

Insights from Diplomatic Frontlines: A Conversation with Former U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Noah Mamet

Noah Mamet is an American political strategist and diplomat who served as the United States Ambassador to Argentina from 2015 to 2017. Born in Los Angeles, Mamet graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with a Bachelor of Arts in political science. After serving for seven years as senior advisor to Richard A. Gephardt, former Democratic leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, he founded Noah Mamet and Associates in 2004. Over the last decade, he managed operations in Los Angeles and San Francisco, consulting for organizations like Global Green USA, the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, and several



California-based clean tech firms. He has advised Democratic presidential candidates and worked on numerous campaigns at all levels, serving on the Obama-Biden National Finance Committee during the 2012 election. In 2013, President Barack Obama nominated Mamet as Ambassador to Argentina and he was confirmed by the Senate in 2014 with a 50–43 vote. During his tenure, Mamet focused on innovation, entrepreneurship, energy, and educational exchanges. One initiative included a unique educational exchange created for Argentine undergraduate students called the “Friends of Fulbright” scholarship program, to dramatically increase the number of Argentines studying in the United States. Later in his tenure, he added security cooperation, counter-narcotics, and climate change to his list of initiatives. Today, Mamet continues to be engaged in public service and political consulting as a board member of the Wilson Center’s Latin America Program and as the Chairman for the Americas at Delphons International.

1. In light of Argentina's recent election outcome, how do factors such as the political landscape, voter sentiment, and the United States' key priorities compare to the last time the Peronists lost the presidency in the Macri era? What do you think are the broader implications for Argentina's political landscape?

When I was stationed in Argentina, my time was split almost 50/50 between two different governments in Argentina. The first was the Cristina Kirchner government, which was largely viewed not just as anti-American, but really as anti-West. Kirchner's administration made a strong effort to get closer to countries like Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, and China. Then came the big election in 2015 at the time when the non-Peronist mayor of Buenos Aires, Mauricio Macri, won for the first time in many years. The widespread assumption at the time was that it would be impossible, or nearly impossible, for a non-Peronist political figure to win the presidency of Argentina—and Macri did. The similarity between then and now is that both elections were a huge vote for change. During the second half of my term in Argentina, I was working with President Macri, which was different from the nearly nonexistent personal relationship between me and President Kirchner. In fact, I believe in her second term she didn't meet with any ambassadors. If she did meet with any at all, it was very few. She was the type of politician who didn't have a cabinet meeting in her whole second term; ultimately she was a very difficult and challenging person to work with for not just the U.S. but other countries and ambassadors. When Argentina had the chance, I went from never having met with President Kirchner to working really closely with President Macri. He had been the Mayor of Buenos Aires when he became President, so we already had a really strong relationship. I was representing the embassy at Casa Rosada, which is Argentina's White House, three to four days a week, and once in a while even five days a week. Science, technology, renewable energy, and education exchanges were the leading topics that I prioritized in the first year because we were not going to get much cooperation, if any, from the Argentine government. In cities like Buenos Aires, which are large and have some provinces with governors, we had a bit more luck, but in terms of bigger issues, we weren't going to get any cooperation. I felt it was best to focus on those four topics, which were all popular issues, so it would be much harder for President Kirchner, and others who wanted nothing to do with the U.S., to criticize us if we were working on popular issues. We tried to

build up goodwill and hope for some sort of change, either in sentiment or political leaders, and that's what we got when Marci came in. We then started working on everything under the sun from those first four issues to bigger problems like counter-narcotics and a three-country deal in which Columbians would conduct training for Argentina's security officials. We also tackled issues like the Paris Climate Accords, in which Argentina had been on the opposing side of the U.S. under the Kircher government. On the very first day of Macri's presidency, I got a call from the State Department saying that the Argentines representing the government in Paris didn't know that Insights from the Diplomatic Frontlines • Garland 135 they had a change of political leadership and were still siding with the Saudis and Chinese in opposition to the preferences of the U.S. and Europe. On that first day, I had to call their Foreign Minister and tell them that their delegation in Paris was not up to date and was not yet in line with President Macri. The Foreign Minister at the time called me later that day to tell me that they fired nearly their entire delegation because it was composed of people from the previous administration. He replaced them with the former head of Greenpeace and announced that Argentina had a different position and was totally supportive of the U.S. and Europe. This underscores the importance of the campaigns and who's in power. When Argentina started supporting our positions in Paris on the Climate Accords, we ended up getting three or four other Latin American countries to follow them. This is just one example of a very big policy change that happened in part because our relationship was totally different in the Marci administration versus the previous administration. Currently, there is a brand new administration and the current President, Milei, doesn't really have a track record yet. He served on the Argentine Chamber of Deputies but he's early into his presidential tenure, so a lot of people are cautiously optimistic. I think the U.S. always wants to see democracies succeed, especially big democracies like Argentina, a country with the third largest economy and third largest population in Latin America. It's good for us when democracies do well, so we're always rooting for Argentina. As diplomats, we look at the interests of the United States but are always trying to promote bilateral relations and find ways to work together. It's a little too early to tell with this new government, but President Milei's first trip was to New York and Washington D.C., and as I understand, he had very good, productive meetings. Again we'll just have to see what happens in the coming weeks and months. I know our current ambassadors and others in Washington are trying to find a lot more ways to work together.

2. Argentina is moving closer to a dollarized economy with Milei's win. What are the socioeconomic consequences of Argentina's political shift towards "dollarization" and how might it impact society? What implication could such a move hold for trade relations with the U.S., considering factors such as exchange rate stability and trade balances? Do you see any broader consequences on U.S.-Argentina relations?

It's a complicated issue that most Argentines think about on a regular basis, if not on a daily basis. There are other countries that are similar in some ways but I'm not sure any other country thinks in dollars as much as Argentina does. They publish the exchange rate for the unofficial dollar in the press every day, otherwise known as the blue dollar, and real estate is still paid for in U.S. dollars. Many people exchange pesos for dollars as quickly as possible knowing that it will keep its value, while the peso is at its 150% inflation value and the exchange rate on the blue dollar market continues to lose value. There have been many generations of Argentines who have been taught not to put money in the bank and to change pesos into dollars as quickly as possible, which makes it really hard to run an economy. I think there is more support to go down this route again now than ever since they last dollarized in the late nineties. As I understand it, economists say that it's not easy to do and is an expensive transition. There are a lot of people who do have savings in pesos and if you transition, the idea is that the government would have to exchange those pesos for dollars. The current government simply doesn't have a lot of surplus of U.S. dollars so it's a complicated issue. I do believe that there is, however, a stronger sentiment to make such a transition now just because of the runaway inflation at around 211%. When you have inflation like that, it's really hard to stop. The dramatic way to do it is to dollarize, but it's risky and there are a lot of bad memories of the last time they dollarized. The last time Argentina dollarized, it worked for a number of years until it no longer worked, resulting in a crash from 2001–2002. Many people and families ended up losing a huge portion of their savings. It's complicated and people have mixed feelings, but I do think that President Milei would like to make the transition. Until they have more reserves, however, it will be challenging.

3. To what extent is there an anticipated increase in U.S. engagement in Argentina, given the new government? Do you think Latin America will remain the “red-headed stepchild” of U.S. geographical neighbors considering the increasing influence of China in Latin America?

There's no question that China is increasingly looking to play a bigger role in Latin America, but it goes hand in hand with their desire to have a bigger influence everywhere in the world. For example, if you went to Africa you'd see huge projects like bridges and railways with the names of construction companies in Chinese lettering. You also see this in Latin America and I think a number of countries are trying to walk a line between the U.S. and China. China is quite different in how it operates when compared to the U.S.: it operates with significant government control over its business, reflecting a philosophy where the state plays a controlling role in the economy, opposing the U.S. free market capitalism approach. China is willing to write big checks to help finance projects in other countries, albeit with certain conditions attached. I was told stories by the Brazilian Ambassador to Argentina that the Chinese went to Brazil and said that they would help fund the big water dam project, but that Brazil would have to take on Chinese workers, doctors, drivers, etc. They would almost entirely create these cities. Brazil wanted the financing but didn't necessarily want to create full cities of young Chinese workers and be indebted to China. The U.S. has totally distinct business practices. We support U.S. businesses but we don't go to countries with blank checks like the Chinese do in a lot of places, including Latin America and Argentina

4. How would you describe the Obama administration's overarching goals and priorities in Latin America and Argentina? How did they change during your tenure and how have they changed since?

I realized early on that we were not going to have a partner in the current government under Kirshner, so I decided that as an embassy we were going to focus on more popular issues and build up goodwill. I said that we would put our focus on science and technology, renewable energy, and education exchanges. These were going to be our four big topics. The White House

works on the day-to-day operations and problems that arise, so we always had new tasks every day. In terms of larger goals, though, I stuck mainly to those four. For example, our first high-level visitor was Charles Bolden, the head of NASA. I figured “who doesn’t like rockets?” and we built on our history of collaborating on launches and satellites to create a program working with the Argentines in which we launch their satellites. He was able to come down for a couple of days and we did a public event with students and teachers, he had various speaking arrangements not only in Buenos Aires but also in Bariloche to learn about how they make high-tech satellites. It was a great trip and building that goodwill was important. Once Argentina had a new government and the opportunity opened it was different. In politics, windows of opportunity open and close. The new government provided a new opportunity and we started working on things like security issues, counter-narcotics and border control, climate change, votes at the U.N, etc. We did not always agree, but with this new window, we were much more aligned.

5. Populism continues to be on the rise in Latin America. Does this development undermine the U.S.’s foreign policy goals in the region and, if so, how? How is this development reflected in Argentina’s current political environment?

Unfortunately, we’ve seen a backslide with democracies and presidents who don’t want to leave office. They threaten, jail, or sometimes kill political opponents, curtail the press, and so on. My friend, Kevin Sullivan, who worked for me at the embassy in Buenos Aires became ambassador to Nicaragua, and it’s been a really difficult six to seven years there. In other countries, the situation is very similar in that they basically no longer have a functional democracy which is bad for the country, its citizens, and bilateral relationships with the U.S. The best countries to do business with are stable democracies, so when they become unstable, it’s much more difficult to navigate issues like human rights, freedom of the press, transparency, and independence of the courts. These are all issues that we take very seriously and if countries start to undermine their own institutions, that becomes the issue that the U.S. has to work on with NGOs or others. We don’t support individual candidates because we want to work with whoever’s in power, but if those institutions are being damaged it makes it a lot harder to work on any policy and trust the government in that bilateral relationship. Unfortunately, we see this in the region to an extent.

Every country is different, but there are definitely more countries with weaker institutions than ten or fifteen years ago. Sometimes these trends occur in cycles, and there's only so much the U.S. can do, but we pride ourselves in standing up for democracy, freedom of the press, and free and fair elections—and we will continue to do that.

6. U.S. foreign policy often requires balancing national interests with the promotion of democratic values. Can you elaborate on how you navigated this delicate balance during your time as ambassador?

We had our problems with the government the first year I was there, but there was never a real threat to their elections. We disagreed on a lot of policy, but there wasn't a real threat to their democratic process. One of the issues we talked a lot about—and still talk a lot about—is the independence of the courts. I think if you talk to most Argentines, if not all Argentines, they would say that, unfortunately, their court system is not nearly as strong or independent as they would hope it to be. We have had various programs over the years in which U.S. judges from the Supreme Court all the way down to lower level and retired judges come to Argentina to strengthen their judicial system and maintain best practices. This is a continuing effort and I'm not sure we've made much progress. Other countries, however, face challenges that are even more at the core of their democracy than those in Argentina. People talk about regional policies as a U.S. tactic in Latin America, but I just don't believe that there's such a thing—it really is more about bilateral policies. Argentina is very different from Brazil and Chile. For example, we had an agreement with Chile that college credits in the UC system in California would transfer to Chile which is completely unique to the relationship between the U.S. and Chile. Each country has different circumstances and it's hard to have an overall regional strategy, just as it is in the Middle East or Asia. Again, I think it's really about bilateral policy.

7. With the rise of political polarization in America and the challenges that come in the age of information and media literacy, do you have any advice for students or those of the younger generation? Do you have any advice for those looking to pursue a career in diplomacy and international relations?

I think International Relations and Foreign Policy is an amazing field. It is fascinating and really consequential. People who are considering a career in diplomacy or working with the State Department, a different agency, or an NGO have incredible experiences. I think what makes it so fascinating is that you often get to live overseas or at the very least experience different cultures, languages, and peoples. You get to see how things are connected globally that you don't necessarily see unless you're working on issues that are international or regional. For example, war in Ukraine affects grain prices around the world. There are few right answers to global problems, and we're constantly trying to improve and get better. We need new generations of smart people that are interested in these topics because ultimately someone is going to be making these decisions. Unless smart people get involved, others are going to make consequential decisions for all of us on issues like climate change, for example. These are big national and international decisions, and individuals can only do so much, but they can have an impact. The concern is that we don't have much time. We're at the two-minute warning. I'm thrilled that you and other students who are a part of your journal and class are interested in international relations and you guys are making a difference. That is ultimately what we are all trying to do: make a positive difference in the world.

Notes

1. Argentina's recent presidential election in November of 2023 saw the victory of Javier Milei, a prominent libertarian candidate, marking a significant departure from the dominance of the Peronist party. The last time the Peronists lost power was during the Macri era, characterized by a shift towards more market-oriented policies and economic efforts, raising questions about the trajectory of Argentina's political landscape and the implications of Milei's win for the country's economic and social policies.

2. Dollarization refers to the complete substitution of the Argentine peso with the U.S. dollar as the nation's sole currency. This would entail the cessation of the Argentine mint's issuance of its national currency, with the U.S. dollar assuming the role of the national currency. This economic transformation mirrors the transition witnessed in countries such as Panama, Ecuador, and El Salvador, where the adoption of the U.S. dollar as the official currency has already occurred.