THE DOMESTIC PROFILE OF THE MACRISTA DEFENSE POLICY AND ITS IMPACT ON TERMS OF INTERNATIONAL INSERTION: MORE CONTINUITIES THAN CHANGES

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Introduction

In recent times, the changes that have taken place in South America show the gradual but rapid decline of the leftist turn and the ideas that supported it. In Argentina, Mauricio Macri’s coming into power is a convincing example of this, particularly regarding the strategic-military dimension of International Relations through changes in the profile of the external Defense Policy.

Argentina once again looked to Washington to develop this external profile, leaving behind the autonomous discourses that defended South American unity in matters of international security through political dialogue as a fundamental tool. The dissolution of the former subregional geopolitical axis is functional for the recomposition of the bond with the US, strengthening hemispheric security and defense architecture and for relaunching relations with European states and Israel.

However, to weigh the impact that this strategic change may bring into the international insertion related to the external profile of Defense policy, it is necessary to review its domestic dimension linked to the management of the sector. This is due to the understanding that Defense Policy is specified at the interface between both national and international dimensions (Dillon 1988, in Diamint 2014: 31). Therefore, the chances of an impact on integration are

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linked to the fact that the strategic change is anchored in a solid political leadership of Defense issues, which in the case of Argentina implies answering the chronic problems of the capabilities of the Armed Forces and the need that they should be planned based on an accurate determination of their role.

Consequently, this article proposes to reveal the central guidelines of the internal dimension of the defense policy of the Macri government, to envision its effects in terms of international insertion in the short term. For this, in addition, the analysis should articulate some reflections on the Kirchnerist management of the defense sector, to indicate continuities, adjustments and changes between the two administrations.

The Armed Forces at the center of the scene

The configuration of the domestic profile of the Defense Policy is indicated by the directives guiding the management of the sector in general and, in this respect, the clearest orientation of the Macri administration is the explicit and public recognition of the importance of the military institution and its role, as well as the government’s desire to establish a positive link.

In this sense, political rhetoric is overwhelming and Macri and Defense Minister Julio Martínez emphasize the need for the Armed Forces (FFAA) to take care of borders, air space and the continental shelf to develop the axes proposed by the government (Ministerio de Defensa, No. 217/16). And they also assert that they will be considered an integral part of the state and respected by the government because its role in democracy is very important, not only in the strategic field but also in the operational one (Ministerio de Defensa, Nº 184/16).

Moreover, this political rhetoric has a counterpart in the level of actions with a symbolic content that positively affects a part of the public opinion and its recognition. Thus, we can point to the performance of the military parade on July 9, as well as other commemorative events, including veterans of the Malvinas (Falklands); the president’s attendance at the anniversary of his escort regiment; the salary increase of up to 40% for the personnel of the three Armed Forces as part of a process of hierarchy and salary recovery and the creation of a line of mortgage loans for the first domicile for the members of the Forces.

Therefore, there is an adjustment of Kirchner’s policy in relation to the sector, consisting of opening a new stage in the bond with the Armed Forces, which is perceived as an opportunity to express their needs and, consequently, is well received (Ministerio de Defensa, No. 165/16). This observation, it should be clarified, is made considering that the Kirchner administration at-
tempted to generate interest in citizenship in defense issues and to increase ties with the specialized academic community (Calderón 2016). This policy, defined by the Executive and articulated by the Ministry of Defense, marked a change in the sector’s approach since returning to democracy, giving it greater visibility and granting a more comprehensive and specific treatment, characteristic of a public policy. And this occurred within the framework of official rhetoric about the return of the State and its interference in National Defense issues. However, the Kirchner administration did not bestow a prominent role to the Armed Forces as an institution.

As noted then, the Macri government continues with this line of action, although adjusting it to the idea of seeking a place of importance directed to the military institution as an operational instrument of Defense in terms of form and with a symbolic meaning, but also of substance and with implications for the management of the sector. Therefore, in this case, we can point to the existence of continuity with adjustment, and not change.

Likewise, it should be noted that this particular issue raises doubts in some sectors of society regarding the future of civilian supremacy over the Armed Forces and the political conduct of Defense (Verbitsky 2016). They originate and are accentuated by some designations that raised questions and the issuance of decree 721. However, it is also true that such doubts should be analyzed by weighing all the factors involved in the configuration of the current scenario of the Armed Forces as part of the institution of a democratic State.

So, to close this first point, the Macri government’s challenge seems to be to guarantee the achievements of civilian supremacy over the Forces and, at the same time, to generate a political management of the Defense. The formation of specialized civilian effectives should be a medium and long-term goal. This is an issue that has long been identified as one of the great debts of the sector’s management (Diamint 2012), without underestimating the experience of the Armed Forces and the articulated work with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the senior commanders of the different Forces.

The recovery of the Forces’ operational capacity as a goal

Continuing with the configuration of the domestic profile of the Macrist defense policy, a second line of defense policy is related to the intention of recomposing the capabilities of the Armed Forces to make them operational through the acquisitions and production of the national defense sector. As a result, statements about the poor state of the Forces’ capabilities, which are
qualified by themselves as precarious, disarmed and with considerable technological backwardness, are frequent (Ministerio de Defensa, No. 9/16). And, given this scenario, the government ensures the beginning of a response path and these proposals are already being evaluated to make purchases in different countries, but that an immediate large-scale investment is impossible due to budgetary difficulties and social emergencies (De Vedia 2016).

Beyond the political commitment and the official rhetoric, in the months that the government of the Macrist has been in place, some signs can be observed about the will to concretize such a policy line. These include: assistance to FIDAE; the evaluation of the incorporation of medium-sized aircraft for the Air Force and the State Airlines and also of armored vehicles used by the Blue Helmets; and the statements regarding the future use of the condition that Argentina has as an extra NATO ally for a re-equipment of the Forces (De Vedia 2016).

Likewise, with regard to acquisitions already materialized or close to being so, there are also new developments such as: the purchase of 20 Italian AB 206 helicopters for the Army Aviation, 10 GAU-17 machine guns for arming and 5 stretchers (Ministerio de Defensa, N°170/16); the communication from the US Department of Defense approving the sale of 24 T-6 Texan II training aircraft (Szklarz 2016; La Nación 2016); the future purchase of Israeli aerial surveillance balloons Skystar (Szklarz 2016); the signing of an agreement by which Fabricaciones Militares will manufacture 9 mm Beretta pistols for Gendarmerie and Prefectura; and, in addition, the Army through the Military Attaché in Washington asked for a quote to make a direct purchase of 27 Carl Gustaf guns, 2 ground surveillance radars, various spare parts and parts for the fleet of aircraft and other military equipment, 61 inflatable boats Zodiac type and 2 multipurpose speedboats (Porfilio 2016). Finally, it is worth mentioning that 4 speedboats were procured from Israel, as well as systems for border control (La Nación 2017).

In general terms, most of these materials are likely to be destined to the reinforcement of the surveillance and control capabilities of the national territory linked to the priority of the fight against drug trafficking, terrorism and organized crime, considered transnational threats that affect the sovereignty of the states. However, if we look at the purchases projected in the framework of the government’s multi-year recovery plan for military capacity for 2017 (Obarrio 2016), we can see a diverse scheme of acquisitions that, at a glance, do not respond to a unique standard of planning of the Forces.

On the other hand, and as part of this defense policy guideline, in addition to acquisitions, the Macri government focuses on the production of the National Defense industry as an input channel for the supply and im-
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In this context, to promote this second line of defense policy as part of a policy that can be sustained over time, it is important to have a balanced analysis of the current scenario. In this sense, we must consider the starting point of the almost complete destruction of the national industry and the achievements and proposals of the previous administration with its deficiencies and weaknesses. In addition, the fact that the gap to be filled in terms of capabilities is extremely broad for the Armed Forces, even if we take as a reference the states of the subregion, and in addition, the evolution of the defense industry and technological developments at the level of medium and large powers. Regarding this last issue, we must also consider the need to involve a level of public spending much greater than the existing one.

Particularly in relation to the military budget, it is worth remembering the criticism given to the Kirchner governments that opposed the formal political-institutional proactivity that characterized their management of the sector and the inadequacy of defense expenditures (Battaleme 2014; Corbacho 2009; Escude 2014; Ugarte 2012). This adaptation is essential, considering that the capabilities of the Armed Forces are going through a situation of extreme fragility that, for some years, seriously compromises its performance as a force instrument capable of being used. In this way, such formal political-institutional proactivity combined with a broadly deficient budget, even if only to maintain the minimum capabilities and resources of the military institution, results in the management of the sector without tangible content. In this sense, it is necessary to say that the intentions to modernize the Forces are far behind as it has been proposed since the late nineties. Therefore, if the Macri government intends to manage the area as a public policy and recognize the Armed Forces’ strategic and operational role, it must find a way to materialize such political will in a complex economic context.

Finally, with respect to both acquisitions and the production of the national industry, it is essential to direct them according to a specific planning of the required capacities. In this sense, it will be necessary to observe if the government resumes the 2011 PLANCAMIL, draws up another different plan or decides to make individual acquisitions to match the needs of the Forces that present themselves as structural and demand a systematic plan adjusted to transform the institution into an instrument capable of being operated for the tasks entrusted to it. Regarding the latter, we must not lose sight of the fact that the main mission of the Armed Forces is the National Defense, which has been blurred because the deterioration of capabilities transformed the Forces into an instrument that is practically impossible to be employed. A significant example of this situation is the withdrawal of the Mirage III C and V without having an effective replacement. Also, the dominance of secondary
tasks taken by the military institution, situation that was reinforced during the Kirchnerist governments, seems to continue during the first year of the Macrist government without major alterations. This occurs despite the fact that the Executive rhetoric distances itself from undervaluing the sector, and reinforces the need to count on Armed Forces prepared for the Defense.

The strengthening of the secondary tasks of the military institution

Returning to what has been said in the previous section, we can point out as the third line of the Defense Policy of the Macrist management the prioritization of the effective development of the secondary tasks of the Armed Forces. In this sense, the Macri government has strongly pointed out that military action is central to combating drug trafficking through the protection of borders, assistance in emergency situations and national and international catastrophes and to maintain the presence of the country in the UN peace missions. That is, three of the four complementary tasks that are currently governed by law for the Armed Forces.

Related to that, in his first year of mandate, multiple actions have been undertaken linked to the participation of the Armed Forces in support operations for the national community or friendly countries. In this way, tasks related to aid in emergency situations related to logistical support, the movement of people, provisions and vehicles, food and medical support and informative tasks were carried out in the national context (campaign against dengue, zika and chikungunya in Buenos Aires, Misiones and Corrientes, and against hepatitis B in Comodoro Rivadavia, operations against the floods in Santa Fe, Corrientes and Entre Ríos, avalanches in Mendoza and fires in Chubut, and the repair of a school at 3000 meters high in Jujuy) as an international (earthquake in Ecuador).

The promotion of the Armed Forces participation in UN multilateral operations is also highlighted. In this sense, the relevance of peacekeeping operations in Haiti and Cyprus have been recognized as instruments that collaborate with the country’s foreign policy (Ministerio de Defensa, No. 176/16), whereas facing the peace process in Colombia, different meetings have been held and statements have been made that run in the direction indicated by the national government to increase the participation of Argentina through its Armed Forces (Ministerio de Defensa, Nº217/16). We must also bear in mind that this is a process widely supported by the international community and by the US in particular and that an effective participation of Argentina in
such a complex scenario as the Colombian one can be beneficial and help to better position ourselves in these subregional matters.

However, regarding the issue of Peacekeeping Operations, we must not lose sight of the fact that they are currently changing their nature by losing the principle of neutrality to become stabilization missions in urban environments, intervening in favor of a certain national sector. In this context, it will be necessary to observe to what extent the Macri government is committed to increasing the participation of the Armed Forces in missions where they cease to be neutral. If there is an increase in participation in these conditions, we could then speak of a continuity with adjustment in relation to the previous administration.

Continuing with the development of the complementary tasks of the Forces, one can also observe the continuity of the involvement in the fight against drug trafficking within the framework of the participation of the Forces in internal security operations foreseen by the Internal Security Law. However, this ongoing continuity with some adjustments seems to close an issue gap initiated in 2011, with the implementation of Decree 1091 that created the Plan Escudo Norte and Fortín II and that was deepened with the changes implemented as of 2013. Although such deployment did not legally imply the cancellation of the difference between security and Defense, it initiated the mentioned gap based on different doubts generated by the configuration of delicate scenarios with a high potential to blur such differentiation. And this is enhanced by the fact that there was no counterpart to a scheme of reasonable use of the available radar infrastructure (Calíbar Report 2016).

Now, the arrival of the new government and the publication of Decree 228 that declared the Emergency of Public Security emphasizing the care of the border through a joint and articulated work of the Ministries of Defense and Security (Ministerio de Defensa, N6148/16), would be closing the gap with respect to the participation of the Forces in the fight against drug trafficking, confirming it in a forceful way. In this sense, the Border Operative proposes to complete the radar monitoring of the 100% of the airspace and for 24 hours a day and is complemented by the Aerospace Protection Rules. This comes in addition to the inauguration of modernization works in the Resistance Area Control Center, the deployment of Tucano Air Force aircraft and the investment to modernize and install new radars and the acquisition of more equipment (Ministerio de Defensa, N6161/16).

However, an attempt can be made to preserve the difference between security and Defense by deactivating the joint patrols of the Forces and Gendarmes and Prefecture and the deployment of large numbers of military personnel in the field. Thus also performing joint operations covered by Article
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30 of the Defense Law that allows declaring as a military zone the areas that must be submitted to military custody and protection, and Article 27 of the Internal Security Law that grants the Ministry the support of the Armed Forces in security operations by affecting their stockpile, stewardship, health, veterinary, construction and transport services.

On the other hand, the basis for giving priority to this specific secondary task seems to be found not only in the needs coming from the national reality, but also in the American requirements as well as in the government’s decision to address them. This would indicate an adjustment in relation to the Kirchner administration if we remember that Néstor moderated and Cristina froze, though without cutting, the collaboration with the US on the fight against drug trafficking. In this way, with Macri, this issue returned to the top of the agenda and cooperation and information exchange programs were re-established, including as part of the agreements signed during Obama’s visit.

However, this willingness to strengthen ties with the US to address the problem of drug trafficking should be put into perspective because the government has shown interest in cooperating with other countries and in this regard, for example, there was an agreement to exchange information sensitive with Israel, it is negotiating the purchase of technological material and cooperation agreements for the assistance of security forces in computer systems with Spain and is developing something similar with Brazil. Even, the international dimension of the Plan Argentina sin Narcotráfico (Argentina without Drug Trafficking) also demonstrates the vocation to reach agreements of technical and operational cooperation with other states (Dinatale 2016).

Finally, there is a fourth and last secondary task that was established in 2006 and which establishes the participation of the Forces in the construction of a Subregional Defense System. Regarding this point, the Macri government has given strong signals of a change of policy with respect to the previous government whose model of International Defense Policy had a cooperative dimension to be concretized through a logic of concentric circles that indicated the priority of South America as the area of external action. And although from a formal policy formulation perspective there is still no public document that marks a precise course regarding the central definitions of the international policy of the defense sector, the official rhetoric and some gestures and specific actions allow us to suppose that one of the fundamental premises is the privilege of the global sphere over the regional and subregional one. In this sense, Martínez stated that we are experiencing new times that demand that we open ourselves to the world and have concrete relationships with real events that allow us to advance in mature relationships with all
countries (Ministerio de Defensa, Nº 41/16 and 120/16).

Some preliminary reflections on the first year of Macri government

Considering the survey conducted on three of the central guidelines of the internal dimension of defense policy articulated during the first year of the Macri government, it was observed that, with respect to the Kirchnerist presidencies, continuity predominates although with different adjustments. In this sense, circumscribing the analysis to the second and third management guidelines, it is still unclear which direction will be given to military acquisitions and the production of the national defense industry which, in turn, is linked to the preponderance or not of secondary tasks over the national defense mission. Getting back to the argument that an impact in the international insertion can be gained by a political handling of Defense that answers the critical doubts of the sector, it is too early to envision if the strategic turn that is taking place in Defense policy with the arrival of Macri into power can deeply affect the “stance in the world” that Argentina has (Paradiso 2007).

In this context, the key to the analysis is to follow carefully the way in which the recovery of the capabilities of the Armed Forces is managed, and this for two reasons. In the first place, as long as this recomposition does not happen, the international changes that may occur will hardly have a significant impact. In relation to this, and from a realistic perspective, it is difficult for other states to be interested in the international insertion of Argentina if it cannot generate concrete consequences for them, regardless of their trends. This applies both to possible out of region and subregional partners because it cannot be ignored that the gap to be filled in terms of capabilities is extremely wide, even in relation to the South American states.

Secondly, the recomposition of the capabilities of the Forces is a central indicator because depending on the decisions made about military acquisitions and the direction of national industrial production, it can be estimated, beyond political rhetoric, whether the will of the Executive is to prioritize the main mission of the Armed Forces to the detriment of the secondary tasks, if the opposite is done, or if alternatives are explored that allow the institution to recover capacities in both senses in a reasonable manner.

Regarding this and considering what was achieved in the first year of the Macrist government, particularly with regard to the projected acquisitions to be effective in the short term and to those being analyzed, as already anticipated, it seems that priority is being given to strengthening the
surveillance and control capabilities of the national territory in line with the relevance of the fight against drug trafficking. A decision in this sense could well be accompanied and contained by a broader military plan with a future projection that puts such resources in tune with the needs of the National Defense, also taking into account the complexity of the country’s economic situation. Such a decision, consequently, would result in the recovery of material military capabilities to implement an operational strategy focused on denying access to the territory and national airspace, as some specialists propose (Battaleme 2016). Likewise, an approach like this would be consistent with both the premise of the government that transnational threats affect national sovereignty and that is why it is necessary for the Armed Forces to be involved in their combat in the border areas as with the defensive defense model established by Kirchnerism. In addition, it would imply closer cooperation ties with neighboring countries for the control and surveillance of common borders, generating mechanisms that optimize the use of resources and improve the realization of those tasks. Finally, this would result in a concrete improvement in terms of international insertion for Argentina in terms of the subregional scope, but also with the rest of the world through the projection of a positive image linked to the commitment of the State in the fight against the non-traditional threats and the seriousness conferred to the protection of national sovereignty.

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ABSTRACT
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Based on the modifications in the external profile of the Defense Policy of Argentina, with the accession of Mauricio Macri, this article highlights the central premises of the internal dimension of such a policy with a view to glimpsing the effects in terms of international insertion in the short term.

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