‘Argentina has always had a pendulum effect in its foreign policy’

By Tomás Brockenshire
Herald Staff

CV

Born: September 19, 1962, Forlì, Italy
Title: Director, Master’s Degree in International Relations: European Union - Latin America, University of Bologna at the Buenos Aires City campus
Media routine: Corriere della Sera, La Nación, Infotram

President Mauricio Macri will be welcoming High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini in Buenos Aires on Wednesday, making her the highest-ranking EU official to visit Argentina in the last decade. In light of the previous visits from Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, French President François Hollande and the arrival of US President Barack Obama at the end of the month, the Herald contacted Italian historian Loris Zanatta by phone in Bologna to examine the roots, present and future of the relationship between Buenos Aires and Brussels.

How important are the visits by high-ranking EU officials in terms of EU-Argentina relations?

I would say that it is a very important and very radical change in Argentine foreign policy. Even if these meetings are short and don’t often have practical immediate effects but rather promises about the future, the meaning is clear. And that is that Europe and other regions are welcoming back Argentina to the world after many years of isolation and hostility toward the EU in general. For both, the EU and Argentina, it is a matter of reestablishing a trusted and old relationship. In historical terms, Argentina has always had this pendulum effect in its foreign policy. Under nationalist governments, principally under Peronist governments — but not always if you consider Carlos Menem — they have an idea of Argentina as a country that has a historic mission to bring together countries with anti-liberal values. Those governments are generally hostile to Europe and the United States. And then the pendulum swings the other way, with governments that have a more cosmopolitan, liberal and multilateral approach.

In the last decade in the EU there has been a rise in extremist political views that clash with the cosmopolitan view that is associated with the EU. How do those views fit with a re-launch of the relationship between the EU and Argentina?

Europe is certainly a crossroads. On one hand because of the economic crisis that it went through and now the migrations that are scaring many Europeans and changing the political culture in many countries of Europe. And that is producing political changes that are contrary to open societies, primarily in Eastern Europe, where there is a push for restorining national identity and not a strong tradition of liberal democracy. There has also been a rise of populist and xenophobic movements in Western Europe. But there are still open societies, and I think that France, Italy and Spain have in Latin American democracies an opportunity to reaffirm their liberal and democratic credentials.

Europe is facing the possibility of a Brexit, the tensions between the major capitals was evident during the crisis, the internal borders are under pressure and there is a refugee crisis. There are plenty of domestic challenges for the EU at this time. Is this the right time to be pushing for increased ties with Argentina?

This is not a good time for Europe for anything, it is very focused on its own problems, which are huge. I am optimistic, however, about the future. Perhaps Europe has expanded too much and has weakened its core values and that makes it more fragmented. So I think we need to think about a two-track Europe, with core countries that totally accept its basic value and peripheral countries which are less involved in EU institutions. There are xenophobic majorities in some countries, there is a reduction of individual liberties in others, terrorist threats of course, but that is another reason to establish stronger and more solid international links.

Spain has not been able to form a government since its December elections and the current government has limited functions. How important is that paralysis in terms of letting Italy and France take the lead in the relationship with Argentina?

Bear in mind that despite Spain’s paralysis, Italy has also suffered a great deal economically and the recovery is weak so it cannot replace Madrid in that regard, France is also facing severe internal issues, so I can’t see it displacing Spain — which has extraordinary economic and cultural
advantages. But I would like to think that, in reality, there isn't national competition between these countries but rather increasingly coordinated policies within the EU and agreement that it is important to move with the Mercosur - EU trade deal. It is also important to note that historical links also have a moderate impact on contemporary bilateral relationships, as the recent tour by Renzi and countries of the Pacific Alliance such as Chile, Peru and Colombia demonstrates. Renzi visited those countries even though the cultural and historical links are not as strong as those with Argentina or Brazil. The interest that Macri has shown with the Pacific Alliance and to sign free trade agreements would signal a very interesting change and would allow greater links with Europe.

How feasible is that move toward the Alliance of the Pacific given the difficulties in the integration with the Mercosur?

It is hard to say that the Mercosur has been a success. Not only for Argentina as the other countries are also unsatisfied. But I think that looking toward the Pacific Alliance is necessary. To determine how likely it is to succeed you have to look at history. As a historian of Argentine foreign policy, I see that nationalist political culture and the idea that Argentina has leadership in an anti-capitalist, anti-liberal, anti-market movement still have strength in parts of society and in some political parties in particular. If the government cultivates the foreign policy approach that it has been suggesting, certainly the nationalist opposition will accuse it of putting national sovereignty at risk and increasing the dependence on international bodies. The myth of Argentina being a self-sufficient power able to lead anti-liberal movement has hurt Argentina, but it has been able to exercise a veto power.

In that light how important is it that Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra has a non-partisan background?

Argentina needs to regain trust, not only in terms of asking for credits but also as a partner. Unfortunately, in recent years, Argentina has been considered as a partner that isn't trustworthy. Earning trust can take years but it can disappear in a day. And to have a Foreign minister who is not a politician but as soon as she takes office becomes a politician, and who has a great deal of experience in the multilateral bodies will undoubtedly be important for Argentina.

The previous government approached China and Russia and the Macri administration has implied that it will at least maintain the relationship with Beijing. Doesn't that clash with the guiding principle of liberal democratic values?

Foreign policy is made up of both values and interests of course, and it cannot be dominated by one or the other. When the Foreign minister says that there is a need to remove ideology from foreign policy, she is saying precisely that and I think that that is very positive. The world is complex and there is a need to cooperate with everyone. Having a good relationship with the EU and the United States does not mean abandoning relationships with Russia and China. Removing ideology and being pragmatic and multilateral means breaking out of the competition between the radical anti-liberal views and the canal relationship with the United States. Neither makes sense.

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