

Foreign space activities in Argentina: Geopolitical imaginaries on the role of China and Europe in the national press (2007–2016)

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Abstract

This article endeavors to understand the construction of a geopolitical imaginary over the People's Republic of China deep space station on Bajada del Agrio, Province of Neuquén, from the perspective of geopolitics. This paper introduces a comparative perspective: the Chinese space facilities are not a unique case within the borders of this sovereign state: there is a similar space installation called Deep Space Antenna under European Union flag in Malargüe, Province of Mendoza. In order to track the construction of such geopolitical imagination, this article analyzes the discourses offered in newspapers of national circulation in the South American country: *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and *Página/12* from 2007 to 2016. This work also describes and analyzes domestic and foreign political discourses, and the sources of information the media selects to explain the issues the facilities raise. Argentina is a state of the Global South with an autonomous track of space development. Acquiring technology from a rising power could be disruptive, generating tensions with the core states, which were former exclusive partners and clients.

Key Words: media; geopolitics; imagining; space bases; China; Europe

Introduction: a constructed imagining

Argentina has a long history regarding space technology, from the 1960s, developing incremental launch capabilities, to the 1980s when the military and President R. Alfonsín developed a middle-range missile, triggering geopolitical concerns in media and diplomacy that the country would become dangerous as a creator or proliferator of weapons of mass destruction in early 1990s. This was the first step in the construction of a geopolitical imagination on Argentine space development. After that, Argentine policymakers opted for exclusively civilian development, mainly satellites, and cooperated with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the European agencies. In recent years Argentina has started a strong cooperation on space policy with China. Since 1960s, many remarkable goals have been accomplished such as launching rockets Alfa, Beta, and Gamma Centauro, Orion, Castor, Rigel, Tauro and the Canopus II, which launched a monkey into space and brought it back alive. Since the 1990s, Argentines have focused on civil institutionalization after the founding of the new agency, the National Commission for Space Activities (CONAE), and satellite development such as Lusat-1, Victor-1, SAC-A, SAC-B, SAC-C, SAC-D, and SAOCOM.

This paper analyzes the media perception and portrayal of the space stations from Europe and China in Argentina that are supported and sustained by geopolitical imagination. The questions I attempt to answer are the following: What are the geopolitical constructions in the media about space activities in the European and Chinese cases? What are the differences between how China and Europe are portrayed in the global discourse on these scientific-technological activities? I argue that an approach – from the point of view of government or the media – to foreign space stations on sovereign Argentinean soil, will face

double standards vis a vis the Chinese space station in Argentina, while favoring the Europeans and a strong pro-United States allies bias. China, as an emerging power, is not only a global player in the economy, and acquiring modern military capabilities. It is also achieving technological goals in niches that were traditionally those of other states, such as space technology. By making a space cooperation treaty as the deep space antenna with China, Argentina is making different foreign policy decisions as a traditional partner of the United States, provoking concerns about China and its global projection.

In order to answer those questions, I turn first to a comparative perspective where I describe the Chinese space facilities that are not a unique case in the national sovereign territory of Argentina. As a matter of fact, the European Union has set up a similar installation called Deep Space Antenna in Malargüe. Secondly, this article analyzes the discourses offered in newspapers of national circulation in the South American country: Clarín, La Nación, and Página/12 from 2007 to 2016, in which I found several geopolitical discourses regarding both antennas, the Chinese and the European. I study the domestic and foreign political discourses, and the information sources the media selected to explain the issues the facilities raised. Third and finally, the paper extracts some inferences regarding the interpretations of the roles of both antenna's owners from the primary sources, their interpretations of what the world is like, what Argentina's alliances should be, what the dangers of its current alliances are, how Europe or the Western world are or should be towards Argentina, and why China represents a national danger.

The selected period begins with the first government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) and ends with the midterm of the Mauricio Macri presidency (2015–2019). The reasoning behind this methodological selection is that the stations were built during the government of Cristina Fernández. Throughout the same presidential term several media reports were favorable to the European astronomical ground station. Years later, several publications warned about the construction of the Chinese facility, until halfway through Macri's period. The Kirchner governments can be characterized as progressive, while Macri's as right wing. In this sense, the alliances and international positions were very different: while the Kirchner presidency implemented a multilateral foreign policy, with a focus on the South American region and the emerging countries of the Global South, Macri's government favored a policy of strategic alliances with the industrialized Western powers, especially the United States and Europe.

When Kirchner came to power in Argentina (2003) there was a strong economic and social crisis, product of neoliberal policies adopted in the 1990s. The South American political context had shifted throughout the region towards more progressive governments, which favored geopolitical unity through the South American Union of Nations (UNASUR), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), the strengthening of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), and other economic and political integration initiatives, and bilateral agreements such a tighter relation with China. The political exhaustion of these governments, in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, or Venezuela, led to rising protests and a new historical political right-wing cycle in the 2010s.

From the empirical sources of selected media, the only one who endorsed Kirchner's governments was Página/12. The others were critical, endorsing Macri's policies since he took office. When the media published on the facilities of the European Agency, they highlighted the potential for national and world astronomy. On the other hand, regarding the facilities of the China Agency, the media highlighted the possibility of a military use, which could affect international security. Since the technologies are very similar, the comparison is worthy of academic inquiry, because the anti-Chinese bias is very evident.

An assessment about these perceptions by media and experts on representations of China, vis a vis Europe exposes a partisanship, regarding a political point of view of where

Argentina should be and what allies should have in the international arena, not about the technology itself. Both facilities are antennas capable to accomplish astronomical aims, maneuver spaceships, track space objects, and other complex activities. Indeed, in both cases such applications could be either military or civilian. Thus, the media advocating for Western technology but taking a militant stance against China could be explained by geopolitical interest behind the pages of a newspaper, the voice of a journalist, or a consultant expert chosen to present ideas that reaffirm this geopolitical bias. However, the purpose of this paper is not to track such a network of interest between media and political power, but to show that it explicitly exists.

I conclude that Argentina, as a Global South country, is faced with a political quagmire in which foreign powers' pressures on policy are twofold. While European installations are described positively in media discourse for the sources collected in the empirical material, the Chinese installations are seen as problematic and dangerous. This also shows the geopolitical status of China as a rising power. China is crossing the Rubicon towards Great Power Status, defying American hegemony, and Argentina is engaged in cooperation in a high-tech sensitive area; while the treaty is fully civilian there are several military use ramifications. The case of higher technological development such as space technology, due to its dual use nature and that is a high-tech manufacture, could be perceived as destabilizing by other actors either in a military or commercial way. Those issues pave the way for foreign interventions, discourses against the political course adopted, from powerful core states to mainstream intellectuals and the media.

Geopolitics and south

Countries are not imagined equally. Nations construct their self-image and others' images on the basis of different parameters, different imaginations. There is a geopolitical imagining of international agents who have a vision of the international system, its operation, and specifically, that of other countries. Different characteristics can be attached to certain states that are unlike others. There is a geopolitical discourse about how political and economic events are read, and how power is represented in space: to put it plainly, the way power is and the way it should be regarding space (Agnew & Cordbridge, 1995: 46–47; Agnew, 2005: 160). Geopolitics as the study of the geographical distribution of power among states, as well as the assumptions, designations, and geographical interpretations that intervene in politics in all geographical scales (Agnew, 2005: 159; Taylor & Flint, 2002: 416).

Critical geopolitical theory rejects geographical determinism and the prevailing prejudice found in classical geopolitics regarding the near abroad. Geopolitics is not only concerned with states, but with power structures producing spaces and places, territories and landscapes, environments and social agents. States are very difficult to understand within the complexity of the agents involved. Nevertheless, they provide geographic certainty. In Eudaily and Smith's words "whether sovereignty and the state are decoupled because the state is now problematic in a globalizing era that has made it less effectual, or if the state was never (or perhaps briefly) effectual is less important than what sovereignty outside the state might mean for geopolitical inquiry and for new forms of power" (Eudaily & Smith 2008: 313).

The geopolitical discourse is about "how the world, its order and its practices are read and written" (Agnew & Cordbridge, 1995: 46) in the unfolding of politics. The question of order is geopolitical because it refers to the geographical and hierarchical elements conditioning economic and political relations. Geopolitics is perspective among the political agents about trade, power, and diplomacy. Through its discourses, geopolitics also presents images of the global landscape using geographical descriptions.

Dalby points out a "longstanding concern in critical geopolitics about the construction of enemies" (2008: 424). Those discourses depicting and characterizing China as the

otherness, a danger to be aware of, are common in geopolitics. For example, the Southcom commander Admiral Craig Faller declared in United States Congress: “The Chinese Communist Party, with its insidious & corrupt influence, seeks regional & global economic dominance and its own version on rules-based International Order. China is quickly growing its influence here in our hemisphere” (Faller, March 16, 2021). The construction of China either as the “other” or as a “threat” drives the foreign policy of the United States and other Western countries (Agnew, 2010); it thus triggers conflicts in regions such as the South China Sea (McCoy, 2016; Vuković & Alfieri, 2020).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, several academic papers were published in English about cooperation between China and Latin American countries on different topics, but it was a recent work of Klinger (2018) that introduced a history of cooperation between Latin America and China, and others in Spanish (Frenkel & Blinder, 2020). Other critical works frame the United States Space Program as “manifest destiny” (Sage, 2008), reviewing the geopolitical constructions from media coverage on the American Mars program (Dittmer, 2010), or how European space facilities draw on the achievements of the classical European civilization and universal human development (Redfield, 2002). Regarding the construction of the image of China in the media and the international relations of this state, several works have been written on representations, identities, and interpretations (Hongshan & Zhaohui, 1998; Zhang, 2010, 2011; Wang & Shoemaker, 2011; Fengmin, 2020). Symbols, perceptions, and ideas are part of the imagery regarding technology and countries in international politics. Countries that are rule makers are also those that create sense, the manufacturers of imagination and legitimacy. They select who has the right to develop certain technologies and who does not. Should those who develop sensitive technologies be held responsible and be controlled by the same instruments? The interpretation about Chinese space policy on Argentinean soil is about power over the territory, and the way the media, intellectuals, and political actors interpret it. The mainstream point of view is on how the world works, the place of Argentina, and what the hidden intentions of an alien actor in space policy cooperation could be.

What is considered suitable for Argentina and the common good of the country from diplomacy and space cooperation? This is defined by the vision of the agent who exercises the political power of the state, in whose speeches, documents, and laws we can find its politics, and of other power actors such as the media, who build up the meaning for society. Several scholars analyzed the geopolitical imagination and its relation with discourses and political implications. Geopolitics, as a subdiscipline of geography, deals with discourses, codes, visions, representations, narratives, and other concepts pertaining to the importance of language in geopolitical practices (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006). Critical geopolitics started from a post-structuralist perspective inspired by the deconstructivist and postmodernist methodology of Foucault and Derrida (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998; Dodds, 2001). It has become an approach that questions the modern geopolitical imagination, focusing on how spatial discourse of the foreign policies of states has been constructed (Agnew, 2005). Ó Tuathail (2000) explains that as geopolitics generates comprehensive visions of world politics while proposing particular strategies for states to pursue against their rivals.

Regarding the geopolitical imagination on China, Latham (2001) describes the American view. He draws on the geopolitical imagination after the Cold War, and how China fits into it. Just as the Soviet Union was aggressive, militaristic, expansionist, and implacably hostile to the United States, China – after the confrontation with the Soviets – emerged as the new “other.” China “was routinely represented in policy, media, and academic circles as being unable to grasp or play by the rules of civilized international society . . . Undemocratically contemptuous of universal human rights; irresponsible; dangerous; irredentist; militaristic; childishly nationalistic; technologically backward; and willfully blind to America’s benign stabilizing role in the Asia Pacific region” (Latham, 2001: 144). While this paper examines

geopolitics in terms of representations in the media of Chinese space policy intentions, it is observed that this state has always been characterized as a global danger.

Flint argues that to justify foreign policy “a sense of place had to be disseminated to the public, both the ‘goodness’ and morality of one’s own country, but also the threat and depravity of other countries” (Flint, 2006: 24). Such theory draws geographical images of the world within their own place-specific settings. Geopolitics is the construction of geopolitical visions and “the representation of geographical space” (Dodds, 2005: 1). Therefore, there are three types of geopolitical practices according to Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998: 5): popular (mass media, cinema, cartoons, novels), practical (foreign policy, bureaucracy, political institutions), and formal (strategic institutes, think tanks, and academia). The purpose of this paper is to analyze popular geopolitics through the lens of formal geopolitical practice. Therefore, there are different geopolitical representations that are produced about the place of an “us” and the place of “others.” In this sense, metaphors like proliferant state, developing country, or technology frontier involve meanings where technological issues explain a hierarchical order. Hence, who has the right to develop, which states are trustworthy to share technology or to cooperate with are insights attached to such metaphors.

Background

Following an analysis of the empirical material of the media, I found several depictions of how China is represented as a danger not only to Argentina but to the world, threatening the military status of South America, and raising concerns on the danger of possible uses of space technology; how Global South countries are regarded as periphery or Third World –unable to take sovereign decisions knowing the dangers attached – implying not taking steps in influential areas, and being detached from the rules of core states. This article offers a geopolitical angle on communication sciences but its contributions to mass media studies and the political agenda cannot be avoided. The concept of agenda setting explains how the media exert influence on the different topics of public agenda, assuming that the media do not reflect reality, but shape it (McCombs, 2006). Furthermore, the media frame issues in order to influence how audiences understood a story, highlighting what is important about news, framing an agenda (Weaver, 2007; Lee et al., 2008; McLeod & Shah, 2014) and how the scientific topics and countries are regarded (Vara, 2007; Hurtado, 2015).

Law 25,775 promulgated on September 12, 2003 by President Néstor Kirchner, two years after the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and a few months after the start of the Iraq War, authorized the installation of the European Union observation antenna in Malargüe, Mendoza. It said: “Approve the Agreement signed with the European Space Agency referring to Space Cooperation for Peaceful Use.” To enable communication with space from Earth, it is technically necessary to have three antennas in different and distant points of the planet, and the Andean location of Mendoza was optimal for this purpose. The antenna installed in Malargüe (DSA 3 or Deep Space Antenna 3) is a 35-meter satellite ground station for communication with spacecraft in deep space (European Space Agency web). The law itself explicitly states that the cooperation agreement is for peaceful uses. It also states: “Each Party shall make available to the other the technical and scientific information obtained during the course of experiments or joint projects” (Infoleg Law 25775). On the other hand, Article 5 establishes the privileges and immunity the European Agency will have, including legal status in the Argentine territory, granting “the privileges and immunity provided for in the Convention on privileges and immunity of specialized agencies, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations,” including tax exemption (Infoleg Law 25775). It is a civil agency linked to the armed forces. The European Space agency is made up of 22 European countries. The Institution’s founding document states that it aims to develop and carry out space projects that, through cooperation, obtain more important results than those achieved

by each individual state. The member countries are Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Romania, Sweden and Switzerland (European Space Agency web 2). It is important to highlight that countries such as Germany, France, or the United Kingdom have broad technological and institutional trajectories in this area, with agencies that have been operational for decades.

The Chinese National Space Administration is the agency responsible for the ultra-terrestrial program. It works under State Administration for Science, Technology and



Figure 1 European Space Agency Deep Space 3, Malargue – Mendoza.

Source: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/ciencia/conae/centros-y-estaciones/estacion-ds3-malargue>



Figure 2 China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General (CLTC), Bajada del Agrio, Neuquén.

Source: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/ciencia/conae/centros-y-estaciones/estacion-cltc-conae-neuquen>

Industry for National Defense. The agreement with the People's Republic of China, signed under President Cristina Kirchner in 2014 is very similar to the one signed with Europe. It states in its Article 1 that the parties agree to cooperate for the construction, establishment, and operation of ground monitoring, command and data acquisition facilities, including an antenna for the investigation of distant space in the territory of the Province of Neuquén. The agreement specifies that the facilities will be built and operated by China. In Article 2 referring to tax deductions, it states that all operations are exempt from taxes as well as customs charges (Infoleg Law 27123). It states clearly that the base will be built and operated by the Chinese, just like the agreement with Europe, since Argentina lacks the technology to do it. The other safeguard that must be mentioned is found in the text of the agreement, it invokes the "Treaty on the principles that should govern the activities of States in outer space, including the Moon and other Celestial Bodies" which is absolute regarding the peaceful use of space, Argentina and China are both signatories (Infoleg Law 27123). As is shown in Figures 1 and 2, both space stations are similar antennas, placed on high ground, and their astronomical uses are also alike.

Imagining civilization

Out of the four newspapers selected, in the 2007–2016 period, only one was more amicable to the policies of the Kirchner administration: *Página/12*. The paper had a critical stance towards Macri throughout his administration. The rest, at different times during the period, have generally disagreed with the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015). When the technological milestone was successfully achieved, and the Philae Lander landed on comet 67P, the European Space Agency called the event "a great step for human civilization" (The Guardian, 2014) and this message was replicated throughout Argentine media. A comment in *Clarín* read: "the European Space Agency informed the National Commission of Space Activities (CONAE), its Argentine counterpart, that it chose the town of Malargüe, Mendoza, to install a support station for interplanetary missions" (Clarín, 2009a). The commentary also said the station had the benefit of following the robotic missions to the Mars and Venus (Clarín, 2009a).

Another piece in the newspaper with the largest national circulation in Argentina pointed out "The European Space Agency (ESA) chose Argentina to install a support station for its interplanetary missions. It will be in Malargüe, south of Mendoza. Thus, in two years, a 'monstrous' antenna of 600 tons, 35 meters in diameter and over 40 meters high will stand in a corner of that desert area" (Clarín, 2009b). The article also specified that it was another milestone in Argentine space development, and highlighted the joint work between Argentines and Europeans. It stood out in the information that the Malargüe station would be there to support the deep space exploration mission, in addition to other interplanetary missions.

A note from a science journalist from *La Nación* newspaper, Nora Bär, reported "ESA was looking for a place in the southern hemisphere with particular atmospheric conditions, human resources and infrastructure" (La Nación, 2012a). Twenty sites were evaluated and in the end they chose Malargüe, taking into account several factors, the purely technological and the available infrastructure, the ease of access and communication, and the specialists they could count on, Bär said. Another article in the same newspaper said that it is "the greatest astrophysical project in history" and that an elite club can be accessed in space exploration for interplanetary exploration (La Nación, 2009). The Argentine scientific community have the right to use 10% of the useful time of the antenna in their own research.

Before the inauguration, *La Nación* reported – as good news – that "the DSA 3 Space Antenna of the European Space Agency (ESA) is installed in the Mendoza city of Malargüe, it will be officially inaugurated tomorrow by the Federal Planning Minister, Julio De Vido, and Governor Francisco Pérez" (La Nación, 2012b). The good news explained in block letters

that the antenna, together with those installed in Spain and Australia, are the only ones in the world that have the most advanced technology for monitoring probes and satellites.

In addition, “The station will support the European agency’s space programs in deep space and allow Argentine scientists to conduct radio astronomy studies on celestial bodies and various astrophysical phenomena from their emissions of electromagnetic radiation” (La Nación, 2012c). Another subsequent news item highlighted the auspicious scientific advances of the year, remarking, “The European Space Agency (ESA) opened a few days ago in Malargüe, in the province of Mendoza, one of the three radio astronomical antennas of the world for monitoring probes and satellites. The other two are located in Spain and Australia. The town of Mendoza was selected among 70 other candidate cities because of its height, climate and low level of interference to transmit information. The station will also allow Argentine scientists to carry out radio astronomy studies” (La Nación, 2012c). Mainstream Argentine journalism, one can observe, was clearly acquiescent with the possibility of international cooperation with Europe, the historical opportunity for cooperation in science and technology, and the benefits of the installation of the space station.

The newspaper *Página/12* also published several items on the space station of the European continent. The first one details: “There are 23 countries that are part of this association, which gives it a wider spectrum and greater significance to participate together with one of the most important space agencies in the world. Argentina is no stranger to these technologies, so it has its own space agency, created in order to have an active role in the peaceful use of outer space” (*Página/12*, 2012a). It went on to state the benefits for economic activity, monitoring of natural resources, and technical development. Another article recounted the technical details of the antenna, the probe, and the purposes of the space mission to the comet, which would seek the presence of water in the form of ice. “From that station we also work with several ESA and NASA missions, such as the Mars probe, one on Venus and the Gaia probe . . . We have also supported a NASA mission that it’s called Juno, a probe that is going to Jupiter” (*Página/12*, 2014).

One of the articles detailed the projects that would make use of the station: “The three DSA stations are equipped with parabolic antennas of 35 m in diameter that provide the increased range and speed of data transmission required for current and future exploration missions, such as Mars Express, Venus Express, Rosetta, Herschel, Planck, Gaia, Euclid, Bepi Comombo, Solar Orbiter and Juice” (*Página/12*, 2012b). Another one titled “Advanced Technology in Argentina” (*Página/12*, 2012c) detailed the features of the choice of our country for the installation of facilities, among which local technological capabilities stand out as a significant factor, in addition to the geographical ones.

The only national television show that issued a journalistic report on the antenna of the European Space Agency was *Científicos Industria Argentina* (2016). In this special presentation, the antenna was shown, and the scientists who work there – all Argentines – were introduced, as well as the hardware, the antenna itself, and the facilities. The station manager explains the operation, the purposes, and other details about what happens in Malargüe. Other institutional broadcasts on video can also be seen on the ESA website and YouTube channels. They show the construction, assembly, and purpose of the antenna. The Chinese venture on the other hand is more opaque; there is a lack of institutional information, leaving room for speculation.

Suspicious China

The Chinese station is very similar to the European one. However press analysis has raised all suspicions, warning alarms, and warnings of militarization, concerning Chinese participation as a financier of different strategic companies around the world, including Europe. When the journalist who interviewed him asked if the space station was an Argentine novelty or it

was a common practice of the Chinese government, the respondent replied that China has similar antennas elsewhere, including Africa, and that Argentina had been chosen due to Earth rotation techniques to monitor their space missions. He also stressed that the United States and Europe had similar antennas. It is acceptable that Argentines can cooperate with this venture but that “the issue is with the use the base will be put to. The case of the European base in Malargüe is completely civil. I think that one of the issues behind the Chinese project is that whoever is going to manage that station is a company that is linked to the Chinese army” (Infobae, 2015).

Indeed, the most important television news program in Argentina – Jorge Lanata – broadcast on Channel 13, whose characteristic was a very strong opposition to the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, presented a program dedicated to the Asian country’s station. With the hash tag #PatagoniaChina the program was set around an editorial stating that China was taking over Patagonia. Lanata told a story that starts in Neuquén’s provincial airport and goes 300 kilometers to Bajada del Agrio, and reaches “China”². Thus, in the edition, in an interview with a police officer who tried to access the ground where the construction of the facilities is located, Lanata asked the policeman “for the Chinese military base.” The television report, based on the statements of a retired Argentine diplomat, noted that it is striking that this was approved in the National Congress after the station had begun to be built “by geostrategic scope” (Periodismo para Todos, 2015). The report focuses on the agreement granted for use of the land for 50 years free of any tax – which is similar in the European station – but also warns about secret clauses, which were denied in different requests for information (Chequeado, February 10 2015). Mr. Lanata’s broadcast is dismissive of the use of 10% of the time that Argentina will have.

With the allegations that different authorities of the Province of Neuquén were ignorant about the legal nature of the project, what laws applied, who operated the station, the television report overlooked that different media had already published the agreement online, so these answers were already available, as evidenced by previous official publications (Boletín Embajada China, May 2015.; Cámara de Diputados de la Nación, 2014). To reinforce the argument with academic authority, the report (Periodismo Para Todos, 2015) interviewed Robert Evan Ellis, a professor of Latin American studies at US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute. A self-defined Argentine expert on the subject is also consulted, to what the dual use of a Chinese military base in Argentina might mean. However, other experts with a different view, of China itself or of Argentina, were not consulted who might have introduced a different assessment about the implications of the issue, and the weight of a military voice of the country concerned about the expansion of Chinese power, United States. The link between the Chinese Space Agency and the military is also emphasized in the television broadcast, and the edition shows a Chinese military parade along with its technology. The same report warns of a possible military attack by an enemy power of China in Argentine Patagonia. In conclusion, the report states that the country has gotten into a “geopolitical mess, giving away sovereignty to a foreign power” (Periodismo para Todos, 2015).

The title of an opinion article published in the most important newspaper in Argentina, by Representative Miguel Angel Toma, former head of intelligence services, wondered: “China: scientific agreement or sovereign surrender?” (Clarín, 2014). Toma writes that the Ministry of Defense was not consulted on the possible implications of this treaty. In addition, he reflected that there was a growing Chinese presence in the Argentine economy and financial sector and that the scientific and military component had now been added, which can be interpreted as a transfer of sovereignty as the counterpart of financial assistance. “Equally dangerous on the strategic level is the risk of reversing the “peace zone” situation in our region, placing it at the center of the geopolitical dispute that characterizes the 21st century between the Western bloc and China, in which no one can ensure that it does not entail the risk of competition and confrontation at the military level” (Clarín, 2014).

With reference to controversy, an article published in Clarín indicated that according to the authorities of the Province of Neuquén, all Chinese personnel would be of a technical nature, and that they would create jobs in the region, not only linked to construction, but to tourism. Additionally, the property would have links with the national space agency, the University of Comahue, and the National Technological University (Clarín, 2015a). Another item on the same day assured that everything would be operational in 2016, described the ambitious space plan the Chinese have, and the technical characteristics behind the choice of Bajada del Agrio. The details of the agreement were also listed, as similar to the European station already in operation, and the questions that the installation of astronomical facilities raises in Argentine politics (Clarín, 2015b). The note ended with the comments from an academic from the Berry College, in the United States: “Dr. John Hickman, a researcher on space policy issues . . . said: ‘Civil and military programs in each of the space powers are linked, but in none as much as in China. Every Chinese space installation is effectively a military installation’.” In addition, the expert added: “The Chinese geopolitical strategy includes effort to attract subordinate allies, and cooperation in space is part of that search” (Clarín, 2015b).

Further information in this newspaper highlights that the official Congress Representatives of the Kirchner government hastened the debate for the approval of the space cooperation project with China among the other economic projects, which continues to be considered controversial. It gives an account of the position stated by officials – which highlights the benefits of cooperating with China and the local advances of recent years in science and technology – and of the opponents who question direct contracting, corruption, and other issues they consider obscure. The note says that Deputy Margarita Stolbizer stated in her speech that the agreement with China is crude and represents a mortgage for the country, and that the government negotiates millionaire agreements with countries that do not have norms for the prevention and sanction of corruption (Clarín, 2015c). The most interesting part of the article is what the then Representatives of the opposition and later Minister of National Security and Minister of Defense of the government of President Macri say. “We have doubts about the presence of military personnel,” said the macrista Patricia Bullrich, in reference to the space station. On that point, the radical Julio Martínez demanded to include in the agreement “that Chinese military will not arrive to the country” (Clarín, 2015c).

Finally, other subsequent news highlighted that the agreement with China was approved (Clarín, 2015d). According to official Kirchner government voices that Clarín newspaper collected, the agreements approved with China will allow in the short term to improve the trade imbalance with China, modernize the industry, increase its competitiveness, and add value to exports, while the opposition voices pointed out that there is a loss of local control over the economy from the agreement, with postponement of the national industry at the hands of Chinese capital. These voices argued about lack of transparency and a neocolonial link (Clarín, 2015d). Finally, an article basically replicated Lanata’s report on Channel 13 (Clarín, 2015e), which belongs to the same Clarín multimedia group.

The newspaper La Nación published the statements of different sectors of the Argentine and Chinese government that seek peace of mind regarding the potential military use of the Chinese project (La Nación, 2014a). Another one from the same year already begins to speak of mystery, and highlights the issue of secret agreements signed with the Asian country, which are a matter of distrust on the part of Argentine political and military opponents due to the supposed secret or reserved clauses, and the possible warlike use of the facilities (La Nación, 2014b). This is also highlighted by further information published by the same newspaper, in which it complains about the possible military use, whose purpose would be the guidance and control of missiles, and the lack of any kind of control by the Argentine state on the Chinese base (La Nación, 2014c). Subsequently, an informative piece highlights that “a group of senators of the party in government and the full opposition

became the stone in the shoe for relations between China and Argentina. In the face of a wave of criticism and signs of concern, the upper house held back the approval of an international treaty with Beijing for the establishment of a lunar sighting space station that would be set up on a 200-hectare site in Neuquén” (La Nación, 2014d). Additionally, it is reported that Chinese diplomacy requested private meetings with members of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Argentine Congress to get an explanation of the reasons for their opposition to the project.

Several months later, the newspaper printed that there were signs of China and Russia continuing with projects that the author calls controversial, criticizing national bilateral businesses with both powers. On the Chinese project it notes that “the National Commission for Space Activities (CONAE), which depends on the Presidency, confirms that in the coming days it will begin to be installed at the Bajada del Agrio space station in Neuquén. This satellite antenna operates in bands 9 (UHF) UIT, band 10 (SHF) UIT and band 11 (EHF) UIT” (La Nación, 2015a) and which would be carried out and run by foreign personnel. The Russian-Argentine cooperation project is the installation of nuclear power plants with Russian technology. These two countries cooperating with Argentina causes conflicts and suspicion.

A story after Mr. Lanata’s television report, mentioned above, highlighted the government’s words regarding what they considered to be a false argument based on the television show (La Nación, 2015b). Finally, under President Mauricio Macri, the news report indicates that the president will explicitly ask for guarantees of the civil use of the Bajada del Agrio antenna. “Mauricio Macri’s intention is not to nullify the treaty that Cristina Kirchner signed with Beijing and that was ratified by Congress in January 2015. On the contrary, the President instructed his appointed ambassador to China, Diego Guelar, and Chancellor Susana Malcorra to negotiate in good terms with the government of Xi Jinping the changes in the treaty, with the idea of including a specific clause that demolishes the axis of the controversy” (La Nación, 2016a). A final article in this newspaper reports that Argentine Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra got the corresponding signature from her Chinese counterpart (La Nación, 2016b). Indeed, the concern regarding non-military use comes from the history of the construction of the national space policy itself, in parallel with foreign policy: after the cancellation of the project Missile Condor II, the Argentines created a civil space agency in the 1990s, and ensured all projects would avoid any military involvement (Blinder, 2014; Blinder, 2015).

The newspaper *Página/12* highlighted precisely the issues related to the investment projects that the People’s Republic of China would carry out in Argentina. These projects were the reason President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner traveled to see her Chinese counterpart, in order to formally sign the agreements. Different investment projects were considered. The newspaper underlined the construction of nuclear power plants, mining, telecommunications, dams, finance, and of course, space cooperation (*Página/12*, 2015a). Another article points out that there is a fear of China, and that that fear is unfounded. Citing the governor of Neuquén, the information explains that it is a project for civil exploration purposes that will benefit the country and the province itself (*Página/12*, 2015b).

Final remarks

The construction of how Europe and China are perceived in matters of foreign relations, technological cooperation, and intentions – in the words of the primary sources I used – is hidden by prejudices and imaginings that derive from power constructions by sovereign nations on strategic issues. Indeed, cooperating, relating, or allying with one or the other has geostrategic implications. Although ESA or NASA are civilian agencies, neither is purely civilian, and uniquely for peaceful research. Europe, like the United States, has an important

military-industrial complex whose companies produce – through a system of state incentives and subsidiary private companies – both for the war industry and for the open market (Paarlberg, 2004; Pestre, 2005; Ruttan, 2006). Why should the Chinese agency be any different? According to the perceptions of those cited in this paper, the Chinese counterpart is linked to the army, different from the Europeans. Geopolitics creates images and is a way to see the world. And as it was in the Cold War in the 20th century with the Soviets, today the picture drawn is a China with a hidden agenda, an opaque black box with military intentions. It is true that the People’s Republic of China should have a communication policy more committed to the language and cultural knowledge of Western countries such as Argentina. In the Lanata’s program cited above, when the report shows journalists on the television channel asking about the Neuquén space station, the person in charge of responding on the part of China answered in Spanish, no, because “it is not convenient.” Convenient in Spanish means useful, timely, or helpful. Perhaps the spokesperson who used that word meant timely, but there is no additional explanation and it can be interpreted as something that must be hidden. Quite the contrary, the Mendoza antenna is operated by Argentines, it allows visitors, and has shown the technology available in the facilities. There are many reasons that can explain why it is managed by specialized Argentine personnel and why they allow access. The truth is that Argentina has a long tradition of cooperation with the European Space Agency and with individuals of each European country, as well as with the powerful agency of the United States. With China everything is new. There is a lack of greater exchange, language, joint university studies, and greater participation in projects to generate greater common understanding, knowledge, and trust. This should include media and cultural devices to show China in an equitable way. The sources consulted show an almost unanimous bias against China, compared to Europe.

Table 1 shows that, over several decades, Argentine space cooperation has increased. Cooperation with the United States or Europe has not decreased due to the inclusion of China to the list. This suggests that Argentina, against what the media argues, does not seek an alignment with China (with consequences for local and global military security), but rather cooperation with a diverse array of strategic partners. Argentina, a Global South State with an autonomous trajectory of space development, acquired technology from a rising power, is perceived as disruptive, generating tensions with core countries – her traditional allies – United States and Europe. In a global scenario with multiple powers, China was an option to consider for partnership. This was understood by the Kirchner administrations, which first made the agreement with Europe and then with China. The latter was resisted by different political players who conveyed their concerns, their worldview and imagination of the other through the local press. Thus, the Malargüe facilities are a contribution to universal knowledge; and those of Bajada del Agrio are portrayed as a supposed geostrategic danger for a country whose elites and organic intellectuals who can only imagine one world, the one they know (and have contributed to create), only one possible world.

Table 1 From the 1970s to the 2020s, in gray, Argentina’s main space bilateral cooperation with the United States (NASA), European countries, or agencies, and China. Based on Blinder (2014)

	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
Cooperation with NASA							
Cooperation with Europe							
Cooperation with China							

The media and other political actors such as academia and diplomacy build a common understanding (Gramsci, 2000: 163). Foreign policy is also defined by the country's institutional diplomacy, just as university sectors produce expert knowledge that makes up the good sense cited. These organic intellectuals see the Europeans as peaceful and responsible members of the international community, while the Chinese constitute a doubt, a danger from a geopolitical point of view. With the Kirchner governments, this was presented as an issue of development and cooperation, in general contrary to the construction of meaning propitiated by the media, while for the Macri government, in line with the postulated by those who warned about China, it promotes a strategy of greater control. Meanwhile, Argentina has two space stations in its territory, positioning the country as a global player in science and technology, which also revalues the provincial territories for global astronomy and space missions.

Notes

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² Suggesting sovereign Chinese territory on Argentine soil.

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