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**• Article •**

## **Analysis of Argentina's role in the MERCOSUR (2019-2023)**

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**Abstract:** This study employs role theory as a framework for analyzing Argentina's foreign policy within MERCOSUR during the Fernández administration (2019-2023). Through a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interpretation with quantitative frequency analysis, the study examines 71 official speeches delivered by the president and two foreign ministers. It identifies 19 national role conceptions, including 6 important and 13 context-specific roles, and constructs a typology that reflects the hierarchical and dynamic structure of Argentina's national roles within MERCOSUR, and then refines Argentina's fundamental role as a defender of regional unity and an advocate of subregional integration. The study further explores the internal and external drivers of role formation—ideological orientation, domestic political conflict, economic dependency, inter-member disputes, and global geopolitical pressures—through the lens of role expectation and role conflict. By systematically applying role theory to intra-regional dynamics in Latin America, this study expands the empirical scope of role theory beyond its traditional focus on global powers and contributes to the theoretical understanding of role negotiation in regional integration contexts.

**Keywords:** Role Theory; Argentina; MERCOSUR; Foreign Policy; Fernández Government

### **1. Introduction**

Argentina has long drawn significant attention from both academic and political circles. Characterized by cyclical shifts in power between left-wing and right-wing factions, the country's political landscape resembles a pendulum, with frequent ideological realignments that challenge the consistency of its foreign policy. As a result, Argentina's external behavior varies across administrations, prompting ongoing scholarly revision and reassessment.

Mercado Común del Sur (known as MERCOSUR), co-founded by Argentina and Brazil in 1991, remains the regional organization most closely associated with Argentina. As South America's largest and most influential economic integration bloc, MERCOSUR originally included Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. The election of President Alberto Fernández in 2019 disrupted the foreign

policy consensus established under his predecessor, Mauricio Macri, altering Argentina's approach to regional integration. These shifts provoked tensions with other member states and raised critical questions: What roles has Argentina assumed within MERCOSUR during the Fernández era? What roles does it seek to play? How are these role aspirations reflected in its foreign policy discourse and behavior? And what internal and external factors have shaped the evolution of Argentina's national roles within MERCOSUR?

## **2. Role Theory and Factors Influencing the Formation of National Roles**

Role theory is an essential tool for the analysis of foreign policies. It has developed rich theoretical concepts to explain a country's foreign behavior. Among them, the concept of national role refers to a country's self-perception of its role and function in the international system, and a country's behavior depends on the country's (especially policymakers') perception of its national role. Role theory accommodates both material and ideational factors. It can directly influence a country's foreign policy behavior and focus on the interaction between countries or between a country and the international system in specific situations.

### **2.1 Connotation and Evolution of the Concept of National Roles**

In 1970, the international relations scholar Kalevi J. Holsti formally and systematically introduced the concept of the national role into the study of international relations and foreign policy analysis. In 1987, Stephen G. Walker comprehensively expanded this framework by integrating role theory more explicitly into the study of foreign policy, further exploring its relationship with the broader international system. In 2012, Latin American political scholar Cameron Thies noted that most research on national roles before the 21st century focused on the concept's origin and its implications for foreign policy behavior. Since the beginning of the 21st century, role theory has evolved rapidly. It has expanded beyond theoretical validity or role categorization questions to practical applications across regions. Initially centered on the United States and Europe, the theory has been increasingly applied to emerging powers such as China and Russia and, more recently, to less developed regions, including Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia.

### **2.2 Development of Factors Influencing the Formation of National Roles**

Holsti proposed that a country's role behavior depends on policymakers' perceptions of their country's international function, which are influenced by two primary factors. The first is domestic structural determinants such as geographic location, national resources, socio-economic needs, etc. The second is external factors such as the institutional structure of the international system, shared values, legal norms, etc. Since the 1980s, scholars have increasingly focused on the causes of national roles. Naomi B. Wish suggested categorizing these causes by dimensions such as national status, motivational orientation, and specific issue areas. Walker defined role theory as a "middle-range theory" in international relations, highlighting the influence of individual and group beliefs, identities, and

perceptions in shaping foreign policy decisions. Hedley Bull further analyzed the motivations behind role behavior from political, economic, security, and systemic perspectives. In more recent studies, scholars have increasingly employed qualitative methodologies to explore the formation of roles, examining the impact of public opinion and political culture on foreign policy behavior. Chinese scholar Pang Xun proposed that the drivers of a country's foreign policy should be examined through both internal and external lenses. External factors include a country's perceived status in the international system and how it believes others perceive it. Internal factors include national identity, political ideology, and expressions of nationalism.

Building on this foundation, this study examines the formation of national roles in Argentina using the dual framework of internal and external factors. Internal factors encompass national geography, resources, socio-economic needs, domestic values and characteristics, political ideology, nationalism, public opinion, national security concerns, and structural economic vulnerabilities. External factors include the global power structure, Argentina's status in the international system, and direct and indirect pressures from other countries.

### **3. The Positioning of Argentina's National Role in MERCOSUR from 2019 to 2023**

#### **3.1 Textual Analysis of Leaders' Speeches**

##### **3.1.1 Selection of Research Samples and Methodology**

This section investigates how Argentina's national role conceptions were articulated through high-level political discourse during president Alberto Fernández's administration. The analysis is based on a systematic examination of public speeches and official statements made by president Fernández and two foreign ministers<sup>1</sup>: Felipe Solá (December 10, 2019-September 18, 2021) and Santiago Cafiero (December 20, 2021-December 10, 2023). As Argentina's top-level representatives on MERCOSUR affairs, their discourse is crucial for understanding the country's role positioning.

This study prioritizes public-facing texts closely related to MERCOSUR, including those delivered at MERCOSUR summits or addressing relevant member and associated countries. A total of 31 public speech texts by the president were collected from the official website of the Presidential Palace and categorized into four groups: domestic addresses, speeches at MERCOSUR summits, speeches at intercontinental forums, and joint statements with relevant countries. In parallel, 40 speeches by the foreign ministers were obtained from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website and categorized into unilateral statements, bilateral/multilateral meetings, speeches at MERCOSUR summits, and speeches at intercontinental forums.

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<sup>1</sup> *Treaty of Asunción*: Article 12 The Presidency of the Council shall be exercised by rotation among the States Parties and in alphabetical order, for periods of six months. The meetings of the Council shall be coordinated by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and other Ministers or authorities at the ministerial level may be invited to participate in them. Article 13 The Common Market Group is the executive body of the Common Market and shall be coordinated by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

The first analytical step involved identifying paragraphs and sentences reflecting national role conceptions. Guided by role theory, each role was categorized in light of Argentina's international context and domestic circumstances. Each speech was treated as a unit of analysis, and the frequency of each identified role was quantitatively recorded. A dendrogram was then generated to visualize the distribution of role types. Finally, through statistical comparison, Argentina's fundamental national roles in MERCOSUR from 2019 to 2023 were determined.

### 3.1.2 President Fernández's Concepts of National Roles

Between 2019 and 2023, president Alberto Fernández articulated 18 distinct national role conceptions in his public speeches.

**Table 1:** President Fernández's National Role Conceptions from 2019 to 2023 (by Frequency)

No	Role Types	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
1	Bastion of revolution-liberator			1		3	4
2	Sub-regional leader			2	1	4	7
3	Sub-regional protector		1	1		2	4
4	Active independent			1		1	2
5	Liberation supporter					1	1
6	Anti-imperialist agent			1			1
7	Defender of the faith			1	1	2	4
8	Mediator-integrator				1	3	4
9	Regional-subsystem collaborator	1	4	4	2	4	15
10	Faithful ally	1	1	2	1	7	12
11	Independent			1			1
12	Example			1	1	1	3
13	Protectee		1	2		4	7
14	Defender of democracy		3	2	1	4	10
15	Defender of international norms/laws		1	1			2
16	Advocate of integrated openness		1	2	1	2	6
17	Defender of multilateralism		1		1	4	6
18	Defender of human rights		2	2		3	7

Note: Considering that the same role may be repeatedly emphasized in a particular speech, the solution adopted in this article is to regard a text as a whole, and if the exact role appears multiple times in a single speech, it is only counted once per speech.

### 3.1.3 Foreign Ministers Solá and Cafiero's Concepts of National Roles

Between 2019 and 2023, foreign ministers Felipe Solá and Santiago Cafiero expressed 16 distinct national roles conceptions in their public speeches.

**Table 2:** Foreign Ministers' National Role Conceptions from 2019 to 2023 (by Frequency)

No	Role Types	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
1	Bastion of revolution-liberator					1	1
2	Sub-Regional leader		5	1			6
3	Active independent		1	1			2
4	Liberation supporter					1	1
5	Defender of the faith			1	1		2
6	Mediator-integrator		4			1	5
7	Regional-subsystem collaborator		12	6	6	3	27
8	Faithful ally		4	2		1	7
9	Example			1			1
10	Protectee		3	4	1		8
11	Defender of democracy			2			2
12	Defender of international norms/laws		1	1			2
13	Advocate of integrated openness		3	1	1	1	6
14	Defender of multilateralism		2	1	1		4
15	Supporter of trade protectionism			5	2	1	8
16	Defender of Human Rights		3	2	1	1	7

### 3.2 Types and Characteristics of Argentina's National Roles

A country's self-ascribed role can vary across behavioral contexts and policy domains. These roles are generally categorized into two types: important roles and context-specific roles. Important roles are foundational, stable over time, and closely tied to a country's core identity. Once confronted with challenges or doubts, they will impact the actor's overall perception, decision-making, and behavior. In contrast, context-specific roles are performed in response to particular circumstances, issue areas, or foreign policy domains, and often support or reinforce the important roles.

From the textual analysis of speeches by the Argentine president and foreign ministers between 2019 and 2023, 19 distinct national roles within MERCOSUR were identified. While these roles are analytically independent, they remain interconnected. In the president's speech texts, the cumulative frequency of the 18 national roles reached 96 instances, with an average of 5.33 and a median of 4. Roles that appeared more than 5<sup>2</sup> times can be considered important roles, including: *sub-regional*

<sup>2</sup> The actual comparison object is 5.33.

*leader, regional-subsystem collaborator, faithful ally, protectee, defender of democracy, advocate of integrated openness, defender of multilateralism, and defender of human rights.*

In the foreign ministers' speech texts, 16 national roles appeared a total of 89 times, with an average frequency of 5.56 and a median of 4.5. Roles that appeared more than 5<sup>3</sup> times can be counted as the important roles recognized by the foreign ministers. Therefore, there are also 8 important roles in the concepts of the national role of the two foreign ministers: *sub-regional leader, regional-subsystem collaborator, faithful ally, protectee, defender of democracy, advocate of integrated openness, defender of multilateralism, and defender of human rights.*

After synthesizing the two datasets, 6 overlapping important roles emerge: *sub-regional leader, regional-subsystem collaborator, faithful ally, supporter of trade protectionism, defender of democracy, advocate of integrated openness, and defender of human rights.* Alongside these, 13 roles are categorized as context-specific. Based on these six core roles, Argentina's fundamental role within MERCOSUR can be defined as: Argentina firmly defends the unity of MERCOSUR and actively promotes MERCOSUR's integration.

#### **4. Analysis of the Factors Influencing the Formation of Argentina's Fundamental National Role**

In light of MERCOSUR's historical evolution, this section explores the formation of Argentina's national role through both internal and external dimensions. Internal elements include domestic political dynamics and inter-member state role conflicts, while external factors encompass regional and global pressures that impact Argentina's strategic choices. Argentina's national role conception, in this context, both shapes and is shaped by its foreign policy decisions. Thus, this section focuses on direct factors influencing the country's role positioning.

##### **4.1 Internal Factors within MERCOSUR**

###### **4.1.1 Domestic Influences in Argentina**

Throughout Fernández's presidency, Argentina experienced overlapping economic crises, political instability, judicial investigations, the COVID-19 pandemic, the global repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine war, and a historic drought. Upon taking office in December 2019, Fernández inherited an economy in collapse, largely attributed to the policy failures of his predecessor, Mauricio Macri. By the end of his term in October 2023, Argentina's inflation rate had soared to 142.7%, marking the highest level since 2011.

###### **4.1.1.1 Ideologies of the President and the Ruling Party**

Prior to Fernández's election, Latin America experienced a "Pink Tide" during which leftist governments predominated. However, by 2019, the regional political landscape had shifted dramatically.

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<sup>3</sup> The actual comparison object is 5.56.

Conservative administrations held power in Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and Bolivia, while in the United States, the presidency of Donald Trump introduced additional ideological tension.

Fernández, a former chief of staff under presidents Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, maintained a left-leaning orientation and aimed to revive a progressive Latin American diplomacy. From the outset of his campaign, Fernández actively engaged with leftist networks, including joining the Grupo de Puebla and publicly expressing solidarity with regional leaders such as Evo Morales and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

During the 2019 Bolivian political crisis, Fernández emerged as a staunch supporter of Evo Morales. When Morales faced threats to his life from the interim government of Jeanine Áñez, Fernández played a critical role in organizing his asylum. On one hand, he appealed to the Áñez administration to honor the right to international protection; on the other hand, he orchestrated Morales's evacuation route by coordinating with Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Peruvian president Martín Vizcarra to facilitate safe diplomatic passage via Peru to Mexico. Simultaneously, he engaged with Paraguayan president Mario Abdo Benítez to secure Paraguay as an alternative route. When Luis Arce won Bolivia's presidential election, Fernández personally accompanied Morales on his return to Bolivia. From beginning to end, Argentina, and Fernández in particular, acted as a *faithful ally* of Bolivia.

In Brazil, Fernández also displayed ideological alignment with the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. In July 2019, while still a presidential candidate, he visited Lula in prison. Lula's victory over Jair Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections was perceived by Fernández as a political breakthrough. Upon assuming office, Lula pledged comprehensive political and economic support for Argentina, including assistance with its ongoing debt crisis. Lula's return was widely viewed as a catalyst for the renewal of Fernández's vision of deeper regional integration. During this period, Fernández repeatedly emphasized the strategic importance of MERCOSUR integration and Brazil-Argentina cooperation. He positioned Argentina as *regional-subsystem collaborator*, *faithful ally*, and *advocate of integrated openness*. During the previous Bolsonaro administration, Argentina found itself increasingly isolated within the bloc. Despite Fernández's ambition to advance external negotiations such as the MERCOSUR-EU agreement, his efforts were constrained by Bolsonaro's climate skepticism and broader ideological opposition.

#### **4.1.1.2 Internal Political Fragmentation and the Imperative of Power Consolidation**

Fernández's presidency was characterized by an atypical structure of executive authority and internal fragmentation. Historically, Argentine presidents have exercised centralized leadership within both the government and the ruling party. In contrast, Fernández's administration was marked by a lack of unified control. Although formally serving as president of the *Frente de Todos* Alliance, Fernández's influence within the coalition remained limited. Prior to the 2019 general election, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner strategically nominated him, an experienced but more moderate figure, as the presidential candidate to enhance the alliance's electoral prospects. As leader of the coalition's dominant faction,

she accepted the vice presidency, marking a departure from Peronism's historical preference for vertically integrated governance.

Cristina had anticipated that Fernández would adopt a largely symbolic role within the executive. However, Fernández resisted attempts to constrain his autonomy. Their personal and political differences, rooted in Fernández's earlier departure from Kirchnerism and long career in the opposition, resurfaced during his tenure, leading to persistent intra-coalition conflict. The Fernández administration was plagued by competing policy agendas and contradictory development strategies. Institutional tensions between the executive and legislature compounded these challenges. Political scientist José Natanson notably described the administration as an unstable assemblage of heterogeneous factions, encompassing both conservative Peronists and progressive Kirchnerists. Despite holding the vice presidency, Cristina exerted substantial influence over the alliance. During periods of relative political calm, internal fractures remained concealed; however, when crises intensified, these cleavages surfaced prominently.

Following the alliance's defeat in the midterm elections, internal discord escalated. The cabinet underwent multiple reshuffles, and public disagreements among high-ranking officials became increasingly frequent. The opposition gained control of Congress and systematically obstructed executive initiatives. During the second wave of COVID-19 in mid-2021, the opposition refused to grant Fernández extraordinary emergency powers, further weakening the administration's capacity to respond to the crisis. To secure legislative support, the ruling coalition was compelled to engage in complex negotiations with allied and peripheral factions.

In this context of heightened political vulnerability, Fernández's administration pursued international alliances, particularly within MERCOSUR, as a strategy to strengthen domestic legitimacy. Aligning with like-minded leftist governments and emphasizing regional unity emerged as a core component of his approach to consolidating executive authority.

#### **4.1.1.3 Economic Weakness and Structural Dependence**

Unlike most South American economies, Argentina is not predominantly reliant on primary industries, nor has it established a stable or coherent development paradigm. While the country possesses considerable productive capacity in natural resource extraction, its advantages are not pronounced relative to regional counterparts. Although its manufacturing sector is relatively well-developed, it lacks sufficient international competitiveness. The heterogeneity of Argentina's industrial base constitutes a key source of persistent structural difficulties. Argentina's manufacturing industry can be broadly categorized into three segments. First, the agricultural sector features both competitive and non-competitive segments: some areas possess strong productivity and export potential, while others are focused on domestic consumption and lack external competitiveness. Second, capital-intensive industries, including automobiles, steel, and chemicals, operate at scale, function near international cost thresholds, and maintain relatively strong export performance. Third, labor-intensive industries employ large numbers of workers but are particularly vulnerable to international competition, characterized by



low wages and limited productivity. These industries survive only with significant government support through trade protection and related mechanisms.

This pattern of sectoral specialization has severely constrained Argentina's export capacity and, by extension, its economic growth. Prior to the 1970s, the country achieved substantial progress in industrialization, characterized by productivity gains, diversification, and increased access to international markets. However, from the mid-1970s onward, premature deindustrialization coincided with financial liberalization. The 1990s witnessed widespread privatization, and although some reindustrialization efforts emerged, the productive structure has remained largely stagnant. Industrial activity has increasingly shifted toward low-technology sectors, resulting in an export profile heavily concentrated in Latin America, particularly MERCOSUR member states.

In sum, Argentina's production structure lacks competitiveness, its exports are weak and constrained, and the resulting macroeconomic imbalances have created a cascade of adverse effects, including diminished foreign direct investment, the dollarization of the economy, and chronic foreign currency shortages. Since 2012, financial activity has gradually stagnated, and by early 2018 the country had fallen into a full-blown balance of payments crisis.

Upon taking office, Fernández faced an economy in steep decline: in 2019, GDP contracted by 2.2%, inflation surged to 53.8%, the peso had depreciated by approximately 550%, financial markets approached collapse, and the government implemented capital controls and announced a partial sovereign default. In this context, two urgent issues emerged: the acute shortage of U.S. dollars and the need to renegotiate the 2018 International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreement signed by the Macri administration, which had led to a debt burden of approximately USD 45 billion.

The Fernández administration initially firmly opposed entering new free trade agreements. Foreign Minister Felipe Solá unequivocally rejected the MERCOSUR-EU agreement, arguing that liberalization would exacerbate the trade deficit, deepen the debt crisis, and undermine domestic production. There was particular concern about replicating a historical pattern in which trade with China was reduced to a commodity-manufactures exchange. A renewed focus on primary product exports would expose Argentina to volatile global commodity prices, generate few employment opportunities, and place additional pressure on domestic food prices and the exchange rate.

As such, in light of severe domestic vulnerabilities, the Fernández government opted to continue the Kirchner-era strategy of trade protectionism and resistance to free trade. Simultaneously, given the country's substantial economic reliance on MERCOSUR, Argentina pursued an active role as a *regional-subsystem collaborator* and promoted the integration. The Argentine economy's close ties to MERCOSUR are evident in trade composition: although its exports to most countries carry low value-added content, its exports to Latin America, especially MERCOSUR states, contain relatively high value-added. From 2019 to 2023, Argentina's primary import partners included Brazil, the United States, China, Chile, and Peru, while its top export destinations were Brazil, China, the United States, Paraguay, and Germany. MERCOSUR remains Argentina's largest trading partner.

Therefore, when Brazilian President Bolsonaro advocated for a reduction in the common external tariff and Uruguayan President Lacalle Pou promoted greater flexibility in external negotiations, Fernández reacted with significant resistance. Although MERCOSUR remains important for all member states, its economic significance to Argentina is uniquely pronounced. Consequently, to support its fragile economy, the Fernández administration made the preservation and strengthening of MERCOSUR a central objective of its foreign policy.

#### **4.1.1.4 The Territorial Issue of the Malvinas Islands**

On 2 April 1982, Argentina launched Operation Rosario in an attempt to retake the Malvinas Islands by force but ultimately failed. Despite changes in leadership and ideological orientation, successive governments have consistently maintained Argentina's sovereignty claim over the islands. The previous administration prioritized developing economic relations with the United Kingdom, positioning the sovereignty issue as secondary within a broader strategy of economic integration with the United States, Europe, and Japan, so the sovereignty issue was relegated to a secondary position. In contrast, the Fernández government's strategic focus is on restoring sovereignty over the Malvinas, and it is committed to elevating the Malvinas issue from a national matter to the level of national policy. Since the beginning of its term, the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs has pursued the termination of the Foradori-Duncan Agreement signed in 2016 and reoriented Argentina's stance within international organizations. The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (Brexit) further presented an opportunity for Argentina to reassert its claims. In the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which was finally approved by the European Parliament, the British Overseas Territories, including the Malvinas, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, were excluded due to territorial disputes.

The Malvinas dispute has served as a symbolic anchor for rallying regional support. By consistently referencing the issue, expressing gratitude to supporting countries, and highlighting the historical trauma inflicted by Western powers on South America, Argentina has adeptly used the Malvinas narrative to reinforce MERCOSUR unity.

#### **4.1.2 Role Conflicts between Argentina and Other Member States**

Before and after the signing of the MERCOSUR-EU Association Agreement in 2019, MERCOSUR leaders appeared to reach a consensus on prioritizing trade liberalization. However, with the emergence of new administrations in the region, this fragile consensus quickly unraveled. Until the inauguration of Lula da Silva in Brazil, Fernández remained ideologically isolated within a bloc dominated by right-wing governments.

Within the framework of role theory, discrepancies between self-perception and external expectations often generate role conflict. For Argentina, domestic economic fragility, deep dependence on MERCOSUR, and internal political instability led the Fernández government to uphold trade protectionism and champion regional integration. However, as a Southern Hemisphere country often

positioned as a “rule-taker” rather than a “rule-maker” in global governance, Argentina has been subject to competing expectations from its MERCOSUR partners. Uruguay and Brazil, proponents of trade liberalization and national-level flexibility, expected Argentina to align with a free trade agenda by reducing tariffs and supporting external negotiations. Argentina, however, maintained its commitment to a protectionist model.

#### **4.1.2.1 The Dispute with Uruguay: Free Trade Agreement between Uruguay and China**

Since 2016, Uruguayan leaders have expressed interest in concluding a bilateral free trade agreement with China. Under President Luis Lacalle Pou, this initiative gained momentum, and in July 2020, Uruguay publicly announced its intention to pursue trade agreements with non-MERCOSUR partners, including China, its largest export destination.

At the 30th MERCOSUR summit in March, Fernández vocally opposed Uruguay’s stance, asserting that Argentina did not wish to be a burden to any member, but would also not tolerate unilateralism. His remarks made the internal divisions within MERCOSUR increasingly visible and cast doubt on the bloc’s cohesion. Uruguay repeatedly emphasized its transparency and reaffirmed its commitment to regional integration, arguing that it had clearly communicated its intentions to all MERCOSUR partners. Brazil and Paraguay also supported greater autonomy in negotiating external trade agreements. Faced with mounting pressure, Argentina softened its stance. At the 60th MERCOSUR Summit, Fernández proposed that MERCOSUR collectively negotiate a free trade agreement with China, rather than allowing individual member states to act independently. While this proposal has yet to be formally adopted, it marked a significant shift. Notably, since 2022, bilateral trade between China and Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil has expanded significantly.

#### **4.1.2.2 The Dispute with Brazil: Comprehensive Reduction of the Common External Tariff**

One of MERCOSUR’s foundational goals is the establishment of a full customs union, including a common external tariff and the elimination of internal barriers to trade. Despite this aim, economic asymmetries among member states and differing national interests have generated persistent tensions.

The standard external tariff requires each member state to levy the same rate on products imported from outside MERCOSUR. For this reason, MERCOSUR’s internal trade grew rapidly between 1991 and 2011. In 1991, MERCOSUR’s standard tariff rate was 14%, which was in line with the tariffs applied by the world’s major economies at the time and much lower than the average tariff in South America. However, with the successive outbreaks of industrial crises in Brazil and Argentina, political differences emerged between the countries. At the same time, the rest of the world moved rapidly to liberalize tariffs. Today, MERCOSUR tariffs are among the highest in the world. However, they are still only comparable to those of some African countries and almost five times higher than those of developed economies such as the United States and Australia. The standard external tariff has gradually lost its appeal. Faced with this situation, Brazil, Uruguay and even Paraguay are committed to promoting

the modernization of MERCOSUR and its global marketization. As early as January 2019, Brazil proposed a 50% reduction in the common external tariff. Confronted with Argentina's resistance, Brazil later supported a compromise: a 20% reduction by the end of 2021, phased as 10% in 2021 and another 10% in 2022. Argentina opposed the initiative, arguing that reduced tariffs would harm its uncompetitive industrial base. It also contended that Brazil's proposal favored agriculture over industry and failed to account for existing external negotiation commitments. These tensions strained the bilateral relationship and destabilized cohesion within MERCOSUR.

However, as mentioned above, MERCOSUR is Argentina's largest import and export partner and the main market for its agricultural and industrial sectors. One in five export companies in Argentina exports products to MERCOSUR. A harmonious relationship between Brazil and Argentina is crucial for MERCOSUR. If Argentina cannot reach a consensus with other countries on reducing tariffs, the tension between all parties is likely to affect the effectiveness of MERCOSUR as an integration tool. At the same time, the disruption of trade between Brazil and Argentina will have a direct impact on national development. Finally, given its strategic relationship with MERCOSUR and Argentina's current state of isolation, Argentina agreed to reduce the standard external tariff by 10%.

In this way, Argentina has progressively made concessions in the conflicts with various parties, giving rise to a new role: *advocate of integrated openness*. MERCOSUR can be opened up to the outside world for Argentina, but only if all members act as a whole.

## 4.2 External Factors of MERCOSUR

During the Fernández administration, the global landscape underwent dramatic shifts: the COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the world, the Ukraine crisis has deepened, the global security architecture has been affected, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue is on the verge of eruption. Although geographically distant, Argentina was not immune to these developments. The intensification of economic globalization ensured that such crises had transnational spillover effects, significantly affecting the Argentine economy.

### 4.2.1 Economic Pressure from the United States

The United States has exerted influence on Argentina's domestic affairs primarily through economic instruments, especially via the IMF and the Federal Reserve. From Argentina's first appeal to the IMF in 1958 up to the end of the Fernández administration, the country entered into 24 agreements with the Fund, most of which ended unsuccessfully. The cumulative impact of these engagements has led to a persistent cycle of debt accumulation and default, in which Argentina borrows continually to service existing obligations. Through its conditionality policies, the IMF has repeatedly intervened in Argentina's economic management, requiring market liberalization, foreign investment facilitation, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises, often at prices favorable to foreign capital.

In April 2019, then-president Mauricio Macri signed the most recent IMF agreement, securing a USD 57 billion credit line, which placed a substantial financial burden on the incoming Fernández

administration. The IMF disbursed nearly the entire loan amount prior to the October general elections, while the repayment period was concentrated in the years 2022 and 2023. After receiving a USD 9.6 billion installment, Macri did not use the funds to strengthen foreign reserves or reduce external debt. Instead, the funds were primarily used to purchase pesos and stabilize the exchange rate, in an effort to enhance the ruling party's electoral chances. This strategy closely resembled Argentina's experience in October 2001, when the IMF disbursed USD 8 billion just 60 days prior to the country's sovereign default. At that time, most of the funds were also used to purchase pesos amid capital flight. Subsequently, bond prices continued to fall, and the interbank lending rate skyrocketed to 250%-300% overnight. Macri's use of IMF funds effectively reproduced this historical pattern. Under the terms of the agreement, the IMF required Argentina to implement liberalization and market-oriented reforms. One key requirement was the replacement of a multiple exchange rate system with a unified floating exchange rate regime. As a result, Argentina became vulnerable to speculative attacks on its currency. The peso depreciated sharply, the currency crisis intensified, and bond yields fell precipitously.

During Fernández's presidency, the U.S. Federal Reserve raised interest rates on 11 occasions. Economist Adriano noted that such increases raise the yield on U.S. Treasury securities, prompting global capital to flow back to the United States while divesting from riskier markets. Although Argentina had already been excluded from global capital markets, its sovereign risk levels reached record highs. Higher global capital costs made it even more difficult for Argentina and its domestic firms to access financing through international debt markets. In general, the U.S. interest rate hikes impacted Argentina in three primary ways. First, the return of global capital to the United States placed immense downward pressure on the Argentine peso. Second, commodity prices, especially in emerging markets, faced increased volatility and devaluation. Third, the rising cost of global capital directly increased Argentina's debt servicing burden, making repayment more difficult and exacerbating the country's already precarious economic situation.

#### **4.2.2 The Spillover Effects of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict**

On 24 February 2022, the Russia-Ukraine conflict erupted, leading to significant geopolitical and economic ramifications worldwide. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global landscape was already fragile, and the war further disrupted international stability. Although geographically distant from the conflict, Latin America, and Argentina in particular, was not immune to its far-reaching spillover effects. The war's initial impact on Argentina was concentrated in the agricultural sector, later spreading to the broader economy.

In the early stages of the conflict, Argentina experienced relatively favorable effects. Ukraine's agricultural production was severely disrupted, and global trade in grain and fertilizers with Russia was interrupted. These developments triggered fears of a looming global food crisis. As a result, Argentine agricultural products became attractive substitutes in the international market. Given the cyclical nature of agriculture, the price hikes were expected to have a lasting impact. Indeed, in the short term, Argentina's economy benefited from higher export prices. During the early months of the war, trade

indicators improved markedly. By May 2022, soybean prices had increased by 9.4%, wheat by 33.7%, and corn by 17.8%, leading to a significant reduction in Argentina's trade deficit.

In the longer term, the situation is even less optimistic. As the Ukrainian crisis intensifies, global economic volatility has increased dramatically, and deglobalization and regionalization are gradually taking hold. The demand for imports in Latin America will gradually slow down. The rise in commodity prices has directly increased the pressure of currency depreciation and inflation in the Latin American region. At the same time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Argentine government continuously increased the intensity of government transfer payments to stimulate residents' consumption, stimulate the economy and expand consumption. Prices of basic commodities rose sharply, further exacerbating inflation. However, this positive trend proved unsustainable. In the following months, international commodity prices corrected, in part due to the policy responses adopted by major economies to mitigate the war's impact. By August 2022, prices had begun to rebound, ending the short-lived boom in Argentina's agricultural exports.

In the longer term, the outlook became increasingly pessimistic. The intensification of the Ukraine crisis contributed to heightened global economic volatility and accelerated trends toward deglobalization and regionalization. Latin American countries, including Argentina, began to experience a slowdown in external demand. The surge in commodity prices also fueled inflation and currency depreciation across the region. In Argentina, the inflationary impact was particularly severe, exacerbated by the government's expansive fiscal response during the pandemic. In an effort to stimulate consumption and counteract economic contraction, the government significantly increased transfer payments. However, this fiscal stimulus coincided with rising international prices, further worsening domestic inflation.

Taken together, the U.S. interest rate hikes and the Russia-Ukraine conflict significantly aggravated inflationary pressures in Latin America and compressed the region's space for economic recovery. Argentina, already grappling with structural weaknesses and external debt, found its economy increasingly dependent on MERCOSUR. Consequently, maintaining the stability and functionality of MERCOSUR became a central imperative for Argentina, not only as a diplomatic priority but also as a means to alleviate domestic economic pressures through regional trade.

## **5. Conclusion**

National role conception refers to a country's self-perception regarding its function and status within the international system. In many respects, it serves as a symbolic "calling card" that a state presents when engaging with the global community. Grounded in role theory, this paper employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze Argentina's foreign policy discourse during the Fernández administration (2019-2023). Through a systematic examination of public speeches delivered by president Alberto Fernández and his two foreign ministers, this study identifies 19 distinct national roles that Argentina assumed within the context of MERCOSUR.

Drawing on the historical trajectory of MERCOSUR, the formation of this fundamental role is analyzed through both internal and external dimensions. Internally, two key dynamics are considered: domestic political influences within Argentina and inter-member state role conflicts. On the domestic front, four major factors have directly or indirectly shaped Argentina's role conception: the ideological orientation of the ruling party and its leadership, internal political instability and the pursuit of power consolidation, economic vulnerability and dependency, and the issue of territorial sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands. All of these factors have had a direct or indirect impact on the shaping of Argentina's role.

First, the Fernández administration's left-leaning ideology and Argentina's domestic political turbulence prompted the government to seek alliances with like-minded leftist governments in the region. In this context, MERCOSUR became a strategic platform for consolidating support and enhancing Argentina's influence. Second, Argentina's fragile economy and high dependency on the MERCOSUR market made the bloc indispensable for economic recovery and stability. Third, the Malvinas sovereignty dispute served as a unifying narrative through which Argentina could reinforce regional solidarity and present itself as a leader within MERCOSUR.

Beyond domestic factors, external and intergovernmental pressures also played a decisive role. Role conflicts with other MERCOSUR member states and broader global developments, such as economic pressures exerted by the United States and the spillover effects of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, further shaped Argentina's role conception. Importantly, these external influences ultimately impacted Argentina's domestic economy, intensifying its reliance on MERCOSUR. Confronted with increasing internal and external pressures, Argentina was compelled to compromise on trade liberalization and gradually adopt the role of an advocate of integrated openness, provided that such openness occurs collectively within the bloc.

In conclusion, faced with domestic challenges, regional tensions, and international economic constraints, Argentina's strategic response has been to reaffirm its commitment to MERCOSUR by defending its unity and actively pursuing deeper regional integration. This role, while shaped by various contextual factors, reflects Argentina's enduring effort to position itself as a pivotal and stabilizing actor within South America's principal regional organization.

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None.

### **Author Contributions**



The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

### Availability of Data and Materials

The data on which the study is based were accessed from a repository and are available for downloading through the following link.

<https://cancilleria.gob.ar/en>

<https://www.casarosada.gob.ar/>

<https://www.MERCOSUR.int/>

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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