

# THE IMPORTANCE OF OBOR\* FOR ARGENTINA

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Argentinean President Mauricio Macri was invited to participate in the “Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation”<sup>1</sup>, that was held on 14-15 May 2017 in Beijing (China). It could be seen as something odd a Chief of State of a South American state attending a meeting with the main objective of discussing future infrastructure and communication projects in Eurasia, but it is not. It is, actually, one of the key priorities for Argentina and other countries of the region (like Chile, which was invited as well).

This connectivity project goes beyond Eurasia and it is framed as a link between continents and Argentina is very interested in developing contacts with the most active economies of the world which are situated today in the Eurasian continent.

OBOR, as it is called, the Chinese driven project, is a key priority for President Xi Jinping, and since China has become one of the most important trade partners of Argentina and almost every South American state, it is quite understandable the growing interest of the governments of my region to participate in this forum.

But besides what we can call “an extra regional interest”, we can add “an intraregional interest” in this

project. One of the most ambitious integration processes of the Latin American countries is UNASUR (acronym of *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*, in Spanish, i.e., Union of South American Nations in English) which comprises 12 states from Colombia to Argentina.

UNASUR has established the South American Council of Infrastructure and Planning (COSIPLAN) which is based on the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA). During the 7th Ministerial Meeting of the COSIPLAN that was held in Buenos Aires on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2017 the Argentine Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jorge Faurie, was very clear about the importance of Asia (Eurasia, we can say): “Latin America, MERCOSUR, and the Pacific Alliance are now looking towards Asia, particularly China, and that is why we have to achieve adequate physical inter-connectivity and a much needed energy connectivity”<sup>2</sup>.

In the 19th century Argentinean economy and policies were focused on Europe representing a Euro-Atlantic approach. It now seems that in the 21st century the dynamic economies of the Pacific area and the growing geopolitical importance of Eurasian countries

\* OBOR has recently been renamed “Belt and Road Initiative”

require a new approach which does not mean to neglect the importance of Europe, at all.

Actually at this moment Argentina and other three founding members of the MERCOSUR (Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay) are negotiating a trade deal with the European Union as part of a broader Association Agreement between the two regions. Argentina cannot and should not abandon the deep historical, economic and political links with the Atlantic world but a multilateral global approach would be a very wise foreign policy strategy.

Based on that, it is quite understandable the interest of Argentina (and through Argentina, of other MERCOSUR Atlantic countries like Brazil and Uruguay and the landlocked Paraguay) and Chile (which is an associate member of this regional organization) in the OBOR initiative.

From the geopolitical point of view, the development of those infrastructure and communications projects will allow Argentina to reach Eurasia through Europe (the Euro-Atlantic and traditional route) or through the Pacific route. Therefore, OBOR will become the link between China and Europe that will allow Argentinean products to reach Eurasian countries, mainly the states of Central Asia and Caucasus through both routes.

To fulfil this multivectorial foreign policy which was defined by President Mauricio Macri as “a strategy of intelligent insertion into the world”, Argentina needs to develop its contacts with Asian Countries (where China will have a core importance) and to take advantage of OBOR developments.

Considering the growing importance of Asia in Argentinean foreign policy we can say that the above mentioned strategy is being implemented. Last year, Argentina reopened its Embassy in Singapore and took part, very actively, in the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation where it was represented by its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Faurie who participated in many important bilateral meetings during that forum.

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Based on this general framework, now it is time to participate in OBOR and, which is equally important, to develop deeper and more comprehensive relations with the hub states that are located at both ends of the OBOR: Turkey, Caucasian States and Central Asian states.

To develop these contacts could become a cause and an effect at the same time, namely a virtuous circle: The political will to focus on those states will generate developed relations and this situation will make easier the inclusion of new economic, social, cultural and political actors in those relations.

In order to be very clear, what I am proposing is not only a strategy to win new markets, a mere economic approach. What I want to emphasize is that new markets will generate new partners and the interactions will lead to new perspectives, which is extremely needed in a multipolar world.

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OBOR is a great opportunity to reach this objective.

## Endnotes

- 1 Full text of President Xi's speech at opening of Belt and Road forum. (n.d.). Retrieved April 13, 2018, from <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/>
- 2 Bastidas, R. (n.d.). @unasur. Retrieved April 13, 2018, from <https://www.unasursg.org/en/node/1228>