

Argentina sinks Chinese fishing vessel

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China's Foreign Affairs Ministry has expressed "serious concern" and demanded a full explanation for the sinking of a Chinese fishing boat by an Argentine coast guard cutter in the south Atlantic on Monday.

All 32 members of the Chinese vessel's crew were rescued after the attack, four of them by the Argentine gunboat that attacked them and the rest by other Chinese ships that were nearby. Argentine authorities took the captain of the Chinese ship into custody.

The Argentine Naval Prefecture issued a statement justifying the armed attack on the Chinese fishing boat, which it said was fishing in violation of Argentina's 200-mile exclusive economic zone off the country's coast.

The report claimed that the vessel failed to respond to repeated radio messages delivered in English and Spanish, as well as to visual and audio signals, instead turning off its lights and attempting to escape into international waters.

The chase continued for several hours before Argentine cannon fire tore through the Chinese boat's hull, causing it to sink. The Argentine military sought to justify the attack by claiming that the Chinese vessel had at one point attempted to ram the coast guard ship.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang said on Tuesday that China's ruling State Council had attached "high importance to this incident." Upon its instructions, she added, the Foreign Ministry had expressed "serious concern" to the Argentine government and demanded that it "conduct a thorough investigation" of the attack on the Chinese vessel, ensure the safety and rights of its crew members and "take effective measures to avoid any repetition of such an incident."

While the Argentine government issued no immediate statement in relation to the incident, the daily *Clarín* reported that there was "enormous anxiety in the Argentine Foreign Ministry and in the Presidency

of the Nation over the transcendence that Beijing is giving to the matter."

This "transcendence" is in large measure due to the coming to power last December of Argentina's new right-wing president, Mauricio Macri. During his election campaign, Macri devoted some of his right-wing attacks against his Peronist predecessor, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, to charging that extensive trade and credit deals with China were "lacking in transparency," and even alleging darkly that there were "secret" agreements with Beijing.

After his election, he and his ministers took the line that trade with China was too important to let politics interfere.

China is the third largest investor in Argentina and its second largest trading partner, after neighboring Brazil. Chinese investments together with merger and acquisition operations in Argentina have risen to \$8.3 billion in the last five years.

There have already been signs, however, that Macri intends to shift away from the close cooperation that Fernández had forged with Beijing.

After Macri's replacement of the military high command, the Argentine Defense Ministry announced last month that it is urgently seeking to obtain engine replacements and other resources to completely overhaul a fleet of A-4R Skyhawk fighters that it bought from the US in 1994. The announcement indicated that the Macri government is backing out of a deal to buy new Chinese fighters that was to be funded by loans backed by Argentine commodities.

Next week, US President Barack Obama is traveling to Argentina after his much publicized visit to Cuba. The second leg of the journey is seen by Washington in many ways to be as important as the first. It is aimed at capitalizing on the election of Macri and the broader crisis of the so-called left governments of Latin America, including those of Maduro in Venezuela,

Morales in Bolivia, Rousseff in Brazil and Correa in Ecuador.

All of these capitalist governments were able to utilize a portion of the increased revenues from the commodity boom to fund limited social assistance programs, while adapting a more nationalist posture in relation to Washington, made possible by increased ties with China. With China's economic deceleration and the slide of much of the region into recession, the continuation of these policies is becoming untenable.

In an interview with CNN's Spanish language station, Obama this week hailed Macri's coming to power as the advent of a "new era." He charged that Fernandez's policies "were always anti-American" and that her government had not "adapted to the global economy as effectively" as it could.

Macri's "adaptation" has taken the form of mass layoffs of public employees, now reportedly totaling over 100,000, attacks on social programs and a move to rapidly pay off the so-called vulture funds, which bought up Argentina's debt at bargain prices and then refused to settle along with other creditors, holding the country hostage for full face value. Among the principal beneficiaries will be US billionaire and prominent Republican Party contributor Paul Singer, who stands to gain a 369 percent return on his investment.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, views the political shift in Argentina through the prism of the so-called pivot to Asia, with senior military analysts warning that the drive toward military confrontation with China must be extended to repelling Beijing's growing economic, political and military influence in Latin America.

No doubt within this context, the Argentine sinking of the Chinese fishing boat is being studied with great interest in Washington.



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