

Interview – Federico Merke

Written by E-International Relations

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Federico Merke, an Associate Professor at Universidad de San Andrés in Argentina, specializes in Foreign Policy Analysis, Latin American foreign policy, climate change, and human rights. He earned his undergraduate degree in International Relations from Universidad del Salvador in Argentina, followed by a Master of Arts in International Studies at the University of Warwick in the UK, and a Doctorate in Social Science from FLACSO University in Argentina. Transitioning from an extensive tenure at the Argentine Council for International Relations, a prominent foreign policy think tank, Federico embarked on an academic career. With publications in International Affairs and Research and Politics, Federico's career trajectory includes roles as a full-time professor at Universidad de San Andrés and a researcher at CONICET, Argentina's public agency for scientific research. Currently, Federico directs the master's program in International Politics and Economics at Universidad de San Andrés, building on his previous oversight of the undergraduate program between 2010 and 2019. You can find his IR and foreign policy publications [here](#).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Over the last few years, I've immersed myself in analyzing foreign policy within the broader scope of international studies. Compared to a decade ago, we now have various tools illuminating the intricate connections between foreign policy, international pressures, and domestic politics. An emerging body of literature brilliantly connects psychological foundations to foreign policy choices. This allows us to integrate individual factors and continually refine our analytical lens. In foreign policy, there isn't a singular overarching theory. Instead, we find theories of intermediate scope, which I believe offer the most clarity in understanding governments' international actions. A pressing query that captivates me is: How do foreign policy preferences crystallize? Who are the pivotal domestic players? What material interest is behind it, and how do narratives and ideologies shape these preferences?

Today, we're witnessing a fascinating shift: Foreign policy has increasingly intertwined with domestic politics, becoming a hotbed for influences like polarization, populism, and nationalism. This blend, coupled with heightened geopolitical rivalries, the rapid pace of globalization and climate change, has muddled the waters for many governments. Striking a sustainable balance or consensus amidst these dynamics proves challenging. In essence, the study of foreign policy in our contemporary era is a tapestry woven from local and global threads, encompassing politics and economics, security, and finance. It presents a far richer, more dynamic, and more intricate landscape than ever before.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Over time, my evolution hasn't necessarily been about shifting from one theory to another, although there's a bit of that. Instead, it's been about the role theory plays in my work. I've gravitated towards a more empirical approach and moved away from pure abstraction. My perspective began to shift notably when I designed my first undergraduate course on foreign policy analysis, followed by an intensive graduate seminar on international policy analysis. Teaching these courses made me wary of overly simplistic explanations we put forward when teaching international relations theory. I started incorporating multiple variables and analytical levels pragmatically, tailored to the specific issues I was exploring. While my foundational approach leans towards rationalism, I resonate more with dissecting

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variables and mechanisms than strictly adhering to grand theories. David Lake's article, "Why Isms are Evil," profoundly influenced me, emphasizing a problem-centric rather than a theory-centric approach. For instance, I can delve into how a coalition's ideology shapes a government's foreign policy and then seamlessly transition to analyzing a strategic scenario driven by tangible interests. I resist labels. When someone affirms, "I'm a realist" or "I'm a constructivist," I recognize the strong pull of confirmation bias that often accompanies such statements.

One of your most recent publications analyses how China influences the liberal international order from the inside. How do your research findings enhance our understanding of China's aspirations and actions in shaping the international order?

In our collaborative work with my colleagues Pauselli and Urdinez, we've observed that China's presence in the UN Human Rights Council influences the voting patterns of other member countries. Specifically, nations sharing Council membership with China tend to align their votes more closely with China's preferences. This isn't just about China's sway over its allies; it signals a deliberate strategy to recalibrate the perception of human rights, moving away from its universal essence.

China's approach isn't to dismantle the Human Rights Council but to promote a more Westphalian perspective. China primarily sees Human rights as domestic concerns, with international intervention warranted only in situations that jeopardize global stability. Our research underscores China's inclination to redefine the "liberal" signifier in the international liberal order. Historically, the West has equated modernity with liberal democracy. However, China challenges this narrative, advocating for a vision of modernity that doesn't necessarily hinge on conventional democratic ideals. This dynamic is intriguing because China's competition extends beyond strategic, commercial, or technological arenas into the realm of ideas. Interestingly, this ideological competition seems more pronounced in the Global South compared to the Global North.

What are the most important implications of US-China competition for Latin America's autonomy?

Latin America is navigating a tumultuous phase marked by persistent economic inequality, fragile democracies, and states often influenced by elite interests rather than genuine autonomy. Within this context, China emerges as an appealing ally for leaders seeking alternatives to liberal democracy. They view China as a partner that respects non-interference in domestic matters, contrasting with perceived U.S. interventionism. Briefly put, China's governance ethos emphasizes the primacy of the state, political considerations, and collective over individual interests. While some regional leaders may not advocate for single-party dominance, they exhibit comfort with centralized power and suppressing dissent. Beyond political leaders, China's appeal resonates with sectors like agribusiness, eyeing vast commercial prospects, and bankers seeking credit avenues. China's appeal has transcended ideological boundaries. Even though numerous Latin American governments may not share China's communist ideology, they discover common ground in principles of non-intervention, sovereignty, and autonomy. This presents a nuanced challenge: striking a balance between economic interests with China while considering domestic institutions that align more closely with Western norms.

What are some of the novel approaches and debates in the areas of IR and FPA in Latin America?

In examining Latin America, I find that four key approaches prove instrumental in deciphering the intricate web of international dynamics at play. Firstly, delving into the study of domestic coalitions in power and their influence on foreign policy preferences offers valuable insights. While Andrew Moravcsik's work on preferences is foundational, Etel Solingen's extensive exploration of coalitions in Latin America, particularly the distinction between inward-looking and outward-looking coalitions, adds significant depth. Given Latin America's notable levels of inequality resulting in social and political polarization, comprehending the formation of these coalitions and how their preferences shape foreign policy emerges as a critical factor in understanding the region.

The second perspective I find intriguing centers around the notion that the material dynamics of power, such as balancing, deterrence, or arms competition, are not as pronounced in Latin America as in other regions of the global south. Instead, framing the region in terms of a balance of political identities, as opposed to the traditional concept of

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power comprising military and economic strength, proves more compelling. In essence, the threat posed by a neighboring country stem not from its raw power but from its success and potential electoral ramifications within my own country. A crucial predictor for predicting the relations between two countries in the region lies in the ideological distance between them. Governments gauge the nature of the coalition in power in a neighboring country to infer its proximity to the United States, the openness of its economy, and its alignment with the demands of the global south, among other dimensions.

The third angle, which I have delved into, revolves around the idea that Latin America, despite its diversity, forms a regional international society. Drawing inspiration from the English School of International Relations, this perspective identifies a strong Westphalian pluralistic ethos in the region, with occasional forays into solidarism, particularly concerning issues like democracy and human rights. However, the core remains anchored in traditional institutions of international society, notably sovereignty, international law, and diplomacy. A particularly fascinating aspect is the concept of “concertation” as a unique institution in Latin America. This entails leaders agreeing on minimal yet fundamental issues to foster continued coexistence and establish the groundwork for basic cooperation, not necessarily for providing public goods but rather to prevent “public bads” such as interstate wars.

Lastly, the fourth dimension that I think demands consideration when contemplating the region is the understanding that Latin America exists within a world characterized by uneven and combined development, with the enduring tension between the North and South as a fundamental element. Unlike other regions of the global south where geopolitics and international security dominate the regional discourse, our focus in Latin America gravitates more towards discussions on globalization and international well-being. It’s important to note, however, that aligning such a perspective on a global scale proves challenging, given the current priority of global powers, which predominantly revolves around geopolitical competition—an area not necessarily at the forefront of the region’s concerns.

What elements of foreign policy change and continuity do you expect to happen in Argentina during Javier Milei’s presidential term?

Certain trends are becoming evident in evaluating Milei’s foreign policy at this early juncture. Notably, there is a stated interest in seeking OECD membership, a preference against joining BRICS, a commitment to negotiating a free trade agreement with the European Union, and a proactive stance in disengaging from UNASUR, accompanied by a distant approach in dealings with China. There is a distinct inclination toward a pro-North orientation, coupled with a notable indifference towards regional affiliations. The historical relationship with Brazil has experienced deterioration over time, and the likelihood of Milei prioritizing efforts to repair this connection seems low for me so far. Should I venture a forecast, it seems to me that Milei’s global outlook will embody dogmatism when conditions allows and pragmatism when circumstances require. This inclination towards dogmatism would manifest itself as a heightened receptivity to influences from the Global North and a wariness towards those from the Global South. Simultaneously, his government may enhance global trade and align with international regulations across various domains by fostering a more open economy. More than an original libertarian approach, Milei’s foreign policy up to this point seems to be a classic liberal-right approach, albeit with more assertiveness than in previous governments.

In a 2022 article, you discuss the increasing divergence in the Argentine-Brazilian relationship over recent decades. Could you elaborate on the factors contributing to this trend and how the bilateral divergence affects South America’s regional integration?

Over the years, the foundation of the Argentina-Brazil relationship rested on shared interests and values. However, in the current scenario, believing this dynamic persists is challenging. Brazil’s ascent and Argentina’s decline have led to distinct situations for both nations. In our article with Gisela Pereyra Doval, we delve into three key factors explaining the deterioration of this bilateral relationship:

1. There are evolving patterns of preferences on both sides, exacerbated by electoral cycles that haven’t fostered improved ties. This dynamic was evident during the Macri-Rousseff and Bolsonaro-Fernandez periods and is likely to persist between Lula and Milei.
2. Material interests tied to trade and investment play a crucial role. Brazil’s waning interest in Argentina can

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be attributed to increased trade with China, diverting focus towards Asia rather than the region. Also, Brazil's process of deindustrialization has diminished the support base of companies invested in the relationship with Argentina.

3. Argentina's enduring crisis spanning over a decade has cast a shorter shadow of the future, diminishing prospects for sustained cooperation.

Considering the current scenario, I am skeptical about any immediate changes. Milei and Lula seem to be concentrating on divergent agendas, and while there is potential for them to complement each other, I haven't observed any indications from either side in that direction. It is a matter of foreign policy orientations and domestic policy considerations. Neither party seems willing to approach the other at the risk of losing support from their respective domestic bases.

What is the most important advice you could give young International Relations scholars?

My most fundamental advice would be to avoid theoretical pigeonholing! But there is more to it: Engage in the study of data analytics and acquire programming skills as they are indispensable tools for any research project. Ensure you incorporate the time variable in your analysis and explore the political economy of the foreign agenda. As a thought experiment, consider that every action a president takes in foreign policy serves purely domestic purposes, and you'll uncover intriguing insights. To identify international sources of political risk, approach your analysis as if you were sitting on the board of a multinational company. Lastly, always return to the classics for foundational insights.