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Status of the Condor II Ballistic Missile Program

Summary

Argentina's President Menem appears committed to terminating the Condor II short-range ballistic missile program, at least in part to fulfill one of Washington's requirements for improving bilateral relations. Menem is aware of residual opposition to this reversal among some nationalists and high-ranking Air Force officers and is seeking US assistance to redirect Condor II resources to peaceful uses. Buenos Aires probably judges that development of sounding rockets and satellite launch vehicles would be legitimate uses of Condor II resources. Washington, however, has indicated that such projects would cast doubt on Argentina's commitment to forgo development of ballistic missiles.

Background

In the early 1980s, Argentina, in cooperation with a consortium of several companies, began developing a short-range ballistic missile known as Condor II. The project was intended to provide the Argentine Air Force with a significant strike capability, encourage technological advances in weapons and space development, enhance Argentina's international prestige, and generate export revenue.

- Development of Condor II advanced steadily from 1984 to 1988, as the Argentines constructed critical missile production facilities and completed many of the missile's major subcomponents.
- During this period, some Condor II related equipment, such as tools for casting and testing rocket motors, may have been exported from Argentina and then passed on to Iraq.
- Since then, however, progress on the Condor II has been stymied by technical difficulties, funding shortfalls, and international scrutiny, as the

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[redacted]

United States and its partners in the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) worked to cut off the flow of vital missile technology [redacted]

[redacted] [redacted]

The Menem Administration's Policy on Condor II

President Menem has played a crucial role in bringing the Condor II program to a virtual standstill. Aware that abandoning the project would be critical to improving relations with Washington, he began moving deliberately to terminate the program early in his administration.

- In August 1990, Menem signed a [redacted] decree canceling contracts with the consortium of [redacted] [redacted] firms that was managing development of the missile for the Argentines. At the same time, he directed then Defense Minister Humberto Romero to shut down the project, [redacted]
 - In January 1991, Buenos Aires hosted a multi-agency team of US experts that inspected various facilities associated with the Condor II.
 - In May, Menem issued a decree transferring control of all remaining Condor II facilities and components to a newly created, civilian run National Commission for Space Activities [redacted]
 - Menem also announced his government's desire to engage in discussions aimed at securing for Argentina full membership in the MTCR.
- [redacted]

We believe Menem is committed to closing down the program and getting Argentina out of the missile business. He knows that some nationalists and high-ranking Air Force officers are strongly opposed to following that course, and therefore believes he must move carefully to avoid sparking open hostility that might strain civil-military relations. ||

- The Condor program has been managed from the start by a small group of senior Air Force personnel who also have financial stakes in its success. Some of these individuals [redacted] persist in their efforts to keep the project alive: as one tactic, they are seeking foreign financing for

[redacted]
continued work on the missile [redacted]
[redacted]

- Some Air Force officials reportedly have also recently attempted to arrange the transfer of Condor II technology to countries such as Libya and Egypt.

[redacted]
[redacted]
Seeking US Technical Assistance [redacted]

Menem and his team have sought Washington's assistance in redirecting Condor II resources to peaceful uses, such as space-related projects. They view this as an important means for overcoming opposition to canceling the program.

- Menem believes he must compensate the military for the years of aerospace research that went into the development of the Condor II, [redacted]
[redacted]
- Moreover, he probably also has lingering doubts about the government's ability to monitor Air Force officers' compliance with termination of the project. He may calculate that engaging them in peaceful projects could preclude Air Force personnel from becoming involved in a rogue program. [redacted]

The government recognizes that joint aerospace cooperation with the United States will hinge on convincing Washington that remnants of the Condor II project, such as already-completed missile components, will not be used for military purposes.

- Defense Minister Gonzalez ordered the Air Force in May to prepare a complete inventory of all Condor II components and facilities. [redacted]
[redacted] this will enable CONAE to determine which facilities and components can be used for peaceful purposes and which are applicable solely to ballistic missile development and, therefore, should be destroyed.
- The government probably considers the development of sounding rockets and satellite launch vehicles as a legitimate use of Condor II resources. The President of CONAE stated publicly in late August that the Commission would study the possibility of working with Brazil and Mexico to build a satellite launch vehicle exclusively for peaceful purposes.

[REDACTED]

-- The US [REDACTED] however, has indicated to Buenos Aires that development of a such a system would constitute a proliferation risk and cast doubt on Argentina's stated intention to forgo development of ballistic missiles.

[REDACTED]

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