

World Court decision on Peru-Chile border fails to quell nationalist rivalries

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Last week's ruling by the International Court of Justice settling a long-running dispute over maritime boundaries between Chile and Peru has failed to quell nationalist tensions between the two countries. It has also underscored the continued presence of regional fault lines that can become a trigger for broader conflicts.

The ruling by the so-called World Court at The Hague failed to fully satisfy either country, with Peru granted control over 50,000 square kilometers of open ocean, but Chile retaining its hold over 16,000 square kilometers of the disputed waters, including rich fishing grounds closer to shore.

Instead of continuing the maritime frontier due west from the land border between the two countries, the World Court decision draws a dog leg to the southwest 80 miles from shore, granting Peru a triangle of ocean that had previously been claimed by Chile.

Countering the nationalist sentiments whipped up on both sides of the border, in the Chilean capital of Santiago, Chilean and Peruvian construction workers demonstrated with a banner reading, "workers of Chile and Peru, a force that loves peace." There are an estimated 130,000 Peruvian immigrants working in Chile.

Meanwhile, in the border fishing port of Arica, 2,000 miles north of Santiago, fishermen protested the decision at The Hague. The Chilean interior minister, Andrés Chadwick, who was in Arica at the time, had to be rescued by police from the protesters, who were dispersed with tear gas and water cannon. The fishermen claim that the decision will deprive them of fishing grounds for shark, cod and other fish.

In Peru, President Ollanta Humala boasted that his government had been the winner in the court's ruling, declaring that "the country will benefit from the exploitation of one of the richest marine areas in the world. Having been elected in 2011 based on a campaign of left-nationalist demagoguery, Humala has become increasingly unpopular as his government has suppressed workers' struggles and defended the transnational mining companies. Clearly, the

president hopes that by playing the nationalist card he can reverse his political fortunes.

Across the border in Chile, outgoing President Sebastián Piñera said he "profoundly disagrees with the decision...and the economic loss of an area of between 20,000 and 22,000 km² in favor of Peru." His successor, Michelle Bachelet, who takes office next month, described the ruling as a "grievous loss."

While Piñera met with Peru's Humala on the sidelines of the CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) conference in Havana last week and agreed to "gradually" implement the court's decision, new disputes have already broken out over a piece of border land claimed by both countries that was not part of The Hague's ruling.

Piñera went so far as to demand that Peru change its constitution to recognize Chilean sovereignty over the territory. And the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* published an editorial referring to the growth of trade and investment between the two countries and warning that "The Peruvian demand places this promising reality at serious risk."

At the same CELAC conference in Havana, regional heads of state optimistically declared Latin America and the Caribbean "a zone of peace," vowing not to use force to resolve disputes between them. Under conditions of deepening global tensions and capitalist economic crisis, however, national fault lines can become a new arena of confrontation.

Indeed, in 2012, a classified Chilean document was published outlining the plans by the country's military to "settle an armed conflict in a short period" if fighting erupted over the border.

The Peru-Chile border dispute dates back to the Pacific War (1879-1882), which erupted when Chile reacted militarily to threats by the Peruvian and Bolivian governments to nationalize Chilean nitrate mining interests in the two countries. The better-armed Chilean army advanced north, seizing 120,000 square kilometers of land from Bolivia, including all of its coastal territory, and 25 percent of Peru's national territory.

The war, which included the sacking of Lima, left deep-seated resentments in both defeated countries. Bolivia's loss of access to the sea severely restricted its economic growth, leaving it one of the most impoverished countries of the region. Bolivian troops are still put through their drills to the cadence of "Viva Bolivia, Muere Chile" (Long Live Bolivia, Death to Chile), and the country celebrates an annual "Dia del Mar" (Day of the Sea) to commemorate its loss.

Bolivia has already indicated that it will use the World Court decision to press its historic demand for the restoration of its route to the sea. The government of President Evo Morales filed its own case at The Hague late last year. Chile has repeatedly made it clear it has no intention of giving up any of the coastal territory that it seized some 130 years ago. Last March, President Piñera warned that Chile would defend "with all the force of its national unity, history and truth, its territory, its sea, its skies and its sovereignty."

There are six additional border conflicts in Latin America before the World Court. These include the dispute between Guatemala and Belize dating back 130 years and Venezuela's claim on territory held by Guyana, a partition made in 1899 by Britain, the US and Russia without any participation by Venezuela. As in a number of disputes, this one involves rights to considerable mineral wealth.

Also still at issue is the clash between Nicaragua and Colombia. The World Court ruled in 2012 in favor of Nicaraguan sovereignty over a maritime zone covering 70,000 square kilometers in the Caribbean, while allowing Colombia to retain its hold over a group of islands, including the San Andres archipelago, which are far closer to Nicaragua's coast than to Colombia's.

The Colombian government has ignored the World Court ruling, going so far as to withdraw from the 1948 Bogota Pact, a foundational document of the Organization of American States, which commits its members to accepting the court's jurisdiction in territorial disputes. Nicaragua, meanwhile, reports that its fishermen are being harassed by Colombian warships in what are supposedly the Central American nation's waters.

Colombia and Venezuela also dispute control over parts of the Gulf of Maracaibo, which links Venezuela's Lake Maracaibo, a center of oil production, to the Caribbean and the world market. The dispute involves a narrow peninsula and islands as well as territorial waters. It has the potential of spilling over into armed conflict given the Colombian government's close ties to Washington, which has turned it into one of the most heavily armed countries in the hemisphere, and Venezuela's conflicts with US policy in the region.

Every one of Central America's countries has at least one border conflict with one of its neighbors. El Salvador and

Honduras resolved a border dispute through the World Court in 1992, but only after fighting a brief war 23 years earlier that left some 3,000 dead.

In recent history, there are other precedents in the region for wars over border disputes. In 1941, 1981 and 1995, Peru and Ecuador went to war based on conflicts dating back to lines drawn by Spain in the eighteenth century, when Spain divided and redid its South American colonies.

The nationalist tub-thumping by both the Peruvian and Chilean governments over the border issue serves a definite political purpose. There is growing social conflict in Chile, with a working class that is moving toward confrontation with an incoming weak presidency of Bachelet and her Nueva Mayoría (a coalition of the Socialist, Christian Democrat and Communist parties). In Peru, Humala has seen his own popularity plummet, particularly among the working class and poor. Nationalist demagoguery has long been employed to divert such social and political tensions.

There is also the potential for international pressures and conflicts fueling such disputes and turning them into an instrument of global geo-strategic struggles. China has emerged as a powerful challenger to Washington's historic hegemony over the lands to its south, supplanting the US as Brazil's number-one trade partner and growing at a substantial rate in terms of trade and investment throughout the region.

Just as the US has intervened in and inflamed disputes over islands in the East China Sea as a means of confronting China and furthering its efforts to cement a regional alliance, so too such disputes in Latin America can become the focus of international interests, and in particular of US imperialism's efforts to offset its relative economic decline by military means.



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