

Even in this context, it should be mentioned that as early as 1977 Argentina, facing what it saw as Western attempts to hamstring its nuclear programme, suggested to Brazil that the two countries could cooperate in their programmes with a view to lessening the impact of outside interference. It should be noted, however, that Buenos Aires was at this time also afraid of the impact of the deal Brasilia had just made with Bonn on nuclear cooperation and one should not make too much of this offer at this point in time. In a 1980 accord, Argentina agreed to furnish Brazil with zirconium for its reactor fuel and in return would receive from that country enriched uranium produced by the Resende plant. Despite military and nationalist governments in both capitals, mutual advantage and the need to reassure the other about one's intentions appear to have counted even at this early date.

It is interesting to speculate on how the balance between this desire to reassure the other side and the need to posture played out. While nothing has been written about the subject, it can surely only be that cooler heads were prevailing in defence ministries when something as serious as nuclear weapons was at issue. Such seriousness was after all a constant theme of both countries' relations with the rest of the world, including those with the United States. And finally, of course, there was a visible reluctance on the part of the military of both countries to actually discuss nuclear weapons as useful tools of defence policy beyond the exclusively deterrent role. All of this must be seen in the context of a still highly limited threat perception on the part of both players.

Later moves in the direction of *détente* mattered much more and were to have decisive importance. And again Argentina was at the centre of the evolving situation. In addition to the collapse of military influence and power in domestic politics, the 1980s also saw the collapse of the economy, long suffering but now shattered by policies consistently out of line with world trends. When the Alfonsín government yielded power early to that of Carlos Menem the economy could hardly have been in worse shape. Inflation running at thousands of percent had ruined the middle classes, had sapped the energy of the public and destroyed confidence.

The country simply could not afford expensive programmes, military or civilian. And funds for the nuclear programme were hit early and hard. Added to this was a realism, growing under Alfonsín but which under Menem became the rule of thumb for the country, which in effect accepted that in so far as the historic rivalry with Brazil was concerned, surrender was the only option open. Alfonsín had been a constant opponent of the nuclear programme since its inception, as had been his Radical Party. Indeed, only one wing of the Peronists actually favoured the acquisition of nuclear weapons, although others supported a civilian programme in line with national energy needs. Argentines increasingly saw that the costs of continued competition with their northern neighbour were simply too high to be any longer sustained. And in the context of greater realism, it was also conceded that more could be gained from collaboration with the obvious regional giant than could be obtained through continued confrontation.¹⁰

¹⁰ See the chapters on the late 1980s and early nineties in Silvia Ruth Jarabe (ed), *La Política exterior argentina y sus protagonistas 1880-1995* (Buenos Aires, Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1996).