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New Peruvian Maps Rekindles Border Row with Chile

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A border dispute that was supposed to have been resolved by a landmark ruling issued eight months ago by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague is once again causing tempers to flare between Chile and Peru, this time regarding a miniscule patch of coastal desert.

The binding ICJ decision, handed down on Jan. 27, ended years of wrangling over the two countries’ maritime boundary (NotiSur, Feb. 28, 2014). At stake was a nearly 40,000 sq km triangle of Pacific Ocean water tucked between Chile’s preferred maritime border, a line heading directly west from the coastal point where the two countries meet, and Peru’s claim, a line emanating from nearly the same point but following a southwest trajectory.

The Netherlands-based court ended up granting the bulk of that ocean territory to Peru but allowed Chile to retain a swath of valuable inshore water used by the country’s industrial and small-scale fishers. Reactions were mixed. Peru had hoped for more yet celebrated the decision as a victory. "We won more than 70% of our demand," Peruvian President Ollanta Humala said at the time. He went on to say that the ruling provided "grounds for satisfaction."

Chile, in contrast, lamented the ICJ decision—then President-elect Michelle Bachelet called it a "sad loss" but was pleased not to have come away completely empty handed. "Chile retains almost all its fishing rights and especially the artisan fishers' rights," the country’s outgoing President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) noted.

Both countries agreed to abide by the ICJ ruling—as it pertains to ocean territory. They remain at odds, however, regarding the specific coordinates from which the new maritime boundary should emanate. Peru, basing its argument on a 1929 treaty, says the ocean border begins at a coastal point called Punto Concordia. Chile’s preferred coordinate, known as Hito 1, is 264 meters farther inland. The seemingly minor discrepancy has resulted in competing claims regarding a postage-stamp-sized chunk of land that measures just 3.6 hectares, roughly the size of two and one-half New York City blocks.

On dangerous ground
Grumblings about the "triángulo terrestre" (land triangle), as the disputed territory is known, followed the January ICJ decision but then died down. Last month, however, the tiny triangle leapt to the political forefront when Peru’s President Humala signed a decreto supremo (supreme decree) approving an official map containing the new ocean boundary, which Chile has grudgingly agreed to, but also the disputed desert plot, which Chile refuses to concede.

"This map shows explicitly that the starting point of the border between Peru and Chile is Punto Concordia. There is no other one," Humala said upon announcing his Aug. 19 decree. "This is the new official map of Peru."

Chilean political leaders were quick to react. Foreign Minister Heraldo Muñoz issued a formal objection to the new Peruvian map and later aired his grievances in a pair of diplomatic missives.
sent to his Peruvian counterpart Gonzalo Gutiérrez. The Chilean Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee was even more forthright in its criticisms. In a declaration released Aug. 20, committee members accused the Humala administration of having "a provocative attitude" and argued that Peru’s position vis-à-vis the disputed land triangle "seriously complicates building true and ample integration" between the two countries.

Tensions mounted even more when a group of Peruvian nationalists known as the Comité Cívico Patriótico announced it would carry out a "patriotic march" from the city of Tacna, just north of the border with Chile, into the disputed territory. Prior to the Aug. 27 event, the group’s leader, Ciro Silva, described the march as a "peaceful" act of protest. And yet, in an interview with a Chilean television station, he said, "The armed forces [of Peru] must establish sovereignty over our territory, the triángulo terrestre, which is Peruvian."

Top Chilean officials responded with some saber-rattling of their own. Defense Minister Jorge Burgos made it be known that Chilean carabineros (uniformed police), a branch of the military, would stop anyone who tried to enter the disputed territory. "Our armed forces are always ready to protect our sovereignty," he said. He also reminded would-be march participants that the border area is strewn with landmines left over from the Gen. Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). "It’s always dangerous for someone trying to enter our territory without previous authorization. It is even more dangerous in that particular area because we still haven’t finished clearing the landmines," he said.

During the Pinochet regime, the Chilean military planted more than 180,000 mines along the border with Peru. Following its return to democracy, Chile—a signatory of the 1997 Ottawa Treaty (also known as the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, APMBC)—began removing and deactivating the mines. So far, authorities have cleared nearly 83,000, or 45.5%, of the deadly devices.

The ties that bind

The much-hyped march proved, in the end, to be a "failure," as the Peruvian daily Perú 21 dubbed it in an Aug. 28 headline. Peruvian authorities intervened finally to prevent the approximately 100 people who showed up for the event from completing more than about one-quarter of their planned trajectory. While Peruvian Foreign Minister Gutiérrez took the opportunity to reiterate his country’s claim to the triángulo terrestre, he also said, "Chile’s mistaken interpretations can’t be resolved with marches of this kind."

Others—in both Peru and Chile—were more overtly conciliatory in their assessment of the standoff. Tacna Mayor Fidel Carita Monroy, who opposed the march from the beginning, said in an interview with the Chilean afternoon paper La Segunda that "delicate" issues of this kind "ought to be handled very prudently." He went on to say that "anything that can be misinterpreted should be avoided. ... We don’t want what happens on other continents to happen here."

Vlado Mirosevic, a Chilean congressional deputy who represents the Región de Arica y Parinacota, just across the border from Tacna, expressed a similar sentiment, noting that, for all the patriotic bluster surrounding the disputed territory, the two countries are closely tied. "Relations between Peru and Chile resemble more [relations] between Tacna and Arica than they do the small nationalist march currently being reported on by the press," Mirosevic, a 27-year-old political independent, told reporters on Aug. 26. "Tacna and Arica are examples of cultural, political, and economic integration. They’re a reflection of our relationship with Peru."
Despite the bad blood regarding the long-disputed ocean border, and the recent tempest-in-a-teapot uproar over the triángulo terrestre, Chile and Peru—as Deputy Mirosevic correctly pointed out—are deeply entwined. Trade between the two countries has grown to more than US$3 billion annually. Peru is Chile’s third-leading source of imports, following the US and China, as well as its third-most-important export destination, after China and the US. Peru is also of major interest to Chilean investors, particularly in the retail sector. Led by retail companies such as Falabella, Cencosud, and Ripley, and the airline LAN, Chilean businesses have invested more than US$13 billion in Peru since 1990, according to the Chile’s Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.

Peru, in the meantime, has been the leading source of recent immigration to Chile. A census carried out in 2012 found that 30.5% of Chile’s approximately 340,000 foreign-born residents arrived from Peru. Second on the list was Argentina (16.79%), followed by Colombia (8.07%), Bolivia (7.41%), Ecuador (4.82%), Spain (3.26%), the US (3.26%), and Brazil (2.89%).

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