

The case of the cargo plane

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It is hard to keep a straight face while following the news dispatches from Argentina concerning the confiscated cargo of a U.S. military aircraft, participating in a bilateral program to train special elements of the Argentine national police in crisis management. That the U.S. military is training police is a subject for serious discussion at some other time. Let's focus on the cargo plane today.

Is it conceivable that the foreign minister, with his own camera crew, personally supervised the customs inspection of the cargo as it was unloaded? Does he do this sort of thing on a regular basis? Is it credible, as Sr Timerman claims, that "every step" of his participation in the episode was approved in advance by the president? Did the minister keep a straight face when he told the press that he had come to Ezeiza to inspect the plane because Argentine laws had to be obeyed? This would be the stuff of soap operas were it not for hints of sub-texts, both domestic and diplomatic, that warrant some reflection and comment.

Assistant Secretary Arturo Valenzuela may have laid bare the domestic subtext when he suggested to CNN that this is an election year in Argentina. There is a long tradition of Argentine governments using international relations as a means of drumming up domestic political support. In such cases, it appears as if the governments in question simply ignore the possible consequences of their rash actions. But, the actions of a state in international affairs have consequences. Sometimes those consequences are much more significant than the short term gains in domestic politics of a bold, hyper-nationalist gesture. Mack Jones, a political scientist based in the U.S., recently published a study of Argentine foreign policy in which he concluded that since the transition to democracy, successive governments have tended to use foreign policy as a tool of domestic policy. If that same calculation lies behind this episode, I would wonder how the government of Mrs Kirchner would evaluate the success of their gambit. Does her handling of this episode improve her chances in the coming elections? It strains credulity. Does she really believe that anyone - in her party or in the opposition - who blames her for the fact that Obama will not visit Argentina on his coming trip to the region will be mollified by her posturing in this episode?

The diplomatic subtext is more disturbing. After several years of careful, quiet diplomacy, the U.S. Treasury Department had indicated its support for the Argentine proposal to end its status as a pariah in the international credit markets (At this point, only Venezuelan debt has a larger spread with U.S. treasuries as Argentina.). In addition, at the ministerial level, bilateral relations were good - calm and collaborative. In several episodes, Assistant Secretary Valenzuela had indicated his impatience with his counterparts in Argentina; but, over the past few months he had kept a low profile, following the lead of his boss, who has lots on her plate and doesn't want to be distracted by minor irritations in Latin America. How to deal with Brazil's new international role is quite enough for the Obama administration at the moment. Now, Argentina imposes itself on the agenda. In terms of its role in world affairs, this episode cannot possibly produce a positive result for Argentina. If Argentina is to demonstrate its relevance in the

international community, it has to behave consistently in a reliable and predictable manner.. An autonomous foreign policy should not be perverse. It should maximize the country's national interests over time. It should be based on sound principles and transparent strategy. Making a fuss over discrepancies in the cargo plane's manifest does not strike me as consistent with such a foreign policy.