

# Governments of Colombia and Peru exploit border dispute to promote national chauvinism

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The border conflict in Santa Rosa de Loreto, a remote Amazonian Island straddling the boundary between Colombia and Peru, has recently reignited tensions between the two South American neighbors.

The dispute, marked by mutual accusations and nationalist posturing, reveals the political fragility of the governments in both countries.

The immediate tensions emerged publicly when Colombia's president, the left nationalist Gustavo Petro, reactivated the country's claim over the island of Santa Rosa in a posting on X. This was triggered by Peru's recent administrative move to elevate Santa Rosa de Loreto to district status and bolster its state and military presence there.

Petro called this a unilateral annexation and voiced alarm that these Peruvian actions could restrict strategic Colombian access to the Amazon River through Leticia, the Colombian city near the disputed territory. He specifically accused Peru of allowing a so-called "Russian helicopter" to land in the area.

This amounted to a cynical attempt to rally US imperialism to Colombia's side by invoking the specter of Russian involvement. Peru has utilized first Soviet and now Russian helicopters and other military equipment since they were first supplied to the left-nationalist military regime of Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado in the early 1970s.

Peru has maintained that Santa Rosa de Loreto is part of the larger island of Chinería, which, according to a 1929 treaty, is under its jurisdiction. The far-right Peruvian government of President Dina Boluarte, with backing from Congress, has moved to solidify control and dismiss Colombia's claims as baseless. The situation has been further inflamed on the ground by the mass display of flags and high-level visits to the island by Peruvian

officials.

Petro went personally to Leticia on August 7 after moving official Independence Day celebrations to this remote, southernmost city of Colombia. There, the President reasserted Colombia's claim on Santa Rosa amid aggressive nationalist posturing.

In an interview, however, Petro said he did not have immediate plans to visit Santa Rosa itself, adding: "That would be an act of war, and I still want to avoid a war."

Then, Boluarte traveled to Santa Rosa itself on August 16 with her military command to give a saber-rattling address, promising not to yield "one centimeter" of Peru's territory.

Historically, the demarcation of the Colombia-Peru border is rooted in a legacy of imperial intervention and manipulation that stretches from the Spanish colonial period through to the dominance of British and then U.S. imperialism in the region. After independence, both countries adopted the *uti possidetis juris* principle, relying on the last borders set under Spanish rule in 1810. However, vague and conflicting interpretations of these colonial-era boundaries sparked protracted disputes and several armed clashes during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The most significant step in defining the border came with the Salomón-Lozano Treaty of March 24, 1922, mediated with strong influence from the United States as both a neutral power and growing regional hegemon. The treaty laid down the formal border following the deepest channel of the Amazon River, but sparked discontent in both countries.

This dissatisfaction led to the 1932-33 Colombia-Peru War, or the Leticia War, when Colombia seized back territory deemed Peruvian. The conflict ended with the 1934 Protocol of Rio de Janeiro, reaffirming the 1922 treaty but establishing mechanisms for future dispute

resolution. Brazil, which shares the border in the same area of the river, opposed the protocol. Moreover, constant geomorphological changes in the river that were not explicitly addressed in the treaties, with the Santa Rosa islet being formed by sediment as late as 1970.

Imperialist powers have long advanced a strategy of “divide and conquer” to maintain their dominance over South America. During the 19th-century Pacific War between Chile, Peru, and Bolivia, British imperialism notoriously offered covert and overt support to rival sides to promote division and tighten its control of saltpeter and guano—critical to the production of gunpowder—in the three countries.

Most fundamentally, such border disputes have long been exploited by imperialism and local elites to stir up national chauvinism and stave off internal class tensions by diverting them against a foreign enemy. As infamously declared by Laureano Gómez, a Colombian Senate chair during the Leticia War, “Peace, peace, peace in inner Colombia; war, war, war on the border against our despicable enemy.”

The tensions emerged as Gustavo Petro, Colombia’s first nominally left-wing president, has failed to meet high popular expectations of major reforms. At the same time, his “Total Peace” initiative aimed at ending armed conflict has fallen short as violence persisted and, in some areas, intensified. Petro’s government has been internally fractured, with the rupture of political coalitions and a constant reshuffling of his cabinet. Meanwhile, widespread social inequality and persistent political violence exemplified by the recent killing of the far-right presidential candidate Miguel Uribe, underscore the unresolved structural crises destabilizing Colombia.

On the Peruvian side, the deeply unpopular Boluarte has been battered by chronic political unrest since assuming office after leading a coup to oust and arrest the pseudo-left President Pedro Castillo. Mass protests have erupted this year demanding substantive reforms to improve security and counter social inequality.

As with Petro, the nominally left political forces in both countries have played a completely foul role in providing a “left” cover for bourgeois chauvinism under the reactionary call to defend each country’s “sovereignty.”

In the context of the approaching April 2026 general elections, Peru’s pseudo-leftist Nuevo Perú, led by Verónica Mendoza, endorsed the nationalist rhetoric with a statement titled “Santa Rosa is Peruvian and We will Defend It.” Peru’s Stalinist Communist Party, for its part, promotes nationalism under the guise of protecting local

Loreto residents’ interests. This response exposes the real class interests these parties serve—those of local bourgeoisies dependent on imperialism.

In their everyday life, border communities tell a different story. Colombians and Peruvians living near Santa Rosa engage cooperatively in commerce, healthcare, and social life across borders with cordiality and mutual aid. The Ticuna indigenous people represent the largest ethnic group on the island and the along the margins of the Amazon River and its tributaries in Colombia, Peru and Brazil, which they consider part of their ancestral land.

This reality contradicts the nationalist hostilities stoked by politicians and ruling elites, demonstrating the arbitrary nature of borders imposed by imperial powers and local ruling elites.

In a globalized capitalist world, the working class is already objectively interconnected and its struggles and interest transcends the confines of the nation-state. The division of humanity into rival nation-states under capitalism inevitably leads to destructive wars, economic chaos, and social crises where workers pay the heaviest price.

The Santa Rosa de Loreto dispute makes clear that nationalism is a barrier to progress, peace, the fight against imperialist oppression and capitalist exploitation.

Workers in Colombia and Peru require an internationalist perspective that rejects nationalist chauvinism. The road to follow consists in a conscious political fight not for the defense of outmoded national borders, but for the United Socialist States of the Americas and ultimately, world socialism.



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