



## Introduction

The word «frontier» comes from the Latin *frons* or *frontis* and means «confine of a State or limit», «placed and positioned in front» and «military leader or chief who commanded at the front»<sup>1</sup>; in other words, the front line established by an army. In fact, in ancient times, the size of a kingdom was the primary criterion for determining its power. However, today, with few exceptions, territorial extension is not an end in itself<sup>2</sup>.

Nowadays, most conflicts related to borderlines or territories take place in very specific areas, where two or more actors dispute natural resources such as rare earths (Russia in Ukraine), water (Iraq, Nigeria, or Somalia), or diamonds (Sierra Leone); or they attempt to dominate an area of high strategic importance (such as the Golan Heights between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria). Borders and wars are so closely related that the former can trigger the latter.

The current problem between Colombia and Peru focus on a territorial dispute over the sovereignty of Santa Rosa Island and other fluvial formations in the Amazon River, in the triple border area that includes the towns of Leticia (Colombia), Santa Rosa (Peru), and Tabatinga (Brazil). This controversy is a direct consequence of the dynamic changes and the accumulation of sediment in the Amazon River channel, which, over the decades, have caused the emergence of new islets such as Santa Rosa (which has ended up merging with Chinería Island).

In this context, the Colombian-Peruvian border in the Amazon ceases to be a static line drawn on a map and becomes a living geographical space in constant transformation. This biophysical instability not only challenges historical treaties but also redefines the security and economy of local populations. When the river channel shifts, it is not just meters of earth and mud that move; the jurisdiction over vital navigation routes and access to strategic resources that sustain effective sovereignty also shifts.

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary of the Spanish Language. RAE. <https://dle.rae.es/frontero>

<sup>2</sup> One of these could be Russia's historical need to extend its boundaries as a means of protection, since Moscow lacks natural barriers (as it is located in the middle of a vast plain), nor does Russia have sufficient population to occupy its own territory. And if you do not occupy your territory, it means you do not control your borders.

Image 1. Chinería and Santa Rosa Islands over time (1984, 1995, 2005 and 2020 respectively).



Source: Google Earth.

The divergence arises because Colombia is beginning to see its access to the Amazon at risk—a source of wealth and economic livelihood for the region's population—while also affecting Colombian national identity and territorial security, as the river is the primary route of communication (Leticia can only be reached by air or by boat).

In early August 2025, President Petro maintained that Santa Rosa, as well as other fluvial formations, emerged after the treaties were signed and, therefore, have not been officially assigned to either country, requiring a process of assignment by mutual agreement. Conversely, Peru rejects this stance because the island is linked to Chinería Island, which was assigned to Peru in 1929.

### History of the conflict

The territorial controversy between Colombia and Peru has historical roots that extend from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (since the era of Gran Colombia and its subsequent disintegration) and has been shaped by complex diplomatic processes and armed conflicts, added to the natural dynamics of the Amazon River itself.

On July 3, 1828, following a series of diplomatic incidents, Colombia declared war on Peru. This conflict would end the following year with the signing of the Treaty of Guayaquil. Although it was not its central theme, the treaty also addressed the territorial dispute between both states, establishing that a commission would be appointed to examine, rectify, and set the dividing line. The fact that Gran Colombia was dissolved two years later, preventing the fulfilment of what had been agreed upon, left the boundary issue unresolved.

After several decades without progress, subsequent negotiations between both countries resumed in 1894, with the basins of the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers as the principal

areas of litigation. In these areas, colonization attempts by both countries led to armed clashes, the most remembered being that of La Pedrera<sup>3</sup> in 1911.

Image 2. Map of the hydrography between the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers.



Source: Ministry of Transport – Colombian Geographical Society.

Subsequently, the Salomón-Lozano Treaty (1922) apparently put an end to the conflict that had been entrenched for nearly a century, thanks to both countries ceding parts of their territories<sup>4</sup>: Colombia ceded the area known as the San Miguel-Sucumbíos Triangle (territory between the Putumayo and San Miguel rivers, which currently belongs to Ecuador) and Peru did the same with the left or northern bank of the Putumayo River, along with the Amazon (or Leticia) Trapezium<sup>5</sup> (a trapezoid-shaped corridor that allowed

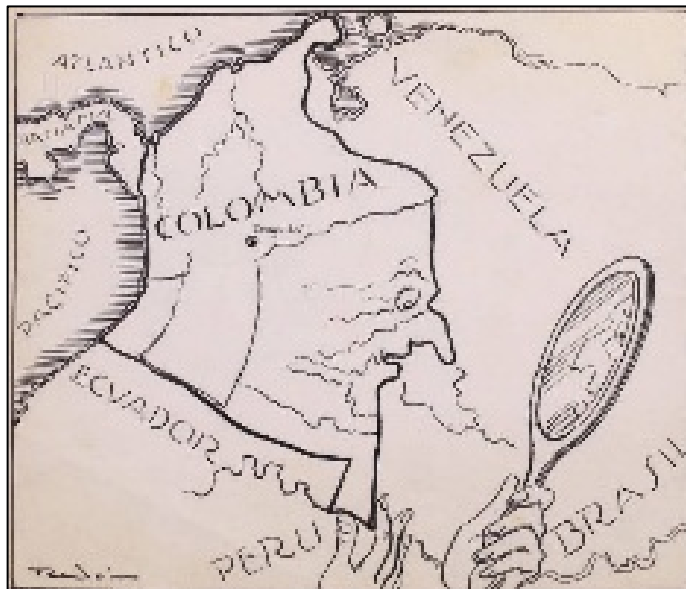
<sup>3</sup> The La Pedrera conflict was a series of skirmishes near the Caquetá River that took place between Colombia and Peru over the territorial possession of a vast jungle area north of the Amazon.

<sup>4</sup> Governments of Colombia and Peru, 1922. Salomón-Lozano Treaty. Lima, n.p.

<sup>5</sup> The unnatural logic of this «piece» of territory is striking, to the point that it was seen by Colombians themselves as a kind of aberration. An example of this is the caricature published by Colombian Ricardo Rendón in the newspaper «El Tiempo» (Image 3).

Colombia access to the Amazon River, located much further south). In this way, both countries would share just over 110 kilometres of the river<sup>6</sup>.

Image 3. A cartoon of «Colombia» looking at herself in the mirror.



Source: El Tiempo (newspaper), number 5922, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

Furthermore, the thalweg or valley line was established as the river border; that is, «the midline of the main navigable channel of the watercourse, in the interest of its use for international navigation»<sup>7</sup>. This term can also be considered the line that marks the deepest part of the river.

The Amazon is the longest and largest river in the world by discharge<sup>8</sup>. If we add its own fluvial dynamics—the process by which river action (primarily erosion and sedimentation) modifies the land relief—the conclusion is that the river's fluvial morphology presents an intrinsic variability that makes it difficult to set static boundaries; in other words, its watercourse will be highly unstable. Additionally, due to the Coriolis effect (as a result of the Earth's rotation), this line shifts slightly but constantly to the right in the Northern Hemisphere; conversely, it shifts to the left in the Southern Hemisphere<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> «More than 80% of the river's course is in Brazil, 18% is exclusively in Peru, and 2% is shared between Peru and Colombia». The Amazon River. Amazon Waters.

<https://aguasamazonicas.org/cuencas/canal-principal-del-amazonas/rio-amazonas>

<sup>7</sup> Pan-Hispanic Dictionary of Legal Spanish. Royal Spanish Academy.

<sup>8</sup> At the Óbidos narrows, a flow of 216,000 cubic meters of water per second has been measured, and its water volume accounts for nearly one-fifth of the planet's liquid freshwater. Which is the world's largest river by discharge? iagua. <https://www.iagua.es/respuestas/cual-es-rio-mas-caudaloso-mundo>

<sup>9</sup> In the case at hand, with the Amazon River channel flowing from west to east, if the thalweg shifts to the right, it means it is moving southward—that is, toward Peru.

Image 4. Border agreed under the Salomón-Lozano Treaty.



Source: [BBC](#).

Both countries not only signed the agreement but also ratified it, considering «each and every one of the differences that, due to the boundaries between Colombia and Peru, had arisen»<sup>10</sup> up to that moment as «terminated».

Between 1928 and 1929, a Mixed Demarcation Commission (as established) was responsible for the technical application of the treaty, defining the thalweg line and assigning the islands existing at that time, establishing that they would belong to the nation whose riverbank was closest. Thus, Chinería Island was assigned to Peru, while Ronda Island (just north of the former) remained under Colombia's charge.

However, the treaty generated deep rejection among Peruvians, particularly in the Loreto region (the department to which Leticia belonged before passing to Colombia), as it meant losing a key territory for river trade and Amazonian connection.

In September 1932, just over forty-armed Peruvians occupied Leticia without authorization from their government<sup>11</sup>, seeking to reverse the effects of the treaty and

<sup>10</sup> ANON., 1922. Tratado de Límites y Navegación Fluvial entre las Repúblicas de Colombia y Perú. Lima, s.n.

<sup>11</sup> At least that is the explanation that the Peruvian President, Miguel Sánchez Cerro, gave to the Colombian ambassador in Lima.

recover land they considered their own. The official Colombian position labeled the act an invasion of its sovereignty and responded by sending troops, leading to armed clashes throughout the Amazon region, especially in Tarapacá and Güepí.

The conflict (which was complex due to the jungle geography, extreme climate, and tropical diseases) took a turn with the assassination of Peruvian President Luis Miguel Sánchez Cerro<sup>12</sup> in late April 1933. His successor, General Óscar R. Benavides, adopted a more conciliatory strategy, prioritizing negotiation over confrontation<sup>13</sup>. With Brazilian mediation, U.S. pressure, and the support of the League of Nations, a provisional agreement was finally reached for Leticia to be temporarily administered by this organization.

This led to 1934, the year the Protocol of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation between the Republic of Colombia and the Republic of Peru was signed, better known as the Rio de Janeiro Protocol, with the aim of «outlawing war, solving their differences politically or legally, and preventing the possibility of conflicts between them»<sup>14</sup>.

Through this agreement, Peru deplored the previous events and expressed a desire to recover the «intimate friendship of the past» (Article 1); the 1922 treaty was ratified, stating it «cannot be modified or affected except by mutual consent of the parties or by decision of International Justice» (Article 2); special agreements were adopted regarding customs, trade, free navigation of rivers, protection of inhabitants, transit, and border police (Article 4); a Mixed Commission was maintained to resolve future conflicts (Article 6); and both countries even declared «not to make war or employ, directly or indirectly, force» (Article 7).

In May 1934, after many months of tension, Leticia was officially returned to Colombia<sup>15</sup>, while Peru obtained guarantees of free navigation on the Amazon.

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ATEHORTÚA CRUZ, A. L., 2007. El conflicto Colombo-Peruano. Apuntes acerca de su desarrollo e importancia histórica. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/4014994.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> His assassination, the result of internal political tensions in Peru, was linked to a sector of the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) political party, who prepared a plot. Mendoza, R., 2018. Magnicides: Chronicle of Three Foretold Deaths. La República, July 22<sup>nd</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> BASADRE GROHMANN, J., 2014. Historia de la República del Perú, 1822-1933. 1 ed. s.l.: Producciones Cantabria S.A.C.

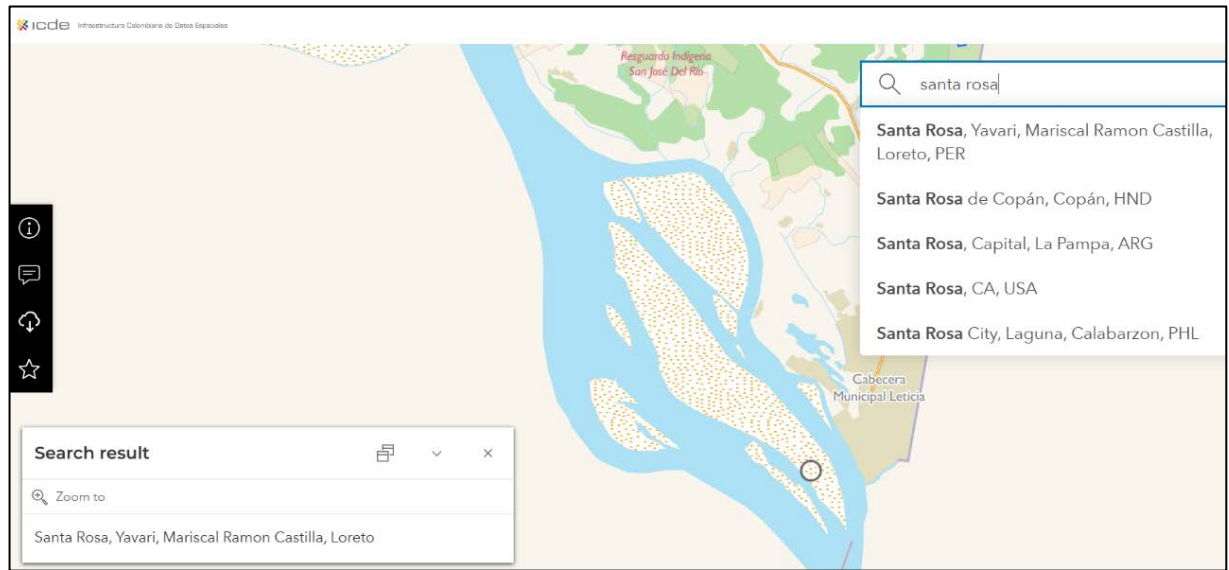
<sup>14</sup> Governments of Colombia and Peru, 1934. Protocol of Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Colombia and the Republic of Peru. Rio de Janeiro, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> SOLAR SILVA, D., 2025. The last war between Peru and Colombia over the Amazon: This was the 1932 conflict that few remember. <https://www.infobae.com/peru/2025/08/08/la-ultima-vez-que-peru-y-colombia-se-enfrentaron-en-un-conflicto-armado-por-territorio-amazonico/>

Beginning in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Santa Rosa Island began to «emerge» because of erosion on the Peruvian side and the subsequent deposition of sediment toward the left (and Colombian) bank of the river<sup>16</sup>. This means that while Peru is losing ground (land), it is gaining river (water); conversely, Colombia is expanding its ground but losing river, and thus, sufficient flow reaching the port of Leticia<sup>17</sup>.

During the 1960s, settlers of Peruvian origin began to establish themselves in what would later be known as Santa Rosa de Yavari (south of the current Chinería Island). Since the 1970s, the Peruvian state has been building various infrastructures (schools, migration offices, customs administration, police, army), without Colombian authorities raising any objection. There is even a binational cartographic coincidence, as official maps from Colombia's Agustín Codazzi Geographic Institute also locate Santa Rosa as part of the Peruvian province of Mariscal Ramón Castilla (Image 5).

Image 5. Colombian Spatial Data Infrastructure (ICDE in Spanish) webpage screenshot.



Source: Agustín Codazzi Geographic Institute.

## Current situation

The recent reactivation of the controversy surrounding Santa Rosa Island can be traced back to July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024. During the First Technical Border Security Meeting held in Leticia, the Director of Territorial Sovereignty of the Colombian Foreign Ministry stated that the

<sup>16</sup> The higher the river's speed, the greater the erosion. With the loss of kinetic energy in the fluid, sediments begin to settle, leading to accumulation and the subsequent formation of islands.

<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, if the border on the Amazon River were to be updated as the thalweg shifts, the truth is that Santa Rosa Island would end up being Colombian.

island was being «irregularly occupied by Peru»<sup>18</sup>. This declaration prompted a formal protest from the Peruvian government to Colombia's Chargé d'Affaires in Lima<sup>19</sup>, reaffirming its rights of sovereignty and jurisdiction over said territory. Just three days later, Colombia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement<sup>20</sup> regretting the incident and reiterating its commitment to maintain bilateral cooperation, which contributed to an initial reduction in diplomatic tension<sup>21</sup>.

Subsequently, in June 2025, the Peruvian Congress approved Bill No. 11278/2024-PE, which created the district of Santa Rosa de Loreto within the department of Loreto. This can be interpreted as a relevant administrative act in terms of the effective exercise of jurisdiction<sup>22</sup>.

On August 5, 2025, the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a new statement<sup>23</sup> pointing out that Santa Rosa Island emerged after the territorial assignment made in 1929, indicating the need to address its status through a delimitation process agreed upon between both foreign ministries.

In this context, the President of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, publicly stated—via the social network X—that the Peruvian government had «occupied territory that belongs to Colombia» and that such action would constitute a violation of the Rio de Janeiro Protocol. However, this interpretation contrasts with the pre-existing administrative reality, given that the Peruvian state has maintained infrastructure and services in the area since the 1970s without documented prior objections from Bogotá. Furthermore, during an

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<sup>18</sup> MC CUBBIN, R., 2024. Colombian official asserts that Santa Rosa Island, in Loreto, is not Peruvian territory and that it is being «irregularly occupied».

<https://www.infobae.com/peru/2024/07/10/funcionario-de-colombia-asegura-que-isla-santa-rosa-en-loreto-no-es-territorio-peruano-y-que-esta-ocupada-irregularmente/>

<sup>19</sup> In March 2023, the Peruvian government withdrew its ambassador from Bogotá in response to statements made by President Petro, who had expressed his support for former President Pedro Castillo, who was removed from office following a failed self-coup in 2022. For Dina Boluarte, President of Peru until October 2025, Petro's statements were «interventionist and offensive». From then until February 2025, the relationship between both countries remained in a state of minimum representation, with chargés d'affaires assuming diplomatic functions.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, 2024. Press release regarding the incident presented at the meeting of the First Technical Table on Border Security.

<https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/newsroom/publiques/comunicado-prensa-79>

<sup>21</sup> El Comercio, 2024. Foreign Minister on Colombia's statement regarding Santa Rosa Island: «It is a satisfaction because it lowers the level of tension».

<https://elcomercio.pe/politica/gobierno/isla-santa-rosa-canciller-sobre-pronunciamento-de-su-par-de-colombia-es-una-satisfaccion-porque-baja-el-nivel-de-la-tension-cancilleria-peruana-javier-gonzalez-olaechea-ultimas-noticia/>

<sup>22</sup> Government of Peru, 2025. PCM (Presidency of the Council of Ministers): Territorial demarcation so far this year benefits more than 2.5 million Peruvians and strengthens the State's presence.

<https://www.gob.pe/institucion/pcm/noticias/1195200-pcm-demarcacion-territorial-en-lo-que-va-del-ano-beneficia-a-mas-de-2-5-millones-de-peruanos-y-fortalece-la-presencia-del-estado>

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, 2025. Press release - «Santa Rosa Island».

<https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/newsroom/news/comunicado-prensa-peru>

institutional event in Leticia commemorating the Battle of Boyacá, Petro claimed that a helicopter with military personnel had landed on Santa Rosa Island.

For its part, the Peruvian government reacted with an official statement<sup>24</sup> expressing its «firmest and most energetic protest», reiterating that it exercises its sovereignty over the territory in question in a «legitimate and legal» manner. Along the same lines, the President of the Council of Ministers of Peru maintained that Santa Rosa Island is part of Chinería Island—assigned to Peru in 1929—and that, although the thalweg shifts, «it does not mean the border moves».

Since last summer, the situation at this triple border has been characterized by incidents reflecting the fragility of the current coexistence, with events recorded that have tested the patience of both foreign ministries.

Currently, the presence of security forces has increased on both sides. Colombia has modernized its detachment in Leticia with better operational capabilities, while Peru maintains permanent surveillance through its Fifth Naval Zone. These incidents suggest that while the Permanent Mixed Commission for the Inspection of the Colombian-Peruvian Border<sup>25</sup> (COMPERIF) works on the maps, the terrain remains a space of friction where any miscalculation could trigger a much larger crisis.

### **The Problem of Leticia (and Colombia)**

Leticia faces a complex scenario that could have significant implications in the medium and long term. As has been evidenced, the synergistic combination of large-scale deforestation and the anthropogenic effects of climate change have altered the basin's water regimes. This scenario, added to cyclic sedimentation processes and the river's own meandering dynamics, has caused the Amazon not only to lose critical flow in its left branch but also its main course to systematically shift toward Peruvian territory.

This fluvial phenomenon may have implications that transcend the strictly geographical; it could represent a significant threat to the connectivity of the capital of the Amazonas department, which faces the potential risk of becoming isolated from its primary artery of

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<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Peru, 2025. The Peruvian Government expresses its protest over statements by the Government of Colombia regarding Peru's territorial integrity.

<https://www.gob.pe/institucion/rree/noticias/1221792-el-gobierno-peruano-expresa-su-protesta-por-declaraciones-del-gobierno-de-colombia-sobre-integridad-territorial-del-peru>

<sup>25</sup> COMPERIF is the body in charge of studying, resolving, or proposing solutions for any matter regarding the border line.

subsistence, transforming what is today a vital port into a sedimentary plain without access to deep-draft navigation.

Even a study by the Faculty of Mines at the National University recently warned of the risk that Colombia could lose its most important fluvial connection<sup>26</sup>. A model developed by the Colombian National Navy in 2018 did the same, predicting that by the year 2030, Leticia could lose its access to the Amazon<sup>27</sup>. To make matters worse, according to Professor Santiago Duque, coordinator of the Wetland Management Laboratory at the National University, «the transformation of the riverbed is a natural process that authorities have ignored for decades», as currently only 19% of the flow passes through Colombia, whereas in 1993 it was 30%.

Image 6. Current state of the Amazon River channel and its projection for 2030.



Source: «El Espectador» newspaper, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Thus, if no remedy is implemented in a short period of time, Leticia could cease to be a riverside town, which would have «cultural, economic, and territorial» implications

<sup>26</sup> National University of Colombia, 2025. S.O.S. The Amazon River is moving away from Colombia.

<https://minas.medellin.unal.edu.co/noticias/facultad/6464-s-o-s-el-amazonas-se-aleja-de-colombia>

<sup>27</sup> LÓPEZ ROMERO, Y. A., 2025. «In 2030, Colombia will be left without the Amazon River», researcher claimed amidst controversy with Peru.

<https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2025/08/06/colombia-se-esta-quedando-sin-el-rio-amazonas-aseguro-investigador-en-medio-de-la-polemica-con-peru/>

according to Professor Lilian Posada García, attached to the Department of Geosciences and Environment of the Faculty of Mines at the National University of Colombia, a specialist who has spent years researching and warning about the situation<sup>28</sup>. In this regard, President Petro has expressed concern over the possible loss of Leticia's fluvial connectivity, fearing it may stop being an Amazonian port, thus losing its primary source of income.

Ultimately, Colombia maintains that the thalweg has experienced a natural shift in recent decades, modifying the relative position of the island, which would constitute a legally relevant factor for its sovereignty. Conversely, Peru defends an interpretation based on the stability of previously agreed-upon delimitations, considering that geomorphological changes do not alter established sovereignty.

If we take the 1922 and 1934 agreements literally, and maintain the idea that the thalweg is the line that demarcates the border between both countries, it is certain that as it shifts toward Peru (something it is expected to continue doing), at some point there will be Peruvian islands that would end up on the other side of it. But the real question to be addressed is whether the border should «update» as it shifts. To this end, in addition to the diplomatic route and the option of signing a new agreement or protocol based on current knowledge of river dynamics, the role played by COMPERIF in the future will be key.

### **COMPERIF and Technical Diplomacy as an Escape Valve**

COMPERIF represents the institutional mechanism designed so that science and technology prevail over political rhetoric. In other words, in the case at hand, it serves as «technical diplomacy»: a branch of diplomacy where, «due to global globalization, important technical issues—such as the environment, terrorism, or drug trafficking—require qualified experts not belonging to the diplomatic career»<sup>29</sup>.

This permanent mixed commission is not merely a diplomatic body; it is a team of engineers, geographers, and cartographers. Its fundamental role is the densification of border markers and the verification of the coordinates established in the 1822 Salomón-

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<sup>28</sup> POSADA GARCÍA, L. & HERRERA ARANGO, J., 1999. El Río Amazonas en los alrededores del puerto de Leticia. *Boletín de Ciencias de la Tierra*, Issue 13, pp. 57-72.

<sup>29</sup> BORAU BOIRA, E. & GARCÍA GARCÍA, F., 2014. Ámbitos: *Revista Internacional de Comunicación*. Evolución de la diplomacia y el protocolo ante el conflicto, Volume 24, pp. 1-12.

Lozano Treaty. Since the Amazon is a «living» river that constantly changes its course, COMPERIF acts as the official interpreter of those changes. Its function is to determine whether the appearance of an islet is a phenomenon of «alluvion» (the slow and gradual increase of land on riverbanks by the deposit of materials carried by water) or «avulsion» (the violent and sudden action of a river that tears a considerable portion of land from one estate and attaches it to another), both of which carry distinct legal implications under international law.

In moments of high tension, COMPERIF serves as a technical communication channel stripped of ideology. By focusing on bathymetric measurements<sup>30</sup> and flow studies, it allows both governments to maintain a dialogue without appearing to yield on their claims of national sovereignty. COMPERIF meetings (such as the XIV session in Lima on September 11 and 12, 2025) are essential for de-escalating the conflict and channelling it toward joint engineering solutions.

The future of COMPERIF must evolve from mere boundary inspection to the joint management of the fluvial ecosystem. The problem of the Amazon River moving away from Leticia cannot be solved by Colombia unilaterally, as it requires interventions in waters that Peru claims as its own. COMPERIF is, therefore, one of the primary institutional forums where binational infrastructure projects can be negotiated to ensure that Leticia remains a riverside port and that Santa Rosa sees orderly development. Strengthening this body is a potentially relevant mechanism to mitigate the risks of escalation between both countries.

## Conclusions

The current controversy on the Colombia-Peru border affects not only the legal stability of the region—by testing the validity of century-old treaties against recent environmental changes—but also the diplomatic relations between both countries and, most importantly, the civilian population of both states.

While for Peru, Santa Rosa Island is a geomorphological extension of Chinería Island (assigned in 1929), Colombia considers it a later formation whose sovereignty has not been formally defined. This could mean that international treaties are not always sufficient

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<sup>30</sup> Technique for measuring and representing the depth of seas, rivers, and lakes. Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Language. <https://www.rae.es/dhle/batimétrico>

to manage territories defined or affected by complex fluvial processes in rivers with high sedimentary mobility. This is especially true when modern knowledge, technological advances, and tools are immensely superior to those available at the time of signing (satellite imagery, multibeam bathymetry, computational hydrodynamic modelling to predict river displacement, LiDAR sensors, GPS, etc.).

From a geopolitical perspective, the shifting of the riverbed could represent a significant challenge for the projection of Colombian sovereignty in the Amazon, as the main channel's movement toward Peruvian territory has reduced the water flow by more than 10% in three decades. This persistence of sedimentary dynamics raises questions about the future viability of Leticia as a deep-draft port, which could impact its food security and strategic relevance if joint management mechanisms are not established.

If we strictly follow the 1922 Salomón-Lozano Treaty, the border passes through the thalweg of the river. If it shifts southward, Santa Rosa Island could end up on the Colombian side. Conversely, Peru considers that the island has eventually merged with Chinería Island, which was indeed assigned to Peru in 1929.

In this context, the Permanent Mixed Commission (COMPERIF) stands as a key instrument for channelling the management of the conflict through technical and institutional mechanisms. Both states have reiterated their commitment to this body as a path for dialogue. From an analytical perspective, its strengthening could contribute to reducing political tension and favouring solutions based on technical and scientific criteria.

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