Regional Border Conflicts Simmer, But Are Not Expected to Erupt

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At a time that the many existing border conflicts between South American countries are either resolved or are latent but dormant, Venezuela, Guyana, Bolivia, and Chile have reactivated disputes (NotiSur, Nov. 1, 2013). Even in countries with relatively like-minded governments, the leaders are making use of verbal artillery and have seemingly forgotten what good diplomatic manners are. Regardless, regional international relations specialists believe that one need not fear confrontations will go beyond rhetoric and lead to a quasi war.

"None of our countries is an attractive market for the arms industry where it can put lobbyists to work. Besides, our societies are too mature to allow any politician to go too far and risk the domestic peace currently being achieved after having suffered decades of civil-military dictatorships," said Lido Iacomini, an Argentine analyst of Latin American issues. "Likewise, the political and social leadership should remain vigilant lest someday we wake up to a nasty surprise," he added in a piece published by the Agencia Paco Urondo, an alternative Web site associated with the university community.

In the last quarter century, several bilateral disputes have been surmounted. In 1991, Argentina and Chile signed a peace accord that resolved border problems at 21 locations in the Andes mountains (NotiSur, Jan. 8, 1999). In 1978, a year in which both countries lived under dictatorships, they were a step away from war, a drama that was avoided with help from a special envoy of Pope John Paul II.

Ecuador and Peru resorted to weapons in 1941, 1981, and 1995 in a dispute regarding the Cordillera del Cóndor, a mountain chain in the Andes. After nearly two centuries of keeping this conflict alive, the two countries signed a peace agreement in 1998 (NotiSur, Oct. 30, 1998).

On March 1, 2008, Ecuador and Colombia lived the last chapter of the historical tension along their Andean border that, according to Columbia, had fallen under the control of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla forces protecting their encampments in the jungle on the Ecuadoran side of the border. On that day, a Colombian air squadron killed the rebel chief Raul Reyes in a bombing that also ended the lives of another 19 persons including an Ecuadoran and two Mexican students (NotiSur, March 7, 2008). On Dec. 13 of that year, a Washington Post investigation concluded that the military action was the result of an undercover intelligence operation of the US National Security Agency (NSA). With Brazilian mediation, the two parties signed a peace agreement ending the problem.

ExxonMobil oil exploration reignites Guyana-Venezuela dispute

Since 1811, Venezuela has asserted its sovereignty over the Essequibo territory, first with the United Kingdom and later with Guyana (officially the Cooperative Republic of Guyana), after the former British Guyana gained independence in 1966. Since 1982, and at the request of the Caracas government, the conflict has been in the hands of the UN. The territory in question is approximately
159,500 sq km, equivalent to 74.2% of Guyana’s total territory. The Essequibo is rich in bauxite, gold, diamonds, fine hardwoods, and hydrocarbons (NotiSur, March 26, 1987).

Precisely, it was the Georgetown government’s awarding an exploration concession for part of the area under litigation to US oil company ExxonMobil that sparked an aggressive verbal protest by Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on July 6. That day, Maduro announced a series of steps related to what he called "Guyana’s escalating aggressions in the historic claim to the Essequibo territory."

A week later the president held a meeting in Caracas with mayors and governors from the entire country as well as with top police and military officials and said, "Sooner rather than later, our claim must be resolved through diplomatic channels." Nevertheless, he later held a meeting exclusively with military chiefs. Nothing was reported about what happened at that meeting.

Maduro reported that Venezuela had asked UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to initiate the process to designate, at last, the Good Officer charged with mediating a definitive solution to the binational dispute.

Although Guyana was the last country to join the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), and, within this framework, has made worthwhile gestures, Caracas’ discourse was hard on its neighbors. Guyana’s positive gestures within the organization include, for example, joining others in supporting the Venezuela government in the face of growing destabilizing efforts by certain right-wing sectors and backing Argentina’s claim to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, a dispute pitting the South American country against Great Britain, the former colonial power with which Georgetown maintains a relationship of ambiguous privilege. Maduro labeled granting rights to ExxonMobil "an aggressive act."

Guyanese Foreign Minister Carl Greenidge responded surprisingly, indicating that his country is not interested in continuing to submit to the good offices of the UN on the grounds that, in the more than three decades since it became involved, it hasn’t seemed to offer any solution to the dispute. Greenidge said the only valid option was to turn to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the UN agency based in The Hague.

Landlocked Bolivia demands sea access

Also rooted in the ancient past, but more latent since its beginning, the dispute separating Bolivia and Chile activated again (NotiSur, May 13, 1992, July 29, 2005, and April 8, 2011). Here, the parties don’t seem at all interested in presenting a good image. After a succession of small incidents registered in the years of the administration of President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014), in April 2013, Bolivia opted to take its claim to the ICJ.

When Bolivia was militarily defeated by Chile in the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), it lost its coastal territory and became a landlocked state. As a result, its development potential was also limited. While the parties signed a treaty in 1904 that in one way considered legal redress, and in the following years Chile indicated that it might reach a settlement, more than a century after the war ended, the Andean country still lacks a maritime port.

The sensation that at any moment an understanding could be reached created what international law recognizes as an "expectative" status, defined as "a latent right not yet perfected, based on the hope or possibility of obtaining a benefit that could be made effective in the future."
Bolivia argued before the ICJ that the Chilean rulers on several occasions created the expectation that an accord could be reached that would come close to meeting its needs. In its appeal, it cites several examples but focuses on an offer the former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) made in 1975 to former Bolivian dictator Gen. Hugo Banzer (1971-1978, 1997-2001). On that occasion, Pinochet proposed a concession of a corridor with access to the ocean in exchange for a portion of Bolivian territory, which, in the opinion of La Paz, generated the "expectative right" now invoked. Bolivia isn't asking that the ICJ decide what territory Chile could give with access to the sea but that it "force its counterpart to negotiate in that direction."

Although the ideological affinities between Presidents Evo Morales of Bolivia and Michelle Bachelet of Chile had created the belief in the possibility of a constructive dialogue, the escalation of the past months makes one think that a solution is nearly impossible while a dangerous confrontation could develop. If a satisfactory agreement is reached, Morales knows that he will take his place in the gallery of heroes of Bolivian history. He managed to get all the country’s former democratic presidents to form a working group to push the demand before the ICJ and follow a hard line toward Chile that analysts consider wrong.

On May 1, Morales refused to grant an interview to three Chilean journalists he called "intelligence officers who came to provoke." On July 10, the target of his anger was Chilean Foreign Minister Heraldo Muñoz who he said "would be the champion in a contest of who most disrespects the truth; he lies and lies."

On Aug. 6, after confirming that Chilean Consul Milenko Skoknic had met with the leaders of Bolivian right-wing parties the day before, Morales threatened to expel him on the charge of "promoting political instability" in the country. Bachelet, more diplomatic, has tried to not enter the field of polemics and limit herself to reminding her colleague that "today, more than ever, Latin America needs unity, dialogue, and cooperation to face the challenges. And for that reason, statements or attitudes that do not contribute to this climate are out of place."

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