MSMUN@UWCSEA X

RESEARCH REPORT

Committee: Security Council (SC)

Topic: Solving border disputes between Guyana and Venezuela

Name: Krisha Shah

Position: Head Chair

UWCSEA

Introduction

The border dispute between Guyana and Venezuela first dates back to the 19th century and is commonly referred to as the Essequibo conflict. At the heart of this dispute lies the Essequibo region, a vast area rich in natural resources such as gold, oil, and timber, which both nations claim as part of their sovereign territory. The disagreement began when colonial powers failed to clearly define the western boundary of what later became British Guiana (modern-day Guyana). Venezuela argues that the land rightfully belonged to them as part of their inheritance from Gran Colombia (the country which Venezuela was previously a part of), while Guyana maintains that the 1899 Paris Arbitration Award, a ruling on the border lines between Guyana and Venezuela has definitively established the border and remains legally binding.

In recent years, tensions have resurfaced as Guyana expanded oil exploration in the disputed region, supported by international companies. Venezuela, facing internal economic and political challenges, has responded by renewing its claim and holding a referendum asserting sovereignty over the territory. The dispute has now reached the International Court of Justice (ICJ), though progress remains slow due to Venezuela's partial non-participation and ongoing regional instability, as well as the limitations of the ICJ itself.

Delegates should focus on finding a peaceful and equally importantly a lasting solution that respects international law while addressing the economic, social, and humanitarian consequences of the dispute.

Definition of Key Terms

1. **Essequibo Region:** This is a region of land in South America that is disputed with both Venezuela and Guyana claiming rightful ownership of the region.
2. **Colonialism:** This is when one country acquires control over another territory previously not belonging to them, it typically involves the **subjugation**[1] of one people by another and economic exploitation. Colonialism is an important part in the early history of this conflict.
3. **Jurisdiction:** This refers to the legal authority and power a legal entity (here a court such as the ICJ) has to interfere and enact justice.
4. **Sovereignty:** This refers to a nation's right to act and govern how it wishes within its own borders.
5. **Arbitration Tribunal**: This is a panel of adjudicators - individuals who study and help settle disputes - who work outside traditional court systems. This relies on the agreement of both parties typically to hand over power of the outcome of the dispute to a neutral 3rd party. All decisions made by an Arbitration Tribunal are legally binding.
6. **Referendum:** A public vote on a specific issue. In 2023, Venezuela held one claiming Essequibo sovereignty.
7. **Moratorium:** A temporary suspension of an action or claim.

Background Information

Historical context: how the conflict came to be

The 19th Century

[1] Oxford dictionary definition: the action of bringing someone or something under domination or control.

The control over the Essequibo region has historically shifted over time, with many disagreements and disputes over land ownership. The Essequibo river was first colonised by the Dutch in the early 17th Century, and control of this region between the Dutch, Spanish and French until finally landing in the hands of the United Kingdom. In 1814, the Dutch formally handed over the power of the Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice region through what is called the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1814. However, the Anglo-Dutch treaty failed to establish a western border of what became British Guiana, which would lead to issues following the creation of Gran Colombia (which would later become Venezuela) in 1819.

Due to the territorial disputes over the Essequibo region between the UK and Gran Colombia, in 1824 the Gran Colombia made a border claim to the British government drawing the border at the Essequibo River. This claim remained unobjected to the British, although they failed to respect Gran Colombia's border claim by promoting colonisation of the territories past the river in the following years. In 1831, the UK finally merged the former Dutch territories of Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice into British Guiana, which would become what we know today as Guyana.

In 1835, again a new border was drawn, this time by the British. This became known as the Schomburgk Line, and it went well beyond the area of the British population all the way to Orinoco River which sits well in Venezuela today. Venezuela obviously disputed the Schomburgk line, and in 1844, they claimed all of Guiana to the west of the Essequibo River. Eventually in 1850 both parties agreed to not further colonise the disputed territory, but neglected to define where exactly this territory began and ended.

A few issues and conflicts did arrive after the agreement in 1850, mostly to do with valuable resources, namely gold being found in the disputed region. This

caused different borders to be declared by both nations and led to incredibly strained diplomatic relations. Eventually after several requests from Venezuela to the United States government using the **Monroe Doctrine**[2] as justification for intervention, the US finally got involved.

In 1897, on February 2nd, the United Kingdom and Venezuela signed a treaty commonly referred to as the Treaty of Washington (1987). Both nations agreed that the **arbitration**[3] **award** ruling would be the final solution to the border dispute. They established a 5-member Arbitration tribunal consisting of 5 representatives, 2 from the UK, 2 from the US (as Venezuela had cut diplomatic relations with the UK), and 1 from Russia (who, as a country, was presumed neutral). Venezuela argued that the land from the Orinoco to the Amazon, which they had inherited, had previously belonged to Spain, while the British argued that it had long-standing Dutch and British Influence. On October 3rd in 1899, the tribunal ruled mostly in favour of Britain, establishing the Schomburgk Line with two differentiations. The new ruling gave Venezuela full control over the Orinoco River, and the border shifted to the Wenamu River, which gave Venezuela some additional land.

[2] The Monroe Doctrine is a piece of the United States' foreign policy that aimed to oppose European colonisation of the Western Hemisphere

[3] Arbitration is a formal method used to resolve conflicts which utilizes neutral 3rd party intervention who is able to make a binding decision to resolve the conflict

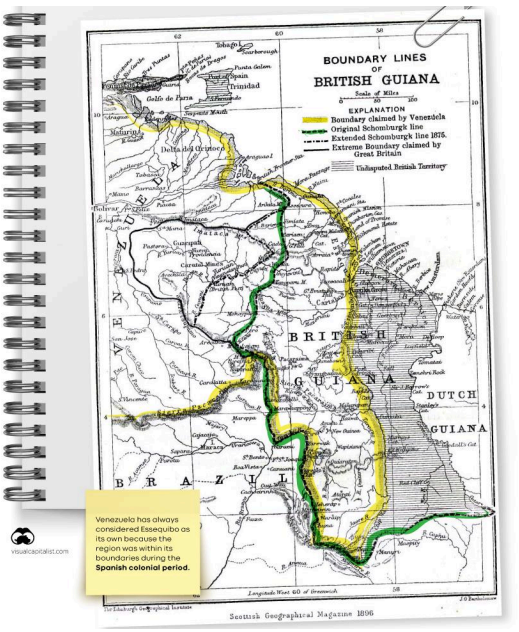

Figure 1: Map of the disputed territory between British Guiana and Venezuela (Scottish Geographical Magazine, 1896).

Venezuelan representatives argued that the British had unfairly influenced the neutrality of the Russian member. However, all protests stayed largely diplomatic and for the most part this ruling was respected by both countries until further revelations about the events surrounding the arbitration award.

The 20th Century

In 1949, the Venezuelan government was made aware of a memorandum written by Severo Mallet-Prevost in 1944 before his death. He was one of the US lawyers who had represented Venezuela in 1899. He described a political deal between Russia and Britain, in his memorandum he states that Friedrich Martens, the Russian representative involved in the arbitration decision, had visited Britain with both of the British Arbitrators in the summer that the deal was being negotiated. Following this visit the American judges had received 2 choices about how to proceed, the first was an agreement with the lines eventually decided and the second was an outcome that more heavily favoured the British where the US

Arbitrators would be out voted. For the Venezuelan government this validated their previous dissatisfaction and complaints in 1899 when the ruling was first decided.

After the revelations of the memorandum, the Venezuelan government at the time had plans to invade Essequibo to take back control of the land they felt they were robbed off. However that government eventually was overthrown before being able to carry out said plans. In the 1960s Venezuela again brought up this issue on an international level. This was also around the time that the British Guiana gained independence to become Guyana. Venezuela's formal complaint to the UN was submitted in 1962, it argued for the denouement of the 1899 Paris Arbitration Award due to the collusion. And since scholars have found further evidence of collusion between Britain and Russia. As a result of the complaint in 1966 the Geneva Agreement of 1966 was signed, this established a regulatory framework again to assist both parties in resolving the issues. The agreement created what was called a Mixed Commission, made up of representatives from both countries, and tasked it with finding a practical and satisfactory solution to the territorial dispute within a four-year period. However, the two sides disagreed fundamentally on how to proceed. Guyana insisted that Venezuela first prove that the 1899 Arbitral Award was null and void, while Venezuela argued that the nullity was already implied by the signing of the Geneva Agreement and that the Commission should simply work toward a negotiated settlement.

In October 1966, Venezuelan troops occupied Ankoko Island which sits between Venezuela and Guyana, They constructed airstrip and military installations. Guyana immediately protested this move, but Venezuela rejected the protest, claiming that the island was entirely Venezuelan territory. This event deepened mistrust between the two countries. By 1970, the Mixed Commission had failed to reach a settlement, and in an effort to ease growing tensions, both countries signed

the Port of Spain Protocol. This agreement established a 12-year moratorium on Venezuela's territorial claim, essentially putting the issue on hold to allow both governments to foster cooperation and development without escalating the dispute. Importantly, Venezuela made it clear they would not abandon their claim over Essequibo, they were simply suspending it.

Following the expiration of the moratorium in 1982, Venezuela did not decide to renew it which effectively reactivated the border conflict. Diplomatic tensions grew again during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly as Guyana began expanding its economic activities in the Essequibo region. Venezuela protested these actions, especially resource exploration, viewing them as violations of its territorial claim.

To keep the situation from escalating further, both countries again turned to the United Nations for assistance. In 1989, they agreed to the Good Office process, a mechanism through which the UN Secretary-General would appoint a personal representative to facilitate dialogue between the two sides. This process continued for several decades, however it failed to result in any substantial progress towards a solution. Throughout this time, diplomatic tensions would periodically flare up, as Guyana would continue to grant international companies concessions for resource exploration in the disputed area, which was vehemently protested by Venezuela. Throughout this Guyana continued to maintain its position that the 1899 Arbitral Award was final and legally binding, while Venezuela continued to insist on its invalidity.

The 21st Century

By the 2010s, interest in the region grew sharply as offshore oil exploration accelerated. With the Good Office process stalled and no settlement in sight, the UN

Secretary-General announced in 2018 that the border controversy would be referred to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Guyana supported this move, seeing it as a way to finally settle the issue through international law, while Venezuela initially rejected the referral, maintaining its historical position.

Current Situation

Currently the conflict over the region remains unresolved, with both sides unable to reach any form of consensus. Throughout 2024 and into 2025, tensions have remained high. Guyana continued to expand oil exploration and production in offshore blocks near the disputed area, supported by major international companies. Venezuela, facing a deep economic crisis and domestic political pressures, increased its nationalist rhetoric around the Essequibo claim, framing it as a matter of historical justice. In early 2025, reports of increased Venezuelan military activity near the border and naval patrols in contested waters drew international concern, prompting statements from CARICOM, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the United States urging restraint. This is what the dispute region looks like today:

Figure 2: Current Map of the disputed territory between Guyana and Venezuela (Satellite map/The Interpreter, 2024).

Involvement of the ICJ

Although this was referred to the ICJ in 2018, due to issues such as the lack of Venezuela's involvement and the Covid-19 pandemic, little progress has been made by the ICJ. Only in April of 2023 was the ICJ able to rule that they had the jurisdiction to rule on the territorial dispute. Later in December of 2023 the ICJ issued provisional measures. They ordered both countries to avoid behaviour that would aggravate and worsen the dispute or alter the status quo in the Essequibo region. Shortly after Venezuela held a conversational referendum in which it claimed sovereignty over the territory and proposed the creation of a Venezuelan state called Guayana Essequibo. Guyana and several international actors heavily condemned these actions describing it as provocation and a risk to escalating regional tensions.

Effects on the Essequibo Region

The Essequibo region has a population of around 125,000 people, this is around 15.8% of Guyana's total population and ⅔ of its land, for Venezuela the region is around 17.5% of its current administered land. For the inhabitants of the Essequibo, the dispute continues to shape daily life. The region is sparsely populated but rich in natural resources, including gold, diamonds, timber, and oil. Communities there face insecurity and economic marginalization, as well as environmental degradation from illegal mining activities. Migration pressures have also intensified, with many Venezuelans crossing into Guyana to escape economic hardship at home, creating new social and economic pressures in border communities.

Why the region is so sought after

The Essequibo is not only important for its natural resources but also for its strategic location along the Atlantic coast. For Guyana, defending its sovereignty over the region is tied to its rapidly growing oil industry and national identity. For Venezuela, the claim serves both economic and political purposes, providing a rallying point during periods of domestic crisis.

Consequences of the conflict

Economic consequences

The economic consequences of this ongoing conflict are significant. Guyana's oil boom, which began in earnest around 2020, has transformed it into one of the world's fastest-growing economies. However, this has also made the country more vulnerable to external threats and heightened tensions with Venezuela. For Venezuela, the unresolved dispute has added to the strain of its broader economic crisis, intensifying its efforts to assert claims over the resource-rich territory. Meanwhile, illegal gold mining and smuggling have undermined governance on both sides of the border, creating grey zones of authority and environmental harm.

Social consequences

Socially, the dispute fuels nationalism and anxiety. Many Essequibo residents live in limbo, caught between competing territorial claims and lacking full economic development. Nationalist narratives on both sides have hardened, and political leaders continue to invoke the dispute as a way to rally domestic support. Despite the tensions, the ICJ proceedings continue, with further hearings scheduled into 2025, but a final ruling may still be years away.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Guyana

Guyana maintains that the Essequibo region legally belongs to it based on the 1899 Paris Arbitration Award, which defined the border between British Guiana (now Guyana) and Venezuela. The Guyanese government views this award as final and binding under international law and argues that Venezuela's renewed claims violate its territorial sovereignty. For Guyana, the Essequibo region is central to its economic growth, especially following major offshore oil discoveries in recent years. Guyana has consistently pushed for the case to be resolved through the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and has sought international support from organizations such as CARICOM and the United States.

Venezuela

Venezuela disputes the legitimacy of the 1899 ruling, arguing that it was the result of unfair influence and collusion between Britain and other arbitrators. It claims that the Essequibo territory was unjustly taken from it and historically belonged to Venezuela since it was part of Spanish colonial lands. Venezuela sees the Essequibo as an issue of national pride and historical justice, especially amid domestic economic struggles. Its government has opposed ICJ involvement, preferring direct bilateral negotiations, and in 2023 held a national referendum claiming sovereignty over the region.

China

China has significant economic interest in Guyana's oil sector, this is through Chinese state-owned enterprises eg: China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC). Companies such as these hold a stake in major offshore oil fields in Guyana's waters and therefore share about the outcome of the dispute. Officially China has taken a neutral

stance having called for both Guyana and Venezuela to resolve the dispute in a peaceful way respecting both countries sovereignty. Moreover, Chinese infrastructure investments in Guyana, in its airports, hospitals, mining and trade means that China has a vested interest in regional stability as well as Guyana's ability to continue attracting foreign investment and its economic growth. While China is not a direct party to the territorial claim, its deep economic ties with Guyana mean that any escalation of the dispute could affect Chinese investments and influence in the region.

Group of Seven (G7)

The G7 consists of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK, US. They have taken a clear public stance on the issue and have issued statements backing Guyana's territorial integrity and in March 2025, G7 foreign ministers issued a joint statement condemning Venezuelan threats or incursions into Guyanese-administered waters. The G7's involvement raises the diplomatic stakes for Venezuela, signalling that escalation could attract international consequences. It also provides Guyana with important political backing in multilateral fora and strengthens its leverage in the ongoing proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

The United Nations only became strongly involved in the Guyana–Venezuela border dispute in recent years, after both countries failed for decades to settle the issue through direct talks and regional agreements. In 2018, the UN Secretary-General referred the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), marking a major step toward an international legal solution. The ICJ confirmed its authority to hear the case in 2020, and hearings are still ongoing, however a ruling on the case would be a promising step forward

towards resolving the dispute. The UN has since focused on preventing escalation and encouraging both sides to resolve the conflict peacefully.

- Arbitral Award of 1899, Paris Arbitration Tribunal (XXX/491-542.pdf)
    - Ruled in favor of Britain, establishing the current de facto border between Venezuela and what is now Guyana.
    - Initially accepted but later contested by Venezuela, which argued the decision was politically influenced.
- Geneva Agreement, 17 February 1966 (volume-561-i-8192)
    - Signed by the United Kingdom, British Guiana (now Guyana), and Venezuela under UN support.
    - Established the Good Offices process to seek a peaceful resolution. Helped avoid open conflict but failed to achieve a final settlement.
- Referral to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), 30 January 2018 (171/171-20180404-PRE-01-00)
    - The UN Secretary-General referred the case to the ICJ after decades of diplomatic stalemate.
    - On 29 March 2018, Guyana officially filed an application in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Venezuela, commencing ongoing legal proceedings.

Possible Solutions

Calling for the establishment of a United Nations supervised border cooperation zone, this would be to prevent further military escalation along the disputed Essequibo region. This would require neutral observers or peacekeeping monitors to ensure that neither country violates deals or or endangers border communities.

Creating a joint resource management commission between Guyana and Venezuela. The committee would have equal representation from both sides and work towards managing natural resources such as oil, gold, and forests in the disputed territory. This could help solve the current disputes and disagreements around natural resource extraction and usage.

Having regional organizations such as CARICOM and the Organization of American States (OAS) to assist as mediators and facilitators of peace talks, providing a neutral platform for negotiations, also allows regional organisations to offer perspective and get involved with the dispute due to vested interests they may have.

Implementing environmental protections and monitoring agreements to help prevent illegal mining, deforestation and pollution in the region, they can also support joint environmental initiatives.

Bibliography

Useful Resources

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guyana%E2%80%93Venezuela_territorial_dispute
- https://cebri.org/revista/en/artigo/138/notes-on-the-history-of-the-venezuelaguyana-boundary-dispute
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUgxxNTzCyI
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwD1_KjYW9w
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYXGpo-85aA

Citations

"Does the World Have Any Energy Left to Cope with Another War? | Lowy Institute." *Www.lowyinstitute.org*, www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/does-world-have-any-energy-left-cope-another-war.

"File:Guayana Esequiba Disputed Area Venezuela-Guyana.png - Wikimedia Commons." *Wikimedia.org*, 20 Mar. 2024, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guayana_Esequiba_Disputed_Area_Venezuela-Guyana.png. Accessed 2 Nov. 2025.

Gunson, Phil. "Venezuela Presses Territorial Claims as Dispute with Guyana Heats up | Crisis Group." *Crisisgroup.org*, 8 Apr. 2025, www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela-guyana/venezuela-presses-territorial-claims-dispute-guyana-heats.

Office of the Historian. "Milestones: 1866–1898 - Office of the Historian." *State.gov*, 2019, history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/venezuela.

United Nations. "Border Controversy between Guyana and Venezuela | Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs." *Dppa.un.org*, dppa.un.org/en/mission/border-controversy-between-guyana-and-venezuela.

Wikipedia Contributors. "Guyana–Venezuela Crisis (2023–2024)." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2 Sept. 2025, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guyana%E2%80%93Venezuela_crisis_(2023%E2%80%932024)#Venezuela_announces_referendum.

---. "Guyana–Venezuela Territorial Dispute." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 19 Dec. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guyana%E2%80%93Venezuela_territorial_dispute.