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DANISH F-16S: UKRAINE OR ARGENTINA?

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Introduction

In mid-2023, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway pledged to train Ukrainian pilots and donate several F-16s to help Ukraine defend itself against the ongoing Russian invasion (Breaking Defence, 2023; Dubois, 2023). More recently, the US Congress approved the transfer of 24 Royal Danish Air Force F-16s to Argentina after White House pressure, in a deal reportedly worth \$338 million (Segovia, 2023). However, while this development contradicts the recent Western pledge to support Ukraine, by apparently deviating to another country the Danish planes publicly earmarked for Kyiv, it will be argued that they do not conflict because of equal geopolitical priorities and, thus, can mutually complement.

Accordingly, this paper sheds light on the motives for such moves, especially considering their geopolitical and strategic implications. More specifically, it will explore the competing geopolitical factors behind the rationale for having F-16s potentially sent to Argentina. In doing so, it will not only examine whether the potential provision of F-16s to Buenos Aires will affect the Western commitments to Kyiv. However, it will also delve into the implications for the South American nation regarding interoperability with NATO and the EU countries.

Argentina: A Long and Troublesome Search for New Fighters

In recent years, Buenos Aires has attempted to acquire new supersonic combat jets to restore its downsized Air Force. Obsolete 1960s Mirages III were retired in 2015, leaving the country without a front-line, dedicated, air superiority, supersonic fighter/interceptor aircraft (TurDef, 2023; Vinholes, 2023). Thus, an official US\$664 million bid was launched in September 2021 to acquire twelve fighter jets (Sharma, 2023). Still, the ambitions to acquire the new fighter were hampered by a series of domestic and external factors of a political, historical and economic nature.

Among those factors, the arms embargo against Argentina by the United Kingdom proved most decisive. This embargo came in the aftermath of the 1982 war between both countries over the Falklands Islands (Vinholes, 2023). This factor explains why any major attempt by Argentina to procure Western, especially European-made, fighter aircraft is inevitably destined to fail due to London's veto.

This situation is troublesome for Argentina because various Western fighter jet systems depend on critical British-made components for their operation and safety, notably Martin-Baker (MB) ejection seats (TurDef, 2023). Accordingly, past intentions to acquire upgraded Israeli-made IAI Kfirs, former Spanish Mirage F1Ms, Swedish Saab JAS 39 Grippens, and Korean KAI F-50 planes met a similar fate, mostly due to British opposition (Leone, 2022; TurDef, 2023; Vinholes, 2023). Unable to obtain any new weapons systems with British-made components, Buenos Aires naturally considered the acquisition of low-cost, non-Western-made fighter jets.

Such a decision was likely incentivised by the political leanings of the populist, pro-Russia, pro-China and anti-Western Peronist leftist regimes which governed the country almost continuously during the last two decades (Coffey, 2012; Farah & Reyes, 2015; Sistema Económico Latinoamericano y del Caribe [SELA], 2022). As such, the possible acquisition of Russian-made MiG-35s was initially considered but later dismissed due to several reasons. Among them, logistical support, reliability, potential Western sanctions against the Russian military industry in the aftermath of the 2022 aggression on Ukraine and possible fears of US sanctions on Buenos Aires (Vinholes, 2022).

Nonetheless, Argentina established high-level, military-technical, diplomatic and political contacts with India and China (Leone, 2023; Vinholes, 2023). As a result, many reports that Buenos Aires might be seriously considering the acquisition of jet fighters from these countries surfaced (Dubois, 2022; Leone, 2023; Roldán, 2020; TurDef, 2023; Vinholes, 2023; Xuanzun, 2023; Zona Militar, 2023a). Notably, two fighter jet models from India and China were competing for a potential procurement by Argentina.

On the one hand, there was the multi-role Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas, developed by India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) (Vinholes, 2023). However, despite its supposedly low cost, this system does not solve the most salient Argentinian problem, as it includes 50 British-designed components, such as the ubiquitous MB ejection seats (Vinholes, 2023). In attempting to alleviate this issue, HAL officials have offered Argentina a version of the Tejas with an increased substitution of foreign components, which should be free of British-derived ones (Vinholes, 2023).

However, it seems extremely unlikely for HAL to develop this variant in time, should Buenos Aires decide to go forward with the programme on short notice. Thus, there is little probability that a 'British-free' Tejas will be readily available soon. Consequently, Argentinian authorities have officially considered the possibility of procuring the JF-17 Thunder/FC-1 Xialong multi-role fighter, jointly produced by China's Chengdu Aircraft Corporation and the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex. Thus, this option becomes, in practice, the sole non-Western contender to the F-16s (Leone, 2023; Zona Militar, 2023a).

Advantages of arms procurement from the West

Consequently, questions arise regarding the impact of a non-Western competitor in the Argentinian jet fighter procurement operation. The Chinese role in the Argentine tender and the implications of the tender itself for the US, Ukraine and Kyiv's European allies are various.

Firstly, the earlier US authorisation for the transfer/sale of the Danish F-16 contradicts the earlier pledge to Ukraine. However, this transaction is no ordinary military sale; it is part of the broader US-China global competition. Thus, for the US, countering Beijing's potential expansion of its "military footprint" in the Western hemisphere is pivotal (Johnson, 2023, para 17.). Indeed, a US Department of Defense Latin American analyst has claimed that if "the US F-16 offer is being promoted aggressively is to kill this Chinese JF-17 sale" (Johnson, 2023, para. 10).

Independently of these geopolitical calculations, Argentina's possible acquisition of F-16s also presents an opportunity for the US and Europe to promote interoperability and defence cooperation with non-EU and non-NATO countries. There is already a regional precedent for such collaboration in the form of the acquisition of F-16s by neighbouring Chile in the 2000s and early 2010s. Chile acquired ten new custom-built F-16 Block 50 Plus under the US "Peace Puma" Program (Northern Skies Aviation, 2018; Wunderlich-Cruz, 2013), and 36 surplus Dutch F-16s that underwent the Mid-Life Upgrade (MLU) modernisation program (Northern Skies Aviation, 2018; Wunderlich-Cruz, 2013).

There are further advantages to pursuing such a deal. Firstly, there is the issue of discrepancy in quality and reliability between both competing systems. The decades-old proven track record of the F-16 heavily contrasts with the JF-17/FC-10, a relatively new system of dubious quality. In this regard, recent reports that China's ally Myanmar has protested to Pakistan over structural problems and technical malfunctions that have rendered its Pakistani-made JF-17s "unfit for operations" (Business Times, 2023, para. 1). Consequently, such developments advise caution before agreeing to procure such armaments.

Secondly, the reputational costs associated with acquiring weapons used by countries without respect for democracy or human rights should concern Argentina. An example of these costs is the use of JF-17s by the Myanmar military regime which, supported by Pakistan, China and Russia has reportedly used its JF-17s in an air campaign to suppress rebel groups throughout the country in the aftermath of the 2021 coup that deposed the country's democratically-elected government (Andrews, 2023; Davis, 2023; Global Defence Corp, 2023). Even more gravely, Myanmar's use of JF-17s against civilian targets and population centres has been widely reported and documented (Andrews, 2023; Davis, 2023).

Thirdly, domestic factors play a significant role in Argentina, as recent elections resulted in the defeat of the pro-China Peronist party and the November 19 election of a radical pro-Western, right-wing, potentially anti-China government. Accordingly, the newly-elected Argentine president, the libertarian, anti-communist populist Javier Milei (Espina, 2023), who took office on December 10, seemingly gives the US and Europe considerable leverage, especially given Milei's declared intention to realign his country with the US (Chiwis et al., 2023). Milei has also notably publicly shunned China during his campaign for its anti-liberal regime (Espina, 2023), which suggested a possible diplomatic rupture (Koop, 2023).

Another domestic factor is that the procurement of arms from the West is concordant with the tradition of Argentina's Armed Forces, which "have been almost exclusively aligned with the US in the past century" (Johnson, 2023, para. 10). More importantly, the sale can help relaunch Western cooperation with a Major Non-NATO (MNNA) ally, a status Argentina has had since 1999 (Coffey, 2012). Besides other benefits, this status allows for "preferential treatment for the procurement of US military hardware" (Coffey, 2012, para. 5). Consequently, a potential arms deal would imply a renewed political and military alignment with the West, further benefiting European and NATO interoperability.

Advantages of arms procurement from China

Nonetheless, a mixture of other domestic and external factors can complicate the success of an F-16 deal, favouring the Chinese bid. Notably, Argentina is struggling with a grave economic crisis. Sovereign debt defaults, restricted foreign financing, exchange controls and high inflation (Delivorias, 2023; Roy, 2022; Zona Militar, 2023a) are its main characteristics.

Hence, this situation might make the acquisition a politically hot topic. Such a controversy may challenge Milei's potential intention to approve the planes' acquisition. Public perception that spending much-needed resources on defence by a country with worrying poverty indicators and high unemployment (Delivorias, 2023; Roy, 2022) might trigger unrest. Thus, it might be possible that the deal aggravates the country's sociopolitical instability (Delivorias, 2023; Roy, 2022) should Milei not handle it carefully, i.e., explain its relevance to the public.

China, for its part, may offer Argentina financing, as it has done in many other strategic sectors (SELA, 2022). More recently, it went as far as helping Buenos Aires pay its debts to the International Monetary Fund (Do Rosario & Strohecker, 2023). However, a loan to acquire JF-17/FC-10 tender may see Buenos Aires "potentially falling into another of the 'debt traps' Beijing has become known for when dealing with poorer nations." (Johnson, 2023, para. 25).

A last note on this matter is the potential impact that President-elect Javier Milei's policies can have on the deal. The populist, right-wing conservative libertarian (Ventura, 2023) has proposed fiscal spending cuts (Espina, 2023), which might impact the acquisition program. Thus, Milei's economic policy stance will make it worth seeing whether he scales down the acquisition or cancels it altogether.

On the other hand, problems of a more technical nature can also negatively affect the F-16 sale. Such issues could arise due to the non-fulfilment of certain Argentinian specifications beyond the requirement of no British components onboard (Dubois, 2022; Leone, 2023). For instance, the age and variant of planes are two notable issues: the models offered within the Danish proposal are 40-year-old F-16C and D variants, despite having undergone the MLU (Dubois, 2022).

This factor itself affects the fulfilment of two other crucial Argentine requirements. As observers have noted, the proposed F-16s do not meet the Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar requirement and are not compatible for in-flight refuelling operations with the KC-130H Hercules tankers currently employed by the Argentine Air Force (Dubois, 2022; Leone, 2023). This incompatibility would remain an obstacle "unless they are aircraft upgraded to Viper standard" (Dubois, 2022, para. 8).

Given these actual and potential insufficiencies, the Chinese JF-17/FC-10 offer of newly-built planes regained traction vis-à-vis the F-16 deal. Thus, despite the above-mentioned reliability and quality issues, the plane can still “offer a good alternative for light-fighter aircraft with low maintenance cost” (TurDef, 2023, para. 9). Moreover, as the plane’s makers claim, the JF-17/FC-10 can fulfil the multi-role requirement for “interception, ground attack, anti-ship, and aerial reconnaissance” aircraft (Leone, 2023, para. 8). The Chinese offer would also fulfil the requirement of unrestricted availability of all system components, including critical ones such as spare parts, ejection seats, engines and weapons, i.e., short, medium and beyond visual range missiles (Leone, 2023).

Moreover, in the past, China has also reportedly offered a guaranteed supply of spare parts depots in Argentina to reduce logistical costs (Roldán, 2020). China would also be willing to fulfil the Argentinian requirements of technology transfer, logistical chains and “product personalization” (Roldán, 2020, para. 10). Furthermore, Beijing could court Buenos Aires with the attractive opportunity of licensing JF-17 production to Argentina’s Fábrica Argentina de Aviones (FAdeA), already raised some years ago (Gutiérrez, 2020).

In the foreign policy realm, China’s support of the Argentinian claim to the Falklands (TurDef, 2023; Xuanzen, 2023) is not isolated from Beijing’s relaxed arms exports policy. The policy, described as one of “no-questions-asked” (Jose & Reghunathan-Nair, 2021, para. 6) could make the JF-17/FC-10 offer tempting vis-à-vis the F-16 offer. Accordingly, “its [China’s] long-standing non-interference diplomacy rests on the view that a customer’s political, military, and human rights record lies outside the arms deal’s contractual arrangements” (Jose & Reghunathan-Nair, 2021, para. 6).

A More Attractive Western Offer?

Despite such enticements, Beijing’s offerings should still be taken cautiously, given their potential reliability issues and sociopolitical and financial trappings. Notably, should Buenos Aires go for the JF-17/FC-10, “it would mean a 180-degree turn at a doctrinal level” (Roldán, 2020, para. 11). However, with F-16s, Argentina could reinforce its Western-aligned military and defence tradition (Johnson, 2023).

In this line, it is still possible to speculate that, should the Milei administration decide on one of the jets, it will prefer the American option. This might be despite Milei apparently softening his stance on China a few days after his election victory, through an exchange of letters with Chinese leader Xi Jinping (Reuters, 2023). Milei on campaign had also pledged to “make every effort” to recover the Falklands through diplomacy, which was promptly rejected by London (Osborne, 2023). Still, it appears unlikely so far that Milei will want to erode his pro-Western credentials and reputation by selecting the Chinese option, despite the above-exposed shortcomings of the F-16 offer.

That being said, an F-16 sale to Argentina is more than just an obstacle to Chinese influence in Latin America. An F-16 deal also has the power to revamp Argentina’s standing vis-à-vis NATO, the US, and Europe. This would bolster Argentina’s MNNA status, which was questioned in the past given the Peronist regime’s loud nationalist, anti-Western and irredentist rhetoric over the Falklands (Coffey, 2012).

The F-16 sale would not only draw Argentina closer to the West and away from China but at least keep China's regional ambitions in check. It can also provide military leverage for regional and Atlantic security. It would do so through strict political conditionalities on the provision of the systems to deter any new potential, irredentist Argentine military adventures in the South Atlantic, such as that which led to the 1982 UK-Argentina conflict (Keeling, 2013).

Crucially, should Argentina get the 24 planes, the remaining 14 of the total 38 F-16s initially announced to be transferred to Argentina (Felstead, 2023) would still be available for Ukraine. This possible asymmetry in planes would not necessarily affect Kyiv's more urgent need for these planes to improve its military capacities against Russia. This is due to both Norway and Netherlands having pledged the delivery of such planes, in addition to other EU countries also offering Ukraine their fighter jets, such as Sweden through its SAAB JAS39 Gripen offer and assorted training to Ukraine (Jennings, 2023). Overall, the delivery of the planes implies sufficient European capabilities and resources to sustain support to Kyiv.

Consequently, although Sweden's proposal has been conditioned on its accession to NATO (Jennings, 2023), Stockholm's proposal would still complement any F-16 transfer, improving EU/NATO interoperability and defence cooperation with Ukraine. This possible delivery can also indicate flexibility regarding the number of F-16s possibly transferred to Kyiv without risking the Western commitment to defend Ukraine. Such a development thus benefits Argentina for a different but no less critical reason, i.e., containing China's inroads in South America.

Finally, it is essential that the US helps address Argentina's requirements and concerns to counter the more attractive Chinese offer. To address the F-16s above-described issues, a solution would be to echo the 1990s successful acquisition and upgrade programme of the A-4R "Fightinghawk" for the Argentine Air Force (Rivas, 2019). This programme saw Argentina acquire four upgraded examples of the legacy, Vietnam-era attack aircraft (32 A-4M single-seaters and 4 OA-4M double-seaters) from US defence corporation Lockheed Martin (Rivas, 2019).

Per the agreement, FAdeA, which in the 1990s was called Lockheed Martin Argentina (LMAASA), locally upgraded the rest of the planes (Rivas, 2019). Notably, the "upgrade saw Argentina obtaining a small slice of F-16 action as LMAASA provided the Westinghouse (now Northrop Grumman) AN/APG-66 radar for the A-4 package, as fitted to early-model 'Vipers.'" (Rivas, 2019, para. 6). Consequently, this story showcases how a defence deal, with a locally made upgrade component, is not only an option that Argentina's American and European counterparts should consider but will make the F-16 deal better fit Buenos Aires' technological needs and aspirations.

Final Remarks

All things considered, it is possible to clarify the apparent conflict or confusion concerning the parties interested in acquiring the Danish F-16s, Argentina and Ukraine. Due to their specific circumstances, transferring or selling planes to both countries have equal geostrategic, military-defence and political relevance. Ukraine needs F-16s and other planes for its defence against Russia and Argentina because it has long-postponed plans (Roldán, 2020) to modernise and reinforce its Air Force. Crucially with Argentina being an MNNA, as explained before, the sale should theoretically be facilitated and given priority, which Washington appears to have done through a recent Third-Party Transfer authorisation for the transfer of the Danish F-16s (Zona Militar, 2023b).

Nevertheless, there is another common political denominator to both deals. This element is the Western need to counter the influence of two strongly tied authoritarian regimes, Russia and China (Bodeen, 2023). Whereas the former is engaged in open aggression against Ukraine, the latter attempts to make inroads into regions close to the West to provide technically unreliable and suspicious military aid.

Such efforts now appear unlikely to succeed under the incoming Milei administration. However, despite Milei's stance, Argentina's recent close relationship with China during the Peronist era (Koop, 2023) leaves his new government vulnerable to Beijing's diplomatic, political and economic pressure. Consequently, while China may still keep chances of succeeding in the tender, the JF-17/FC-10 could not only not improve (if not weaken) Argentina's military capabilities and national defence. However, it could also be used as a means to attempt to subvert or negatively influence Argentina's foreign policy towards its traditional US and European/NATO partners.

In the end, this assessment does not exclude the need of renewed diplomacy, dialogue and cooperation within the UK-Argentina component of the Argentina-West relationship. This, however, will require Milei to avoid touching the Falklands issue. With restraint in place, constructive and peaceful security cooperation with a traditional Western ally will be more possible than ever. The F-16 acquisition has the potential to further reinforce this close link.

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