

CASE STUDY IN
TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL
CONVERGENCE: SANTIAGO DEL
ESTERO, ARGENTINA



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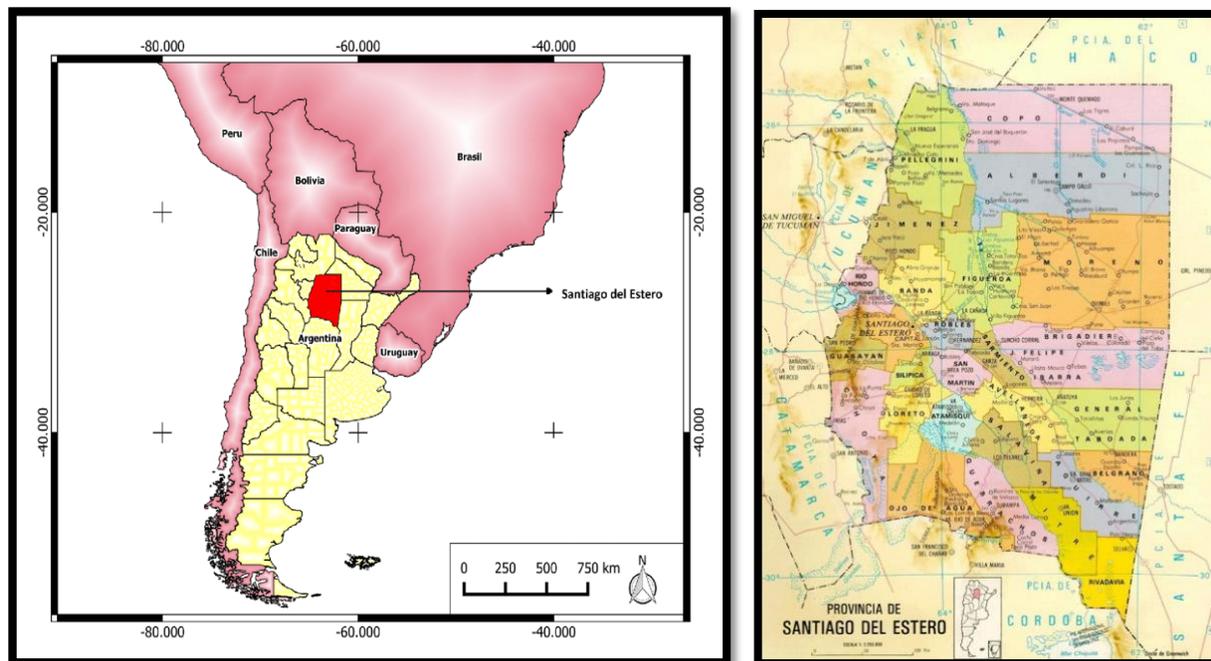


Figure 1: Map of Santiago del Estero in Argentina, and provincial map

Santiago del Estero, a sweltering, impoverished province in rural Argentina, sits astride Route 34, one of the most important cocaine arteries of South America. The highway cuts from Bolivia's southern border into the heart of Argentina, intersecting with roads that carry the illicit products south and east to the Atlantic ports, and west to Chile's Pacific coast.¹

Crisscrossing the region are hundreds of secondary roads that serve as airstrips for small aircraft carrying drugs from Bolivia and Peru, drugs which are then fed into the regional distribution network. Often, the aircraft dump their loads while flying at a low altitude for local cartel workers, who hoist the cocaine bundles onto waiting trucks that scatter to different storage centers. As one headline in a major Argentine newspaper noted, "Rain of Cocaine in Santiago del Estero."²

This is the new crossroads as Latin America's cocaine trade shifts from the traditional routes to new avenues of distribution designed to reach more lucrative emerging markets. The historic model of cocaine trafficking has been from Colombia and Venezuela in the south, to Central America (Honduras and Guatemala), through Mexico and north to the United States.

The distribution network in recent years shifted in the opposite direction, from northern South America toward the Southern Cone. Increased production in Peru and Bolivia provides white powder that flows south through Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay to more lucrative European markets. Santiago del Estero is a key juncture in the emerging map of the global cocaine trade.³

Market economics dictate that the product flows to where there is greatest demand and highest profit. While the United States is still the largest overall market in the world, it now ranks third in the world in per capita consumption. Uruguay, Argentina and Chile are all among the top 10 countries in per capita consumption, providing lucrative internal markets.⁴

Cocaine use in the U.S. declined by some 40 percent from 2011-2016⁵ and prices remain stable. But consumption is growing in Europe, Australia and the former Soviet republics. Prices in the emerging markets are 50 percent to 100 percent higher than in the United States.⁶ Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil are now important transshipment centers for the new markets. According to Argentina's own statistics, internal drug use doubled from 2010 to 2019.⁷

The white powder rains brought clear benefits to Santiago del Estero and other provinces in northern Argentina. This province has almost no tax base, few jobs outside of regional government employers, and one of the highest homicide rates in the country.⁸ Santiago del Estero's geography and distance from other population hubs makes it an insular territory; outsiders, especially foreigners, stand out in the eponymous capital city and surrounding countryside.

A recent three-day visit found a region and a regional government full of contradictions, intrigue, and unexplained cash flows that fuel one of the most powerful and sophisticated political machines in the country.

The provincial capital city of Santiago del Estero was founded in 1553 and is called Argentina's Mother of Cities as the first city established in Argentina. The province has the highest rates of poverty and extreme poverty in the country.⁹ Despite this, it boasts a modern airport, which operates few flights; a world-class soccer stadium, with few teams to fill it; a new track for race cars, with few vehicles that race; a golf course, with a handful of golfers; a state-of-the-art cultural center; and a towering, gold colored statue of Argentine soccer great Diego Maradona, said to be the largest in the world. The statue was unveiled last year under the gaze of Lionel Messi, considered one of the world's top players, along with the rest of the Argentine national team.

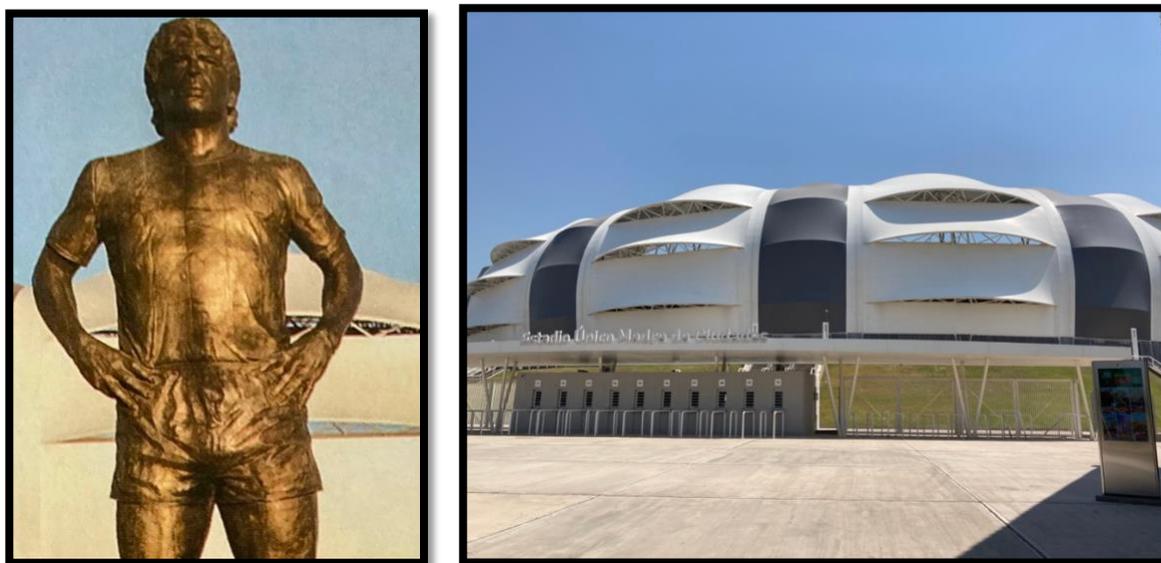


Figure 2: Golden painted statue of Argentine soccer hero Diego Maradona (left) and the Estadio Unico soccer stadium (Photos: IBI Consultants)

It is also the operational center for three Chinese companies partnering with Argentine state enterprises that have promised to help build one of the largest lithium battery factories in the hemisphere, here in this isolated enclave. While the plant's construction may seem far-fetched given the region's isolation, its future is no more improbable than the other out-of-place construction

projects here.¹⁰ Taken together, the gleaming amenities amid the isolation and wide-spread poverty would make the region an apt setting for one of Gabriel Garcia Márquez's Magical Realism novels.

Police investigations, regional and national intelligence reports, local residents, and media exposés all point to the reason for these deep contradictions. Santiago del Estero is the epicenter where multiple criminal and corruption networks converge, touching the governor, his family, his wife's family, and the nation's powerful vice president Cristina Fernández Kirchner.

Presiding over this land of contradictions are Governor Gerardo Zamora and his wife, Claudia Ledesma Abdala, who together have governed the province with an iron fist since 2005. Both are unshakeable allies and close personal friends of Kirchner, the former president and current vice president. In the senate, Zamora and Ledesma are unflinching allies of Kirchner's *Peronista* party, delivering votes, cash and electoral muscle when needed. Kirchner personally chose Ledesma, now a national senator, to serve as acting president in 2020 for several days when the vice president and the president were both absent from the country.¹¹ Due to term limits on the governorship, the couple rotates between presiding over the province as a feudal manor where the governor's word is law, and occupying a seat in the nation's senate, leading the Kirchner agenda.

Our research over the past decade has extensively documented the endemic corruption of past Kirchner administrations that touched almost every facet of government;¹² Kirchner's gross negligence in the investigation into the 2015 assassination of Alberto Nisman, the prosecutor who linked Iran to terrorist bombing in Buenos Aires in the 1994 and who was about to unveil possible Kirchner collusion in the case just before he was killed;¹³ and the role of Kirchner in sponsoring radical, authoritarian populist movements.¹⁴

Kirchner has recently hinted at another presidential run as she faces a slew of criminal corruption charges for her years in public office. Cristina Kirchner followed her husband Néstor Kirchner, former president of Argentina from 2003-2007, with two terms of her own from 2007 to 2015. As her corruption scandals mounted and moved through the courts, Cristina opted to run successfully as vice president with Alberto Fernández in 2018. Kirchner is widely viewed as the true power center in the administration and is now desperate to hold on to an elected office that grants her immunity from prosecution.

Kirchner's grip on a position of power is also vital to the survival of the Zamora-Ledesma political machine, and her ability to reclaim the presidency rests heavily on the Santiago del Estero machine's ability to deliver the goods. It is the province that provided the highest percentage of votes to Kirchner's tickets in recent elections in a deeply polarized nation.

"Zamora, Ledesma and Kirchner are an iron triangle of power in a land where time has stood still," said one civilian intelligence source. "It is really a feudal system, where the *caudillo* runs his *finca* and delivers political muscle to the central government, and in return is given a free hand to steal what he pleases. Each interest protects the other, and the hold so far has been unbreakable."

Despite having a ubiquitous public relations team churning out daily social media content, Zamora's office in Santiago del Estero and the capital Buenos Aires did not respond to multiple, detailed requests for comment on the allegations of corruption and drug trafficking in his province.

These regional iron triangles are essential to understanding illicit networks and how convergence centers for multiple types of transnational criminal activities develop through political authoritarianism and corruption protected both at the regional and national levels.

Santiago del Estero is not unique in playing this role, but it serves as a case study in how these different elements interact. Key to creating these convergence centers are control of the judiciary, extensive patronage and corruption networks that tie in the regional elites, cooptation or corruption of the media, and providing enough benefits to the community from the system to keep inhabitants from turning on the government.¹⁵

According to police intelligence officials, Santiago del Estero is not only a major cocaine transit hub, but also an important new entry point into Argentina for the Brazil-based *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC), one of the largest and most criminalized of the hemisphere's prison-based gangs.

The PCC is no longer a traditional gang but a significant non-state armed actor that controls territory while wielding political and economic power in multiple countries. The PCC is now engaged in cocaine trafficking, bank heists, extortion, racketeering and other criminal activities in Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay and Argentina.¹⁶ The inauguration of new flights linking Brazil to Santiago del Estero's new airport has been a major reason for the expansion into this area, the sources said, because PCC members enter under the protection of local cocaine trafficking groups.

Santiago del Estero is also a key node in the route of contraband vehicles and goods that for decades has smuggled goods from the port of Iquique in northern Chile, to Bolivia, Paraguay and beyond. The large trucks loaded with smaller cars are dubbed "mosquito trucks" because they swarm the highways after dark usually moving cars stolen from Asia, the United States and Europe and resold in the booming used car business often tied to money laundering activities.

With Kirchner's unflagging support, the couple built a sprawling patronage network that touches every facet of public life and the private sector. The province receives some of the highest federal government subsidies, yet lags woefully behind the rest of the nation in most social indicators, including education, poverty and extreme poverty.

The national media, whose reporters are often harassed in Santiago del Estero because they are viewed as being anti-Zamora, noted the chasm between deficient social spending and flashy mega projects. One noted that the "Pharaoh-like public works built under the Kirchner governments collide head-on with the social emergency" the province is living.¹⁷

National law enforcement officials have publicly accused the Zamora political machine of bending the judiciary to serve the purposes of family, friends, and political allies, and persecute and jail enemies.

One recent report from a leading newspaper in neighboring Salta province (most of the media in Santiago del Estero is controlled by the provincial government) accused Zamora of being an "autocrat" who "uses the worst methods" of persecuting political opponents. These include "police torture" and "corruption of the judiciary by naming hand-picked judges of dubious honesty who act as executioners of orders from the tyrant to punish any citizen who criticizes his rule or attempts to undertake any opposition political activity."¹⁸



Figure 3: Ledesma Abdala (left), Kirchner (center) and Zamora (right) pose for a selfie (La Nación)

Those interviewed over the course of the recent visit repeated stories of how the new “Mother of Cities Unique Stadium,” the ultra modern soccer stadium that seats 29,000 people, was originally designed to hold 60,000, but the Zamora machine siphoned off so much money in bribes there was only enough money for half of it.

The Zamora-Ledesma machine seems intent on creating at least the illusion of progress through slick marketing, extravagant public events and social media dominance while the massive projects seem to be having very little impact in reducing poverty or creating jobs the patronage network does not control.

Although the province is an impoverished backwater, Zamora maintains a first-rate, multi-person public relations team that provides a constant, visually sophisticated social media stream of daily drone shots of the city. They capture the governor carrying his trademark ceremonial staff with a silver head as he inaugurates public works at a frenetic rate, flanked by citizens singing his praises or playing guitar and singing in a local school inauguration. Zamora’s Facebook account says he has 223,000 followers.



Figure 4: Governor Zamora (left) inaugurating a new school and the governor with his trademark staff and official sash in the government center

During IBI Consultants' recent visit, Zamora, dressed in blue jeans, white shirt and green baseball cap, presided over the trial run of an Indy 500 race car at the state of the art *Autodromo Termas de Río Hondo*, the international motor sports complex designed by renowned Italian motor circuit designer Jarno Zaffelli. It was the first time in almost 50 years an Indy 500 car ran in Argentina, according to the event's publicity. The car was flown in from Indiana as part of the Argentine Jungos Hollinger car racing team.

Some 15,000 people took advantage of the free admission, tango shows, drumming and circus acts that provided a respite from the sweltering heat and abject poverty surrounding the event. Zamora, who reportedly loves Italian Ducati motorcycles, was omnipresent, and was prominently photographed with Argentina's most famous race car driver, Agustin Canapino, who drove the demo Indy 500 car at the event.

Such extravagance in such a poor and isolated region is unusual and defies the rational laws of economics. The explanation likely involves the profits reaped from serving as an important criminal convergence center.

Like with successive Kirchner administrations, the reports of ties to drug trafficking are constant and credible.¹⁹ Law enforcement and intelligence officials in the capital Buenos Aires said there were numerous, constant reports of official collaboration where the provincial government protected drug trafficking, and profited from providing that protection. However, because the police and judiciary in Santiago del Estero are completely controlled by Zamora, the sources said, they cannot get any cooperation or support from local officials.



Figure 5: Ledesma Abdala wishing Kirchner a happy birthday in February 2022 (Twitter)

It is well documented that cocaine-laden aircraft flying south from Peru and Bolivia – among the largest cocaine producers in world – drop tons of product in the area. The product is then transported by land to ports in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, for onward movement to Europe as the primary market. One judge in neighboring Córdoba province called Santiago del Estero an “aircraft carrier of narco-trafficking.”²⁰

The flights, which either drop their cocaine packets from small aircraft flying at low altitude or land on clandestine airstrips, operate unimpeded by functioning radars or police patrols. One scathing piece in the nation's leading *La Nación* newspaper noted there are “well founded suspicions of the complicity of authorities in this crime (drug trafficking), given the passivity of the security forces that seem to be more interested in protecting the transit of drugs rather than combating it.”²¹

Radars on Bolivia's southern border north of Santiago del Estero are supposed to be the first line of defense against the aircraft but work only intermittently. The local police forces are supposed to seize the aircraft when they land, or grab the product that is dropped in rural areas.

“The border radars only work for a few hours a day, and police have standing orders not to move when an aircraft is seen dropping white packages from the air,” said one civilian intelligence officer who served in the area for several years. “If the radars are on, they are conveniently pointed away from where the airplanes approach from. If someone grabs a load, it is a competitor of the cartel that dropped it, not a law enforcement action.”

The same is true of drug busts in the area, the national police said. While there are constant seizures of cocaine in the province, it is the cocaine of those who have not bought the protection of the Zamora-Ledesma network. In contrast, many major cocaine busts seize cocaine that had already transited Santiago del Estero uninterrupted before getting picked up further south.

In 2017, Patricia Bullrich, at the time the respected Minister of Interior (2015-2019) and now leader of the PRO political party, leading the opposition to Zamora’s *Peronista* party, coordinated one of the biggest cocaine busts in Argentine history in Santiago del Estero. She did it by bypassing the local authorities to grab 1,800 kilos arriving by air from Paraguay.²²

Sources with knowledge of the planning said that Bullrich and her intelligence team had deep concerns over reports that Zamora and local law enforcement officials protected drug traffickers, and coordinated the operation out of Buenos Aires, using a federally controlled helicopter to force the small aircraft carrying the cocaine to land.

The Zamora-Ledesma family is also accused of using the pliable judiciary to appropriate tens of thousands of acres of land for personal benefit. To do this, they first pay impoverished indigenous communities to invade large landholdings, before expropriating the land supposedly on the communities’ behalf.

According to recent interviews with residents, law enforcement officials and national intelligence officials, during this process the indigenous communities usually end up with less than half of the expropriated land, while the Zamora-Ledesma family either holds the rest or sells it for enormous profits. The lands attacked are often prime territory on the multiple drug trafficking routes that run through the province.

Bullrich, now considered a leading candidate for president in next year’s presidential elections, said that as minister she asked the governor “eight million times” to stop the land seizures and that every time Zamora promised action but never did anything. “It is the law of the jungle” in Santiago de Estero, Bullrich said, referring to Zamora’s hold on the judges and string of implausible judicial rulings aimed at supporters of political opponents. She said that “there cannot be even one corner of the country where the rule of law isn’t respected.”²³

The most active peasant movement in the region, the Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero (*Movimiento Campesino Santiago del Estero* – MOCASE) that is often involved in land occupations and informal seizures, is closely aligned with Kirchner and the Zamora-Ledesma political machine. Their support is public, and the group has openly campaigned for all three as part of the political tickets on the ballots. These ties make getting independent judicial rulings on land disputes, particularly those that target the Kirchner and Zamora-Ledesma, almost impossible.



Figure 6: MOCASE posters showing public support for Kirchner (Twitter).

As a way of retaining political power, the Zamora-Ledesma often allow the land seizures to proceed without interference in order to keep this key constituency happy. This is a common tactic of the Kirchner political machine, which has a long history of using *piqueteros*, or are violent street gangs recruited from the ranks of unemployed and paid by the government, to carry out violent street protests and other direct action activities against political opponents.²⁴

One of the Kirchner's most important *piquetero* leaders is Luis D'Elía, who, in addition to engineering political violence was identified by slain prosecutor Nisman as a key agent for Iran operating in Argentina.²⁵ D'Elía was arrested in 2019 on charges of covering up evidence in the 1994 terrorist bombing of a Jewish center, which Nisman alleged was executed by Iranian intelligence agents. D'Elía was released from prison due to ill health and has also charged with other violent political actions, although he remains free.²⁶ D'Elia is also close to the Zamora-Ledesma machine and MOCASE.

Police intelligence reports show that MOCASE has strong ties to both the former FARC guerrillas in Colombia and other armed Marxist movements in the Western Hemisphere that advocate the use of force to take land. In 2018 MOCASE hosted an international meeting of 130 activists from Cuba, Brazil and Argentina. The group met to exchange experiences and a delegation of Cuban doctors, led by Aleida Guevara, daughter of Argentine/Cuban revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, held free health clinics.²⁷

Both the Zamora and the Ledesma Abdala families own major businesses in the province, with the proven capacity to award themselves enormous public service contracts and reap the profits that accrue from the endemic corruption and self-dealing the contracts entail.

The Zamora-Ledesma machine's corruption is openly discussed by residents here, though few seem to object because enough money survives the payoffs to create some jobs and critical infrastructure. One resident described Zamora as distillation of the massively corrupt Néstor and Cristina Kirchner national political machine, noting that the governor "learned from the Kirchners, and in this case the student became more accomplished than the teacher."

One of the main points of leverage is the fact that almost half the formal jobs in the province are directly dependent on the governor, as are almost all of the major contracts for the ostentatious public works that seem so out of place in the city.

Ledesma Abdala comes from a prominent local family of Syrian origin who were famous supporters of the province's earlier strongman Carlos Juárez, who governed the region for 55 years either directly or by proxy, often having his wife occupy positions of authority. A violent social uprising in the region was triggered by massive protests against official abuses and corruption in 1993, and in 2004 the federal government sent the national police to place the provincial government under federal receivership and end the Juárez rein. The federal intervention, unique in Argentine history, was justified due to the "systematic violation by the state government of the rights and guarantees of the national constitution," according to the decree authorizing the drastic move.

Despite the fact he does not hold a national office, Zamora also maintains a busy international travel schedule, unusual for a provincial governor. He and several other governors visited Washington, D.C. in September 2022, after he visited the United Arab Emirates in March 2022 to press for infrastructure investments. Ledesma has been a staunch defender of China and has spoken at international events on China's strategic importance to Argentina.



Figure 7: Gerardo Zamora, governor of Santiago del Estero, with UAE officials (Left) and during visit to Washington, D.C.

Perhaps the most ambitious project to date is the recently announced joint venture lithium battery project, backed by Argentine state companies who are partnering with Chinese state companies. Northern Argentina, Bolivia and Chile jointly hold some of the largest lithium deposits in the world, including in regions adjacent to Santiago del Estero.

Global lithium demand is soaring, as is the price of the commodity. The "Consortium for Cooperation for the Manufacture of Ion Lithium Cells and Batteries" is managing the project, which was announced as the largest such factory in Latin America. Lithium is a vital resource for building electric vehicle batteries, computers, a host of other products necessary to drive the global green revolution and cut dependence on fossil fuel consumption.

The consortium includes Argentine state YPF company, its subsidiary Y-TEC, and its Chinese partners: Contemporary Amperex Technology Company Co. Ltd (CATL) and Tianqui Lithium and Gotion High Tech. The details of the project's financing and timeline for completion were vague,

and no financial documents relating to the project have been made publicly available. The growing presence of the Chinese in Santiago del Estero led to persistent rumors that a water park that will reportedly be built soon is being paid for by the PRC in order to provide entertainment for the expected influx of Chinese workers.

As usual, establishing the role of PRC companies through public records searches is difficult because they often do not meet the reporting requirements, as is the case with the companies discussed here. A memorandum signed in July 2022 indicates that Y-TEC is a research and development company that serves under the YPF energy company.²⁸ Y-TEC has its own Argentina based website, citing an ongoing partnership with CONICET (National Scientific and Technical Research Council).²⁹

Further reporting indicates that Y-TEC was formed after a merger of companies YPF and CONICET,³⁰ and YFP is an Argentinian state energy company which pushed into the lithium sector in mid 2021.³¹

In November 2021, YFP company officials met with the major Chinese battery manufacturer CATL to form strategic partnership plans around lithium battery manufacturing.³² CATL, or Contemporary Amperex Technology Co Ltd, is the world's largest electric vehicle battery manufacturer but did not yet produce any lithium at the time.³³ YFP President Pablo Gonzales and CATL Vice President Chen Junwei were both present for the meetings.

In September 2022, YPF reportedly signed a deal with the PRC's Tianqui Lithium to develop lithium mining in Argentina. China's Gotion High Tech company also reportedly plans to build two processing plants together with Argentinian state-owned company JEMSE.³⁴

According to numerous recent studies by the National Endowment for Democracy and others, when Chinese state companies operate as partners, they almost always use corrupt local and state officials to win lucrative contracts, evade environmental controls, avoid land use restrictions, and ignore indigenous rights. As one recent study found, growing trade with the PRC "creates powerful lobbying constituencies in other countries' politics. The results can be the weakening of democratic institutions, a reduced inclination to support democratic norms globally, and/or increased support for the PRC's deeply authoritarian model of governance and global ambitions."³⁵

As one international businessman who works in Argentina noted, the Kirchner-Zamora-Ledesma iron triangle is the perfect environment for such a project to flourish – a corrupt central government, a corrupt local government and corrupt external state agencies that lubricate the interlocking systems. "Nothing will happen without Kirchner's approval, Zamora's direct involvement and PRC officials willing to use money to oil the system," the businessman said. "It could be a win-win-win situation."

Endnotes

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