

President Javier Milei Seeks to Recover Argentina's Submarine Fleet But Will Not Challenge UK

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Argentine President Javier Milei has said that he will buy new submarines for the country, which has been left without operational capacity since the ARA San Juan tragedy in 2017 and will probably opt for French or German submarines. Despite this rearmament plan, Milei will unlikely attempt to capture the Falkland Islands from the British.

Argentina will seek to recover, at least in part, its diminished submarine capacity by purchasing new units, as the president confirmed in an interview. When consulted by the La Nación + [channel](#), Milei said, "The purchases of submarines that we are going to be making" are within the list of actions promoted by his administration to improve the capabilities of Argentina's Armed Forces. This also includes the purchase of F-16 fighter jets, acquiring ships and tanks and opening a naval base for the United States in Ushuaia, in the country's extreme south.

The presidential announcement put the spotlight back on the Argentine Navy's Submarine Force, a corps created in 1956 and hosted at the Mar del Plata Naval Base. At one time, four submarines operated simultaneously. However, the passage of time and the tragedy of the ARA San Juan in 2017, in which 44 crew members died, seriously diminished Argentine capabilities.

ARA Santa Cruz remains uncertain while work is being done on its mid-life repairs. At the same time, the ARA Salta is no longer in a condition to sail, so it is used in the port for educational purposes. Furthermore, the ARA San Luis submarine, famous for actively participating in the Falklands War, was decommissioned in 1997.

In this context, Juan José Roldán, editor of [Zona Militar](#), recalled that the need to recover the submarine fleet is not recent but had already been handled by the previous administrations of Alberto Fernández (2019-2023) and Mauricio Macri (2015-2019). However, purchasing submarines is difficult to address since it is an investment that needs "a great amount of resources." Roldán pointed out that purchasing 24 F-16 fighter planes cost Argentina more than \$300 million, while acquiring new submarines will cost "billions of dollars."

Submarines should be understood as a weapon of deterrence crucial to avoiding conflicts or possible actions by enemies. This is important because Argentina has a large maritime coastline. According to Roldán, submarines are key for Argentina in deterring illegal activities. The analyst also recalled how important submarines were during the Falklands War when British submarines prevented Argentine warships from operating in its maritime space.

"The strategic role of the submarine lies in the fact that it is a weapon that is very

difficult to detect, even with the advances that exist in the anti-submarine field. It is a strategic and deterrent weapon because, beyond combat, which would not be the goal, you send a message to the adversary that you can deny them access to the sea," he explained.

Roldán believes that Argentina should "rebuild its military capabilities," looking towards the South Atlantic, under the hypothesis that "an eventual conflict between the US and China would automatically close the Panama Canal to ships that are not allied to the US." In such a scenario, passages such as the Strait of Magellan or the Drake Passage at the southern end of South America could become critical.

Although no official information has been released regarding possible offers, amounts or terms for the possible new purchase of submarines, it is recalled that, since the Alberto Fernández administration, Argentina has considered France and Germany the two most likely possible suppliers.

In fact, Fernández's Minister of Defence, Jorge Taiana, visited the shipyards of the French Naval Group and the German Thyssenkrupp in July 2022 to evaluate the possible purchase of some of their models. While the Naval Group offered its Scorpene submarines, ThyssenKrupp presented the 209 class submarines that Argentina already operates - ARA Salta and ARA San Luis.

These two options were ratified in a report by Nicolás Posse, Milei's chief of staff until the end of May, and presented to the Senate in mid-May 2024. An article in the newspaper La Nación states that this report indicates that French and German offers for constructing three new submarines are being evaluated.

Milei's geopolitical positioning favours the US, Israel, and the West in general. This will tip the balance definitively in favour of the French or German offers. Therefore, he will not allow other possible alternatives from China or Russia.

More importantly, France and Germany have enough influence and power to avoid possible pressures from London, which is concerned about Argentina's rearmament in the South Atlantic. Nonetheless, it cannot be expected that Milei would challenge the UK for sovereignty over the Falkland Islands since he fully supports the Western liberal system.

According to the report, Milei's government admitted that it is also thinking about a "transitional" submarine to use while the new ones are being built, which would take two to three years. Possible alternatives include the acquisition of used submarines from the Brazilian Navy or the Norwegian Navy, from whom Argentina has just bought P3 Orion surveillance planes.

Although Milei's desire to purchase submarines is not to capture the Falkland Islands from the British under his leadership, their acquirement does open the possibility for Argentina to achieve this goal in the future. Nonetheless, the Argentine military has a long way to go in upgrading its capabilities before considering such an operation and challenging British sovereignty over the islands.

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