



Space: The Cold War Moves to the Andes

Published on 10/05/2026

From the Argentine peaks to the Chilean deserts, telescopes have become the new trenches in the clash between Washington and Beijing. While scientists search for the origins of galaxies, down-to-earth politics freezes projects in the name of national security.

SAN JUAN, ARGENTINA – On the hills of San Juan, where the air is thin and the sky so pure it seems unreal, a giant of metal lies dismantled. It is the **China Argentina Radio Telescope (CART)**, a 32 million dollar project that was supposed to be the largest radio telescope in South America. Today, instead of capturing signals from distant galaxies, the antenna points blindly upwards, a victim of what local astronomers call a "**political black hole.**"

The New Monroe Doctrine

The race for space supremacy between the United States and China has found an unexpected front in the southern hemisphere. For Beijing, having stations in Argentina and Chile is not just a

scientific matter: it's a geographical necessity. Located on the other side of the planet, these facilities offer China a window to a half of the sky otherwise invisible from its own borders.

However, for **Washington, these "windows" are potential military eyes.** The Trump administration, continuing a line already traced by the Biden administration, is applying an updated version of the **Monroe Doctrine**. The goal is clear: to counter Chinese influence in America's "backyard." U.S. officials fear that the San Juan telescope, although managed in partnership with the National University of San Juan, could be used to track American military satellites or intercept sensitive communications.

Pressures and Frozen Gears

The "arm wrestling" diplomacy has led to tangible results. In Argentina, key components of the telescope have been stuck in customs for months. **In Chile, a similar project in the Atacama Desert, which involved the installation of 100 Chinese telescopes for asteroid monitoring, was abruptly halted** after pressure from former U.S. ambassador Bernadette Meehan.

"It was an absolute priority to prevent that project from being authorized," Meehan stated, emphasizing how these installations are considered "strategic entries" for Chinese intelligence.



Space: The Cold War Moves to the Andes

The Milei Factor and Realpolitik

The Argentine political landscape has added further complexity. President **Javier Milei**, initially hostile to Beijing during the election campaign, had to soften his tone once elected. With an economy closely tied to trade and financing from China, Milei finds himself in a precarious balance. Despite the strong bond with Trump and the recent 20 billion dollar financial rescue obtained from the USA, **the shadow of the Chinese space base in Neuquén — granted to Beijing for 50 years by the previous government — remains a cumbersome symbol of Asian presence in Patagonia.**

Science vs. Security

While governments sign trade agreements that limit space cooperation with "third countries," scientists remain on the sidelines. Ana Maria Pacheco, a sixty-one-year-old astronomer, looks bitterly at the skeleton of the telescope: "We are stuck." For researchers, the telescope represented the opportunity to bridge the gap in instruments between the northern and southern hemispheres; **for Washington's technicians, however, it was just a "dual-use" risk (civil and military use).**

In the basement of the San Juan facility, traces of Chinese workers still remain: boxes of oyster sauce, green tea, and a sign explaining how to behave in case of encountering a puma. These are the remnants of an international scientific collaboration that, for now, has been defeated by terrestrial geopolitics.

The space race no longer only passes through the rockets of Cape Canaveral or the laboratories of Beijing, but through the customs of Buenos Aires and the winding paths of the Andes, where the silence of the telescopes tells the tension of a new Cold War.

News link: <https://www.nytimes.com>