

THE GEOPOLITICAL WEIGHT OF THE AMAZON

Home to vast biodiversity and inhabited by hundreds of human groups, the Amazon is not only a key space in the geopolitics of food but also a potential center of dispute over its aquifers.

In 1542, Spanish explorer and conquistador Francisco de Orellana discovered the Amazon River during a risky expedition through the dense South American jungle. He would meet his end along its course. The origins of the name "Amazon" are still debated, with theories pointing to the myth of warrior women (perhaps sparked by attacks from long-haired indigenous groups) or the Tupi term *amassunú*, the name locals gave to the river. Beyond these debates, one thing is certain: throughout history, the Amazon region has been subject to countless economic exploitations. These have caused conflicts not only among the countries claiming sovereignty over the region but also with the Indigenous communities who inhabit the heart of this vast green lung. Given these facts—and knowing this is a massive geographic space, full of resources and social conflict—we must ask: What are the current regional and international conditions of the Amazon? What are the main geopolitical axes of its study? Let's explore.

To begin, it is necessary to define the geographical region in question. The Amazon (not to be confused with Amazonas, the name of the river) refers to an entire biome (a tropical forest type) covering approximately 7.4 million km², the largest on the planet. It contains the world's longest river, the Amazon River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean. The Amazon is also home to incredible and highly varied biodiversity (harboring 60% of the world's species), with many unique species—one-third of which are still unknown to humanity (a large part of the jungle remains unexplored). In terms of exploitable resources, it is an extraordinarily rich land: rubber, timber, fish, arable land, aquifers, gold, other valuable minerals, and even hydrocarbons, among many others. And it is not empty in anthropological terms: it is estimated that around 400 Indigenous nations live

within, each comprising various tribes (as well as five linguistic groups, each with multiple languages). These are large human groups, most of which remain isolated from modern civilization.

Nine countries share Amazonian territory. First is Brazil, with 63%, followed by Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Suriname, Guyana, and finally, French Guiana. Brazil hosts the largest city within the jungle: Manaus, a vast metropolis of two million people. In 1978, all the aforementioned countries (except French Guiana) signed the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (ACT), which aims to regulate and coordinate the sustainable exploitation of resources on the one hand, and the inclusion and protection of Indigenous communities on the other. Later, in 1995, the ACT was institutionalized through the creation of a Permanent Secretariat, and in 2002, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization was established, based in Brasília.

Undoubtedly, Brazil is the actor with the greatest geopolitical power in the region. Since its constitution as an empire in the early 19th century (1822), nearly 90% of the current Amazon belonged to Brazil. Over time, peripheral territories were added¹ until today's map was formed¹. The political and ideological framework of this expansion was solidified with the emergence of the Brazilian Geopolitical School², active and adopted by nearly all Brazilian governments since 1930. Developed by political scientists and intellectuals Gobery do Couto Silva, Everardo Backheuser, and Mario Trovassos around 1930, it considers the Amazon a decisive variable in Brazil's rise as a regional power, particularly regarding its projection toward the Pacific—its so-called "*manifest destiny*." Thus, the 1978 ACT gave the Brazilian state an international framework to establish itself as a regional leader (though not a hegemonic actor), by institutionalizing a cooperative strategy with other members—a clear example of political soft power.

¹ Through treaties and concessions, Brazil acquired territories from Colombia, Venezuela (between 1853 and 1907), Paraguay (War of the Triple Alliance, 1865–1870), Bolivia (Acre War, 1899–1903), and Argentina (1827).

² MANSILLA BLANCO, R. (2014) – An Approach to Brazil's Geopolitics. Available at: <https://www.igadi.gal/es/analise/una-aproximacion-a-la-geopolitica-de-brasil/>

Main Geopolitical Axes of Study

As stated earlier, the main goal of this article is to inspire further research on the following points, which are introduced only briefly for now.

At the international level:

- **Food geopolitics:** Brazil is the world's top soybean exporter, and China is its main importer³. This makes Brazil-China relations crucial within BRICS and for Brazil's geopolitical orientation. China's rising demand for soybeans (driven by its increased beef consumption) is expanding cultivation areas, which in turn fuels unregulated deforestation. This has triggered conflicts not only with Indigenous communities but also with neighboring countries. Deforestation and the resulting fires are directly linked to the expansion of agricultural land⁴.

At the regional level:

- **Environmental:** The Amazon absorbs 25% of global CO₂ and holds 20% of the planet's surface freshwater. Deforestation, illegal wildlife trafficking, and illegal mining (especially gold) are economic, political, and social issues. In some cases, this results in paramilitary territorial control and slave labor among local communities. Gold mining contaminates water sources with mercury (used to extract pure gold from ore), harming soil quality and disrupting Indigenous communities' relationship with rivers they rely on for survival. According to the 2018 ACT report, Brazil's Amazon alone received 2,300 tons of mercury up to 1994. Mercury settles in riverbeds and also affects groundwater circulation due to its permeability. Illegal mining is primarily located in the Guiana Shield (northern Brazil, Guyana, French Guiana, Suriname, eastern Venezuela), Peru, and Bolivia⁵.
- **Criminality and terrorism:** This is the most dangerous factor, which has grown

³ Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (2022). Available at: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/soybeans/reporter/bra>

⁴ 2022 data. Available at: <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1129459/principales-paises-importadores-de-soja-en-el-mundo/>

⁵ BARBA, R. (n.d.) – Illegal Mining: The Other Destruction of the Amazon. University of Navarra, Spain. Available at: <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/detalle/-/blogs/la-mineria-ilegal-la-otra-destruccion-de-la-amazonia>

especially after the 2020 pandemic. The Tren de Aragua (Venezuela), the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), the remnants of the FARC, and the ELN (Colombia) are currently the most active paramilitary groups in the Amazon (though there are over 20 armed groups estimated to be operating). Indigenous communities, often unprotected by their governments, are the most affected⁶. These groups frequently use illegal mining as a source of funding and exploit Indigenous labor. The Amazon's dense, impenetrable jungle makes it an ideal base for paramilitary groups, which clash with Indigenous tribes over territory⁷ and engage in sexual and labor exploitation, as well as forced recruitment (Venezuela's Amazon is especially affected by this last issue, due to the government's absence)⁸. Peru has repeatedly denounced actions and threats from the Tren de Aragua on its territory, even requesting U.S. cooperation in criminal investigations⁹. Other related issues include gold, cassiterite, and manganese smuggling (with Venezuelan guerrillas as the main drivers and beneficiaries)¹⁰ and drug trafficking: clandestine airstrips are built in the jungle to ship narcotics to Central America. According to the 2023 Brazilian Public Security Forum report, 40% of Brazil's drug trafficking crosses through the Amazon (from producer countries Bolivia and Colombia), which has led to a lucrative market of "tolls" and hidden transport networks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, territorial monitoring in the Amazon decreased, allowing criminal gangs to expand, occupy Indigenous lands, and build airstrips and coca plantations¹¹.

⁶ Verdad Abierta (2017) – Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon Secured Protection Measures for Their Territories. Editorial note. Available at: <https://verdadabierta.com/indigenas-de-amazonas-lograron-medidas-de-proteccion-de-sus-territorios/>

⁷ Insight Crime (2022) – A Cultural Occupation: Guerrillas and Indigenous Peoples in the Venezuelan Amazon. Editorial note. <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/una-ocupacion-cultural-guerrillas-e-indigenas-en-la-amazonia-venezolana/>

⁸ EBUS, B. – Colombian Guerrillas Recruit Indigenous Youth in Venezuela. Available at: <https://infoamazonia.org/es/2023/08/20/guerrillas-colombianas-reclutan-jovenes-indigenas-en-venezuela/>

⁹ PELCASTRE, J. (2023) – Peru and the U.S. Unite Against the Tren de Aragua. Available at: <https://dialogo-americas.com/es/articles/peru-y-ee-uu-juntos-contras-el-tren-de-aragua/>

¹⁰ Venezuela: In 1998, several ACT provisions were abandoned by Caracas, as state policies shifted. As a result, illegal mining practices were permitted.

¹¹ MENESES, C. and BAYARTE, P. (2023) – The Amazon: A Strategic Region Where Drug Trafficking Expands Its Networks and Power. Article from Clarín (Argentina). Available at: https://www.clarin.com/mundo/amazonia-region-estrategica-narcotrafico-extiende-redes-poder_0_pAdHtRitMQ.html

The Aquifer Issue

The Amazon holds the largest surface water reserve on Earth. However, surface water represents only about 8% of the biome's total aquifer potential. A massive "underground ocean," technically called the *Grande Amazonia Aquifer System* (SAGA in Portuguese)¹², contains over 80% of the region's water reserve—totaling about 160 trillion (yes, trillion) cubic meters. That makes it 3.5 times larger than the Guarani Aquifer, which spans Brazil (67%), Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. However, scientific research on the SAGA only began about 10 years ago, so further studies are needed to assess its economic and consumption potential. According to research by Francisco de Asís Matos de Abreu, professor at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), current difficulties in exploiting the underground aquifer (due to its geological complexity and lack of research) lead to it being viewed as a strategic water reserve for Brazil. At the same time, the surface portion of the Amazon River is vital to the economic life of riverside communities, serving as their main transport and fishing route, and bearing deep religious and spiritual meaning. As previously discussed, however, the river basin suffers increasing pollution from illegal mining (mercury contamination) and both legal and illegal logging.

Conclusions

The Amazon is a vital economic and environmental space, with relevance to the geopolitics of food and water, as well as to global oxygen levels and CO₂ absorption. It also presents a long list of conflicts and problems that, by their very nature, require cooperative efforts and joint action among all ACT member countries. While the treaty was a first step toward cooperative relations among Amazonian states, various obstacles—such as the difficulty of exploration, unfriendly diplomatic relations among some members (notably, the serious Esequibo dispute), and poor investment in research (as with the aquifer issue)—hinder the development of cross-border collaboration to find international solutions for international problems. Yet another symptom of a divided South America, a continent often torn apart by fratricidal wars, almost always driven by foreign interests.

¹² IAGUA (2014) – Beneath the Amazon Lies an Ocean of 160 Trillion Cubic Meters of Water. Editorial note. Available at: <https://www.iagua.es/noticias/dicyt/14/09/11/amazonia-se-oculta-oceano-160-billones-metros-cubicos-agua>