



Spotlight on Crisis:

The ARA San Juan Disappearance, 2015



Argentina's military history

Argentina spent the years 1976 to 1983 under military dictatorship. The regime itself was called the National Reorganization Process, "the Process" for short. At its height, funding for the nation's armed forces stood at roughly 3.5 percent of GDP (gross domestic product).

The disastrous military loss to the U.K. in the Falklands War of 1982 helped break what remained of the regime's popular support. Democracy was restored a year later, and military funding began to fall. By 2016, Argentina would spend less than a percent of its GDP on the armed forces, the lowest percentage in the Southern Cone.ⁱ

What's more, the overwhelming majority of funds allocated to the military sector, some 70 percent according to estimates, actually goes to salaries and pensions, not procurement and modernization.ⁱⁱ

One of the sectors hit hardest by the decades-long erosion of funding: the country's submarines. As Reuters reports, in 2014, the country's submarine fleet spent a grand total of 19 hours submerged under water. The amount actually required to fulfil operational and training needs: 190 days.ⁱⁱⁱ

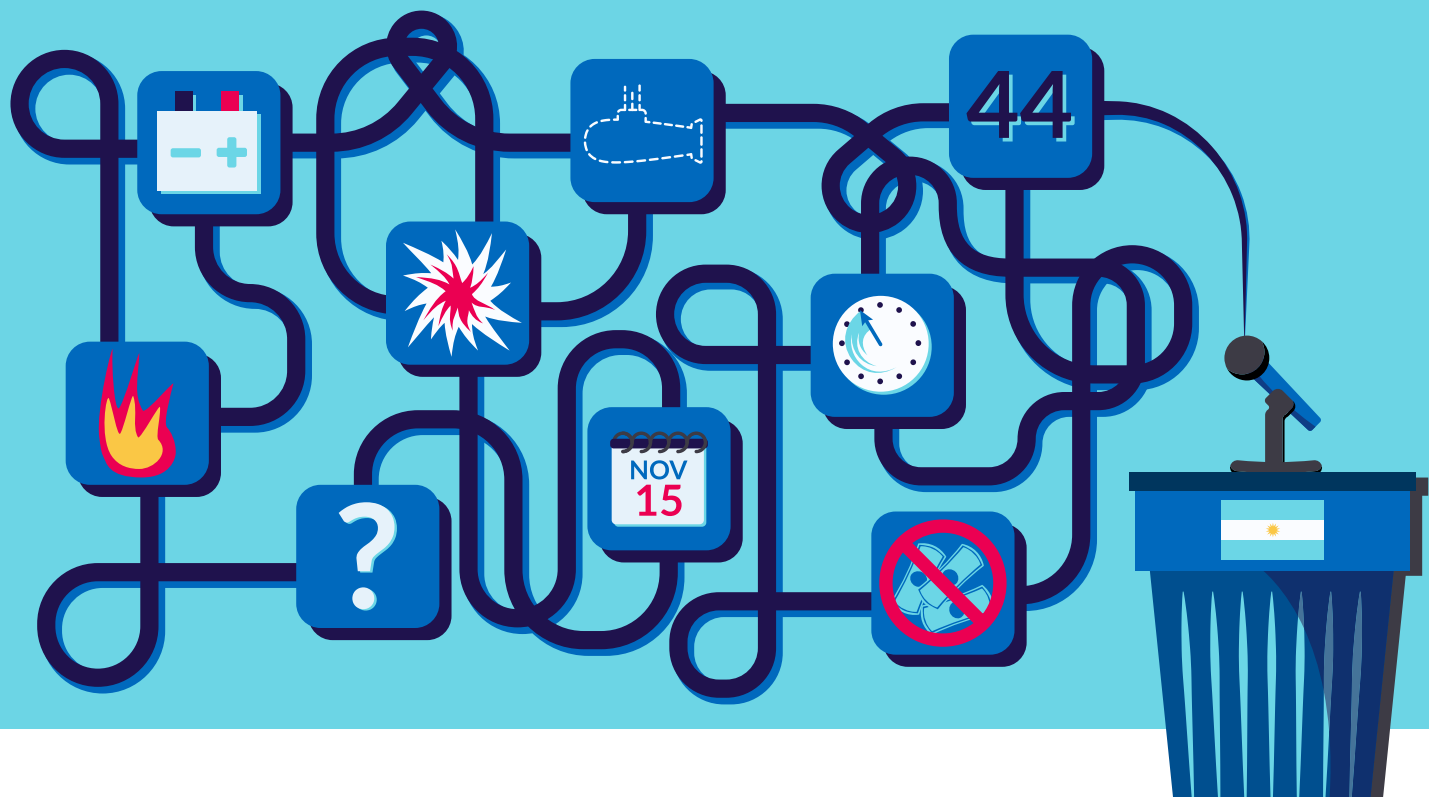
The history of the ARA San Juan submarine

This policy of cuts to military spending intersects directly with the history of the ARA San Juan, the German-build, diesel-run sub which entered service in the Argentine Navy in the mid-1980s. In those days, it was the newest of three submarines that all entered the country's fleet roughly around the same time.

Decades later though, budget constraints would delay the San Juan's mid-life updating. Intended to preserve the San Juan for an additional three decades, the upgrade dragged on from 2008 and 2013. After that, the San Juan undertook a new mission, carrying out surveillance exercises in the Argentine economic zone around Puerto Madryn. The vessel continued to do so up until its mysterious disappearance in November 2017.^{iv}

The disappearance of the San Juan

Before that disappearance, the San Juan's home station was the naval base Mar del Plata, to where it was returning on 15 November 2017 after a mission in one of the country's southernmost ports. Its crew at the time consisted of 44 members, including the country's first female submarine officer, Eliana Maria Krawczyk.^v



In the early morning hours of the 15th, the captain of the San Juan reported a battery failure due to a short circuit, an issue not uncommon to submarines, according to navy officials.^{vi} A few hours later, the captain relayed that the problem had been fixed. Those were the San Juan's final communications with the outside world.

The search for the San Juan

The standard protocol for submarines is to report their location twice a day. The San Juan last reported its location (in the Gulf of San Jorge, roughly half way to its final destination) on 15 November. By the next day, news of the missing sub leaked to the press. Without any further updates from the San Juan, the navy began its official search, a massive effort which would eventually cover vast stretches of the South Atlantic and come to involve specialized ships and aircraft from over a dozen countries.

From the start though, the search and rescue would be troubled. Huge waves, brought upon by inclement weather, made the operation extremely difficult. All the while, time was ticking away. According to the navy, a fully submerged San Juan would only have a week's worth of oxygen reserves for its crew.^{vii}

Criticism of the government and navy

Soon after the crisis began, Argentina's president, Mauricio Macri met with the families of the missing crewmembers, pledging all available national (and international) resources to the search. Nevertheless, public criticism came almost immediately.

To many the navy's story about the disappearance of the submarines felt evasive and inconsistent. For instance, it took days after the San Juan first went missing before the navy revealed that there might have been an explosion near the vessel's last-known location.^{viii} What's more, the navy took a full ten days to confirm that the San Juan had reported problems with its batteries and that the vessel had, in fact, made eight calls to onshore authorities the morning of its disappearance.

Critics also honed in on what they saw as a lack of communication between the navy and its civilian supervisors in the government. News sources reported that even the country's defense minister, Oscar Aguad only learned that the sub had vanished from the press – not from his nominal subordinates in the navy.^{ix}

Family members of the missing crew were also vocal in their displeasure, especially of the fact that their loved ones had been sent out to sea in a submarine built in the 1980s – some of the families even alleged that members of the crew had warned them of issues on board. Of the country's three submarines, all constructed roughly around the same time, only the San Juan and Salta were operational in 2017. The third, the Santa Cruz, had already been removed from service.^x

On 30 November, the navy ended its official search for the San Juan, claiming that the operation had lasted double the length of time that the submarine would have had oxygen for.

Meanwhile, the international search continued. The families were outraged; they demonstrated in Mar del Plata as well as

in the capital city of Buenos Aires, calling for a longer search and for the opening up of congressional investigations. Some would later accuse the government of spying on them, a case taken up by a federal court in Buenos Aires.

Investigations are called

That wasn't the case brought to court. Less than a month into the crisis, a judge in the southern port city of Caleta Olivia opened up a criminal investigation into the matter. The judge later ordered the Federal Police to raid naval bases in Mar del Plata and Puerto Belgrano. Prior to that, the judge had received an auditor's report claiming that the San Juan had sailed with flaws and major shortcomings before its final voyage.^{xi}

In late 2017, Macri's government responded by firing the head of the Navy, Admiral Marcelo Srur. In early 2018, the Argentine Congress also began its own inquiry into the causes of the disappearance.

But since then, more than six months have passed since the San Juan first went missing. The international search has effectively ended. To this day, the vessel remains unaccounted for, but the crew members still receive their paychecks. They will continue to do so until their bodies are found or until the government changes their official status to deceased.^{xii}

Citations

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