

United States-Argentina: Two Hundred Years of Shared History

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Argentina's commemoration this year of the bicentennial of its path to independence provides a perfect opportunity to reflect on the evolution of the relationship between our two countries, and, to focus on ways that we can strengthen the bonds between our peoples and to deepen our strategic partnership. As Secretary Clinton recently noted, "Argentina and the United States have a long history of close cooperation. Our shared commitment to the values of democracy and human rights serve as a common ground in advancing the bilateral relationship between our two nations."

Reflecting the strong will of its own people upon the return of democracy after a period of military dictatorship, successive Argentine governments have made the defense of human rights at home and abroad important guiding values of Argentine policy. The current administration, led by President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, has vigorously embraced that tradition by focusing on accountability for crimes committed during the dictatorship, as well as with ground-breaking new initiatives. In July, Argentina became the first country in Latin America to pass a law granting the same rights to same-sex couples as enjoyed by heterosexual couples under the law, including the right to marry and adopt children. Argentina also has committed itself to an active policy of supporting peace efforts and humanitarian challenges, especially in the region. It currently has nearly 600 peacekeeping troops in Haiti in support of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). When a devastating earthquake struck Haiti this past January, the Argentine hospital in Port-au-Prince was the only health care facility that remained operational, providing medical treatment to thousands of Haitians.

Since the 2001-2002 economic crisis, Argentina's economy has rebounded and sustained a steady recovery, with five consecutive years of over eight percent real growth in gross domestic product. In 2008 and 2009, when local and international factors undermined growth in so much of the world, Argentina still managed to keep itself above the regional average with an official real growth rate of 6.8 percent and 0.9 percent, respectively. Official data report that poverty has dropped from a high of over 50 percent during the crisis-era period to a current rate of 15.3 percent in the country's largest cities. Today, Argentina ranks second only to Chile in Latin America on the United Nations' Human Development Index.

While the vicissitudes of economic performance and political atmospherics of the moment tend to dominate press coverage and popular perceptions, the fact is that our bilateral relationship is anchored by a number of shared strategic interests that have remained constant for more than two decades. These include nuclear security, nonproliferation and

counterterrorism. We are also partners in the fight against all forms of illicit trafficking, whether it's drugs, arms, or people.

US-Argentine cooperation extends to initiatives on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, space technology, and the environment. Argentina is a regional leader in space technology, and in collaboration with INVAP S.E., an Argentine high-technology company, NASA will launch the SAC-D Aquarius satellite which carries parts built in the United States and Argentina, as well as Italy, Canada, and France, and promises a technological revolution in the way we measure global warming and understand climate change. (Before launch, the satellite will be tested in Brazil.)

The longstanding bilateral partnership has benefitted both countries. Over 500 US-based companies currently operate in Argentina, employing over 155,000 Argentines. US investment in Argentina totals over 13 billion dollars, mainly concentrated in the energy, manufacturing, information technology, and financial sectors.

The United States is Argentina's third largest trading partner. A Bilateral Investment Treaty provides protections against capital movement restrictions, expropriations, and performance requirements. US foreign direct investment in Argentina was 15.2 billion dollars in 2008 and continues to increase. Argentina's economic prospects for the long-term future look bright, boosted by what appears to be a trend toward the reduction of import restrictions within the MERCOSUR, (a regional trading bloc between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, founded in 1991 with the goal of promoting free trade and the fluid movement of goods, people, and currency), an internal market of 40 million which enjoys relatively strong and widening levels of prosperity, and a surging volume of diversified exports.

In addition, Argentina increasingly sees its future as a reliable strategic partner in the hemisphere. Latin America is one of the most peaceful regions in the world, with only three international wars since the beginning of the 20th century. The recent ratification of former President Nestor Kirchner as the Secretary General of UNASUR (the political association of South American nations) underscores Argentina's commitment to working toward a greater degree of regional integration.

Argentina has long valued the role of international organizations and her foreign policy has shown a notable commitment to engage and strengthen multilateral institutions. As a current member of the G-20 and as Latin America's third largest market, an active member of bodies such as the International Atomic Energy Association and the UN's Human Rights Council, Argentina has a respected presence in international fora. Argentina has positioned itself as a bridge between more polarizing political views which has enabled it to serve a constructive role in defusing tensions between other countries in the region. That presence extends to an individual level, as one finds Argentines leading organizations such as the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, or serving as the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.

Late Foreign Minister Saavedra Lamas, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for brokering talks during the Paraguayan-Bolivian War in 1936, is a shining example of Argentina's deep-rooted commitment to international institutions. Peace-brokering efforts include the participation of former President Nestor Kirchner as a guarantor in the release of FARC hostages in Colombia; and his mediation between Brazil and Bolivia following the nationalization of an oil company; and more recently, his success in persuading Colombia and Venezuela to join together to resolve their differences.

Over the course of our shared history, the United States and Argentina have established a meaningful agenda of mutual cooperation. Nonetheless, both countries are mindful of and sensitive to our differences, particularly when it comes to divergent ideas. Polls indicate that anti-American sentiment is stronger in Argentina than in any other country in Latin America, and this is most likely due to widespread misperceptions, stereotypes, and a lack of knowledge about each other's history, culture, and customs.

In order to address this dissonance, the US Embassy in Buenos Aires sponsors many educational programs and exchanges. Argentine leaders in a variety of fields, including journalism, law enforcement, government, science, and education have participated in the Embassy's international visitor program exchanges. The Fulbright scholarship program has more than tripled the annual number of US and Argentine academic grantees since 1994, and, the US Embassy is working to improve other educational exchanges.

As we look ahead to the future, we hope to focus our efforts on searching for common ground, while at the same time respecting our differences, in order to deepen our mutual understanding of one another's countries and to further build upon our already productive and positive shared history.