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THE NEVER-ENDING MATTER OF THE ESEQUIBO: HORIZONS OF ARMED CONFLICT IN LATIN AMERICA?

In early October 2023, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro announced the proposal for a referendum on the creation of a new Venezuelan province: Esequibo (Guyana Esequiba). However, that region is, as of today, internationally recognized as part of the State of Guyana. Relations between Georgetown and Caracas have become increasingly tense following the announcement of the referendum, which was called after the discovery of oil deposits in the territorial waters of the disputed region. What is the history behind this conflict? Why now? Is a forced annexation possible? Who would support Venezuela and Guyana in the hypothetical case of war?

The Esequibo is the name of a river that splits Guyana in two. The capital, Georgetown, lies on the eastern bank, while the entire western bank—three-quarters of Guyana's internationally recognized territory (74.21%)—is the disputed zone claimed by Venezuela. The area has been in contention since the late 19th century.

What is the history of this conflict?

The Esequibo issue traces its roots back to Venezuela's war of independence from Spain, which lasted from 1810 to 1821. Following the Battle of Carabobo, Venezuela secured victory over the royalist troops[1]. Shortly before this battle, the three liberated Spanish territories—New Granada, Ecuador, and Venezuela—joined to form one large nation: Gran Colombia. This state stretched from modern-day Ecuador in the south to the Esequibo River, which today divides Guyana. Gran Colombia would dissolve in 1830 due to internal disputes, and Venezuela adopted the Esequibo as its eastern border. This boundary was recognized by the United Kingdom, which had become the colonial ruler of Guyana in 1814[2]. Moreover, it later accepted the 1845 Treaty of Recognition from Spain, in which the former colonial power acknowledged Venezuelan

[1] It was not the final battle, but it was the most significant in this process. In 1823, the Battle of Lake Maracaibo and the fall of San Felipe Castle would take place.
[2] Previously, Guyana was under Dutch control. The Netherlands ceded control of Guyana to the United Kingdom in 1814 and 1815 (Anglo-Dutch Treaty and Congress of Vienna, respectively).

independence as well as its current borders (based on the legal principle of *uti possidetis iuris*)[3].

In 1831, Britain unified its three colonies (Esequibo, Demerara, and Berbice) into what became known as British Guiana. Four years later, in 1835, the British government commissioned explorer and naturalist Robert Hermann Schomburgk to chart new borders (the Schomburgk Line). This new definition fraudulently granted British Guiana territories west of the Esequibo River—territories that, de jure, belonged to Venezuela—violating previous recognitions[4]. The region was (and still is) rich in oil and gas (in its territorial waters), as well as bauxite (aluminum), gold, and diamonds, among other resources. The de facto annexation of Esequibo began to take shape around 1844 with the migration of British settlers. Venezuela filed its first protest with the British colonial government, but the discussion yielded no results, as the Schomburgk Line was still under review. Gradually, more British colonies settled in the contested territory.

By 1899, both countries agreed to resolve the issue through international arbitration, with Russian jurist Fiodor Martens[5] serving as a neutral party in Paris. The UK did not allow Venezuela to have its own full delegation (except for one lawyer), so the South American nation was represented by three American jurists: Melville Weston Fuller, Severo Mallet-Prevost, and Davis Josiah Brewer. Only one Venezuelan, José María Rojas, participated. The Paris ruling favored the United Kingdom, a decision that Venezuela rejected. However, at that time, the Caribbean nation was experiencing significant internal political turmoil and was not in a position to push for a forced annexation, as it risked losing even the limited gains it had achieved (namely, control over the Orinoco River outlets) through the ruling. Moreover, a successful war against the world's main colonial power was unrealistic[6].

Everything changed in 1948. When Mallet-Prevost, one of the American lawyers involved in the arbitration, died, documents came to light exposing secret agreements between the British and American delegations. The international scandal led Venezuela

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[3] Legal principle that refers to the right of newly independent states to retain the borders of their colonial territories.

[4] The United Kingdom had not recognized Spanish sovereignty over this area at the time, as it had not signed (nor had the Netherlands) the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), which granted Spain ownership of the western bank of the Esequibo.

[5] Martens was also a professor at Cambridge and Edinburgh.

[6] ROMERO, C. (2021) – Venezuela-Guyana: reasons for a conflict. Opinion article. Nueva Sociedad. Available at: https://nuso.org/articulo/venezuela-guayana-razones-de-un-conflicto/#:~:text=Venezuela%20y%20Guyana%20se%20enfrentan,brit%C3%A1nica%20descubri%C3%B3%20enormes%20riquezas%20petroleras

to bring the issue before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1962, declaring the Paris ruling completely null and void. Consequently, Venezuela and the United Kingdom (on behalf of British Guiana) signed a document (Geneva Agreement – 1966), in which Venezuela's territorial claim was acknowledged[7]. London recognized Caracas's right to consider the ruling null and void due to the mentioned irregularities. That same year, British Guiana gained independence, becoming the country of Guyana, which went on to ratify the Geneva Agreement.

Everything seemed to be moving peacefully until 1969, when the first indigenous uprising against Guyanese control occurred, known as the Rupununi Rebellion. Although the rebels appealed for support from the Venezuelan Army and declared themselves Venezuelan, Caracas refrained from intervening, and the rebellion was suppressed by the Guyanese Army, leaving 70 people dead[8].

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, negotiations between the two countries stalled repeatedly—mostly due to disagreements over the appropriate legal venues for dispute resolution. In 2011, Guyana discovered oil fields (in the territorial waters of the Esequibo), which overlapped with Venezuelan claims, triggering protests from Caracas. Clashes followed between the Venezuelan Navy and vessels operating in areas claimed by Guyana, with notable incidents in 2012, 2013, and 2015, though none resulted in fatalities.

Another important shift occurred in 1999 when Hugo Chávez assumed the presidency of Venezuela. He softened relations with Guyana, insisting that the Esequibo issue should be resolved bilaterally and rejecting the jurisdiction of some international bodies over the matter. Guyana, conversely, sought third-party mediation. Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, returned to a more assertive position, explicitly stating that "Esequibo is Venezuela."[9]

Meanwhile, in 2015, Guyana saw a political shift after 23 years of Progressive People's Party (PPP) rule. David Granger of the People's National Congress won the election, and under his administration, tensions with Caracas increased—especially when that same year, Guyana allowed ExxonMobil to begin exploiting oil fields in the disputed

[7] In 1965, Caracas had already published its official territorial map including the claimed area.
[8] ROMERO, C. (2021) – op. cit.
[9] 14/11/2023 – Venezuela vs. Guyana: the dispute over the Esequibo before the International Court of Justice. Report by France24. Available at: https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20231114-venezuela-vs-guyana-la-disputa-por-el-esequibo-ante-la-corte-internacional-de-justicia

area[10].

The current situation

In 2018, after multiple failed diplomatic efforts, the UN declared the Good Offices[11] mechanism exhausted and recommended elevating the case to the International Court of Justice. In April 2023, the ICJ ruled against Venezuela's claim. In response, Caracas proposed holding a self-determination referendum in Guyana Esequiba, consulting the local population (around 125,000 people) about Venezuelan sovereignty rights in the region. These elections were scheduled for December 3, 2023[12].

Fig 1. - This map shows the area in question (shaded area) and the territorial relationship between both countries.

[10] 09/06/2015 – Venezuela accuses Guyana of a "dangerous" provocation policy in the Esequibo. Report by La Vanguardia. Available at: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20150609/54432725731/venezuela-acusa-a-guyana-de-peligrosa-politica-de-provocacion-en-esequibo.html

[11] Good Offices: peaceful settlement of disputes. A third country acts as mediator between the litigating parties.

[12] 14/11/2023 – Venezuela vs. Guyana: the dispute over the Esequibo before the International Court of Justice. Report by France24. Available at: https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20231114-venezuela-vs-guyana-la-disputa-por-el-esequibo-ante-la-corte-internacional-de-justicia

Are there possibilities of forced annexation? –

Possible scenarios and military alliances

While still hypothetical, the possibility of a regional armed conflict is real, albeit distant. The two countries have negotiated the status of the region for decades without reaching any agreement, having exhausted several dispute-resolution venues. The issue is compounded by the exploitation rights of natural resources and a long history of border tensions[13].

After the referendum results on December 3, Venezuela could use them as justification for militarily occupying areas it claims, citing the need to protect the rights of citizens who voted in favor of creating Guyana Esequiba[14]. The most concerning question in the referendum is the fourth, which indirectly refers to the use of force if the integrity of a state is threatened[15]. Furthermore, both nations have escalated their belligerent rhetoric—Venezuela has conducted military exercises near the border and built an airstrip[16]. Guyana, for its part, has declared it will not yield "an inch" of territory it considers legally its own and, while committed to diplomacy, will not remain idle in the face of a Venezuelan military provocation.

The military forces of the two countries are highly asymmetrical. Venezuela has one of the best-equipped armies in the region, with a fleet of tanks, aircraft, and ships primarily of Russian, American, and European origin. The Bolivarian Army is vast, with 115,000 active personnel and many more in reserve[17].

In contrast, Guyana's Defense Forces number no more than 7,600 (including reserves), and lack tanks. Their armored units consist of 6x6 vehicles of Brazilian and Spanish origin. They have no offensive air force or navy—only coast guard capabilities[18].

Regarding alliances, South America has traditionally been a peaceful continent, with

[13] PAREDES, N. (2023) – Why the Esequibo dispute between Guyana and Venezuela has intensified after nearly two centuries. Report by BBC Mundo. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c28vrmj73m0o

[14] 20/11/2023 – Venezuela successfully holds a mock referendum for the disputed zone with Guyana. Report by France24. Available at: https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20231119-venezuela-realiza-con-%C3%A9xito-simulacro-de-referendo-por-zona-en-disputa-con-guyana

[15] In English: "Do you agree to oppose, by all lawful means, Guyana's claim to unilaterally dispose of a yet-to-be-delimited maritime area, in violation of international law?"

[16] 29/10/2023 – Venezuela builds airstrip near the Esequibo. Report by DW. Available at: https://www.dw.com/es/venezuela-construye-pista-de-aterrizaje-cerca-del-esequibo/a-67246404

[17] Data from the Venezuelan Ministry of People's Power for Defense. Available at: https://www.mindefensa.gob.ve/mindefensa/

[18] Data from the Ministry of Defense of Guyana. Available at: https://www.gdf.mil.gy/

few exceptions (especially in the 21st century). Therefore, it is unlikely that any regional country would support an act of aggression by either Venezuela or Guyana. Given the region's shifting political alignments, not even countries ideologically close to Venezuela (such as Cuba or Nicaragua) would likely endorse an international conflict—especially since Cuba and Guyana are close collaborators. Considering this, the possibility of war in Esequibo remains low. But as analysts, we've often been surprised by our own conclusions.