

LATIN AMERICAN TERRITORIAL DISPUTES AND CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE: ECONOMIC POWER AND GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Latin American countries managed to avoid major wars after their liberation from the colonial system. At the same time, smaller, local wars and territorial conflicts have affected the region, often creating a tense interstate atmosphere and delineating areas of geographically disputed affiliation. In the 21st century, the controversial territorial disputes of the 19th and 20th centuries continue to shape the regional dynamics of interstate relations. Among the numerous examples, this paper examines the land disputes between Chile and Bolivia (Atacama, Antofagasta), Argentina and the United Kingdom (Las Malvinas or Falkland Islands), Brazil and Uruguay (El Rincón de Artigas, Ilha Brasileira, Masoller), Costa Rica and Nicaragua (Isla Calero), Guayana and Venezuela (Essequibo), Guatemala and Belize (Cayo, Belize, Stann Creek and the Toledo Territories). It explores the history and origins of these interstate conflicts, describes possible solutions, including measures taken to date to resolve them, and argues that existing problems with colonial roots are being exacerbated by the race for resources and global markets, with a particular focus on China's role in regional geopolitical realities. The analysis concludes that these disputes are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, despite the policies and efforts already undertaken.

Keywords: *Latin America, territorial disputes, claimed territories, interstate relations, 21st century, China, USA*

Introduction

Latin America is currently experiencing a growing trend of land and maritime border disputes that threaten to disrupt peace and undermine stability in the region. However, tensions arising from territorial disputes have been present since the independence of Latin American states, and in some cases led to wars in the 19th and 20th centuries, but mostly only to the point of saber-rattling and mobilization

of forces, without any real military action. The few conflicts that did result in localized aggression did not, with one or two exceptions, escalate into full-scale war. However, increasingly frequent and often hostile statements are heard from leaders and political elites blaming other states for their perceived or real grievances, highlighting their landlocked and territorial status as a source of economic and other disadvantages. These accusations often emphasize the use of force as a possible means of resolving disputes between states, even in official communications. This is a worrying trend in a region where wars have been fought for such reasons in the past.

The aim of this paper is to outline the interstate conflicts, territorial disputes, and disputed territories in contemporary Latin America, to briefly summarize the antecedents of the 19th and 20th centuries, to provide a historical background, and to describe the attempts and efforts of the respective states to resolve the disputes. In the cases examined, the results demonstrate that Latin American states in the 21st century are much more inclined to favor peaceful settlement proposals than the war-like conflict resolution practices of two centuries ago. There are two main reasons for this. First, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) now provides a real alternative to war, and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and its conflict management activities are now globally recognized as impartial and legitimate arbitrators and peacebuilders (Kacziba, 2017). Another reason is that the use of war as a tool is considered stigmatizing and degrading among Latin American states, and therefore to be avoided. In addition, many international treaties explicitly prohibit the use of military force, and countries that have accepted this as a binding criterion for themselves may face serious international sanctions if this is violated (Paterson & Flynn, 2013).

Overall, while tensions are rising in Latin America relevant to disagreements over disputed borders and territories, the international treaties and existing peace agreements, as well as mutual respect for international law and diplomacy, have meant that the countries concerned have not automatically resorted to the use of force and war to resolve their disputes in recent decades.

China's challenge to US geopolitical interests in Latin America

In recent years, Latin America has emerged as a critical arena for geopolitical competition between China and the United States (US). Traditionally within the US sphere of influence, the region has witnessed a growing Chinese presence, driven by its strategic ambitions and economic interests. This shift in dynamics has significant implications for Latin America's geopolitical landscape. China's involvement in the region is multifaceted, encompassing economic, political, and military dimensions. Economically, it has become a major trading partner for many Latin American countries, providing much-needed investment, particularly in infrastructure and energy.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has further solidified China's presence in the region (Jenkins, 2021). Latin American countries, in turn, provide China with essential commodities such as oil, copper, and soybeans, underscoring the complementary nature of their economic relationship. Politically, China's influence in Latin America has grown through diplomatic engagements and multilateral organizations. Many Latin American countries have welcomed China's non-interventionist approach, which contrasts sharply with the often prescriptive policies of the US. China also strategically used "vaccine diplomacy" during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance its soft power in the region. These efforts have helped China build stronger ties with Latin American governments and gradually erode US influence.

The military dimension, although less pronounced, is also noteworthy. China has increased its arms sales to the region and engaged in joint military exercises with Latin American countries. While these activities are limited compared to China's economic engagements, they signal Beijing's growing interest in becoming a global military player and challenging long-standing US dominance in the Western Hemisphere. Recognizing China's growing influence, the US has sought to reassert its presence in Latin America. However, Washington faces significant challenges in countering China's rise. Latin American countries, burdened by debt and seeking economic diversification, often see Chinese investment as crucial to their development. Moreover, the US's own internal political struggles and inconsistent foreign policy have made it difficult to present a coherent strategy for Latin America. In sum, the geopolitical tug-of-war between China and the US in Latin America is likely to intensify in the coming years. While the US still wields considerable influence in the region, China's strategic investments and diplomatic initiatives are gradually reshaping the geopolitical landscape. The outcome of this competition will have far-reaching implications, not only for Latin America but also for the broader global order (Carafano, 2024).

Due to economic unpredictability, high levels of inequality and inefficient administration, Latin American countries remain trapped in a low-growth scenario. As a result, most governments in the region rely on foreign direct investment (FDI) to stimulate economic growth. Over the past year, however, FDI fell 9.9% to \$184.3 billion. Despite a 15% increase in mergers and acquisitions, its total value fell by 13%. FDI is concentrated in a small number of countries. Brazil received 35% of the region's FDI last year, and Mexico came in second with 16%. Argentina, boosted by the new government of President Javier Milei, came third with 13%, followed by Chile with 12% and Colombia with 9%. With the European Union leading mergers and acquisitions, the US remains the region's largest investor. From 2022 to 2023, the EU saw the highest increase in FDI, followed by Canada. Although still active, China's share of investment has declined from a decade ago (GF, 2024).

The Impact of Chinese Influence on Latin American Border Disputes

China's growing influence in Latin America has increasingly become a topic of global strategic importance, especially as it intersects with the region's longstanding border disputes. Traditionally, Latin American border conflicts have been shaped by historical grievances, resource claims, and geopolitical ambitions. However, the rising presence of China introduces new dynamics that could significantly alter the resolution or perpetuation of these disputes.

China's involvement in Latin America is primarily economic, characterized by substantial investments in infrastructure, energy, and raw materials. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded Beijing's economic footprint across the region, fostering deeper ties with Latin American governments. This economic leverage provides China with considerable soft power, which could influence the way border disputes are managed or resolved. Countries engaged in territorial conflicts may prioritize maintaining favorable relations with China, especially when Chinese investments are critical to their economic development (Berg, 2024). This prioritization could either encourage peaceful negotiations or, conversely, embolden nations to assert their claims more vigorously, banking on China's diplomatic and economic backing. Moreover, China's principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, often cited as a key element of its foreign policy, is a double-edged sword in the context of border disputes. On one hand, this stance allows China to maintain neutrality, avoiding direct involvement in the region's territorial conflicts, which could be seen as a stabilizing influence. On the other hand, China's substantial economic influence could indirectly sway the outcomes of these disputes. For instance, nations receiving significant Chinese investment may feel pressured to align their policies with Beijing's broader strategic interests, potentially compromising their positions in border negotiations.

Additionally, China's growing military presence in Latin America, although less overt than its economic influence, adds another layer of complexity. Through arms sales and military cooperation, China has established security ties with several Latin American countries. While these ties are not directly aimed at influencing border disputes, they do enhance China's strategic presence in the region, which could indirectly affect the power dynamics of such disputes. For example, a country engaged in a territorial conflict might leverage its military relationship with China to bolster its defense capabilities, thereby altering the balance of power in its favor. Furthermore, China's role in multilateral forums within Latin America could also impact border disputes. As China becomes more involved in regional organizations such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) (Altmann-Borbón & Rivero, 2022) or the Organization of American States (OAS), it could exert influence over the diplomatic processes that govern the resolution of border conflicts. China's position as a major economic partner gives it a potential platform

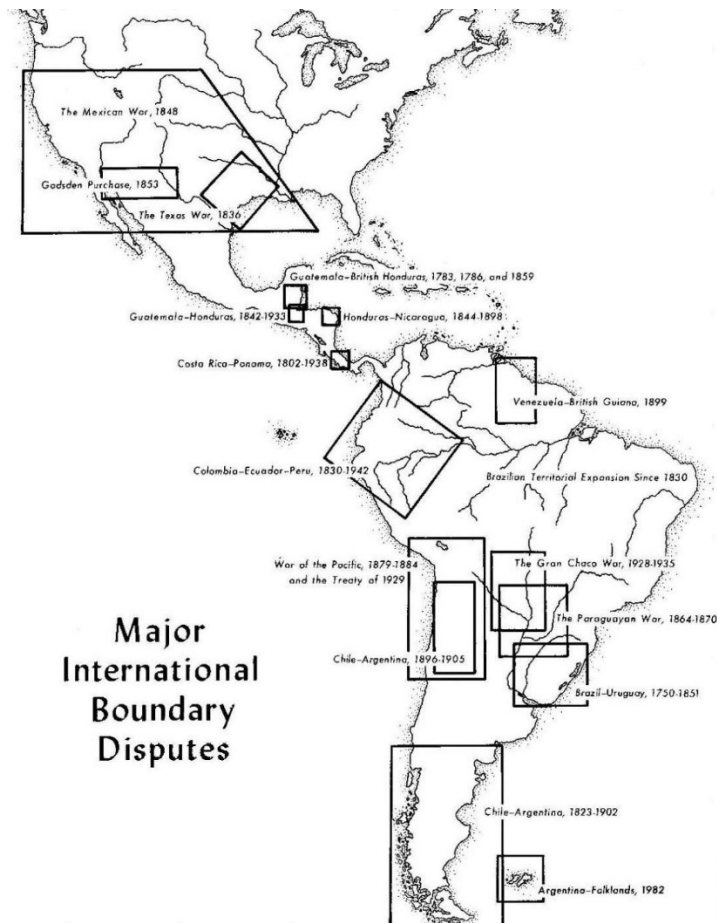
to shape the discourse around these disputes, promoting resolutions that align with its interests, such as regional stability that favors continued economic engagement.

In conclusion, the growing influence of China in Latin America is likely to have significant, albeit complex, impacts on the region's border disputes. While China's economic, military, and diplomatic engagement provides it with tools to shape outcomes, its policy of non-interference and focus on economic ties could result in indirect rather than direct involvement. The extent to which China will actively shape these disputes depends on how its broader strategic interests align with the specific circumstances of each conflict. As Latin America continues to grapple with these territorial issues, China's role will be a critical factor in determining the trajectory and resolution of these disputes (Ibid).

Brief overview of the specific historical and geographical context of Latin America

The history of the continent has specific characteristics. The role of geography and its impact on regional geostrategic decisions can be traced back to the early and mid-19th century, when several Latin American states became independent relatively early and have maintained their independence to the present day. Their liberation was facilitated by the enormous distance from the European continent, as the Spanish and Portuguese colonies became unsustainable due to the challenges emerging in the Iberian Peninsula. The resulting power vacuum could not be filled by other European powers, again due to their great distance. And it is the same distance that today prevents the countries of this region from being a viable counterweight to their northern neighbor, the US (Soltész, 2011). Other factors that contribute to South America's developmental shortcomings are its small population (600 million people), its uneven distribution, and its lack of modern infrastructure. The population is mostly concentrated near the coasts ('the inhabited fringe') because this is where they mostly found their livelihoods, and typically these sea and ocean areas were the only habitable regions (Marshall, 2018). However, it is also distance that protected the countries of the region from major global wars in the 19th and 20th centuries, as neither the First nor the Second World War devastated these states. They were left to their own conflicts, since almost immediately after the declarations of independence, either territorial battles or internal civil wars determined the political culture of the newly created states (Kákai, 2004).

Map 1: Territorial disputes of Latin America



Source: Los diccionarios y las enciclopedias sobre el Académico, https://es-academic.com/pictures/eswiki/76/Latin_America_Major_International_Boundary_Disputes.jpg, last accessed 28.01.2025

The Mexican-American War, fought between 1846 and 1848, not only determined the borders between the two countries, but also created a cultural divide between the US and Latin America. Perhaps the bloodiest war on the South American continent took place from 1864 to 1870, known as the War of the Triple Alliance. The combined forces of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay defeated Paraguay, with Argentina and Brazil in particular annexing large territories from the defeated party. Although the country was not divided among the victors, it effectively ceased to be a functioning state, and nearly 60% of its population (400 000 people) died in vain (Paterson & Flynn, 2013). The so-called War of the Pacific (see below) was fought from 1879 to 1884 and ended with Chile's victory over Peru and Bolivia, cutting off Bolivia's access to the sea. Among other things, this victory helped

Chile to develop significantly and become one of the model economies of Latin America (Pólyi & Thomázy, 2019). By the end of the 19th century, state borders were largely established, and the upcoming 20th century was not free of armed conflicts and struggles. In the first half of the century, from 1932 to 1935, the Chacó War was fought between Paraguay and Bolivia following the discovery of oil in an area that both countries claimed as their own. Peru and Ecuador fought three times to adjust their border along the Andean ridge, in 1941, 1981, and most recently in 1995. El Salvador and Honduras fought a so-called 'Football War' in 1969 due to political disagreements between the two countries and migration. Argentina, in a desperate attempt by its last dictatorship to save itself, invaded the British-ruled Falkland Islands in 1982, and the conflict ended in the country's swift defeat and the fall of the junta.

Additionally, in the second half of the twentieth century, Central and South America became a secondary theater in the Cold War. Despite the global divide, the underlying problems of territorial claims have not changed or been resolved during this period. Relations between Chile and Bolivia remained particularly tense, and the border between Belize and Guatemala was disputed. Argentina and Chile were in dispute over the sovereignty of the Beagle Channel, Venezuela claimed significant territory in Guyana, and Ecuador had territorial demands against Peru (Marshall, 2018). Currently, the territorial disputes that still exist have either been suspended or are being resolved through diplomacy and international law, but with few real and tangible results (Deák, 2021).

Territorial disputes of Chile and Bolivia

The states of Latin America gained their independence from the former Spanish colonial dependencies during the 19th century. Chile has been de facto independent since 1810, although it was not formally proclaimed a state until February 12, 1818. Bolivia (then known as Upper Peru or Alto Perú) gained independence in 1825 with a much larger territory than it has today. Most of its territorial losses, amounting to almost 1 000 000 km², of which 1 200 000 km² went to Chile, were related to the so-called War of the Pacific. The main problem for Bolivia was, and still is, not the extent of its territorial losses, but the loss of its access to the sea. Currently, there are only two states in South America without access to the sea: Bolivia and Paraguay. This fact has been a major economic and commercial handicap throughout the 20th century and has increased the isolation of foreign trade in the 21st century.

The source of the problem dates back to the 19th century, shortly after the two countries gained independence. There was another player in this conflict, Peru, which also suffered significant territorial losses in a dispute that escalated into war.

The so-called War of the Pacific¹ broke out in 1879 and led to a major transformation of the map of South America.

The immediate cause of the war was Bolivia's unauthorized imposition of new taxes on the Chilean company *Compañía de Salitres y Ferrocarril de Antofagasta* (CSFA), then operating in the Bolivian territory of Antofagasta, in 1878, in violation of the 1874 treaty², in which the two parties agreed that no new tax could be imposed for 25 years on any Chilean individual or company operating in Bolivia. The dispute escalated into military action, when Chilean troops occupied the port of Antofagasta on 14 February 1879 in response to the Bolivian action which the Chilean government considered a breach of the treaty.

The war ended in 1884. Hostilities with Peru ceased in 1883 (Treaty of Ancón), and relations between the two countries were settled in 1929 with the Treaty of Lima, mediated by the USA. Chile retained the occupied province of Arica. In 1884, Bolivia accepted the loss of its entire coastline to Chile by signing the Treaty of Valparaíso. The Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1904 ceded the entire Antofagasta region to Chile (F. Sater, 1996). As a result of the wars, Bolivia became a landlocked country, while Chile gained control of new saltpeter fields and strengthened its position vis-à-vis neighboring countries (Deák, 2007; Jancsó, 2008).

After 1904, the Bolivian aspirations to regain the lost sea access became - and still are - one of the defining features of the relations between Chile and Bolivia. This effort is known in studies as the Atacama border dispute (*Litigio de la Puna de Atacama*). The issue was raised several times during the 20th century, but it was not until 1975 that the first milestone of negotiations was reached. Then leader of Chile, Augusto Pinochet and his government proposed a solution to settle the Bolivian claims (Harsányi, 2011). According to the plan, the Lluta River would have been the new border in the north, marking a narrow corridor parallel to the Peru-Chile border from Bolivia to the sea, resolving the centuries-old conflict in the border dispute between the two countries. But the project would have been implemented on territory formerly belonging to Peru, and under the terms of the Treaty of Ancón, Chile could not unilaterally transfer to a third party any region it had acquired from Peru without Peru's consent. The ruling Peruvian dictator Francisco Morales-Bermúdez rejected the plan and proposed instead the designation of a common region (Arica) controlled by the three countries as a solution. Chile, however, did not accept this proposal, arguing that such shared sovereignty would be complicated and uncontrollable in practice.

¹ War of the Pacific or Saltpeter War (*Guerra del Salitre*), 1879-1884. Not to be confused with the war between the USA and Japan in the Pacific theatre of operations in World War II, also professionally known as the War of the Pacific (Pacific War).

² Boundary Treaty (Treaty of Sucre), 1874. Boundary Treaty, Treaty of Sucre, trade and border treaty between Chile and Bolivia. It extended the treaty of the two countries concluded in 1866.

In 2004, on the 100th anniversary of the 1904 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, the Bolivian claim was again put in the spotlight. Building on the huge volumes of natural gas discovered in Bolivia at that time, Bolivian president Carlos Mesa, in the context of his 'gas for the sea' movement, opened dialogue with his Chilean counterpart Ricardo Lagos in public at the Organization of American States (OAS). In the spirit of reconciliation, Lagos suggested that the first step should be the resumption of diplomatic relations to ensure the smooth continuation of the dialogue. This proposal was firmly rejected by Mesa in the presence of representatives of the states of America, and he was probably not seeking a solution to the problem but wanted to win the sympathy of the international community for his country and to gain some domestic political support (in order to remedy his declining popularity). At that time, Bolivia was already engaged in internal political battles, such as the so-called gas war - which will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

After Evo Morales came to power in 2006, the new president gradually took what had been a bilateral issue to the international community on the continent (and then the world) in the hope of gaining some support. It is also important to highlight the aspect that raw materials are in great demand in global trade in the 21st century. Bolivia is a country rich in mineral resources (ores and natural gas) which are currently only available on the world market to a limited extent, despite the huge demand for them (Navarro, 2004).

In 2012, negotiations between Chile and Bolivia to resolve the border dispute broke down and Morales decided to take the issue to the ICJ. He did this despite the fact that the Organization of American States had already adopted a resolution on the issue in 2012, stating that the border dispute was a conflict that could not be resolved by the international community and should be resolved through bilateral negotiations between the two countries. On 24 April 2013 the proceedings were launched, which surprisingly did not affect the issue of the border modification claim, but Bolivia filed a claim regarding the enforcement of previous promises made by Chile in the 1950s and 1970s - which were never fulfilled (Veltzé, 2014).

The court proceedings were concluded at the end of 2015, and a final and binding resolution was delivered in October 2018. According to this, Chile cannot be obliged to grant Bolivia a license to use the sea exit. The court has also delegated the case back to the two countries to reach a joint solution (Reuters, 2019). A settlement is still pending. At the same time, bilateral relations are still very much affected by the unresolved, still open, and highly politicized issue, which divides both Chilean and Bolivian society (Szente-Varga, 2016).

The Silala/Siloli water dispute

Water is a high priority issue in Bolivia, especially since the so-called water war. The explosive growth of large cities has not been matched by infrastructure development,

prompting the Bolivian government to involve international companies in its development. This process was accompanied by a significant increase in the price of drinking water, which the population could not afford. The escalation of tensions led directly to the Cochabamba Water War in 2000 (Mulligan & Eckstein, 2011).

Understandably, Bolivia is sensitive to perceived or real threats to its watershed. This is true even though the conflict, known as the Silala or Siloli water dispute (discussed below), has strong anti-Chilean political overtones that Bolivia seeks to use to gain domestic political capital, strengthen its power vis-à-vis Chile, and maintain international attention. The issue of clean water is well suited to this purpose, as many believe that one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century will be to ensure access to drinking water for the world's population (Glied, 2009; Glied & Kacziba, 2021). The Silala conflict – linked to one of the most vulnerable water sources in the region (Wolf, 2007) – has also highlighted irregularities in water and river basin rights that have not been addressed, or not in this form, but their significance goes beyond the problems of the two countries.

The origins of the dispute date back to the early 1900s (1908), when a Chilean-resident company (Antofagasta & Bolivia Railway Company, Ferrocarril de Antofagasta a Bolivia, FCAB) built a canal for its mining investments, with the aim of diverting the waters of the Silala, which originates in Bolivia, to the Chilean side of the border. In 1997, Bolivia withdrew the concession rights, claiming that the water was not being used for the purposes specified in the original agreement. Instead, it signed a new 40-year contract with the Bolivian company DUCTEC SRL worth 46.8 million USD, in return for which it agreed to establish an industrial park in the area and to market Silala water as bottled drinking water under the slogan “Drink Silala water for sovereignty” (International Water Law Blog, 2013). According to the Bolivian position, the Silala River does not exist, it is artificially formed and thus the water belongs to Bolivia, and that they are only willing to negotiate any further if it is linked to the recovery of Bolivia's lost sea access. They claim that the water belongs to Bolivia (Agencia Efe, 2019) and that the Silala is therefore not subject to international river and water law.

Chileans, on the other hand, believe that the Silala River exists and that regardless of the fact that part of the riverbed is artificial, it would flow towards Chile anyway. According to their position, the river flows across the Chilean border, and it is subject to international river and water law, and they accuse Bolivia of violating the relevant international conventions by altering the flow of the water and “blocking” it (Ibid).

This situation is interesting for several reasons. On the one hand, the decision depends heavily on whether the Silala River is considered an artificial river or a natural, inherently existing river. On the other hand, this issue has highlighted the fact that international law is not always properly applied, for example, the rights to the riverbed and water flow of artificially created watercourses are unclear. Geological

and historical studies are underway to determine what the Silala is. However, evidence and surviving historical documents already suggest that the Silala flowed across the Chilean-Bolivian border before the artificial channel was built, more or less along the course of the later artificial channel. The situation is further complicated by the fact that in 2017, in addition to water rights issues, new elements such as the human right to clean water have emerged in this already highly politicized issue. In 2010, the UN recognized the right to clean drinking water and adequate sanitation as a human right, following a proposal submitted by Bolivia (Greco, 2017).

In addition to the viewpoints of international law, water and river law, human rights, the border dispute between two neighboring countries, and the quest to regain a lost sea exit, the dispute also highlights other very significant issues. The water body is described in the literature as a river, but in reality, it is merely a stream with a flow that is a fraction of the Amazon (estimated at 0.000001%). In many countries around the world, rivers, streams and river basins that are many orders of magnitude larger than this are the subject of repeated legal disputes – e.g. the Amazon, the Nile, the Euphrates or the Danube – and it is easy to see why the Silala dispute and its outcome are of such importance. If such a small watercourse can cause such a major international conflict, then the issue of the rights of much larger surface waters and the precise settlement of the relevant legal relationship could be one of the most important international legal tasks of the 21st century.

Argentina

With regard to the Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas), the issue of Argentina's territorial dispute and disputed territories stands out in several respects from the traditional understanding of interstate conflicts in Latin America. Not only because it involved a country outside the region, or even the Southern Hemisphere, but also because it involved an actual war of conquest that ended in Argentine defeat and the retention of British control over the Falklands.

The origins date back to the 16th century. The British discovered the island in 1592 and first landed in 1690. After a brief French interlude, the Spanish took possession of East Falkland in 1767, while the British (1774) abandoned their West Falkland settlements. The Spanish didn't stay much longer, giving up the area in 1811. Argentina laid claim to the islands and the surrounding waters in 1820 and built a fort there, to which the British responded by returning again in 1833, destroying the Argentinian fort, occupying the islands and electing a governor. Argentinian territorial claims were legally ended by the Arana-Southern Treaty of 1850. Argentina never really gave up its claim to repossession, but it did surprise the international community when, after almost 150 years, it invaded the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982 without any particular warning signs. Although the strategic

and situational advantages were essentially better exploited by Argentina because of its relative geographical proximity, the action can be seen as a last-ditch attempt by a dictatorship in crisis rather than a well-considered military action. It was a desperate attempt by the military junta led by Leopoldo Galtieri to retain power and popularity, which failed as much as the military action.

The Argentinian invasion was followed by a short, but violent and bloody war. The British expeditionary forces sailed more than 8000 nautical miles in a war the world almost had not seen since almost the Second World War. A British nuclear-powered submarine sank an Argentine cruiser (ARA General Belgrano) killing over 300 of its crew, then in response the Argentinian air force sank 7 British ships using Exocet missiles. The air, sea and land actions killed 650 Argentinian soldiers (750 according to other sources) and 250 British soldiers, and the war ended with the defeat of Argentina, the fall of Galtieri and new free elections. The territory remained in British hands. The details of the armistice agreement are set out in a UN regulation of 26 May 1982 (UN, 1982, res. no. 55). Relations between the two states have been slow to normalize and diplomatic relations were not resumed until 1989.

Despite the resumption of diplomatic relations, in 2010, the conflict flared up again. The UK granted permission to explore for oil and gas in the Falkland Islands and the surrounding waters, to which Argentina protested and accused London of 'militarizing' the South Atlantic region through its military exercises in the area. In 2011, the members of Mercosur (Mercado Común del Sur, Southern Common Market; Domonkos, 2010) decided to remove British-owned ships sailing under the Falkland Islands flag. After the sanctions came into force, neither Brazil nor Peru allowed British ships to dock in their ports. For example, the ship HMS Clyde had to turn in front of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) because it was not allowed to dock in its port. The following year, in 2012, Bolivian president Evo Morales made a veiled threat, supported by other members of ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para los pueblos de Nuestra América). According to the president's statement: "if the British were to attack Argentina, Argentina will not be alone" (Lilón, 2015). Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa called for the imposition of sanctions against Britain, while at the 10th meeting of ministers of defense of the Americas, held in Punta del Este, Uruguay, in October 2012, representatives of almost all the countries present recognized the legitimacy of Argentina's territorial claim. Many states in the region have remained in solidarity with the South American country, and the above examples and statements show that the problem of the Falkland Islands and Argentina's territorial claim has not remained a domestic issue for just two countries but has now been given tacit support in almost all of South America over British interests. Nevertheless, it is presently unlikely that Argentina will seek to reassert its control over the islands by armed force, but it has never renounced its claim to recognize the territory as its own. It has largely exhausted its options under international law, as the UN has already

ruled in favor of Britain three times – in 1947, 1948 and 1955 – and in 1964 it finally returned the possibility of a decision to the two countries.

In addition to the Falklands, Argentina has other territorial disputes, as well as territories that it officially claims. With Chile, not only the infamous Beagle conflict should be mentioned, although this was undoubtedly the most significant event that almost brought the two states to war. The conflict was over the ownership of some islands (Picton, Lennox, Nueva) and the sea around them. In 1904, Argentina tried to settle the status of the territory with Chile (on the basis of the 1881 territorial treaty that established the boundaries), but this did not succeed. In 1977, the case was brought before the ICJ, where the judges ruled in favor of Chile. Argentina did not accept the decision and in 1978 began military operations in the region (Operación Soberanía). However, a year later, on January 9, 1979, in Montevideo, the parties accepted the possibility of a peaceful solution and the mediation of the Vatican, but Argentina had to halt military operations. Meanwhile, in 1982, Argentina and the United Kingdom fought a war over the Falkland Islands, which resulted in the defeat of the former and an internal political reorganization. On November 29, 1984, with the participation of the new government, the two countries signed a treaty of peace and friendship, and the status of the disputed territories was settled. However, even today there are voices questioning this decision and raising the issue of territorial revision again (Szalánczi, 2016a).

However, the territorial disputes and overlapping territorial claims of the two countries are not over yet, and Antarctica is another area where Chile and Argentina have both made territorial claims. Many countries have claimed territories in the region since the 19th century, but Chile, for example, traces its claims back to the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). In January 1942, Argentina formally announced its territorial claims relevant to Antarctica, but these overlapped with Chile's claims. The two countries signed a bilateral agreement in March 1948, mutually recognizing each other's territorial claims, and Chile signed the Antarctic Treaty on 1 December 1959, which is considered the international treaty of the region. The two countries have settled the issue peacefully, and in 2003 the two parties jointly started the construction and operation of a research station (Abrazo de Maipú). Since the area is extremely rich in mineral resources and clean drinking water, according to research and expectations, it could be an old-new buffer zone for scrambles for resources in the 21st century (Szalánczi, 2016b).

In 1990, a settlement process was launched to resolve disputed territories between the two countries, and to date, the parties have been able to agree on 24 instances. Chile's Patricio Aylwin and Argentina's Carlos Menem were involved in the initial negotiations. In 2021, Argentina again surprised the world with an unexpected twist: in September, a map was published that almost doubled the country's land area. This was preceded by a law signed by President Alberto Fernández in August that officially added 1.7 million square kilometers to Argentina's territory,

including some of the world's richest fishing grounds, oil and gas fields, and the Falkland Islands (Cecchi, 2020). The decision is based on Argentina's interpretation of a 2016 UN regulation. It is therefore noticeable that Argentina is currently looking for ways to find a peaceful solution, but its repeated territorial claims, based on its national interests, pose new challenges to neighboring countries and the international community.

Brazil and Uruguay (El Rincón de Artigas, Ilha Brasileira, Masoller, Mirim Lagoa)

The two neighboring countries signed a peace treaty in 1851 to settle their borders. Several disputed territorial issues strain their relationship, but a unique feature is that bilateral diplomatic and economic relations are almost entirely unaffected by these conflicts. This is due to the fact that the affected area is small and sparsely populated, especially by Latin American standards. The area was probably disputed because the commissioner who surveyed the boundaries of the peace treaty of 1851, Colonel Reyes, measured the boundaries incorrectly in 1856. On August 10, 1934, Uruguay formally asked Brazil to review the issue, which involved 22,000 hectares of land, but since 1974, in the absence of a solution, the official Uruguayan national map has shown the areas of Rincón de Artigas, Ilha Brasileira and Masoller as disputed territories. Here, in 1985, the municipality of Vila Tomás Alborno was created as a Brazilian initiative, based on the principle of "uti possidetis" (Zanini, 2019).

The inhabitants were subjected the sovereignty of both Brazil and Uruguay, although the borders are freely permeable in both directions, and Brazilian efforts to control the territory are mostly marked by the military's actions of deforestation (Brunet-Jailly, 2015). The approaches of the two governments can be described as essentially conflict-averse in pursuing the interests of the people living here and their states. Although the settlement was created by Brazil, it has not provided adequate support. The roads from the Brazilian side are in such poor condition that, for example, the gas station here can only be supplied once a week by a fuel truck from the Uruguayan side, which has to travel almost 100 km through Uruguayan territory to get there. Since fuel - like other goods - is not cleared through customs at the border, it would officially be considered contraband if the Uruguayan authorities were serious about enforcing the laws. In addition, fuel prices differ significantly on both sides of the border, creating an interesting price competition for residents (El País, 2015).

Costa Rica and Nicaragua (Isla Calero, Isla Portillos)

The territorial dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua is not new. The borders were established by the Treaty of Cañas-Jerez, signed in 1858, along the San Juan

River, which gave Nicaragua the right to control the river, but also granted Costa Rica the right to commercial navigation. The 1858 treaty was confirmed by two other international agreements (Cleveland and Alexander Decisions, 1897).

In 1998, Nicaragua arrested a Costa Rican policeman and prevented him from crossing the river, claiming that he had violated Nicaragua's sovereignty and imposed a fine on anyone attempting to enter the country for non-civilian and commercial purposes. On July 13, 2009, the ICJ issued a resolution on the case, reaffirming the 1858 ruling and reiterating that Nicaragua exercises control and that Costa Rica has no right to send police officers to the area, but is free to use the river for commercial purposes.

Tensions flared again in 2010 when Nicaraguan troops began operations in the area on October 8th under the leadership of Minister Edén Pastora, a Sandinista politician notorious for his role as a guerrilla and military leader. Nicaragua claimed that the three-kilometer-long canal at the end of Isla Calero was not part of international waters but under its own jurisdiction, and troops unilaterally began clearing the coast of forest and deepening the canal. Costa Rica immediately protested, accusing Nicaragua of invading Costa Rican territory (Isla Portillos) and causing enormous natural damage by controlling the canal. Nicaragua retaliated by claiming that it had to take control of the territory to combat drug trafficking and denied the occupation, saying that it was not possible to occupy what was an inalienable part of its own state. On December 16, 2015, the ICJ ruled on the case, placing Isla Portillos under the jurisdiction of Costa Rica, upholding previous decisions and issuing additional rulings in 2017 and 2018, for example on the amount of compensation to be paid to Nicaragua for damage to nature (ICJ, 2015).

Guyana and Venezuela (Essequibo/Esequiba)

As shown above, territorial conflicts are usually longstanding disputes that are intensifying or fading away today. The case of Guyana and Venezuela is no exception, as the disputed territory has been the subject of contention practically since the earliest demarcation of the state boundaries, and is located roughly between the Orinoco and Essequibo rivers. The area has become particularly valuable today because the region is extremely rich in natural resources – especially oil and natural gas – and whoever eventually extracts them stands to gain a considerable economic advantage. Venezuela's position, and the alleged legal basis for its claim, derives from the fact that it declared independence in 1810 as the successor to the Spanish Empire, and since the territory had been a Spanish colony and viceroyalty since the 16th century, it has the right to claim it. Guyana, on the other hand, has been an independent state (successor to British Guiana) since 1966, but it claims the territory by virtue of an agreement between the Dutch and the British in 1814. The Dutch established trading settlements here in 1616 and the Spanish formally recognized the Dutch rights

to Guyana in 1648, so this can and is also invoked by the country. The Dutch East India Company was the entity that ruled and controlled this territory – including the coastline and the Essequibo River – from the 1650s until 1814, after which it was under British control from 1814 to 1966, and thus, as mentioned above, passed to the state of Guyana upon the declaration of independence (Bethell, 2024).

In the 1840s and 1850s, the British made further efforts to clarify the boundaries (with the help of German surveyor Robert Schomburgk), but the matter did not get closer to a solution. In the second half of the century, British settlers continued to arrive in the area between the two rivers, which Venezuela saw as an act of aggression, and broke off diplomatic relations with British Guiana, asking for US help in 1897. A council (led by the Russian jurist Fyodor de Martens) was finally set up to draw up the borders, at the suggestion of the US, and took place in Paris in 1899. The decision gave 90% of the disputed territories to Britain, and the decision was confirmed by the repeated boundary-setting process in 1905. However, the dispute continued into the 20th century and intensified again after 1966.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Venezuela has been working to strengthen its regional power positions (Vogel, 2011), including the territorial revisionist efforts. In 2015, Nicolás Maduro, the president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, made a highly publicized announcement in the Venezuelan National Assembly that the huge oil fields found off the coast of Guyana belonged to Venezuela (Padgett, 2021). The announcement was confirmed by Presidential Decree nr. 1859/2015, followed by immediate protest by Guyana (Bethell, 2024).

On 30 January 2018, the UN Secretary General notified the parties that the dispute would be accepted and hosted by the ICJ (ICJ-CIJ, 2018). This could put an end to a dispute between the two countries that dates back more than 100 years. Guyana and the Caribbean states welcomed the decision, but Venezuela was not amazed by the fact that an international arbitration tribunal would hear the disputed territory. Indeed, the parties have been having law interpretation disputes from the outset, as Venezuela, citing Section 33 of the 1966 Geneva Agreement with the United Kingdom, refused to accept the jurisdiction of the ICJ over the issue (Padgett, 2021).

The crux of the dispute is that the parties disagree on the alleged nullity and invalidity of an arbitration award made in 1899, the so-called Paris award, which stated that the Essequibo region lies on the British Guiana side of the Venezuelan border. On 29 March 2018, Guyana filed a claim against Venezuela to the ICJ, but Venezuela continues to reject its jurisdiction. The case currently appears to be stalled here, with no resolution expected in the near future (Ibid).

Guatemala and Belize (Cayo, Belize, Stann Creek and Toledo areas)

In many cases, the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) was regarded as the legal basis for the possession of states that had been created by the Spanish and in the territories of Spanish viceroyalties. Like other great powers, the British (who appeared in the region later, in the early 16th century) considered this treaty null and void when acquiring their territories in North and South America. The first British settlers appeared in the region in 1638, and their presence is considered continuous until 1779. In 1670 (the Godolphin Treaty), the Spanish recognized the rights of the British in all the territories they held at the time of concluding the treaty, including Belize, but did not accurately specify which territories were covered. The situation was complicated by the fact that in 1738 the colonists began to organize their own administration, which was not recognized by either the Spanish or the British. Under the terms of the treaty concluded in 1783 (Treaty of Versailles), Britain finally abandoned its forts constructed in the area and recognized the sovereignty of the Spanish Crown over the territory, with the stipulation that the rights of the settlers (Baymen) would remain guaranteed. However, the local people, who mainly worked in agriculture and logging, did not accept the content of the treaties. The Spanish attempted to reclaim the area several times, most recently during the Battle of Saint George's Caye in 1798, but the settlers prevailed, and the Spanish were defeated.

They have not made further efforts to take the area, and the locals lived under their own administration, in their own governorate, until 1862, when they formally joined the British Empire under the name British Honduras. It is mentioned several times in contemporary documents as British territory, and when the Spanish lost control of Mexico and Central America in 1821, the British extended their rule to the whole region, and the whole area between the Hondo River and the Sarstoon River was considered a British territory. However, the subjects of the disputes over the territory changed to some extent. The countries in the region that gained independence after the 1820s interpreted the territories of the former Spanish viceroyalties as belonging to them, and Mexico and Guatemala both claimed Belize. The British, however, never accepted this doctrine, and in the 1893 British-Mexican treaty, Mexico renounced this territorial claim and was the first of the neighboring states to recognize the independence of Belize. In 1859, Guatemala formally recognized British Honduras as a British Crown Colony (Wyke-Aycinena Treaty), but in 1940 it unilaterally annulled this treaty, claiming that the British had not fulfilled their obligations under the 1859 treaty and could not claim rights over British Honduras. This official position made Belize Guatemala's longest-standing territorial claim (since 1859) (Montenegro, 2021).

On 8 February 1948, Guatemala announced the possibility of invading Belize with its armed forces. In response, the British repeatedly reinforced their military presence in the region, sending there an aircraft carrier and 8000 troops in 1972 to

prevent a possible invasion. The crisis finally came to an end in 1975, mainly because a large number of Guatemalan troops deserted, forcing the state to withdraw (Ibid).

That year, Cuba was the first to declare its support for Belize's independence, then also confirmed by Nicaragua and Mexico. In 1980, a UN resolution also supported the aspiration and called on the British to continue to guarantee the territorial integrity of the country (UN, 1980). On 21 September 1981 Belize declared independence, which was then recognized by the states in the region. However, Guatemala failed to do so, and isolated itself with its territorial claims, until it finally recognized Belize as an independent state in 1991 (Lauterpacht et al., 2001).

In 1994, the state established its own armed forces, and the British armies left Belize. On 18 October 1999, the Guatemalan foreign minister sent a letter to the prime minister of Belize, informing him of the continuing territorial claims. According to this letter, Guatemala claimed 12 272 km², almost 53% of Belize's territory, mainly in the areas of Cayo, Belize, Stann Creek and Toledo. On 14 February 2000, an armed clash took place in the Toledo area, resulting in fatalities.

Presently, the case is being reviewed by the ICJ, after both states decided in referendums (2018 and 2019) to ask the organization to settle the issue. However, the expected outcome is that the court will rule in favor of Belize, as Guatemala has never possessed or occupied the territory of the country. The case was formally brought before the ICJ on 7 June 2019, after both countries announced their desire for an international law settlement. It is a question for the future whether the decision will be accepted by the parties, but the possibility of a peaceful and long-term settlement of the almost 170-year-old territorial dispute has been in sight (ICJ, 2020).

Conclusion

It is evident that Latin America is currently burdened by a number of territorial conflicts that pose a real threat, with the risk of outbreak of war. While the territorial disputes discussed above are essentially a matter of relations between neighboring countries, it is also important to note that the changing geopolitical processes of the 21st century are having a major impact on the region, and that these external influences may even exacerbate the disputes. In addition to the decline of US influence (Lehoczki, 2007), China and Russia, as well as regional middle powers such as Iran and Turkey, have established a permanent presence in the region, intensifying competition for resources and markets. An important element of this realignment is the relative erosion of British influence, with Barbados announcing on November 30, 2021, that it will reject the formal sovereignty of Elizabeth II, further extending its independence and sovereignty (McGreevy, 2021).

This article examined ongoing territorial disputes in Central and South America, particularly those with historical roots in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and explored how these historical tensions shape interstate relations in the twenty-first

century. These disputes, involving countries such as Chile and Bolivia, Argentina and the United Kingdom, Brazil and Uruguay, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and others, often stem from colonial-era boundaries and resource claims. The paper emphasized that while outright wars over these territories have been rare in recent decades, the disputes still create tensions and sometimes lead to militaristic posturing by political leaders.

The paper highlighted that despite ongoing tensions, Latin American countries are increasingly favoring peaceful methods of resolution, such as international arbitration through organizations such as the ICJ and the UN. This preference for diplomacy over military conflict is partly due to the stigma attached to war in the region and the potential international sanctions that could result from violating treaties that prohibit the use of force.

This contribution discussed China's growing influence in Latin America, particularly its impact on border disputes. Beijing's economic investments, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative, have deepened its ties with Latin American countries, giving it soft power that could influence how these nations approach their territorial disputes. While China's principle of non-interference may seem neutral, its economic and military ties with these countries could indirectly influence the outcomes of border negotiations. For example, countries may be emboldened to assert their territorial claims more aggressively if they believe they have China's backing, or they may seek to avoid conflict to maintain favorable economic relations with Beijing.

The paper concludes by noting that while China's involvement in Latin America is multifaceted, encompassing economic, political, and military dimensions, its impact on border disputes is likely to be indirect rather than direct. The extent to which China will influence these disputes will depend on how its strategic interests align with the specific circumstances of each conflict. Ultimately, China's growing presence in the region adds a new layer of complexity to the already intricate geopolitical landscape of Latin American border disputes. The power vacuums that may emerge as a result of similar processes could further complicate Latin America's already complex territorial disputes, making the study of events in the region of paramount importance.

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