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# Don't Cry for me "Argenchina": Unraveling Political Views of China through Legislative Debates in Argentina

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**Abstract** This study seeks to explain the profound discord currently observable in elite political discourse on Chinese investments in many host countries. Using Argentina as a case study, a combination of quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis was employed to analyze parliamentary speeches on a controversial space-monitoring station built there by China in 2015. The study finds that the competing discourses about China in Argentinean politics draw primarily on locally embedded contexts and the region's particular historical experiences and geopolitical position. These local narratives are used in different ways by both sides of the debate to support contradicting positions on relevant issues. Questions of regional hegemony, center-periphery relations, national autonomy as well as Peronist and anti-Peronist ideologies are being drawn on by elite politicians in an attempt to cope with the deep uncertainty about what China's increased engagement means for the country and to compensate for the lack of predictability about China's behavior in its future role as a major global power. Ultimately, however, Argentina's elite politicians end up in a dilemma in which these narratives and historical memories can be spun in both ways to either support or reject a controversial investment project to go ahead on domestic soil that is, at the same time, a symbolic test for the potential depth of the future relationship with China.

**Keywords** China-Argentina relations · Deep-space monitoring station · Chinese FDI · Latin America · Center-periphery · Comprehensive strategic relationship

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“In five years, China will be the world’s most important economic actor [...] how can you expect us not to have a strategic relationship with it if they bring us investments? Why are you so fearful of the Chinese?”

*President Cristina F. de Kirchner - opening of legislative session, speech to the legislators, March 2015.*

## Introduction

In December 2014, the Argentinean Senate approved an agreement on cooperation between Argentina and China on the “Construction, Establishment, and Operation of a Chinese Deep-Space Monitoring Station” in the Argentinean Province of Neuquén. It was set within the framework of the Chinese Moon Exploration Program. The agreement to build this station immediately generated a lot of criticism from politicians, journalists, and academics, who raised concerns about issues such as the possible military use of the facilities, the magnitude of the tax breaks granted to the Chinese, the limited access granted to Argentine scientists and its alleged level of secrecy.

Such criticisms of Chinese investments are not new, and have been widespread in many parts of the world ([22]: 107). Chinese investments have tended to shoulder a particularly heavy baggage of political controversy, as the majority of investments are carried out by State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and government support for outward investments is intensive [26, 34, 46]. Uncertainties about China’s future role as a global economic and political power further exacerbate stakeholder concerns in host countries over issues such as national security, unfair competition, and state ownership. In Britain, the May administration’s summer 2016 announcement to review Chinese participation in the construction of the Hinkley Point C nuclear power plant is just another more recent example of the political consequences these uncertainties about China bring with them. Nevertheless, scholarship to date has not conclusively pinned down the reasons why China and Chinese investments have received such an above-average amount of scrutiny by host country stakeholders over the past few years – much more than firms from the United States (US) or other countries commonly receive.

The strong criticism of Chinese investments is even more puzzling when viewed against the backdrop of rapidly intensifying economic and investment relations with China. In Latin America, China has become a major external economic actor over the past decade – in 2014, the country was already the second largest trade partner and a major source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows in Latin America. Several Latin American countries have established strategic partnerships with Beijing, which implies greater cooperation on FDI-related matters and a positive attitude towards China. This is a significant advance, considering the fact that Latin America has traditionally been the backbone of American hemispheric hegemony [30].

Within Latin America, Argentina has developed one of the strongest relationships with China [25]. In July 2014, when Xi Jinping visited Argentina, both countries signed several multi-billion dollar agreements on infrastructure finance and currency swap arrangements, and a new framework agreement on cooperation in economic and investment matters was agreed. Impeded from accessing western financing, China’s

emergence as a new Latin American creditor provided the country with a funding source that was independent of global financing markets [4, 19]. During Hu Jintao's visit to South America in 2004, Argentina and China had already signed a memorandum of cooperation in trade and investment that defined the partnership as "strategic."<sup>1</sup>

The Argentinean approach to China is similar to that of many host countries in other parts of the world that are actively attracting and promoting Chinese investments. Many companies even happily agree to become a target of a Chinese acquiring firm [21]. However, these very positive views and eagerness to court Chinese investors greatly contradict the many criticisms commonly voiced about Chinese investments. Hence, there exist major controversies and contradictions in perceptions about Chinese FDI and reactions to them. In fact, these differences in perspective about Chinese outward FDI form one of the biggest unresolved puzzles about China's economic expansion into the rest of the world.

In this study, we seek to gain greater understanding of the origins of these controversies and contradictory perceptions and examine the nature of the discourses employed to support competing arguments about Chinese investments. We analyze in detail what type of discourses elected politicians in Argentina use to argue in favour or against the space-monitoring station. Why do they adopt an overly critical view of Chinese FDI in Argentina, or why do they view the issue in a positive light? Where do the differences in arguments lie?

For the purpose of our analysis, the value of the Chinese space-monitoring station project in Argentina is twofold. First, its nature—a mix of science and high politics—makes it an interesting case for understanding fears over an increasing Chinese presence in Latin America; second, it is China's only investment project that has ever been discussed in Congress in Argentina.

We took a mixed-method approach, employing both quantitative text analysis and qualitative political discourse analysis to analyze all parliamentary speeches in the Senate and the Chamber discussing the approval of the cooperation agreement between Argentina and China. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to examine domestic political discourses on the emergence of Chinese investors in Latin America. While China's ascendance in Latin America has been studied through purely quantitative methods [49], no one has yet focused on specific case studies of individual countries.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the next section, we describe the nature of the Chinese space-monitoring station. Then, we discuss the existing literature on congressional debates in Argentina as well as the state of the art of the literature on Chinese engagement in Latin America to propose three hypotheses. Afterwards, we describe our methodology and we proceed to disentangle the embedded perceptions of Chinese investments in political debate. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the findings and policy implications, and develop a future research agenda.

## **Framing the Case Study: Argentina, an Appealing Country for Space Science**

As a growing global power with leadership ambitions, China started developing programs aimed at exploring the Moon and other celestial bodies, Mars in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Chinese media, the term "strategic partnership" is the ultimate definition of bilateral relations [36].

To this end, China established the so-called China Deep Space Network, a series of monitoring stations in order to support various space missions as the planet rotates. This project, by its very nature, enhances China's global capabilities in science and military fields. China needs strategically-located stations in various parts of the world, and the Patagonian region in Argentina proved to have the correct geographical conditions for the installation of one of them.

In Argentina, the organization in charge of scientific activities related to astronomy is the National Commission on Space Activities (CONAE). In 2004, after Hu Jintao's visit to the country, a framework of cooperation agreement between CONAE and China's National Space Agency (CNSA) was signed, recognizing the potential for joint activities between the two agencies. After a joint assessment, it was decided that the base would be installed on 200 ha of land in the area of Bajada Del Agrio, an isolated sub region of Patagonia.

On April 23, 2014 a provincial law was approved establishing tax breaks and a relaxation of immigration rules for Chinese officials involved in the project. This was the subject of great debate among the congressional commissions, making this project markedly more politicized than others. Even though the station was already being built, the project was submitted to the National Congress in July of 2014 for discussion in both houses.

In November of 2014, after the provincial law was already enacted,<sup>2</sup> the province of Neuquén approved a tax exemption for the China Harbour Engineering Company, the Chinese company in charge of building the station, and granted exemptions of VAT, customs duties, and internal taxes to the CNSA and other companies for the duration of the concession (50 years). Furthermore, it allowed Chinese employees working in Neuquén to be governed under the laws of China.

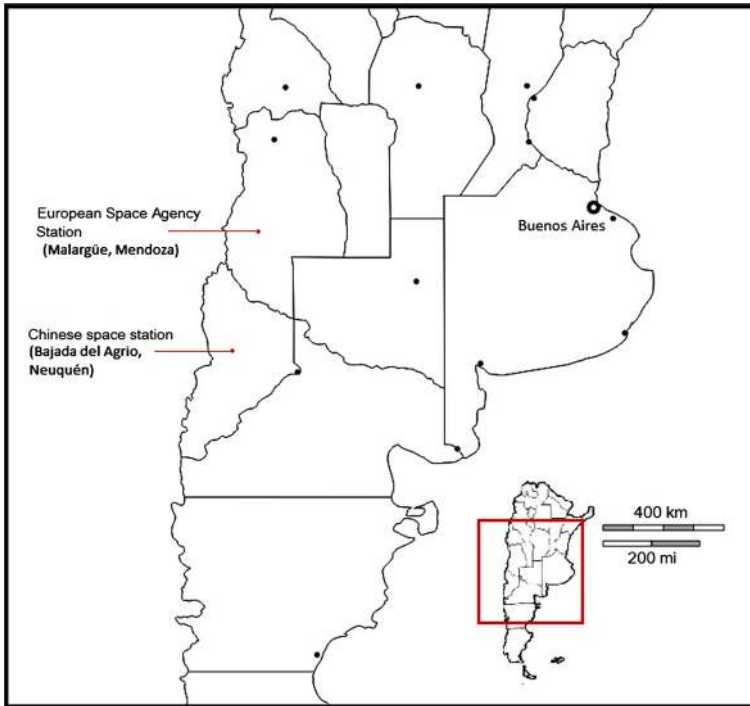
Set against this Chinese deep space-monitoring station project is the case of a similar station built by the European Space Agency (ESA) in 2012. This station was inaugurated in Malargue, in the province of Mendoza. As with the Chinese project, Argentina's CONAE was involved in the early technical assessments and the first cooperation agreements in 2009. Figure 1 shows the location of the ESA and the CNSA's space-monitoring stations. Both are located in the western part of the country, close to the border with Chile.

Moreover, Table 1 shows how both agreements were very similar in content, yet exhibited a few notable differences. While Article 1 of the agreement with the ESA established the mandatory use for peaceful ends, the agreement with the CNSA only mentioned it in the introduction as part of the "spirit" of the project.<sup>3</sup>

Both agreements were identical in that they established a session of land for a period of 50 years; included termination clauses and controversy-solving mechanisms; and incorporated an agreement that Argentine scientists would be allowed to use the facility for 10% of the time. As for the differences, there were no tax exemptions for the ESA, while there were for the CNSA, and European technicians did not receive migratory benefits as the Chinese did.

<sup>2</sup> Law no. 27,123 of the 6th of November.

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in 2004 a technical cooperation agreement for the "Peaceful Use of Outer Space" had already been signed between CONAE and CNSA, and included wording similar to that in the introduction of the agreement with the ESA.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

**Fig. 1** Location of the European and Chinese space-monitoring stations in Argentina

Companies and entities with connections to military projects constructed both stations. The China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General, the entity that controls the space-monitoring station, is subordinate to the People’s Liberation Army’s General Armaments Department (GAD), while the Italian company Telespazio is

**Table 1** Comparison between agreements

	European station	Chinese station
The agreement provides for mandatory use for peaceful ends	Yes (Art.1)	No (but mentioned in intro)
The agreement is for a period of 50 years.	Yes	Yes
There is territorial cession	Yes	Yes
Tax exemptions	No	Yes
Migratory benefits	No	Yes
Agreement can be terminated	Yes	Yes
Sum of time used by Argentine scientists	10%	10%
Estimated cost	€45 million	US\$ 300 million
Operated by:	ESOC / Telespazio Argentina	CLTC
Built by:	SED Systems (Canada) & Vertex Antennentechnik (Germany)	China Harbour Engineering Company
Subcontracted Argentine companies	Yes	Yes

Source: Elaborated by the authors

partially owned by the Thales group, which works on security and defense projects (such as cybersecurity, drones, and defensive missiles) for European countries. The China Harbour Engineering Company subcontracted Esuco SA for the construction of the stations, and the ESA subcontracted Carlucci, Pascual Casetta, Alcatraz, and Desarrolladora Monteverdi—all Argentine companies. Finally, China’s project had a budget almost five times larger than the ESA’s. The European base was budgeted at €45 million (approximately US\$63 million), and the Chinese base was budgeted at US\$300 million. All of these points triggered discussions among congressional representatives.

In Argentina, other investments have also inspired domestic debate. Historically, the most politicized investments were those of the Americans and Spanish companies,<sup>4</sup> but even with regards to China, the space-monitoring station was not the first deal to generate controversy. In 2011, the governor of the province of Rio Negro, also located in the Patagonian region, signed a deal with an SOE from Heilongjiang province for the use of 300,000 ha of land to grow crops for a period of 20 years. The deal generated so much opposition from the press, academic circles, and public opinion in general that it ended up being cancelled.<sup>5</sup> This background suggests that Chinese investments might inspire certain concerns that Western investments do not, but what are these concerns specifically?

## Literature Review

Research that uses speeches and votes to study congressional position taking, oversight and signaling is vast in the American Political Science literature [1, 11, 20, 28, 40]. These works served as a framework for the development of similar research in Latin America, although the literature employing such approaches is still sparse in both Latin America and Argentina.

The Argentine Congress does not ratify treaties; it merely approves or rejects the text of a treaty. Beforehand, projects are discussed in commissions and are only subject to nominal voting if parties do not reach a consensus in the commissions. The fact that an international agreement was subject to a vote is thus proof that it triggered considerable debate. The image of the US is, along with the amount of state intervention in the economy, the most relevant dimension of political party polarization in Latin America, including Argentina [43]. Foreign policy as regards the US has been largely determined by domestic politics in Argentina, and aligns with the ideology of the party of the president and his/her cabinet [35].

Since the return to democracy in 1983, the two dominant political parties in Argentina have been the Partido Justicialista (PJ, also known as the Peronist Party) and the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR). Peronism historically accused opposition parties of being functional to the interests of the US. It started as a political movement inspired in the populist government of Juan Domingo Peron, who presided Argentina on three opportunities (1946–1952; 1952–1955; 1973–1974). The famous political campaign slogan that led Peron to his first presidency in 1946 was “Braden or Peron”, with

<sup>4</sup> One example is the partial renationalization in 2012 of YPF, the nation’s largest energy firm, in the interest of energy sovereignty. YPF was previously owned by the Spanish Repsol.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences of the National University of Comahue criticized this agreement since the investment could “compromise the food sovereignty and sustainability” [27]. While the main argument was land grabbing, at the time of the debate, the Italian textile company Benetton already owned 900,000 ha—about three times the area of Hong Kong—in Patagonia to raise cattle. This fact was largely overlooked.

reference to Spruille Braden, the US ambassador to Argentina who had mobilized the opposition against Peron.

The *Kirchnerismo* (the branch of Peronism led by the Kirchners) made intensive use of this rhetoric. Although less than other populist movements during the Pink Tide such as *Chavismo* in Venezuela or *Correísmo* in Ecuador, Kirchners made their opposition to the US a key theme of their foreign policy. Moreover, while Menem's (1989–1999) and De la Rúa's (1999–2001) administrations reflected an automatic alliance with the US, Duhalde (2002–2003), Nestor Kirchner (2003–2007), and Cristina Kirchner (2007–2015) adopted a much more autonomous policy, with traces of anti-Americanism, which defined a new shift in foreign policy.

Argentina spent most of the twentieth century looking first at the UK and later at the US and, in a secondary way, Brazil.<sup>6</sup> China remained in a second—or even third—tier group. During the 1990s, it is worth noting, however, that the alignment with the US did not impede Argentina from following a relatively autonomous foreign policy towards China. The most notable example is the position of Argentina towards the 1989 incident on Tiananmen Square, when President Menem pursued a different policy than President George Bush, and was the first Head of State of a Western country to visit China in a moment in which the Chinese government was being highly criticized for human rights violations [37].

Only in the twenty-first century did China emerge as an important actor in Latin America and Argentina. Latin American countries embraced the rhetoric of South-South relations, advanced to a considerable extent by China itself, as a way to increase their autonomy from the US. The concept of autonomy, particularly towards the US, is essential for understanding the foreign policies of Latin American countries. This concept, which has been discussed for many decades by political scientists [45] refers to the ability to self-government and self-control a country has on a political dimension ([41]: 165).

Latin American countries embraced China as part of a new multidirectional diplomacy aimed at diversifying their foreign relations [47]. China was seriously looked at as an “alternative diplomatic and economic partner to Washington” ([24]: 139).

Flores-Macías and Kreps [9] found that states which trade more with China are more likely to converge with it on issues of foreign policy [9]. Similarly, Urdinez et al. [49] find that there is an inverse relationship between the investments made by Chinese SOEs / Chinese bank loans on the one hand, and the US influence in each country on the other hand, suggesting that China is filling a vacuum. This effect of enhanced political closeness between China and its economic partners generates foreign policy consequences, especially for the US which may see China emerge to counterbalance its influence. Beijing's official interests in Latin America hardly remain restricted to the economic realm, but instead follow the rationale of a ‘comprehensive cooperation’ that also encompasses political aspects [48].

<sup>6</sup> Argentina underwent three foreign policy stages. Before World War II, it had three main orientations: Europeanism, opposition to the US, and isolation from the rest of Latin America. Between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War, Argentina maintained non-alignment with respect to the US and vowed Latin American integration without doing much to deliver ([42]: 266). After the Cold War, Peronist president Menem steered foreign policy toward subordination to the political and strategic interests of the US. This period ended dramatically in 2001 when the country defaulted on foreign debt and the worst economic crisis in Argentine history unfolded.



The above discussion suggests that when considering Argentina's relationship with China, the US can either function as a mirroring case for comparison or be viewed as a power to be counterbalanced by turning to an alternative. The relationship with the US should therefore be expected to surface in the discourses advanced by deputies in the Argentine Congress:

**Hypothesis 1:** *Attitudes towards the US as the historical hegemon in the region are being projected onto the relationship between Argentina and China and the role the space-monitoring station plays in this relationship.*

In Latin American countries, a fierce debate has been ongoing for at least a decade on the appropriate way to engage with China. Blázquez and Santiso [2] bluntly ask whether China is an “angel” or a “devil” for Latin America. Those favorable to greater engagement with China point to win-win scenarios in which China provides Latin American countries with aid ([6]:12), trade flows [5], FDI [7] and political cooperation [15] in exchange for political support in international organizations and long-term business opportunities for Chinese companies. As a result of the so-called “Pink Tide” of leftist governments in Latin America, an interesting pragmatic convergence with China came about: the state was granted an important role in the economy, and fresh money to carry out infrastructure projects was needed [10, 15]. The Chinese government itself claims that the China–Latin America economic relationship reflects fundamental *complementarities* and therefore has a positive effect for both sides ([8]: 57).

Yet, concerns about greater engagement with China are numerous. There are worries about economic and political imbalances created by China's growing influence in the region. Trading with China is seen to have a detrimental effect on the national economies, resulting in trade deficits and possibly deindustrialization. There is also fear of increased “primarization” of the economies, resulting from a specialization on primary product exports in exchange for industrial products from China [13, 14, 23, 31]. This would result in a reproduction of neocolonial/neo-dependent relationships, where the asymmetric nature of the relationship in terms of the relative importance of bilateral trade to each partner, the composition of trade flows, and the balance of FDI flows exhibits many characteristics of typical center–periphery relations [13]. A generation from now, Latin Americans may well be denouncing Chinese “imperialism” and “exploitation” of the Americas, just as they had denounced American and British, and even Spanish, “colonialisms” and “imperialisms” in the past ([39]: 20).

Moreover, doubts have been raised on whether fertile ground for long-term mutual benefits actually exists. China's rapidly increasing imports of raw materials from Latin America were allegedly a consequence of a historical commodity “boom” that saw the volume and price of certain minerals, energy resources, and agricultural commodities skyrocket. This boom, which provided the foundation underlying China's renewed ties to many resource-rich countries ([8]: 58), appears to have ended now that commodity prices finally dropped. Many argue that Chinese investments have been big on promises but short on actual implementation. The problem of cultural clashes has been mentioned especially in this context.

Such a discourse on center-periphery relations is likely to resurface as an important theme in the Argentine congressional debates, especially as multinationals have in the past been accused of using FDI as an instrument to manifest an alleged exploitative nature of center-periphery relations:

**Hypothesis 2:** *Latin American discourses of center-periphery relations and the role FDI should play in the economy are re-routed towards Argentina-China relations and the role Chinese FDI (exemplified in the space-monitoring station) should play in the Argentine economy.*

The relative discipline levels in the Legislative are extremely high for both main parties in Argentina, Peronism and Radical [16, 17, 33], and it is extremely rare for a legislator to vote against his/her party's position. Those party members who strongly oppose the position taken by the party generally will leave the floor at the time of the vote or less frequently will register their abstention ([17]:157).

Two dimensions best capture the political attitudes of Argentine legislators: the left/right cleavage and the Peronist/non-Peronist divide [44]. Because the two main Argentinean political parties—the UCR and Peronist Party—occupy quite similar positions in the right/left scale (both parties are in the center-left spectrum), the second dimension (Peronist/non-Peronist) becomes, at times, more relevant. Peronism combines two peculiar characteristics: high discipline and low ideological cohesion among its legislators. For example, most of the Peronist politicians who had been fervent advocates of neoliberal policies under President Menem became fervent advocates of State-led policies under President Kirchner ([18]: 68). In addition, it is common to find both right wing and left wing Peronists coexisting at the same time in both chambers and voting together. These two characteristics, high discipline and low ideological cohesion, made the Peronist Party a strong and enduring one.

Jones [17] identified three primary determinants of the highly disciplined voting behavior: First, at the provincial-level, and to a lesser extent at the national-level, the party has a great deal of control over a legislator's access to the ballot, and hence their opportunity for reelection. Second, most legislators pursue political career pathways that are strongly linked to the party. Third, legislators who consistently vote against their party are likely to be expelled ([17]:159). At the time the Chinese space-motoring station was debated in Congress, the branch of the Peronist Party of the governing president (first Nestor and thereafter Cristina Kirchner) had 113 out of the 257 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (44%) and 32 out of 72 seats in the Chamber of Senators (44%). To guarantee at least 51% of the votes to pass the bill, the government had to be cohesive and appeal to all branches of the Peronist Party to vote unanimously.

Accordingly, the main cleavage in the National Congress tends to be the government-opposition division [18], reflecting the more strategic than ideological approach of Argentina's main parties [44]. Jones et al. [18] argue that the Argentine Congress, while certainly much more of a reactive veto player than a proactive agenda setter, is nevertheless an important actor in the policy process. They observe that during the 1989–2007 period the party holding the majority dominated the legislative process through agenda control. The opposition was left in a very reactive position.

As the space-monitoring station project was discussed during an electoral year and the Kirchner government had a majority in the legislature, it made an effort to pass as

many bills as possible. Speeches by politicians in government and the opposition became more polarized and aggressive, aiming to appeal to the public in view of the upcoming presidential elections. Historically, Peronist rhetoric employs a logic of “us vs. them” (“us” referring to friends or “compañeros” and “them” referring to enemies), places great emphasis on “loyalty” among Peronists and often accuses the opposition of being allied with foreign interests that undermine the “national interest”. Ideological differences are less likely to be at the center of the political debate:

**Hypothesis 3:** *Debates in the Argentine Congress on the Chinese space-monitoring station are not driven by any particular ideological rift or diverging foreign policy paradigms, but follow a clear division between the Peronists in government and non-Peronists forming the opposition.*

### **Methodological Strategy: Disentangling Embedded Perceptions of China in Parliamentary Speeches**

As a preliminary exploratory exercise, we analyzed Argentine public opinion data to shed some light on the role ideology, attitudes towards the US and Peronism play in forming views about China. We used data retrieved by the Project ‘Las Americas y el Mundo’ for 2015. The sample was comprised of 733 individuals, representative of the country’s population. We ran a logistic regression for the following dichotomous dependent variable: “In your view, if China’s economy grew to be as large as that of the United States, do you think that would be positive for the world?” One was coded as a positive answer, and zero as a negative. We included as independent variables ideology (left-right, on a scale of 1 to 10), a dummy for those who consider themselves Peronists (1 being Peronist), a dummy for those who declare admiration for the US as the main feeling towards that country and the respondents’ opinion about China’s impact on Argentina (this is an ordinal variable based on the question “Overall, how would you rate the influence of China on Argentina? Very positive (1), positive (2), no opinion (3), negative (4), very negative (5)”).

The findings, reported in Table 2, show that Peronists are more favorable to the idea of China challenging the economic leadership of the US, as are people who side towards the left of the political spectrum. Also, the probability was smaller among those who thought China exerted a negative influence in Argentina, *ceteris paribus*. This confirms that, among the general public, Peronists and those leaning towards left-wing ideologies tend to be more critical of the US and more favorable to China.

Moving on to examining the specificities of the congressional debate, we compiled all speeches delivered in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate that addressed the Chinese space-monitoring station.<sup>7</sup>

The congressional discussions lasted for several hours. In total, 30 members of Congress expressed their views on the issue, making this source very rich in content. The project was first discussed in the Senate on 17 December 2014, where 36 legislators voted in favor, 27 against and none abstained. Afterwards, on 25 February 2015, the project was debated in the Chamber of Deputies, where 133 legislators voted in favor,

<sup>7</sup> The European Space Station project was not discussed in Congress, evidencing how it was less controversial than the Chinese project.

**Table 2** China-US cleavage in public opinion

	Coefficient	Standard error	T-test	Statistical significance
Peronist	0.76	0.21	3.61	***
Ideology	-0.06	0.02	2.52	*
Admires US	0.13	0.20	0.70	
China in Argentina	1.77	0.17	10.23	***

Statistical significance \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Chi<sup>2</sup> test = 0.0000, Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> = 0.16,  $N = 733$

Data is publicly available at <http://www.lasamericasyelmundo.cide.edu/>

107 against and none abstained. The parliamentary discussions were obtained from the website of the Argentine Legal Information System (SAIJ), part of the Ministry of Justice.<sup>8</sup> Through another online platform, *Decada Votada*,<sup>9</sup> we identified the vote of each of the legislators to identify each speech as either in favor or against the investment.

We followed a *summative* technique of content analysis by identifying and quantifying certain words or content in text with the purpose of understanding the contextual use of these words or content ([12]:1284). A summative approach to qualitative content analysis goes beyond mere word counts to include latent content analysis, which refers to the process of interpretation of content in light of the context in which the discourse occurs.

Using *Wordstat* – a software that groups words by topic – we created several discursive categories, or ‘groupings’, following an inductive logic [29]. The groupings were created through a function in the software called “topic extraction”, which is based on factor analysis. Such extraction is achieved by computing a document frequency matrix, or alternatively by segmenting documents into smaller chunks and computing a segment frequency matrix. Once this matrix is obtained, a factor analysis with varimax rotation is computed in order to extract a small number of factors. We asked the software to group the legislative speeches into five main clusters. All words with a factor loading higher than 0.4 (the default criterion in the software) were then retrieved as part of the extracted topic. While in hierarchical cluster analysis, a word may only appear in one cluster, topic modeling using factor analysis may result in a word being associated with more than one cluster, a characteristic that more realistically represents the polysemous nature of some words as well as the multiplicity of context of word usages.

We then proceeded to interpreting the word groupings created by the software in light of the literature on Argentinian legislative behavior. We followed Van Dijk [50] by enriching our quantitative analysis with qualitative components of political discourse analysis, taking into account that legislative speeches are meant to legitimize a political position. Legislators speak up for several reasons: they argue for or against legislative proposals; they scrutinize the executive and they send signals to their constituents,

<sup>8</sup> Accessible at <http://www.infojus.gob.ar/>

<sup>9</sup> Accessible at <http://www.decadavotada.com.ar/>. *Decada Votada* provides information on each nominal vote for both chambers, with details on how each legislator voted and allowing for analysis by partisan and provincial groupings.

fellow party members, or other members of parliament ([38]: 333). This case study ultimately works as a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods [3].

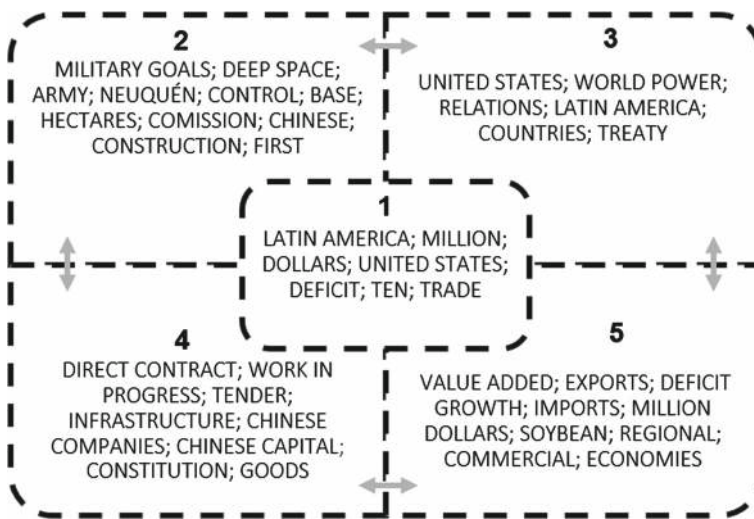
## Untying the Knot: What Do Legislators Say of China?

We created a cluster map of the five main discursive groupings of legislators who voted against the project (Fig. 2), as well as those who voted in favor of it (Fig. 3). The order 1 to 5 in the figures represent the ranking of importance of each topic in the speeches. We then proceeded to their interpretation in light of the content of the speeches. We interpreted the discourse ‘groupings’ for each box, using discourse analysis and exemplifying with textual quotes, translated from Spanish.

It becomes immediately apparent from Fig. 2 that the United States, financial dependence, and the intrusiveness as well as potential dual-use nature of the Chinese space-monitoring played an important part in the discourse advanced by those voting against the project. Words of particular significance in Fig. 2 (by importance of associated topic category and frequency of occurrence) are: Latin America, United States, deficit, million, dollars, ten, trade, military goals, deep space, army, Neuquén, control, base, hectares, commission, Chinese, construction, first, world power and relations.

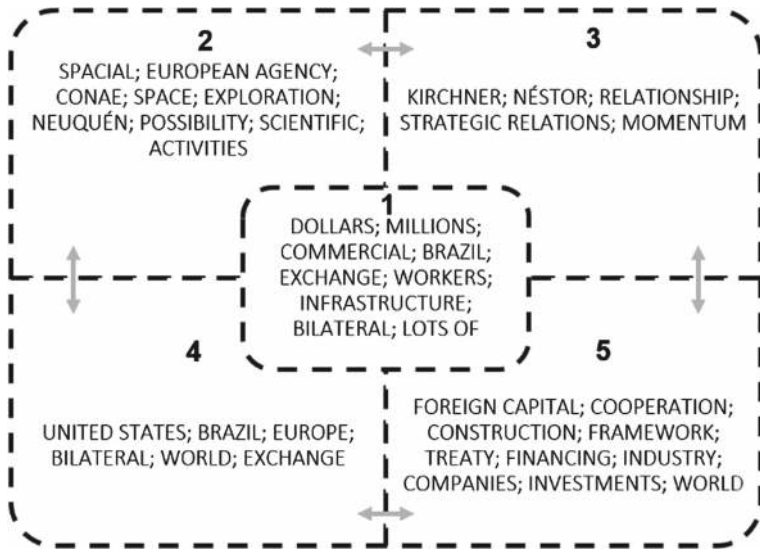
The central discursive grouping, formed by the words in box 1, can be summarized by the theme ‘asymmetry of power.’ Oscar Aguad (UCR), who is deputy of the province of Cordoba, argued in relation to these asymmetries:

“[Kirchner’s] government rejected, perhaps with good reason, the agreement they wanted to do with the United States, the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas [...] What they said then was: ‘we cannot associate with the US because that will



Source: Elaborated by the authors using *Wordstat*.

**Fig. 2** Word clusters of the legislators who voted against the project



Source: Elaborated by the authors using *Wordstat*.

**Fig. 3** Word clusters of the legislators who voted in favor of the project

consolidate a primary goods production matrix in Argentina.’ Nevertheless, today we are doing the same with China.”

This quote confirms the mirroring with the United States suggested by the first hypothesis. There is a clear mention of Kirchner’s government being anti-American, providing some initial confirmation of hypothesis 3, and there is a comparison between the US and China. It is argued that the patterns of asymmetry existing between Argentina and the US—which are rooted in the commodity specialization of the Argentine economy—also apply to relations with China.

Pablo Javkin (Coalición Cívica, province of Santa Fe) cited Brazil as an example to be followed when handling power asymmetries with China. Previous empirical work found that Brazil’s image has in the past been used as an inverted mirror in Argentinean domestic debates, where Brazil is portrayed as a rising power and Argentina as a country in decline [32]. Pablo Javkin argued: “Discussing the center-periphery logic means setting a strategy. Brazil did it. Let’s do it as well.” Furthermore, Deputy Miguel Giubergia (UCR, province of Jujuy) pointed out that “Brazil refused to grant benefits to China the same way Argentina is doing”. We observe in both Javkin and Giubergia the use of Brazil as a mirror that should inspire Argentina. Both statements assume a center-periphery logic, as suggested by hypothesis 2.

The second discursive grouping among opposition legislators (box 2 in Fig. 2) captures fear over China’s future military might. Laura Esper (Frente Renovador, province of Buenos Aires) argued: “It is a concern that CLTC [...] reports directly to the Department of Arms and the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Army [...]. So this gives, without a doubt, a strong military mark to this installation.” Concerns over China controlling the space-monitoring station for military purposes are fueled further by suspicions about strong connections between China’s economic players and the military.

Christian Gribaudo (Union PRO, province of Buenos Aires) stated:

“As for geostrategic and military issues, I have no certainties. It would have been enough to simply add a clause [...] establishing a ban on military uses, but this was not done. Does anyone know whether in 2050, 2065, or even after that, the function of this agreement will not have a geostrategic and military use to China in our country?”

We observe in Gribaudo’s speech a mention to the uncertainties – especially geopolitical ones – inherent to long-term relations with China, reflecting the tacit idea that China will certainly change the world order in the years to come.

From box 3 we interpreted a discursive grouping addressing the issue of Argentina’s geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis former, existing and emerging world powers. Deputy Fabián Rogel (UCR, province of Entre Rios) signaled that:

“The agreements we are now considering arrive late for a government that is ending soon and it should have drawn up a strategic policy plan no less than two years ago. No one can bear the thought that, after twelve years in office, [the government] has finally achieved the replacement of both the old European model [of dependence] and that of domination by the United States with a new model of domination, that of an empire looming at least over Asia if not over Latin America: China”.

Rogel is critical of Peronism by claiming that the country was replacing one regional hegemon with another, due to the incumbent government lacking any long-term strategy towards China. As previously, we observe here a strong government-opposition division and references to the US as well as a center-periphery logic.

Claudio Lozano (Unidad Popular, province of Buenos Aires) argued in this regard:

“[I]n the southern region of our country, there is a military base on the Malvinas Islands [that is controlled by Great Britain]. We also know that Patagonia is a territory to populate and that China is a country with a large population density. Knowing the importance of the southern region in terms of mineral resources, oil and gas, and fish, as well as in terms of its fresh water, it would be extremely prudent [...] to think a little deeper and less hastily about this agreement, especially when the government has committed for fifty years”.

Lozano brings up colonialism from Britain as an example of what could end up occurring with China. There is the concern that, in the long term, China will take advantage of the center-periphery power imbalance that have historically marked Argentina’s foreign relations, to exploit natural resources and land in Argentina.

The geopolitical concerns also include the discrepancy between US action towards China and Argentinean accommodation of China by allowing the construction of the space-monitoring station. Gilberto Alegre (Frente Renovador, province of Buenos Aires) argued: “The US is moving its entire fleet to the Pacific because of its conflict with China, and we will give up territory and sovereignty to the Chinese”. This phrase implicitly suggests that Argentina might have to align with the US, as having good relations with both countries may be geopolitically implausible.



The lower-left cluster, in box 4, encompasses the arguments for the domestic impact of the agreement. There were concerns about the agreement giving permission to the Chinese government to build through direct awards (that is, by avoiding domestic laws for public bidding). For instance, Patricia Bullrich (Unión PRO, province of Buenos Aires) said: "[...] it is possible that these constructions will be made without any kind of bidding, without following basic rules of transparency, which would be necessary for the public works not to be a matter of discretion and subject to corruption."

Following a strong government-opposition division, the opposition claimed the lack of transparency in granting awards would allow Kirchner's government to make discrete recommendations to Chinese companies that have links to Kirchner's party.<sup>10</sup> Araceli Rossi (Unión por Cordoba, province of Cordoba) stated that "there is no guarantee that the lowest price will be paid, much less can we guarantee the quality of input used for the completion of works." In the same line, Elisa Carrio (ARI, province of City of Buenos Aires) argued: "As this agreement allows direct awards, it violates Article 27 of the National Constitution, which states: 'The federal government is obliged to strengthen its relations of peace and commerce with foreign powers through treaties that are in accordance with the principles of public law established in this Constitution.'" This line of discourse also means to call attention to the fact that the two dams to be built in the province of Santa Cruz (where Kirchner hails from) were financed by China, and the contracts were awarded to companies owned by people with close ties to Kirchner's party: "friends of the power."

One of the most notorious alleged cases of corruption in Argentina during Cristina Kirchner's presidency involves the conglomerate owned by Mr. Lazaro Baez, a businessman related to the Kirchner family. His name was mentioned four times during the speeches of those legislators who opposed the space-monitoring station agreement, as part of an attempt to accuse the government of corruption in the bidding process.

Finally, the lower-right cluster of the figure shows a group of words criticizing economic relations with China that are based on the export of primary goods, which reflects concerns of an unbalanced relationship. Representative Araceli Rossi (Unión por Cordoba, province of Cordoba) argued that "Argentina continues to sign agreements with China. The deficit in the trade balance has reached billions of dollars and is still growing. That is, some [the Chinese] get a lot and some [we] get very little." Claudio Lozano (Unidad Popular, province of Buenos Aires) said that "96 percent of what we sell to China is of primary production, of which 85 percent is soybean, soybean oil, and crude oil, and what we receive from China are manufactured goods." These imbalances present in Argentine-Chinese trade were extended to the issue of economic asymmetries in the space-monitoring station agreement. Mario Negri (Unión por Cordoba, province of Cordoba) said: "The work is done with Chinese capital, Chinese companies, Chinese technology and Chinese labor. And that obviously creates an imbalance".

Having analyzed the discourses employed by those criticizing the Chinese space-monitoring station, we now turn to analyzing the speeches by legislators who supported the project, following the same strategy as before. An initial examination of the word groupings in Fig. 3 presents a strong difference to those found in Fig. 2. While the words shown in Fig. 2 appear to emphasize issues of dependence, power, hegemony

<sup>10</sup> The companies said to be "related to the Kirchner's party" are the China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC), *China Gezhouba Group* and the **China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC)**.



and a China threat, the words in Fig. 3 more reflect a discourse about collaboration, opportunities, economic gain, the technicalities of the project and praise of the current government. Words of particular significance in Fig. 3 are: Space, Brazil, exchange, bilateral, strategic relationship, dollars, million, commercial, workers, infrastructure, European Agency, CONAE, exploration, Neuquén, possibility, scientific, activities, Kirchner, Nestor, momentum.

The main argument (see box 1) again concerns the bilateral economic relationship with China, but in this case the discourse highlights the gains that Argentina experiences from a deep relationship with China. For example, Deputy Roberto Feletti (Frente Para la Victoria, province of Buenos Aires) defended the deal because of China's economic strengths compared to those of Brazil, the EU, and the US: "The truth is that when looking at the international integration with China, the European Union, Brazil and the US, one will realize that the only dynamic country which grew strongly in these years was China, overcoming the 2008/2009 crisis. Not so wrong to choose a bilateral agreement with China." This argumentation highlights China's short-term role as the "belle of the ball." Furthermore, China is presented as an alternative to Argentina's excessive dependence on Brazil, whose government is said to have forgotten about Argentina:

"Among the four countries with which we have major amounts of trade, China is the one which has grown the most. Therefore, it is logical that at this stage we have a privileged bilateral relationship with that nation. On Brazil, during the third Workers Party government headed by Dilma Rousseff, its foreign policy changed, privileging the relationship with the BRICS to the detriment of Mercosur and UNASUR."

The upper-left corner cluster reveals a discursive grouping that explores the difference in scrutiny between the Chinese and European space-monitoring stations. The speeches of legislators who supported the agreement contained several mentions of the ESA station insisting on the fact that both projects were similar in nature. For example, Deputy Martin Rodrigo Gill (Frente Para la Victoria, province of Córdoba) argued that "there is a degree of prejudice and paranoia about the location of this station in our country. The space-monitoring station in Neuquen has no different characteristics to that operating in Malargüe [...], which was the result of another agreement with the European Space Agency." Deputy Alicia Comelli (Neuquén's Popular Movement, province of Neuquén) pointed to the fears of power asymmetries with China as suggested by hypothesis 2:

"[I]f the entire argument [against the project] is going to be about the fear of asymmetries, it should be clarified that there were no such fears against other, worse, asymmetries, as when there was the installation of Malargüe with the European Space Agency in partnership with NASA, which is basically British."

Asymmetries also played a central role in political discourses favoring the project, including latent references to American hegemony. Yet the argument was that no difference should exist between asymmetries with China and previous regional hegemons.

The upper-right cluster of discursive groupings echoes the idea that Argentine-Chinese relations were evolving into a 'comprehensive strategic relationship' between the two countries and for that reason, the agreement needs to be understood as a big step in the political approximation between both countries. For example, Carlos Heller (Frente Nuevo Encuentro, province of Buenos Aires) made the point that signing agreements with China was part of a broad political alliance:

"[I]t has been ten years that [a strategic partnership] has been built, and now the steps are being taken to turn this strategic relationship into a comprehensive strategic relationship. What does this mean? It refers to something that goes beyond commercial, technological, scientific bonds and extends towards political positions, sharing positions in international organizations."

Sharing common political positions in international organizations is one of the last stages in the process of bringing two countries closer together, and Heller celebrates that Argentina is heading in that direction with China. Implicit in this may be a reduced concern over China's future military might.

Paired with the idea of strengthening bilateral relations, there were mentions of and praises for former president Nestor Kirchner's initiative of kicking off a strategic relationship with China back in 2004. Some legislators argued that voting in favor of this agreement was a matter of being coherent with Kirchner's foreign policy of alignment with China. This conforms to hypothesis 3.

The lower-left cluster represents a discursive grouping that can be summarized as "China is the best alternative, Brazil forgot us, and the US and EU are the 'old world' we no longer want to belong to." Peronist legislators in particular hold a positive view of closer ties with China, which is seen as an alternative to the neoliberal policies advanced by the US in the region. For instance, deputy Adriana Puigros (Frente Para la Victoria, province of Buenos Aires) argued that.

"[The opposition] shouts fears against possible Chinese imperialism or against an invasion, and they even argue that an antenna has been installed for military purposes, when in fact it has a dimension of 35 meters in diameter and 45 meters in height [...]; it is impossible to have a military purpose. So in fact Chinese imperialism becomes a smokescreen aimed at defending the Western neoliberalist hegemony of the United States."

This combines with arguments explaining why China should be a preferred country to partner with. Deputy Julia Perié (Frente para la Victoria, province of Misiones) argued that China is different from other powerful nations in that it is an "emerging" one, and Kirchner supported the foreign policy of strengthening South-South relations, "which led us to that historic moment when we said 'no' to the FTAA and 'yes' to the consolidation of other regional blocs: Mercosur, UNASUR, and CELAC." In this view, strengthening ties with China is framed within the foreign policy of South-South relations.

Finally, the lower-right cluster offers a discursive grouping addressing the positive impact of China's FDI in Argentina. Alfredo Dato (Frente Para la Victoria, province of Tucuman) mentioned:

“I think there’s an issue we must clarify and not get caught up in the clauses. We must clarify what a satisfactory role of foreign capital is in the national economy, i.e., if it contributes to the development of domestic productive forces or plays a role of spoiler of these forces [...], intended to widen the pockets of the owners of foreign capital. [...] [W]ith this agreement, will Argentina be a better nation? Is this agreement confined only to a financing process or also a process of economic and technological progress? Clearly, the possibility to access technology available today in China represents a quantum leap forward for our national economy.”

Dato exposes the argument that not all FDI may be beneficial for Argentina, but that Chinese FDI will have a positive impact.

This argument may dovetail with a critical view on domestic businesspeople and agribusiness producers who are considered to be aligned with the US. As Deputy Oscar Martínez (Movimiento Solidario Popular, province of Santa Cruz) stated:

“A project with China will not come to meet the great needs facing the country and all the people in science and technology, but neither will the petty politics of businessmen, industrialists, and members of the Rural Society who only focus on how best to do business at the expense of the people”.

This exposes a “we-against-them” dichotomy that is much stronger among Peronist legislators. “We” is used to refer to those interested in protecting national interests and economic development, while “them” refers to agribusiness, neoliberals, speculators, and those who are pro-American.

## Conclusions

This study employed a mixed-method content and discourse analysis to investigate why members of Congress in Argentina hold such varied views about Chinese investments. In Table 3 we identify five common themes towards which those in favor and those against the Chinese space-monitoring station have formulated opposing discourses, which came to the fore in the congressional debates. As becomes apparent, the themes are all related to uncertainties about how to handle China as a new powerful political and economic player in the world. As already discussed in the previous section, these themes effectively confirm both hypothesis 1 and 2 (see right column in Table 3). In addition, the congressional debates on all these thematic areas evidenced either criticism of the Peronist government by the opposition or praise for Peronist policies by the Peronists themselves, confirming hypothesis 3.

Although the broad issues are the same, both sides address them in fundamentally different ways, informed by partisan politics, attitudes toward the US as a regional power as well as ideological perspectives: China may have hegemonic tendencies, but it also reins in US hegemony; new asymmetries may be created, but diversification of global power structures could benefit Argentina; China may be a future threat, but it could also be a strong ally; economic relations between China and Argentina may be uneven, but China’s relative economic and technological strength may also provide major benefits to Argentina; and Chinese FDI may be economically harmful to

**Table 3** Summary of findings

Issue	Opposition block	Government block	H*
Geopolitical positioning	US regional hegemony replaced by Chinese power	Good relations with China a useful counterpart to the US	H1&2 & H3
Asymmetry of power and center-periphery logic	Asymmetry with China – as with the US – puts Argentina at a disadvantage	Asymmetries with China no different from those with EU/Britain and US	H1&2 & H3
Future economic and military might of China	Potential military threat to Argentina	Political alliance through comprehensive partnership	H2 & H3
Bilateral economic relationship	Unbalanced “commodified” trade relations with China	China’s growth provides major economic benefits	H2 & H3
View of Chinese FDI in Argentina	FDI as an imposed necessity with negative impact	FDI is welcome, with positive impact	H2 & H3

\*Indicates confirmation of hypothesis by a particular theme

Argentina, although proponents of the space-monitoring station see it as having a positive impact. The focus of the arguments rested primarily on geopolitical interests and matters of economic impact, and were not driven by other possible themes, such as nationalistic sentiments or cultural distance.

Overall, those voting against the space-monitoring station see it as part of a trend towards empowerment of China, ultimately at the detriment of Argentine national interests politically, militarily and economically. But those in favor of the space-monitoring station see in the same issues a set of political and economic opportunities for Argentina.

To emphasize their own particular take on these same issues, both sides drew on narratives from Argentina’s negative historical experiences, its particular regional context and its subdued positioning in the rest of the world. They did so by drawing on familiar popular concepts such as “hegemony”, “asymmetry of power”, “center-periphery logic”, “imbalance” and “commodification”. Yet, they use them to support opposing views. The critics are concerned that asymmetries in relations with the US and EU/Britain would be replicated through further engagement with China via FDI, while proponents of the deal – who may or may not take a favorable view on China overall – argue that engaging with China and inviting Chinese FDI creates a desirable alternative and counterbalance to those asymmetries from the “old” world order. These differences are fueled further by the traditional rifts about economic ideology that are entrenched in Argentinian society, between those advocating a more open economy and open investment relations, and those concerned about the negative implications this may bring with it.

An interesting finding from this study is thus that the discourse about Chinese FDI is formulated from within the particular societal and geopolitical contexts of the host country, Argentina. The critical views of the US as well as the center-periphery logic underpinned by differences of economic ideology are characteristic of the Latin American context and are being employed to advance competing discourses about Chinese FDI in Argentina. That being the case, however, it is less clear whether the findings of the study can provide explanations for perceptions and reactions to Chinese FDI in other regions of the world. Even when the nature of the Chinese project is similar, it is quite possible that the discourses employed to argue in favor or against it

would differ, bringing in local aspects that carry argumentative weight in the context of a particular locality. The identification of these discourses will, however, have to be left for future studies.

The interpretation we did of the legislative speeches allows us to conclude that China may well be a double-edged sword for Argentina, where a mix of threats and opportunities creates uncertainties that ultimately produce very different discourses about Chinese FDI. Given these current differences, the question is whether China will gradually become a constant divisive factor in domestic politics and form a cleavage just as the US has done in the past. This new cleavage would likely overlap with other existing divides, such as government-opposition and Peronists-anti-Peronists. Without regard of the potential depth of any such cleavage, the political discourse about China in Argentina will certainly remain complex and multifaceted in the years to come.

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