah," *Foreign Policy* 45 (Winter 1981-82): 69-83.

scarce room for diplomatic negotiations, especially because the propagandistic campaigns of successive Argentine governments have strengthened popular acceptance of a brand of naive nationalism which equates negotiation with weakness and concessions with betrayal.

The essays included in the first part of *La Argentina vs. Las Grandes Potencias* complete this critical evaluation of Argentine foreign policy by discussing, from an historical and comparative perspective, the high price paid by Argentina for its rhetorical, nonaligned stance of the 1940s and the benefits obtained by the Western European countries and Brazil from their alignment with the US in the postwar years. After assessing the relative validity of explanations that attribute Argentina's postwar decline to an international conspiracy or to government mismanagement, Escudé acknowledges the role of these two variables but emphasizes that the major factor which led to the boycott against Argentina, and reinforced the trend toward foreign policy mismanagement, was the naive attempt made by the Peronist government to challenge the international order hegemonized by the US. By trying to promote a process of rapid industrialization, which (a) may have slowed down the European recovery then demanding scarce capital goods and raw materials and (b) negatively affected the British balance of payments, the Argentine government ignored the international hierarchy of power and generated conditions for inevitable failure. By contrast, countries (such as Brazil) who developed flexible foreign policy approaches and aligned themselves with the US created conditions for a favorable outcome that, over the long term, facilitated economic growth and turned the South American balance of power in their favor.

The realistic perspective adopted by Escudé leads to conclusions about the relative nature of Argentina's territorial claims, the negative consequences of nonalignment, and the causes of Argentine decline that would undoubtedly be disputed by many in Argentina. No less controversial are his policy recommendations concerning (1) educational changes needed to transform Argentine political culture, (2) the convenience of a flexible Argentine alignment with the US, (3) abandonment of the aggressive stance towards Great Britain, (4) the need for restraint in Argentina's claims over Antarctic territory, and (5) the advantages of ratifying the Tlatelolco Treaty. Extreme nationalist groups would state that sovereignty is not negotiable. Defenders of the "Third Position" might observe that the relative decline in US hegemony has created new profitable opportunities for the practice of

flexible nonalignment policies. *Dependencia* analysts would see these recommendations as leading to the reinforcement of Argentina's dependent status. Realist supporters of power-centered approaches might state that, in some cases, such as in the Beagle Channel crisis, aggressive behavior forced concessions from the adversary.

However, what is indisputable is that these essays add a welcome dose of rational analysis to the debate on foreign policies established in Argentina after the defeat in the South Atlantic war and the restoration of democracy. There is room for disagreement when discussing the eventual costs and benefits of each foreign policy option but no longer do authoritarian decisions dominate the field nor naive nationalistic assumptions remain unchallenged. A trend towards rational approaches and realistic foreign policymaking is emerging. The Radical administration, although with some vacillations (notoriously on the Malvinas-Falklands and nuclear issues), has formulated and implemented more pragmatic policies concerning problematic issues such as the Beagle Channel, the foreign debt, and relations with countries such as Brazil and the US. Public opinion seems to be moving also in the same direction, as the overwhelming approval of the peace treaty with Chile over the opposition of Peronist and nationalist groups tends to demonstrate. One can only hope that books such as Escudé's will multiply in the future, reinforcing this trend. The lively debate that would ensue will certainly help to diminish chances of repeating costly foreign policy mistakes, while facilitating the formulation and implementation of policies aimed at promoting a more effective, profitable insertion of Argentina into the world order.

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