

IRAN-BOLIVIA MILITARY COOPERATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE SECURITY OF THE REGION?

On July 20, the Defense Ministers of Iran and Bolivia (Brigadier General Mohammed Reza Ashtiani and Edmundo Novillo Aguilar, respectively) signed a Defense Agreement, in which Tehran commits to the sale of various military systems to La Paz. The intention declared by the Andean country consists of reinforcing its surveillance power on the borders, specifically north and south, where a large part of drug trafficking circulates. However, several states in the region expressed their disagreement with the treaty, alleging that it implies a possible threat to security. In this article, after a brief introduction to the history and dynamics of La Paz-Tehran bilateral relations, we will analyze the implications from a geopolitical perspective, paying attention to the content of the treaty itself, what this cooperation consists of and what it means for the region.

The Andean country has faced the problem of illegal drug trafficking for years, since in the same country, the coca leaf, a natural plant of the Andes, is obtained from which the well-known alkaloid, cocaine, is derived. It is worth mentioning that the coca leaf itself is for legal and traditional consumption in the region, used by Andean communities to cope with the harsh living conditions in the mountains.

Another issue that worries the Bolivian military, and which may plausibly be a hypothesis of conflict, is the continuous friction on the border with Peru and Argentina: the former president Evo Morales has played a leading role in encouraging separatism in the area that produces coca in Puno, Peru¹, as well as the Argentine province of Jujuy, in which sectors critical of the current provincial government have recently been accused of being instigated by former President Morales and his political party, the MAS (*Movimiento Al Socialismo*)².

The bilateral treaty essentially consists of the Iranian sale of military hardware to Bolivia. According to data from the Institute For The Study Of War (ISW), the Iranian minister

¹ *Cátedra Perú desarrolló su sesión 107 denominada "la crisis separatista en Puno"*. 20/7/2023. <https://usmp.edu.pe/catedra-peru-desarrollo-su-sesion-107-denominada-la-crisis-separatista-en-puno/>

² *Enfrentamientos por nueva reforma en Jujuy y autoridades acusan a Evo de intromisión*. 23//2023. <https://urgente.bo/noticia/enfrentamientos-por-nueva-reforma-en-jujuy-y-autoridades-acusan-evo-de-intromisi%C3%B3n>

literally mentioned that he would sell Bolivia "*advanced technology*" for "*border control... and confront drug trafficking*."³ This technology, according to the latest information, would consist of:

- Reconnaissance drones – useful for surveillance in the complex orography of the Andean country⁴. Another regional partner, Venezuela, purchased these systems from Iran in 2007.
- River boats – for the control of Lake Titicaca, in functions of drug trafficking and smuggling control⁵.

The Iranian minister affirmed that the agreement also includes the exchange of officers and military training, as well as the exchange of techniques related to cyber-security.

Although the information is still scarce, former Bolivian government minister Carlos Sánchez Berzaín stated⁶ that in return, Iran would presumably obtain Bolivian concessions for lithium exploitation (as China and Russia previously did in 2005). Lithium, as a mineral used in electronics, is essential for the construction of batteries (lithium-ion batteries). It is interesting to mention that another possible use is related to nuclear technology. Two isotopes of lithium, lithium-7 and lithium-6, are used to control primary reactions in fission reactors and to make neutron detectors, respectively. But also, lithium is the basis for the synthesis by fission of tritium, which together with deuterium, is the key to nuclear fusion and therefore, for the manufacture of thermonuclear (hydrogen) weapons.

Another beneficial aspect for Iran resides in the increase of its influence at the regional level: beginning in 2005 with Venezuela and other countries (Cuba, Nicaragua), they have a long tradition of energy, defense and economic cooperation with Iran. Even until 2020, the so-called "Warnes anti-imperialist school" was operating in Bolivia, an international joint construction with Venezuelan, Cuban and Iranian instructors that sought to

³ ISW: *Iran Update, July 20, 2023*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/iran-update-july-20-2023>

⁴ ISW: *Iran Update, July 26, 2023*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/iran-update-july-26-2023>

⁵ *El gobierno de Bolivia admitió que el acuerdo con Irán incluye drones, lanchas y ciberseguridad*. 26/7/2023. Nota de Infobae, Argentina. <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2023/07/26/el-gobierno-de-bolivia-admitio-que-el-acuerdo-con-iran-incluye-drones-lanchas-y-ciberseguridad/>

⁶ *Acuerdo con Irán incluye el litio, misiles, armas e inteligencia en el ciberespacio. Nota de Opinión*. Bolivia. 23/7/2023. https://eldeber.com.bo/edicion-impresa/acuerdo-con-iran-incluye-el-litio-misiles-armas-e-inteligencia-en-el-ciberespacio_333342

encourage military cooperation in training and equipment. Today, that school has been dismantled and transformed into a School of Engineers⁷.

It is necessary to understand that the international position of various countries in the region (as has just been demonstrated in the Bolivian case) changes every 4 or 6 years depending on the political sign of the national government. We can see this case in Argentina itself, with which a questioned Memorandum of Understanding was signed with Iran in 2015, after relations between the two countries eroded after the attacks of 1992 and 1994. Another country with ambivalent relations is Brazil. It is Iran's largest trading partner in the region. This relationship, paradoxically, was strengthened during the government of the questioned Jair Bolsonaro, who maintained tense relations with Tehran during his government⁸.

In these terms, the government of Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) was the administration that opened the most diplomatic representations in Central and South America: Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile and Brazil. As of today, only Paraguay, Peru, Guyana, French Guyana and Suriname, plus some Central American countries, do not have Iranian embassies⁹.

Likewise, the cooperation between both countries has a long history. In economic terms, in the midst of the political turn towards socialism that the continent experienced in the early 2000s, in 2010 Bolivia accepted investments from Iran for the local exploitation of lithium (of which Bolivia holds the first world reserves), making Iran an important geo-economic partner. In addition, culturally, Bolivia has opened its doors, enabling the construction of mosques and Islamic education centers in La Paz. Furthermore, the Bolivian television channel TV Abya Ayala, ranked among the best on the continent, was a gift from Ahmadinejad to Bolivia (to the Juan Evo Morales Ayma Foundation) in 2013. In terms of diplomatic cooperation, the close political relationship between former President Evo Morales and Mahmud Ahmadinejad manifested itself in October 2010, with Morales's official visit to Tehran. Today, the Iranian embassy in Bolivia has the largest number of staff, and is a centralized diplomatic management center for all other embassies in the region.

⁷ *Bolivia elimina escuela militar 'antiimperialista' impulsada por Evo Morales*. 16/1/2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/espanol/sns-es-bolivia-elimina-escuela-militar-antiimperialista-20200116-14d7zdak7jggllx5ksz5bau6ti-story.html>

⁸ *Bolsonaro: Irán está en su derecho de convocar al representante de Brasil en Teherán*. Sputnik News. 7/1/2020. <https://sputniknews.lat/20200107/bolsonaro-iran-esta-en-su-derecho-de-convocar-al-representante-de-brasil-en-teheran-1090061150.html>

⁹ Islamic Republic of Iran – Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

According to information from the official website of the Persian government, in a news item dated August 29, 2022, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Amir Abdollahian, expressed his interest in bilateral collaboration in areas such as the export of agricultural machinery, implementation of extractive infrastructures and private sector investment. In addition, he mentioned that the relationship between the two countries favors the construction of multilateralism and reinforces international security and peace¹⁰.

The treaty, however, received internal criticism from the Bolivian opposition. The same criticized the state secrecy on the content of the treaty, since several clauses remain confidential and subject to speculation. The criticisms were led by Gustavo Aliaga, secretary of the Defense and Armed Forces Committee of the Bolivian Chamber of Deputies¹¹.

The main objector to the regional response was Argentina itself. To understand this position, it is necessary to take into account that Argentina suffered two terrorist attacks on its own soil, the Israeli Embassy and the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA), in 1992 and 1994 respectively (it should be noted, as additional information, that the Iran-Bolivia treaty was signed coincidentally with the 29th anniversary of the AMIA bombing, July 20, 1994). The official lines of investigation indicated that these attacks had been committed by Hezbollah, a well-known Islamic fundamentalist group openly financed by Tehran (although the case has not yet been resolved). Taking these events into account, Argentina has indicated that Bolivian-Iranian military cooperation represents a potential danger to the stability of the region, by allowing the discreet entry of Iranian intelligence elements into the region¹². The DAIA (Delegation of Argentine Israeli Associations) expressed its bewilderment and fear regarding this treaty, since according to an ISW report¹³, the drones that Tehran will provide to Bolivia could have offensive capacity (similar to those used by the armed forces of Russia in Ukraine). These drones could be of the "loitering ammunition" type, *Shaheed* 136 (martyr) type. Moreover, the former Argentine foreign minister and former ambassador to France Jorge

¹⁰ *FM: developing cooperation with Bolivia in Iran's interest.* <https://irangov.ir/detail/394756>

¹¹ *El gobierno de Bolivia admitió que el acuerdo con Irán incluirá drones, lanchas y ciberseguridad.* 23/7/2023. Nota de Agencia AJN. <https://agenciaajn.com/noticia/el-gobierno-de-bolivia-admitio-que-el-acuerdo-con-iran-incluye-drones-lanchas-y-ciberseguridad-218049>

¹² It should be noted that these embassies have separate departments for Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (VEVAK) and for the Revolutionary Guard.

¹³ ISW: Iran Update, July 26, 2023. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-july-26-2023>

Faurie (management 2017-2019), mentioned that the Iranian drones sold to Bolivia function as intelligence tools, but not only to combat border drug trafficking¹⁴.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Iran's presence in terms of military cooperation with countries in the region is booming. The predominant political sign, that is to say, the Socialism of the XXI Century and the multipolar perspectives of the region, open the way so that actors like Russia, China and Iran can make their way into the area, to the detriment of the presence of the United States, which has set its focus on the Asia-Pacific region. The present treaty between Bolivia and Iran, although it has caused the nervousness of Argentina and to a lesser extent of Peru, does not constitute, at least at first sight, an immediate danger for Lima or Buenos Aires, even taking into account the arguments indicated. The South American zone still presents many domestic problems, which make it difficult to consolidate a common regional position.

¹⁴ *Irán vende drones a Bolivia a cambio de litio para sus armas nucleares*. La Razón, 2/08/2023. https://www.larazon.es/internacional/iran-vende-drones-bolivia-cambio-litio-sus-armas-nucleares_2023080264ca763889c42a0001c7b79c.html