

AN ARGENTINEAN NAVAL BUILDUP IN THE DISARMAMENT ERA:

THE NAVAL PROCUREMENT ACT OF 1926

Introduction

This paper is focused on an Argentinean Naval buildup in the 1920's, and its roots in Southern Cone rivalries dating back to early Twentieth Century and even to the Nineteenth one.

A key element to this discussion is the coincidence among Argentinean political and naval leaderships about the concept that Southern Cone security rested on a strong – even superior - Naval Power, and not on international agreements that did not appear to offer effective guarantees of peace and stability. This viewpoint was held in spite of predominant ideas of Pacifism, Disarmament and Collective Security, that came to light – or grew in significance - on the wake of World War One.

As stated in the Executive's 'State of the Nation' reports to Congress in 1922-28, Argentine foreign policy intended to maintain friendly relations with all nations, but keeping the necessary means for National Defence. In addition, the Executive's instructions on arms limitation issues, as well as his support of a reasonable degree of military readiness was absolutely on line with Argentinean contemporary military thought.

This similarity in viewpoints among civilian and military leaders is a good sample case of 'subjective control', as defined by Samuel Huntington in the 1950's in "Civilian Control of the

Military: a Theoretical Statement”¹. In Huntington’s model, subjective civilian control of the military exists when the military forces are an integral part of society, embodying the dominant social forces and political ideologies of that society. In Huntington’s words: “ In brief, in subjective civilian control, the military are at one with society. Civilian control, consequently, is the product of the identity of thought and outlook between civilian and military groups.”²

A Southern Cone naval race in early Twentieth Century

The Great Powers’ naval race in early Twentieth Century had its South American counterpart.

Argentina had been already involved in a naval race with Chile, due to conflicting territorial claims in Patagonia. This issue was solved by several agreements signed in 1902, among which there was a naval arms control one.

. In 1904 the Brazilian Government decided to launch a significant naval expansion program, which took final shape in 1906. The core of this naval buildup were two dreadnought type battleships to be built in Britain, to be named Minas Gerais and São Paulo. A third battleship was envisioned and actually ordered in 1910. Her name was Rio de Janeiro, but was finally sold to Turkey in 1913 before completion. There was another Brazilian attempt to build an even larger dreadnought to be named Riachuelo, but the project was abandoned due to financial reasons. In addition to the dreadnoughts, Brazil ordered two light cruisers and ten destroyers which were actually built in the United Kingdom and delivered to the Brazilian Navy.

¹ Huntington, Samuel. “Civilian Control of the Military: a Theoretical Statement”, in Political Behavior: a Reader in Theory and Research, Heinz Eulau et al., eds. (Glencoe Illinois,: Free Press, 1956), quoted by Barber, James A. In “Britain and France,: the Officer Corps and Civil Military Relations”, p. 19.

Argentinean perceptions of Brazilian procurement plans were mixed. There was an important sector of influential public opinion who regarded Brazilian naval expansion as dangerous and aggressive, and favored a hard line by way of a similar Argentinean naval buildup. Another sector saw no danger in Brazilian armaments policy and thought that an Argentinean naval expansion would be extremely costly and harmful to national prosperity.

A heated debate followed - in Congress as well as on the Press - that delayed a decision, which finally gave the upper hand to the hardliners by way of the sanction of the Armaments Procurement Act of 1908.³ On the naval side, this Act authorized the acquisition of two battleships, six destroyers and twelve torpedoboats. It also stated that "if necessary" the Executive could increase the former authorizations by one battleship, three destroyers and four torpedoboats.

World War One

The First World War was going to have a significant impact on Argentinean and Chilean naval acquisitions. Argentina actually ordered two battleships to be built in American yards and twelve destroyers to British, French and German yards. Except for some delays, there were no major troubles in the delivery of the US built battleships, but only four destroyers were commissioned in the Argentinean Navy due to the outbreak of the War.

Chile had followed its South American neighbors, and in 1910 ordered two superdreadnoughts to be built in Britain, derived from the Iron Duke class but armed with 14" guns. They were taken over by the Royal Navy at the outbreak of World War I. One of them, named Almirante Latorre served in the

² Huntington, quoted by Barber, p. 19

Grand Fleet as HMS Canada, fought with the British battle line at Jutland and finally was delivered to Chile at the end of the war, reverting to her former name. The second ship, whose intended name was Almirante Cochrane, was converted during construction into an aircraft carrier and became HMS Eagle. Chile had ordered six destroyers in British yards, of which two had been delivered before the outbreak of hostilities. The remaining four were taken by the Royal Navy. Of these, three were handed over to Chile at the end of the War (one had been sunk in action). As a compensation for HMS Eagle, Great Britain transferred five submarines to Chile (a sixth was purchased by the Chilean Government).

Besides the aforementioned disturbances in naval procurement plans, World War One had another important effect on the navies of the Southern Cone: the relative obsolescence of recently acquired ships and the almost absolute obsolescence of naval units of pre-dreadnought vintage.

Southern Cone contemporary naval strategic views

Southern Cone naval experts were deeply concerned about the balance of naval power in reference to their neighbors. It follows a brief summary of their respective views, that have a distinct 'mirror image' flavor.

In the 1910's and early 1920's there were several Argentinean naval officers who published their views on sea power, emphasizing Argentina's need for a strong navy, essentially centered on capital ships. Probably the best known and perhaps the most influential was Segundo R. Storni, who, as a Commander, gave two lectures in 1916 which were published as a small book under the

³ Act Nr. 6283, 19 December 1908.

title Intereses Argentinos en el Mar (Argentinean Sea Interests).⁴ This work has a definite Mahanian touch, and covers all fields of current and prospective - in those days - Argentinean sea power. In reference to naval balance of power in the Southern Cone, Storni stated in a dictum that could be referred to as a 'One Power Plus Standard': "The Argentinean Sea Fleet should be strong enough to have superiority over the individual neighbor ones and should act to preclude their concentration in case of war".⁵

Similar mirror views were held in Brazil and Chile. In the first case Armando Burlamaqui, a Brazilian naval expert, complained of a perceived Brazilian naval inferiority in 1921⁶. On a later work the same author stated ".....anyway, Brazil needs to be strong enough at sea as to inspire serious fear to any squadron that might attempt to dictate laws to her⁷ free maritime expansion..."⁸⁹

In the case of Chile same views were held by a naval officer, Luis Langlois, on a Mahanian inspired book about sea power and Chilean history, published in 1911.¹⁰ When dealing with the dimensions of Chilean Sea Power, Langlois stated: "In any case, to hold command of the sea is a need for Chile, both in a defensive war as well as in an offensive one. Any chance of war is going to be avoided if it is maintained a naval power at least equivalent to any other South American country."¹¹ On a similar line were the words of the Chilean Minister Plenipotentiary in London, on

⁴ Storni, Segundo R. Intereses Argentinos en el Mar. 2d. ed. Buenos Aires: Platt, 1952. This is a reprint of the original text of 1916, with the addition of an updating introduction by the author.

⁵ Storni, Intereses..., page 105.

⁶ Burlamaqui, Armando. A situação naval sul-americana em 1921. Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Nacional, 1922.

⁷ i.e.: Brazilian.

⁸ Burlamaqui, Armando. Esboço da Política Naval Brasileira. Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Nacional, 1923, page 64.

⁹ A contemporary report by the US Naval Intelligence about ABC navies, states: "Brazil makes no secret of the fact that she regards Argentina as her most probable enemy. The two countries do not compete seriously in an economic sense, but each is jealous of the political leadership in South America assumed by the other." (Office of Naval Intelligence, Monthly Information Bulletin Nr. 6 – 1922, 15 June, 1922, p. 3.)

¹⁰ Langlois, Luis. Influencia del Poder Naval en la Historia de Chile desde 1810 a 1910. Valparaiso: Imprenta de la Armada, 1911.

¹¹ Langlois, Influencia..., page 11.

27 November, 1913, on occasion of launching the Almirante Latorre: ‘By modernizing her naval forces, Chile has no other object in view but having enough power to prevent events that might threaten international South American concord and, by these means, to ensure exercising her¹² legitimate influence upon the American Continent’s destiny, as pointed out by History.’¹³

These quoted views are just samples of frequent statements about the significance of Sea Power and the need to keep a favorable balance of it – from each one’s national point of view – made by political and naval leaders, either in the press, on lectures and speeches, or in official reports to the Executive or to Congress.

In summary, naval experts and statesmen in the Southern Cone were strongly advocating for naval superiority or at least naval parity for their respective countries.

The naval ‘lessons’ of World War One

Southern Cone navies kept an alert watch on the naval side of World War One when it was still on progress, and, after its termination these navies gave a careful look to all the massive amount of information published in naval official and private works of the warring powers.

In addition, with respect to the Argentine Navy, several officers were sent to the United States to get both theoretical and on the job training with the US Navy. A group was sent to the Battle Force, another to the Naval Aviation, and a third group went to New London to be trained in

¹² i.e.: Chilean.

¹³ Ghisolfo Araya, ‘Situación Estratégica Naval’, pages 607-608.

submarines. As a matter of fact, the Argentine Navy had submariners – qualified by the US Navy – several years before the commissioning of the first Argentine submarines.

Even at the risk of oversimplifying, it may be said that in the Great Powers' navies the results of the First World War kept the sailors' faith upon the concept of command of the sea, to be conquered and maintained by means of a Battle Fleet fighting one or more surface actions.

In spite of the submarine danger and the rise of air power, it was generally accepted that Allied naval superiority had been an important factor - for some a decisive one - in achieving victory. In reference to the submarine menace, it was understood that the convoy system had kept it under control, new detection devices would make even more doubtful future submarine successes, and mine barriers appeared to be a promising antisubmarine system. Moreover, legal constraints would make almost impossible a future unrestricted use of the submarine, as Germany had done. Aircraft, the other newcomers to sea warfare, were still unreliable, had a restricted weapon carrying capacity and short range, and were heavily constrained by meteorology.

In short, the Battle Fleet was regarded as a well known, proven and efficient weapon system. It would be safe to keep on that track.

As may be imagined, these views were fully accepted by Southern Cone national and naval leaderships.

Naval arms limitation attempts

As already known, Collective Security and Arms Limitation became significant concepts at the end of World War One. Collective Security materialized in the League of Nations, which came to light in 1919. In spite of taking part in the preliminary conferences, Argentina did not become a member because serving President Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916-1922) set as a necessary precondition to have the League open to membership by all nations with no exception. In spite of determined efforts by President Alvear – Yrigoyen's successor (1922-28) – Congressional obstruction kept Argentina out of the League until 1933.

On the wake of the Washington Conference of 1921-22, arms limitation in the American Continent was included in the agenda of an Inter-American Conference which took place in Santiago, Chile in March – May, 1923.¹⁴ The Chilean Government had recommended to discuss an Arms Limitation agreement in the agenda of the aforementioned Fifth Inter-American Conference. This proposal got full support from the US Government. As a matter of fact, there were no results concerning ground armaments. It should be recalled that Brazil, Chile and Argentina were the main South American naval powers. Therefore, if it was going to be an agreement, it should take into account ABC countries' views. There were some promising discussions about naval arms limitation, but, due to conflicting views on this subject - mainly between Brazilian and Argentinean delegates - no agreement was reached, in spite of determined efforts by the Chilean President, Arturo Alessandri. Both Brazilian and Argentine representatives looked to maximize national interest – as perceived in those days. In short, Brazilian position sought to have either high enough limits or no limits for future battleship acquisitions, and the Argentineans supported an agreement based on a limit on battleship tonnage equal to the largest – i.e.: the Argentinean one. This arrangement appeared fine and fair on principle, but, given the actual figures of Argentinean and Brazilian battleship tonnage, it left no margin for an additional

effective Brazilian battleship, except by decommissioning one of the two Brazilian dreadnoughts. On the other hand, the Argentineans would have only to support the cost of modernizing their existing battleships. As already stated, no effective results were achieved, but five agreements were signed, which set 'recommendations' in reference to peaceful solution of disputes; convenience of future arms limitation agreements; adherence to Law of Armed Conflict, and restriction of Air Operations against non military targets, as well as adherence to the Washington treaties in respect to capital ship tonnage, maximum gunnery caliber, submarine operations against merchant ships, and use of poisonous gases.¹⁵

Harold Peterson¹⁶ summarizes US views on the attitude of the Argentinean representatives: "Along the whole conference, the Argentine representatives concentrated their fire on the Chilean proposal on arms limitation. By setting limits by which their government would not incur in additional spending, they opposed to land and naval arms limitation"¹⁷

With respect to the Brazilian views on the Conference, a Brazilian naval author stated in 1985: "Without any doubt, Brazil's major concern in the Conference was not to accept limitations that could limit her freedom of action in the naval field, mainly when the future appeared to open promising perspectives and, once more, Baron de Rio Branco's dreams seemed to be close to fulfillment"¹⁸

The Naval Arms Limitation conference held in Rome in 1924 – sponsored by the League of Nations - had the same inconclusive outcome for the Southern Cone. As a matter of fact, because

¹⁴ There had been a significant previous arms limitation achievement in the Western Hemisphere: the Central American Convention for the Limitation of Armaments, signed in Washington, DC on 7 February, 1923.

¹⁵ Conferencias Internacionales Americanas 1889-1936, pp. 284-286

¹⁶ Peterson, Argentina y los Estados Unidos

of Argentina's non-membership of the League of Nations, the Argentinean representative had been instructed to act just as an 'observer'.

As a consequence of the meager results of both conferences, each country kept for herself her freedom for weapons procurement, to be determined solely by her political will and her financial position.

The genesis of the Argentinean naval buildup in the 1920's

The interruption of the naval buildup authorized by the Weapons Procurement Act of 1908 was a great frustration for Argentinean naval leadership. There was an attempt to correct this state of affairs in 1918, when the Executive sent to Congress a bill asking for significant naval reinforcements which comprised cruisers, destroyers and submarines, among other types of naval and auxiliary vessels. Unfortunately for the Argentinean Navy, this bill was never enacted, which increased the previously mentioned sense of naval frustration.

In 1922, when a new elected government took office in Buenos Aires, Admiral Domecq García, who had been an observer on board the Japanese Fleet during the Russo-Japanese War, was appointed Navy Minister. He believed - as well as the Navy Leadership - that the Argentinean Navy was in a position of relative inferiority vis-à-vis the Brazilian and Chilean navies.¹⁷ Their perception derived essentially from:

¹⁷ Peterson, *Argentina y...*, pp. 419-420 and note 27. (This quotation is a re-translation of the Spanish version. Actual wording in English may differ).

¹⁸ Vidigal, *A evolução do pensamento*, p. 69.

¹⁹ US Naval Intelligence reported on 15 April 1922 that the Argentine Navy was number one in the ABC Navies, closely followed by the Chilean one and Brazil a little farther away as third. However, this report assessed that there was ample evidence that Brazil was willing to change its state of affairs in her favor, that would result in an increase in ABC naval competition. (office of Naval Intelligence *Monthly Information Bulletin*, Nr 6 – 1922, p. 6.

- The interruption of the 1908 building program because of the outbreak of World War I, as already been mentioned.
- The modernization of the Brazilian dreadnoughts in the United States and the establishment of an American Naval Mission in Brazil.
- The commissioning in the Chilean Navy of a superdreadnought, Almirante Latorre (ex HMS Canada) armed with 14" guns, and updated by the Royal Navy during World War I.

In addition to these views, derived from the then current situation, there were news about planned Brazilian and Chilean buildups.²⁰

Fortunately for the Navy, the Argentinean civilian leadership shared the former' s views. Thus, Argentine Congress passed an Act²¹ in September 1923 authorizing funds for battleships' and destroyers'²² modernization.

Plans for the dreadnoughts update had been considered as early as November 1918, and there had been preliminary contacts between the Argentine Embassy and the U.S. Government, followed by exchanges between the U.S. Navy Department and the Argentinean Naval Commission in Washington DC.

Both battleships were modernized in 1924-25 in the United States, along the lines dictated by the lessons of World War I:

- Coal fired boilers were replaced by oil fired ones.
- Coal bunkers were converted into fuel or feed water tanks.

²⁰ For Brazilian plans, see Scheina, Latin America..., pages 134-137. For the Chilean actual buildup, see Gardiner (ed) Conway's 1922-1945, pages 422-423.

²¹ Act Nr. 11222, 20 September, 1923..

²² i.e.: the four German built destroyers commissioned a little before World War One.

- Direct drive turbines were replaced by geared ones, which let an increase in SHP from 39,500 to 45,000.
- A new fire control system was installed.
- The pole mainmast was replaced by a tripod one, and the fore cage mast was retained, which gave these ships a unique appearance.

As early as 1922, the Navy Minister had ordered the Navy Staff to undertake a study of Argentinean naval needs, given the current Southern Cone situation. As may be imagined, the size of Brazilian and Chilean navies was of primary concern, especially with respect to first line surface forces, i.e.: battleships, cruisers and destroyers. The study also confirmed that in the future, the Argentinean Navy could only count on the ‘new’ ships of the 1908 program, i.e.: the battleships and the four German built destroyers. Consideration was given, too, to the difficulty of predicting rival buildups, because of the variability of financial situation in the Southern Cone countries, due to the fact that their production rested almost exclusively on primary products²³.

On the first place, this study focused on a ‘minimum’ increase in Argentinean naval power. ‘Acceptable’ and ‘desirable’ expansions were analyzed but they dealt mainly with increases in numbers of ships to be requested. However, two battlecruisers of 20000 tons were included in the ‘desirable’ plan because frequent bad weather conditions in the southern tip of South America might inhibit scouting by light cruisers, flotilla leaders and destroyers.²⁴ As a matter of fact, financial realities led to the enactment and actual execution of a naval expansion plan reasonably close to the ‘minimum’ program.

²³ Estudio comparativo sobre Poder Naval Sud-Americano 1923, page [89]. This is the final document of the study started the previous year. (Pages in this document are shown in brackets because they appear to have been hand numbered by an archivist)

The Naval Procurement Act

The Argentine Navy asked foreign yards for sketch designs and prices for several types of warships in 1924, in order to figure out the funds to be required from Congress. There was a considerable interest in foreign yards which submitted projects for cruisers, destroyers and submarines.²⁵

The Naval Procurement Bill was sent to the Senate in mid-1925. It asked for a considerable amount of money for those days, about 15.000.000 pounds, to be spent along ten years. In order to have a reasonable degree of comparison of this figure, it should be remembered that contemporary naval budgets of first line Naval Powers – i.e.: Great Britain and the United States – were around 60.000.000 pounds. Moreover, the significance of the required money is also underlined by comparing it – 170.000.000 Argentinean pesos – with contemporary Navy Ministry budgets for 1922-28, which varied from 42.000.000 to 54.000.000 Argentine pesos.²⁶

An explanatory submitting introduction by the Executive underlined the importance of what was regarded as a ‘replacement’ program for updating Argentinean naval power. The Navy Minister sent also to the Legislature a rather extensive report, in which he depicted naval needs in detail. The Bill had a relatively easy transit in the Senate, but the issue became complicated in the House. As may be imagined, the amount of money requested by the Executive made a rather large group of representatives unwilling to let the Bill pass. In addition, Congress had passed an Act in late 1923 authorizing significant funding for Army modernization. In spite of the full support of serving President Marcelo T. de Alvear (1922-1928), enactment appeared doubtful because the Government party representatives were split among the President supporters and a group which

²⁴ *Estudio Comparativo*, pp. [9a], [10], [12] and [116].

²⁵ “Antecedentes sobre pedidos de precios - Año 1924”.

was absolutely loyal to former President Yrigoyen.²⁷ This last group was not willing to approve an increase in military expenditure, because the Socialist Party representatives were decidedly against a naval buildup,²⁸ and this issue could be successfully used in the coming legislative elections that were going to be held in Buenos Aires – a district in which the Socialist party had strong support.

Given this state of affairs, the Navy Leadership decided to take advantage of the acquaintance of Navy Captain (Supply Corps)²⁹ Francisco Senesi with former President Yrigoyen's physician. Captain Senesi found his way to meet the former President and show him the importance for the Navy of the Naval Procurement Bill. Dr. Yrigoyen accepted the Navy viewpoint and agreed to instruct his supporters in Congress to vote in favor of the Bill.

The Bill was enacted in late 1926,³⁰ after a long and heated debate in which the Socialist representatives made determined efforts to defeat it. The situation demanded the attendance of Navy Minister himself to the House in various occasions, and further appeals to former President Yrigoyen to ensure a favorable outcome. In addition to improvements in shore facilities, ships authorized were three cruisers, six destroyers, six submarines and two surveying vessels. There was a considerable interest in foreign yards, which submitted tenders for cruisers, destroyers and submarines.

²⁶ Figures in British pounds and Argentine pesos refer to their rate of exchange of those days.

²⁷ In spite of belonging to the same party – Unión Cívica Radical – both serving President Alvear and former President Yrigoyen headed their own 'wings'.

²⁸ In fact, Socialist representatives bases their opposition on grounds that the current political situation in the Southern Cone did not deserve an increase in military readiness.

²⁹ In those days, Supply Officers had different names for their ranks. Senesi's actual rank was 'Contador Inspector', that could be translated into English as 'Inspector Paymaster'.

³⁰ Act Nr. 11378.

As a result of the tender selection process, two cruisers³¹ were ordered from Italian yards, as well as three destroyers on British yards³²; two Spanish-built destroyers³³ - based on a design very similar to the destroyers ordered in Britain - were purchased, and three submarines³⁴ were undertaken by Italian builders. It should be taken into account that these submarines were the first commissioned in the Argentinean Navy.

Moreover, the approved funding allowed further development of base facilities, acquisition of updated communications equipment, as well as a significant impulse to naval aviation.

Reactions to the Argentinean naval procurement program had a tone of alarm and disappointment in Brazil. On the contrary, the Chilean press asked its Government to take into account Argentina's example, mainly not for fear of Argentina but because of strained relations between Chile and Peru.

In fact, Chile achieved a rather large naval expansion by extensively modernizing battleship Almirante Latorre, and by ordering in Britain six destroyers and three submarines. Brassey's 1927 gives the amount of 11.000.000 pounds³⁵ for the Chilean naval program, which underline a substantial financial effort for this country, especially if compared with the 15.000.000 pound Argentinean buildup.

Brazilian political and financial troubles in the 1920's precluded a significant naval improvement as envisioned by her civilian and naval leaders. In spite of the efforts of the US Naval Mission,

³¹ Names given were Almirante Brown and 25 de mayo (A reduced version of Italian Trento class.)

³² Mendoza, La Rioja and Tucumán (a modified version of British Scott class.)

³³ Cervantes and Garay

³⁴ Santa Fé, Santiago del Estero and Salta

³⁵ Brassey's 1927, p. 49.

the only significant achievements in those years were the modernization of cruisers Bahia and Rio Grande do Sul, and the acquisition of an Italian built submarine.

Coming back to the Argentinean Navy, remaining allowances of the Naval Procurement Act let to order seven destroyers from British yards in mid 1930's.³⁶ Moreover, additional Congress authorizations resulted in the commissioning of a British built light cruiser³⁷, and the construction of nine minelayers/minesweepers in Argentine yards.

As may be imagined, the fulfillment of this procurement program gave the Argentinean Navy a significant superiority margin in the Southern Cone up to the end of World War Two.

Conclusion

During most part of the Twentieth Century, Argentinean Leadership perceived an adequate balance of military power in the Southern Cone - naval power included - as essential for national security.

Ships' acquisitions and refits authorized in the 1920's were key to an increase in Argentinean Naval Power in the 1920's and 1930's deemed as instrumental - from an Argentinean viewpoint - to achieve and maintain this balance of power.

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³⁶ Similar to British 'G' class.

³⁷ La Argentina.

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