

## BOLIVIA'S HISTORIC STRUGGLE FOR ACCESS TO THE SEA

*After the War of the Pacific (1879–1884), Bolivia lost a vast stretch of territory along the coast of the Pacific Ocean. For many years, the Andean country has unsuccessfully sought to regain access to the sea, which remains the nation's quintessential aspiration. How did Bolivia lose its access to the sea? What efforts have been made to reclaim it, and what are the prospects that Bolivia might cease to be a landlocked country in the future? What interests complicate finding a resolution to this conflict?*

### A Long-Standing Issue

A common problem among the new nations that emerged after the wars of independence against Spain (mostly across XIX century) was the delineation of territories. Following the expulsion of the colonial power during the first half of the 19th century, the borders of the newly liberated countries remained undefined, as much of the territory lacked internal demarcations. In the context of forming new states, this lack of clarity became a root cause of future military conflicts between several nations, such as Argentina and Chile, Ecuador and Peru, Guyana and Venezuela, and, ultimately, Bolivia and Chile. The latter case eventually led to one of the largest wars on the continent: the War of the Pacific, also known as the Guano War or the Saltpeter War. These names refer to the fact that the disputed region, located in northern Chile and southwestern Bolivia, was rich in deposits of these valuable resources.

### The War of the Pacific

The origins of the conflict date back to 1874, when Chile and Bolivia signed an agreement for the joint exploitation of the so-called Zone of Mutual Benefits (*Zona de beneficios mutuos*) in Antofagasta, a region initially under Bolivian sovereignty but



with a majority Chilean population. In this treaty, Bolivia agreed not to increase taxes on Chilean extraction of saltpeter and guano. However, due to a severe economic crisis, Bolivia was forced to break the agreement in 1878. Furthermore, in 1873, Bolivia had signed a mutual military assistance treaty with Peru<sup>1</sup>, which sought to redefine its borders with Chile in a more favorable manner. When Bolivia violated the 1874 treaty, Chilean companies refused to pay the new tax, leading Bolivia to seize Chilean properties in the region in 1879. In response, Chile militarily occupied Antofagasta, which gradually escalated into a large-scale military conflict when Bolivia and Peru responded with force. The war lasted five years (1879–1884), with Chile demonstrating its naval supremacy from the outset, leveraging its ironclad ships against the Peruvian navy (since Bolivia lacked warships). Once Chile dominated the seas during the first year of the war, it began land operations by launching an amphibious assault on Tarapacá, Peru's economic center. That same year, Chile defeated Bolivian forces (Battles of Tacna and Arica), which, despite being larger in number, were poorly equipped and lacked the military expertise of Chilean troops.

Two years later, in 1881, Chile militarily occupied the Peruvian capital, Lima. Peruvian guerrillas continued fighting against the occupiers until 1883<sup>2</sup>, when a stable Peruvian government was formed and signed a peace treaty with Chile in October of that year<sup>3</sup>.

### **Treaties and Subsequent Claims**

Peru signed a peace treaty with Chile in 1883 (Treaty of Ancón), ceding the territories of Tacna, Arica, and Tarapacá. The province of Tacna was later returned to Peru under the Treaty of Lima. However, the most significant loss was suffered by Bolivia, which initially signed a truce in 1884. The terms were finalized in 1904 with the Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Under this treaty, Bolivia permanently renounced its coastline, the so-called "*Departamento del Litoral*", amounting to 400 km of coastline and 120,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The territories acquired by Chile provided it with enormous deposits of saltpeter, copper, and guano. Subsequent treaties included<sup>4</sup>:

- **1920**: Bolivia appealed for a revision of the 1904 treaty at the League of Nations (the precursor to the United Nations), arguing that it had signed the 1904 agreement under Chilean military coercion and highlighting the treaty's devastating impact on its economy. However, no positive outcome was achieved.
- **1926**: U.S. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg proposed that Bolivia's access to the sea be negotiated between Peru and Chile (as both countries had coastlines). Peru rejected the proposal, fearing that questioning the 1904 treaty could also lead to the revision of the 1883 treaty, risking further territorial concessions to Chile.
- **1929**: The Treaty of Lima returned the region of Tacna to Peru (ceded in 1883), but Chile retained Arica.
- **1975**: The Charaña Conference was held. Bolivia and Chile negotiated a potential maritime access for Bolivia in exchange for Bolivian highland territory

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<sup>1</sup> Argentina had been invited to join this treaty in exchange for the possibility of reclaiming part of the Chilean Patagonia, but the proposal did not gain traction in Buenos Aires. Subsequently, in 1881, Argentina and Chile signed the Boundary Agreement, which defined the Patagonian borders of both countries, eliminating any need for Buenos Aires to become involved in the conflict.

<sup>2</sup> After the fall and subsequent occupation of Lima, the remaining Peruvian forces were divided over whether to sign a peace treaty or continue the war. In fact, two parallel governments were established, each claiming to represent the Peruvian government (led by Miguel Iglesias and Andrés Cáceres). In July 1883, Chile launched a final expedition against the latter, crushing the last strongholds of resistance at the Battle of Huamachuco. Following this defeat, the recognized government of Iglesias signed a peace treaty with Chile in October of the same year.

<sup>3</sup> López, J. (1931) – *Historia de la guerra del guano y el salitre*.

<sup>4</sup> Data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Plurinational State of Bolivia. Available at: <https://cancilleria.gob.bo/mre/>

for Chile. The negotiations failed due to Peruvian opposition and internal disagreements, leading to the breakdown of diplomatic relations between Chile and Bolivia.

- **1992:** The presidents of Peru and Bolivia (Alberto Fujimori and Jaime Paz Zamora, respectively)<sup>5</sup> signed an agreement granting Bolivia a 5 km strip of coastline, named "*Bolivia Mar*", for tourism purposes. However, Bolivia was not permitted to build a commercial port and would need to use Peruvian facilities for that purpose. Bolivia has not invested in the area, as doing so could undermine its sovereign maritime aspirations in its claims against Chile.
- **2010:** The 1992 agreement was significantly improved, expanding the free industrial zone and fostering cooperation between the Peruvian and Bolivian navies<sup>6</sup>.
- **2013-2018:** Bolivia brought its claim to the International Court of Justice. In 2018, the court ruled in favor of Chile, declaring that it was not obligated to renegotiate the terms agreed upon in 1904.

### Interests at stake

- **Chile:** The country bases its resistance to negotiation on the assertion that Bolivia's access to the sea was definitively resolved in the 1904 treaty. Furthermore, that treaty granted Bolivia access to Chilean ports (specifically Arica and Antofagasta) for imports and exports, as well as the right to establish its own customs facilities<sup>7</sup> with preferential tariffs. Chile views any potential territorial concession as a surrender of its sovereignty over the coastal strip. Additionally, ceding this area would mean relinquishing strategic northern ports, not to mention the economic importance of the region, which holds vast mineral deposits. Lithium also plays a significant role in the dispute: Chile is the second-largest exporter of lithium globally, behind Australia, and the leading exporter in the Americas. Facilitating Bolivia's export of this mineral would diminish Chile's regional prominence as the continent's primary exporter.
- **Bolivia:** The country does not explicitly claim a specific territory on the Pacific coast but rather seeks a willingness from Chile to negotiate. La Paz argues that bureaucratic delays caused by Chilean authorities reduce the competitiveness of Bolivian exports by 25% compared to its neighboring trading partners. Beyond importing goods, the ability to export is crucial for Bolivia, particularly for marketing lithium. Currently, Bolivia exports just over 250 tons of lithium annually<sup>8</sup>, but this figure could rise to 200,000 tons in the coming years with the construction of a second industrial mining complex by 2030, potentially generating \$20 billion in revenue<sup>9</sup>. This mineral is of particular interest to China, as lithium is essential for electric vehicle batteries and electronic devices, both booming industries in the Asian giant. Bolivian exports are primarily focused on gas (45% of its foreign trade), gold (10%), followed by zinc, potassium, oil, tin,

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the treaty between these two presidents was partly driven by the 1992 terrorist attack on the Bolivian Embassy in Lima, carried out by the Shining Path group (*Sendero Luminoso*). Following the attack, in which the embassy building was destroyed, the Bolivian government demanded compensation from Lima, leading both countries to negotiate the possibility of Bolivia using the port facilities in the Peruvian city of Ilo.

<sup>6</sup> Despite being landlocked, Bolivia's Armed Forces include a Navy, which in practice operates as a lake/river assault, patrol, and reconnaissance force.

<sup>7</sup> Article 6 of the treaty: "*Chile recognizes in favor of Bolivia, and in perpetuity, the broadest and freest right of commercial transit through its territory and Pacific ports.*"

<sup>8</sup> In Latin America, Chile is the leading exporter of lithium (and second globally), with 44,000 metric tons, compared to Bolivia's 270 metric tons. Data from 2024 provided by the US Geological Survey and *Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos* (the state-owned mining company).

<sup>9</sup> Bolivia's lithium reserves are estimated to exceed 23 million metric tons.

and other minerals. Notably, more than half of its exports are transported overland to neighboring countries such as Argentina, Paraguay, Peru, Chile, and Brazil, while minerals are shipped by sea to Japan, China, and South Korea<sup>10</sup>.

- **Peru:** Lima has supported and continues to support Bolivia's claim against Chile in international forums and organizations. Additionally, it has proposed alternative solutions for Bolivia, such as the use of its ports at preferential rates, without involving any territorial concessions.

### **Current Situation**

Bolivian maritime imports currently rely primarily on Chilean port infrastructure in Arica and Iquique, as well as Ilo in Peru. Arica is a free trade zone, being the only shared zone among the three countries involved. However, the Chilean ports (Arica and Iquique) are the most utilized, with Bolivian cargo accounting for 80% of the total handled at these ports. The Peruvian port of Ilo is already insufficient, and with the increase in Bolivian imports since 2016, Chilean facilities could also become inadequate in the near future, according to former Bolivian consul David Herrada in Peru<sup>11</sup>. The construction of the Chinese-funded megaport in Chancay, Peru, further demonstrates the geostrategic importance of the region for China. This project<sup>12</sup>, led by Cosco Shipping Company<sup>13</sup>, a Chinese state-owned maritime trade enterprise, is located 70 km from the Peruvian capital and will significantly enhance China's capacity to import strategic minerals from the area, including lithium. The Atlantic alternative also offers hope for the Andean nation. Thanks to favorable diplomatic relations and ideological alignments, countries like Uruguay (2023)<sup>14</sup> and Argentina (2019)<sup>15</sup> have expressed willingness to provide access to their ports in Nueva Palmira/Fray Bentos and Rosario, respectively<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup>. Finally, considering the possible scenarios, the hypothesis of Bolivia regaining sea access by force is highly unlikely. Beyond the stark disparity in military capabilities between Chile and Bolivia (ranked 52nd and 82nd on the Global Firepower scale, respectively<sup>18</sup>), where Chile holds advantages in nearly all areas, there are also significant economic and financial differences<sup>19</sup>. These factors make any attempt by Bolivia to engage in military action implausible. Moreover, such an initiative would severely undermine its ability to make future diplomatic claims.

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<sup>10</sup> Data from the Bolivian Institute of Foreign Trade. Available at: <https://ibce.org.bo/ibcecifras/index.php?id=1308>

<sup>11</sup> Source: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-43146946>

<sup>12</sup> The port has the capacity to accommodate the largest cargo ships in the world, capable of carrying up to 24,000 containers. Previously, only the port of Manzanillo in Mexico had the necessary infrastructure for the export of large quantities of goods across the Pacific.

<sup>13</sup> For more details, visit the official site: <https://coscochancay.pe/#/home>

<sup>14</sup> Executive Branch of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay: <https://www.gub.uy/presidencia/comunicacion/noticias/puerto-fray-bentos-facilitara-conectividad-bolivia>

<sup>15</sup> Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ar/es/actualidad/noticias/rosario-recupera-la-zona-franca-de-bolivia>

<sup>16</sup> Source: [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150925\\_bolivia\\_chile\\_acceso\\_mar\\_puertos\\_irm](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150925_bolivia_chile_acceso_mar_puertos_irm)

<sup>17</sup> In summary, Bolivia can currently use the ports of Arica and Antofagasta in Chile (with free transit rights under the 1904 treaty), the Peruvian port of Ilo (under the 1992 agreement), the ports of Uruguay and Argentina (via the Paraguay-Paraná waterway), and to a lesser extent, the Brazilian port of Santos.

<sup>18</sup> Source: [https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country\\_id=bolivia](https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=bolivia)

<sup>19</sup> For details, refer to the comparison available at: <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/paises/comparar/chile/bolivia>