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MLA 369

Professor Diaz

8 December 2022

Resource Wars: How Bolivia Lost Its Access to the Pacific

In the era of globalization, some of the most important assets a country can possess is a natural resource that has a global market and a "geographical location (proximity to major markets, along trade routes, not landlocked)" conducive to trade¹. Bolivia losing its access to the Pacific in 1883 serves as a case study in understanding the influence of resources and trade routes on the geopolitics of a region. With the help of maps produced by regional and international publishers, the paper will explore the War of the Pacific for sovereignty in the Atacama region between Bolivia and Chile. The paper will shed light on how boundaries and resources can spark regional disputes, and political agreements to resolve such disputes can give rise to even bigger conflicts.

The region of Atacama (between 18°S and 26°S) along the Pacific coast of South America was in a boundary dispute from the late 18th century. The region was originally part of The Real Audiencia of Charcas, which fell under the Viceroyalty of Peru. In 1776, Charcas was transferred to the newly created Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata (modern-day Argentina), as can be seen in Fig.1. As independence struggles swept the entire Latin American continent in the early 19th century, Charcas again got transferred to the Viceroyalty of Peru in 1810². However, with Peru and Chile gaining independence soon after, the Atacama region of Charcas saw multiple overlapping claims.

¹ Yusuf

² St. John 2-4

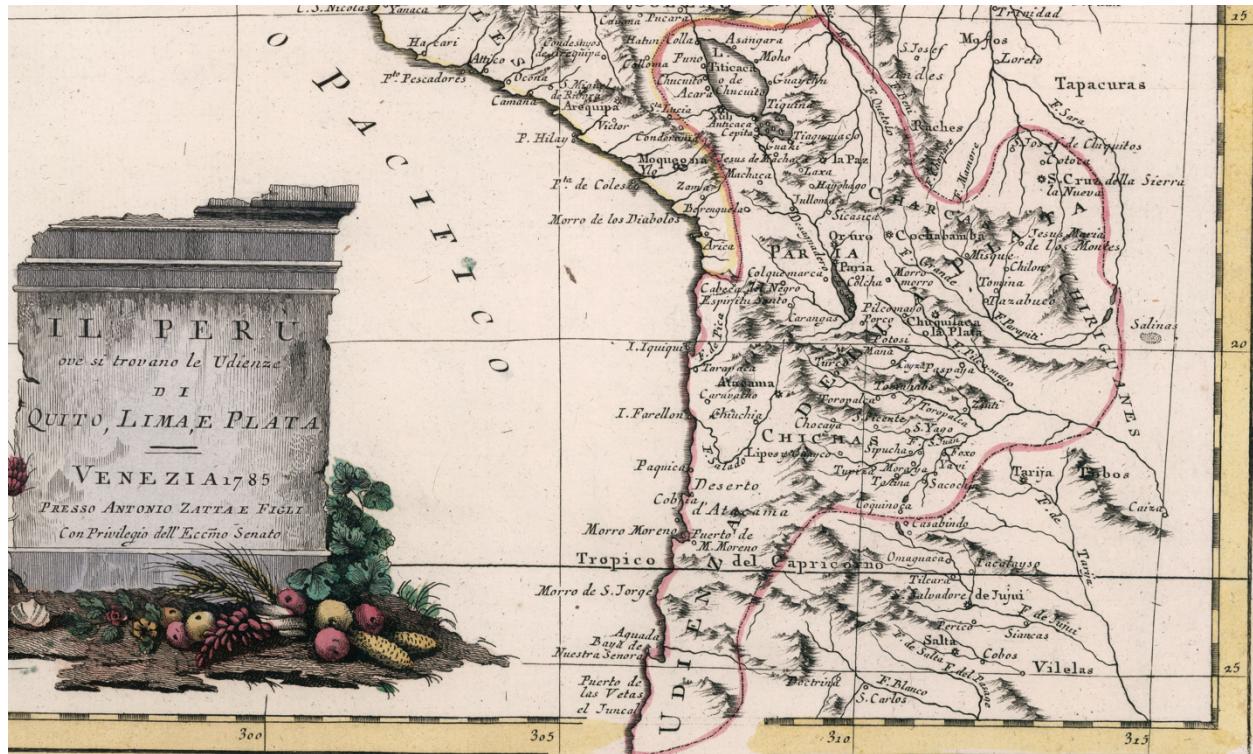


Fig. 1: Section of 1785 map depicting the Real Audiencia of Charcas under the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata.

Source: Appendix Figure A

The boundary dispute in the Atacama was also accentuated because the Spanish administration never precisely defined the boundaries in the region. Before the discovery of Saltpeter reserves, Atacama had a low economic potential for the Spanish empire. As a result, proper delineation did not exist between Spanish viceroyalties surrounding the area³. However, this negligence became a problem for the new republics of Peru and Chile as they decided to implement *uti possidetis* to determine their boundaries⁴. *Uti possidetis* calls for keeping the boundaries between the new states like what existed at the time of independence from Spain.

³ Some regions of the Atacama were shown in Chile in 1793 even though the area was officially part of the Viceroyalty of Rio De la Plata. See Appendix Figure B

⁴ Ratner 594. Also, see Appendix Figure C for an 1816 map acknowledging Peru's claim

However, with boundaries never defined in the Atacama, the region became embroiled in border disputes from 23°S to 25°S, which remained unresolved until 1825.

With Simon Bolivar proclaiming independence for Bolivia in 1825, the new state defined its boundaries as it existed for the Real Audiencia of Charcas⁵. As with any newly independent state, Bolivia went through its initial phase of political turmoil, after which it saw a relative period of stability till 1839. During this period, the country's boundaries gained international acceptance, as depicted in Fig. 2. As per the general criteria for creating a new state at that time, it was important that the international community formally recognizes a state's area claim⁶. With publishers from various countries making maps depicting the Atacama region from 21°S to 25°S as part of Bolivia, the new country got recognition for its boundaries.

⁵ Wagner, Maria Luise 17

⁶ Fabry 49, Lauterpachet 385



Fig. 2: Section of 1829 map by London publishers showing the Pacific boundaries of Bolivia from River Loa to River Salado.

Source: Appendix Figure D

Increasing reliance on global markets and the political environment in the early 1840s saw the border dispute over the Atacama region arising again. The region was always known to be rich in guano (fertilizer) and commercial mining operations existed as early as 1810. New reserves of sodium nitrate or saltpeter were discovered in the 1840s, which coincided with increased demand for fertilizers in European and North American markets (See Appendix Figure E). In addition, saltpeter was also useful in making ammunition, making it a commodity of

global demand⁷. Given the proximity of the region to the Pacific and already established trade routes, a new era of vested interests in the region began. Stanford researchers Paul David and Gavin Wright have theorized about such sudden resource booms. In their 1996 paper, they argue that an "economically relevant resource base can grow as a result of new discoveries and institutions that effectively channel market incentives toward exploration and commercial utilization."⁸ Whereas economic incentives were a clear reason for contention over the Atacama region, there was another factor in play, as discussed next.

Differing political situations between Bolivia and Chile also motivated Chile to reassert its claim on the Atacama. Chile enjoyed a dominant position in the region due to being politically and economically stabler than Bolivia⁹. In 1842, Chile declared the 23°S (near Mejillones) as its northern frontier, which increased the hostilities between the two nations¹⁰. However, due to internal strife, Bolivia usually found herself in less assertive positions in such skirmishes¹¹. Chile's expansionist desires, coupled with Bolivia's weaker political and economic situation, resulted in a series of treaties between the two countries to resolve the conflict.

The Boundary Treaties of 1866 and 1874 between Chile and Bolivia sought to establish condominium provisions in the Atacama region¹². However, the terms of the treaties and their implementation (or lack thereof) opened doors for bigger problems. As per the 1866 treaty, the international boundary between Chile and Bolivia was drawn at the 24°S¹³. Also, the two countries were to divide the export duties paid on guano and minerals in the zone between the

⁷ Offen 140

⁸ Gavin and Wright 203-45

⁹ Sater 15-16

¹⁰ "Bolivia/Chile Pacific Access"

¹¹ St. John 7-8

¹² A condominium in international law is a political territory (state or border area) in or over which multiple sovereign powers formally agree to share equal dominium.

¹³ "Tratado de límites." Google translate used to convert Spanish to English

23°S and 25°S as shown in Fig. 3. However, "differing interpretations of the 1866 treaty soon complicated diplomatic relations between Bolivia and Chile (as) the agreement did not specify by name the individual items from which Chile was to derive half the fiscal revenues."¹⁴ The situation deteriorated rapidly, forcing Bolivia to enter into a secret defense pact with Peru in 1873. As per the pact, Peru was to come to Bolivia's aid in case of any Chilean aggression. The defense pact was also in the interest of Peru, which sought to safeguard its own saltpeter reserves in the Tarapaca region near 20°S. Despite the tensions, Bolivia and Chile made a final attempt to resolve the issue in 1874 via a new boundary treaty. Chile had mining operations in the region between the 23°S and 24°S but agreed to relinquish its right to the area in return for no increase in taxes by the Bolivian government for 25 years¹⁵. However, disagreement over the stipulations of the 1874 treaty soon resulted in another dispute, making the situation worse.

¹⁴ St. John 10

¹⁵ St. John 11



Fig. 3: Map showing the ‘Mutual Benefits Zone’ as per the Boundary Treaty of 1866.

Source: Keysenger. “Mutual Benefits Treaty 1866.” *Wikimedia Commons*, 22 Apr. 2015, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MBT.en.svg#metadata. Accessed on 10 Nov. 2022

The tensions between Bolivia and Chile came to a head with the breach of the 1874 Boundary Treaty. A Chilean company, *Compañía de Salitres y Ferrocarril de Antofagasta* (CSFA), was running the biggest mining operation in the Atacama region in 1878. To renew its mining license, the Bolivian government of the time, led by Hilarion Daza, proposed a tax of 10 cents per quintal on the extracted nitrate. However, CSFA objected to this increased tax and

stated that it violated the 1884 Boundary treaty¹⁶. The company officials reached out to the Chilean government to redress its grievances, who argued in favor of CSFA. However, Bolivia claimed that the tax increase was unrelated to the treaty and refused to reduce the tax. Historians have pointed out that the refusal to roll back the taxes was mainly driven by Daza's reliance on Peru's support (due to the 1873 defense pact) and hence, was a gambit to force a compromise from Chile¹⁷. On the other hand, Chile's knowledge of the nitrite-rich fields of Atacama made the treaty violation the perfect excuse to expand its territories¹⁸. By December 1878, negotiations had reached a stalemate, and the prospect of war loomed large.

The abovementioned agreements failed partly due to no clear redressal mechanisms against treaty breaches. It is a well-established fact in political theory that international agreements without enforcement mechanisms rarely succeed. As New York University's Emily O'Brien and Richard Gowan state, "international agreement's success ... (depends on) how implementation and compliance are enforced and monitored."¹⁹ Enforcement mechanisms encourage compliance by the parties involved and foster increased cooperation²⁰. In the case of Chile and Bolivia, no third party was involved in the negotiation talks. Also, no clear penalties were defined for the party violating any terms of the agreement. As historians note, it is the disagreement over the 1874 boundary treaty that "proved to be the *casus belli*" for the War of the Pacific²¹.

The War of the Pacific (1879-1884) resulted in a decisive victory for Chile, and it gained 600 miles of new territory along the Pacific coast. The war started in March 1879 after Chilean

¹⁶ Collier and Sater 128

¹⁷ Collier and Sater 128

¹⁸ Skuban 10

¹⁹ O'Brien and Gowen 8

²⁰ Ouellet

²¹ St. John 12-13

forces stormed into Antofagasta in Bolivian territory. Bolivia immediately invoked the defense pact of 1873, resulting in Peru joining the war on the Bolivian side. With twin benefits of resources and access to the Pacific at stake, the war became a painful yet necessary course of action for all the countries involved²². Though lacking in the number of soldiers, Chile had a more advanced military. It has recently acquired two ironclads and had better weapons than its opponents. With the help of educated and experienced officers in their ranks, Chilean forces meticulously planned their military campaigns and emerged victorious²³. By the time truce was signed between the belligerents in 1884, Chilean forces had brought the Pacific coast from 18°S to 24°S under its control²⁴. Chilean victory was recognized internationally, and the maps produced thereafter by Chile (and many European and American powers) placed the Atacama and Tarapaca region under Chile's boundaries (Fig. 4).

²² Sater 7-43

²³ Farcau 48-50

²⁴ To get an idea on how the territory between 18°S to 24°S changed hands during the war years, check Appendix Figure F, Figure G, and Figure H. Maps are taken from Mitchell's New General Atlas of 1879, 1880, and 1884

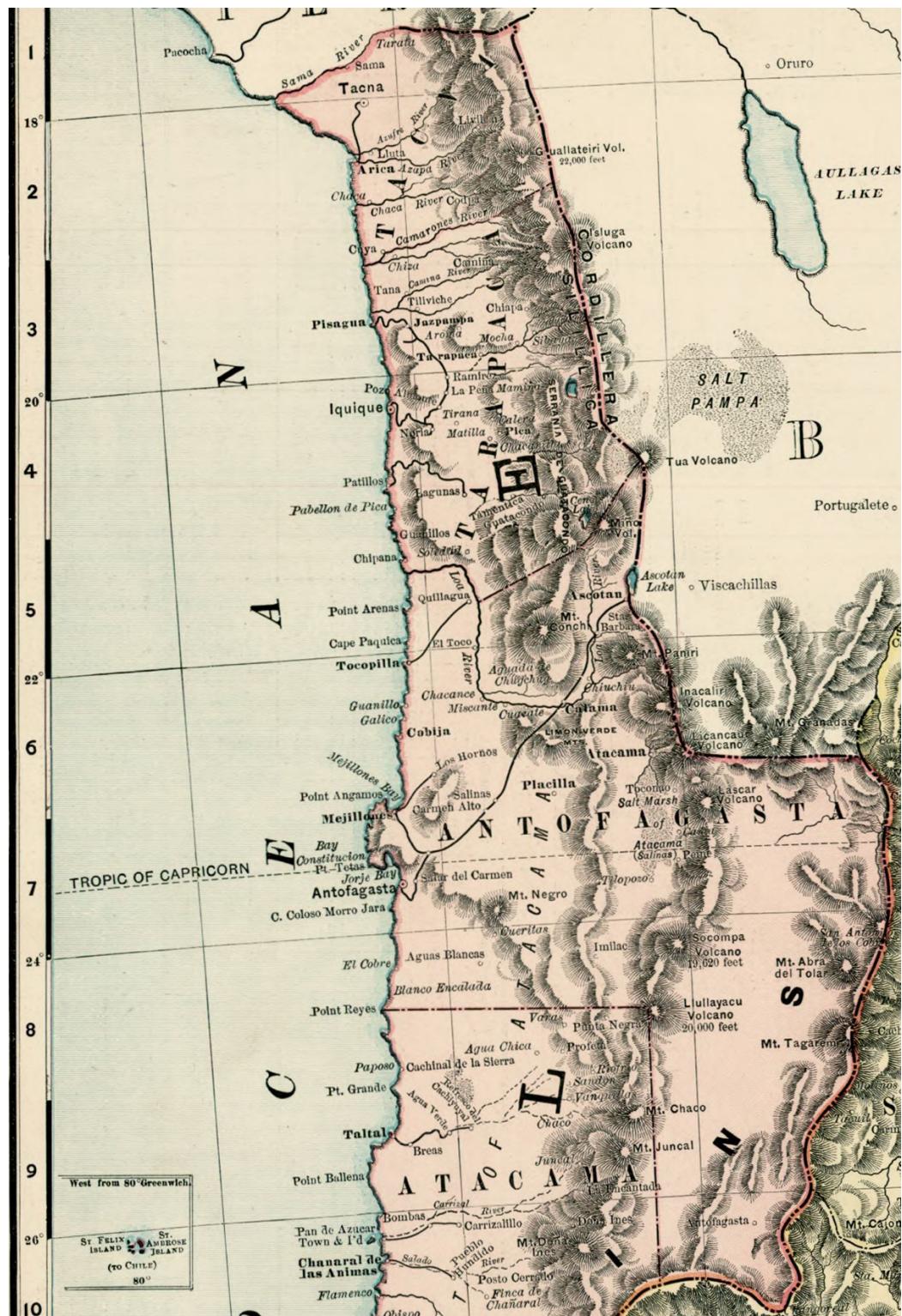


Fig. 4: Section of 1892 map by American publishers showing new boundaries of Chile from 18°S to 24°S

Source: Appendix Figure I

After decades of dispute over the lost territories, Bolivia and Peru finally reached an agreement with Chile in 1904 and 1929, respectively. The 1904 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Bolivia and Chile "delimited the boundary from south to north through 96 specified points ... between Cerro Zapaleri (Cerro Sapaleri), the Argentina tripoint, and Cerro Chipapa."²⁵ Maps produced by Bolivia after that, as shown in Fig. 5, recognize the ceding of the Atacama region and the new boundaries of the nation. As part of the treaty, Chile recognized the right of Bolivia in perpetuity to commercial transit through its territory and ports. Similarly, under the Treaty of Lima in 1929, Tacna (in the Tarapaca region) was transferred back to Peru, with Chile retaining Arica²⁶. With the treaties in place, the three countries finally recognized each other's boundaries, but political unease between Bolivia and Chile continues to this day.

²⁵ The Geographer 5

²⁶ The Geographer 3. The present-day boundaries between Peru, Bolivia and Chile are a result of the 1929 Treaty of Lima. See Appendix Figure K



Fig. 5: Section of 1911 map by Bolivian government showing new boundaries of the country. The border between Bolivia and Chile is depicted by +++ symbol on the map

Source: Appendix Figure J

Relations between Bolivia and Chile have been on a downhill slide for many years.

Bolivia has asked for more autonomy over the use of ports in the Atacama region as part of the

1904 treaty but without much success²⁷. Multiple negotiation failures have led to the suspension of diplomatic relations between the two countries since 1978²⁸. *The Book of the Sea*, published by the Bolivian government in 2015, highlights the loss of revenue due to restricted access to the Pacific. Also highlighted is the suspended railway line between Arica and La Paz, which is part of the 1904 Treaty²⁹. In 2003, when the Bolivian government proposed to export the country's natural gas via the Atacama (involving cooperation with the Chilean government), a massive protest broke out in La Paz due to Anti-Chilean sentiments³⁰. On the other hand, Chile sees any claim on the Atacama region as unjustified and has also won a case on the subject against Bolivia in the International Court of Justice³¹. Though Bolivia has recently shown interest in reviving diplomatic relations with Chile, the road to reconciliation is long³².

The War of the Pacific has shaped the fortunes of Bolivia and Chile well into the 21st century. Bolivia suffers from the economic downsides of being a land-locked country. The loss of the Pacific is seen by Bolivians as the major reason for the country's underdevelopment, whereas the massive coastline of Chile is one of its strongest assets. Moreover, the resource-rich Atacama region has been instrumental in Chile's growth and a sore spot for Bolivia. Negotiation and agreement failures are responsible for the current situation between Bolivia and Chile. It is the need of the hour that the two countries weigh in on their past experiences and arrive at a robust political solution to resolve the Atacama dispute.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bolivia 24-29

²⁸ Ciara

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bolivia 58

³⁰ Samper

³¹ International Court of Justice

³² "Bolivia Considers"

Appendix

Maps Referenced in the Paper



Figure A: 1785 Map of Peru and surrounding region of Charcas

Source: Zatta, Antonio. "Il Peru." David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, List Number 11598.245, Image Number 11598245

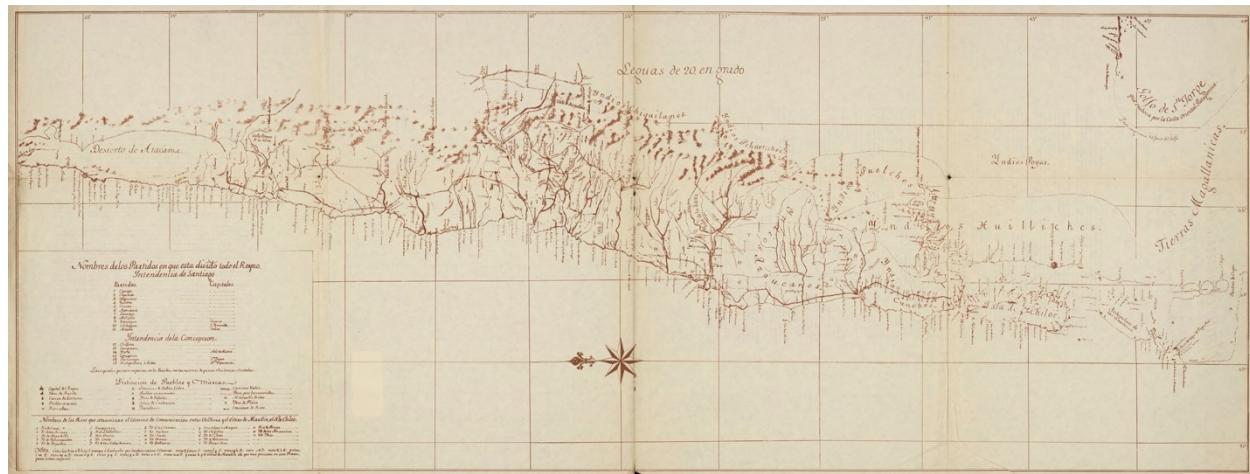


Figure B: 1793 Map depicting the Kingdom of Chile under Spanish Empire. Atacama Desert (extreme left) is placed within the territory of Chile. (Google Translate)

Source: Baleato, Andreas. "Plano General del Reyno de Chile." Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, Laboratorio Digital, BN Código: MP0003910



Figure C: 1816 Map depicting Atacama as part of Peruvian territory by a British publishing house

Source: Thomson, John. "Peru, Chili, and La Plata." David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, List Number 1007.077, Image Number 1007077



Figure D: 1829 Map of Bolivia published in *A New General Atlas* by a London publishing house

Source: Hall, Sidney. "Chili, la Plata, Bolivia or Upper Peru." David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, List Number 4224.054, Image Number 4224054

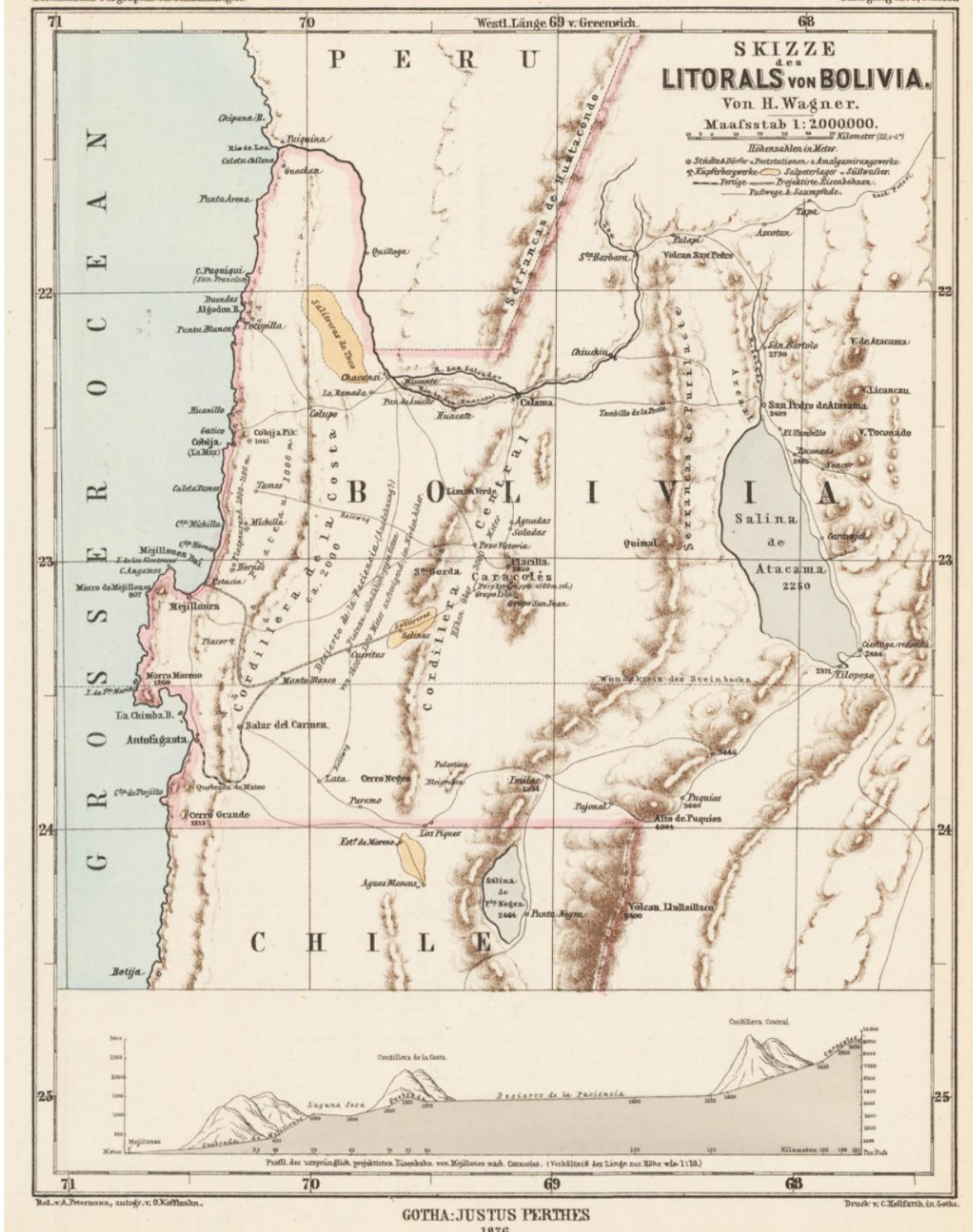


Figure E: 1876 Map showing saltpeter reserves in light brown near 22°S , 23.5°S and 24°S

Source: Wagner, Von H. "Skizze des Litorals von Bolivia." The Book of the Sea, p. 18



Figure F: Map showing boundary between Bolivia and Chile drawn at 24°S. The map shows political boundaries as they existed before the War of the Pacific (early 1879). Published in Mitchell's New General Atlas of 1879

Source: Mitchell Jr., Samuel Augustus. "Map of South America, Showing Its Political Divisions." David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, List Number 4564.052, Image Number 4564052

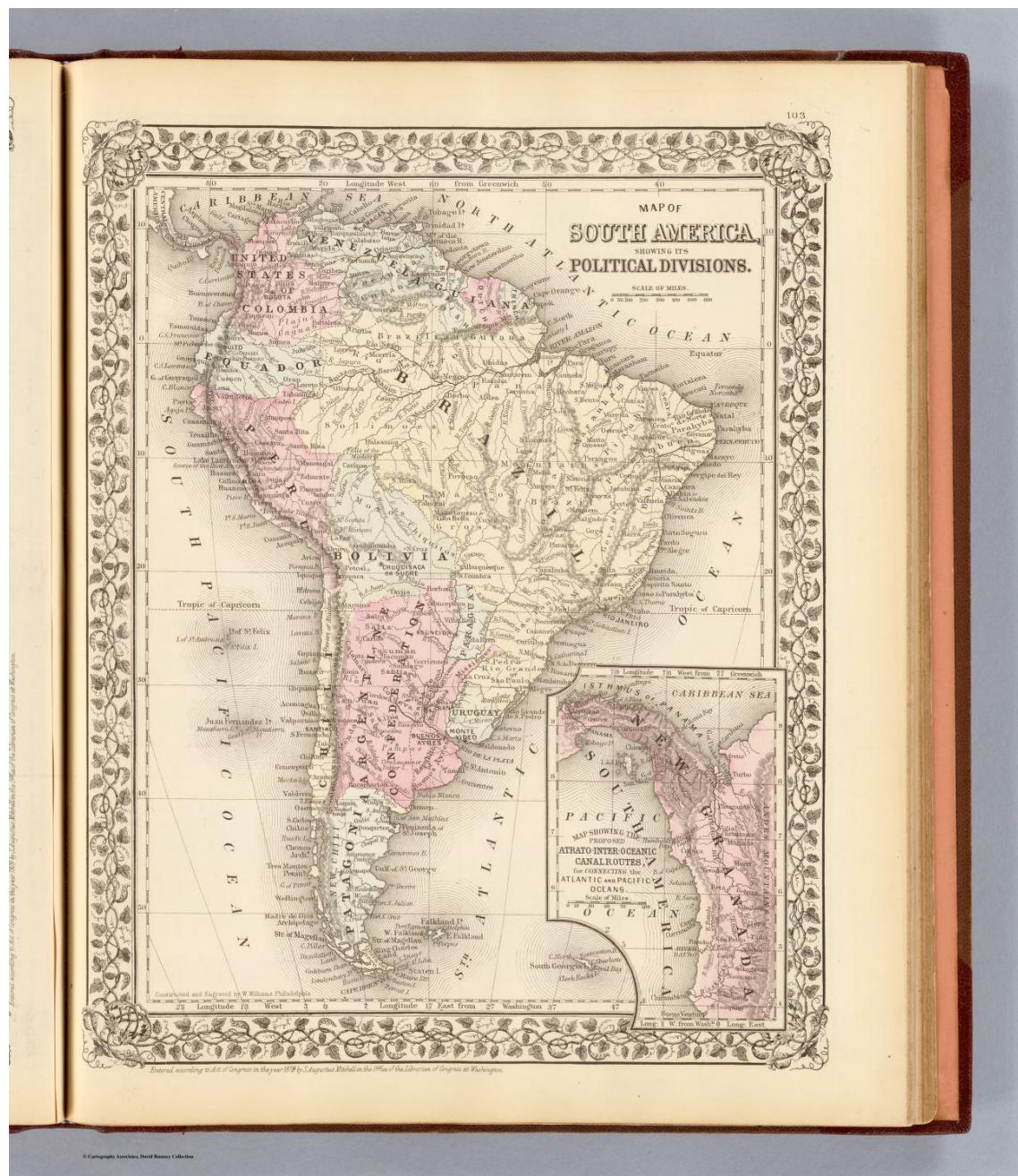


Figure G: Map showing boundary between Peru, Bolivia and Chile. Chile is shown as occupying Atacama region (near 22°S), cutting off Bolivia's access to the Pacific. The lack of clear boundary between Bolivia and Chile is probably mapmaker's acknowledgement of the ongoing political situation due to the war. Published in Mitchell's New General Atlas of 1880

Source: Mitchell Jr., Samuel Augustus and W. Williams. "Map of South America, Showing Its Political Divisions." David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, List Number 0586.054, Image Number 0586054



Figure H: Map showing boundary between Peru, Bolivia and Chile. Chile has completed its territorial expansion up to 18°S consisting of Tarapaca region. The lack of clear boundary between Peru and Chile is probably mapmaker's acknowledgement of the ongoing political situation due to the war. Published in Mitchell's New General Atlas of 1884

Source: Mitchell Jr., Samuel Augustus and W. Williams. "Map of South America, Showing Its Political Divisions." David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, List Number 0592.055, Image Number 0592055

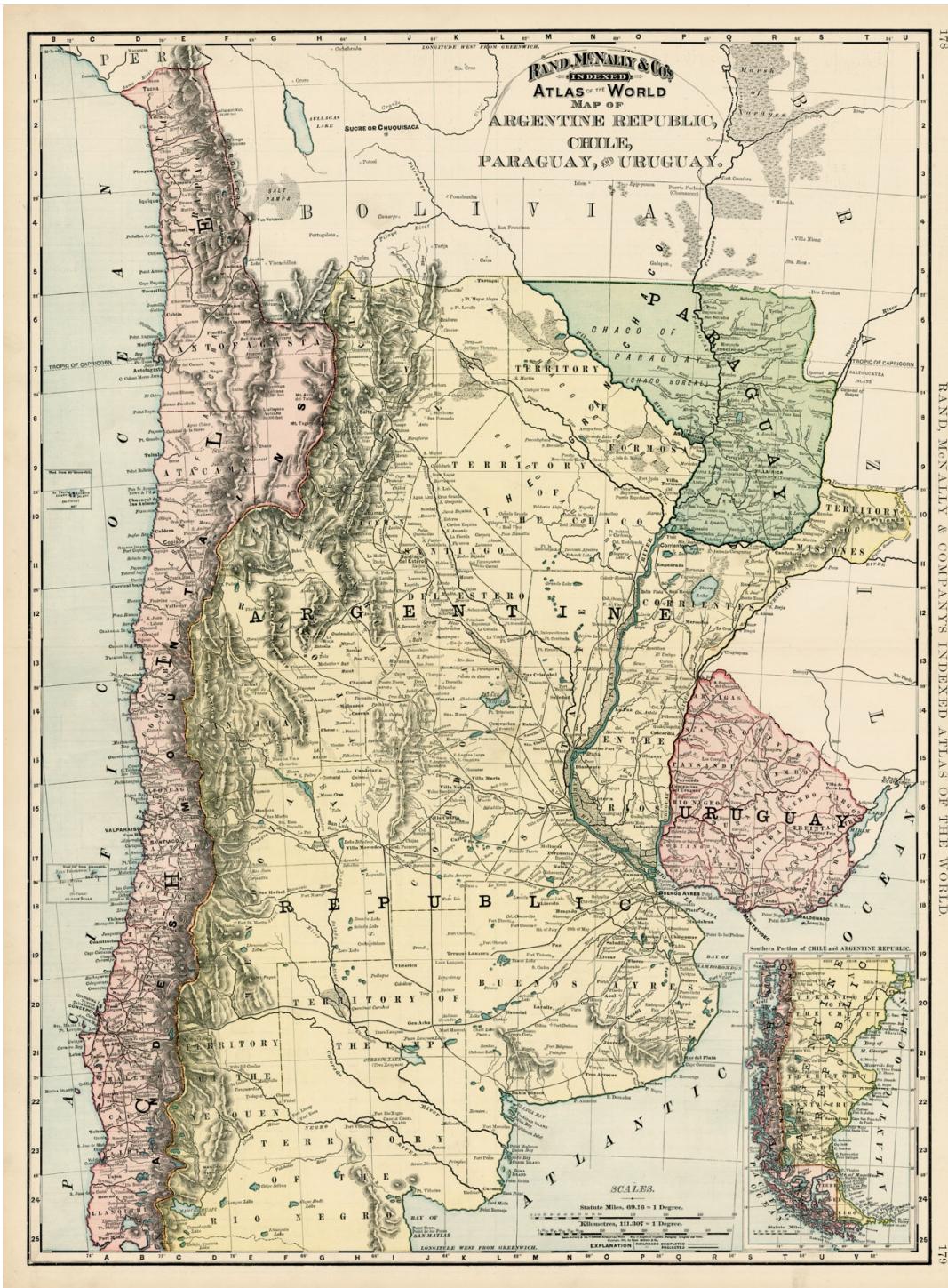


Figure I: 1892 Map of southern South American countries

Source: Rand, William and Andrew McNally. *Map of Argentine Republic, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay*. Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc., Chicago, 1892, Stock no. 5217, www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/5217. Accessed on 10 Nov. 2022.



Figure J: Map of Bolivia, published in 1911, made for General Jose Manuel Pando, who had previously served as president of Bolivia until 1904. The map is colored by departments and includes details regarding railroads completed, projected and under construction, provincial capitals, and boundaries.

Source: *La Republica de Bolivia*. Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc., 1911, Stock no. 53934, www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/53934/la-republica-de-bolivia-con-los-limites-de-los-ultimos-trata-anonymous. Accessed on 10 Nov. 2022.

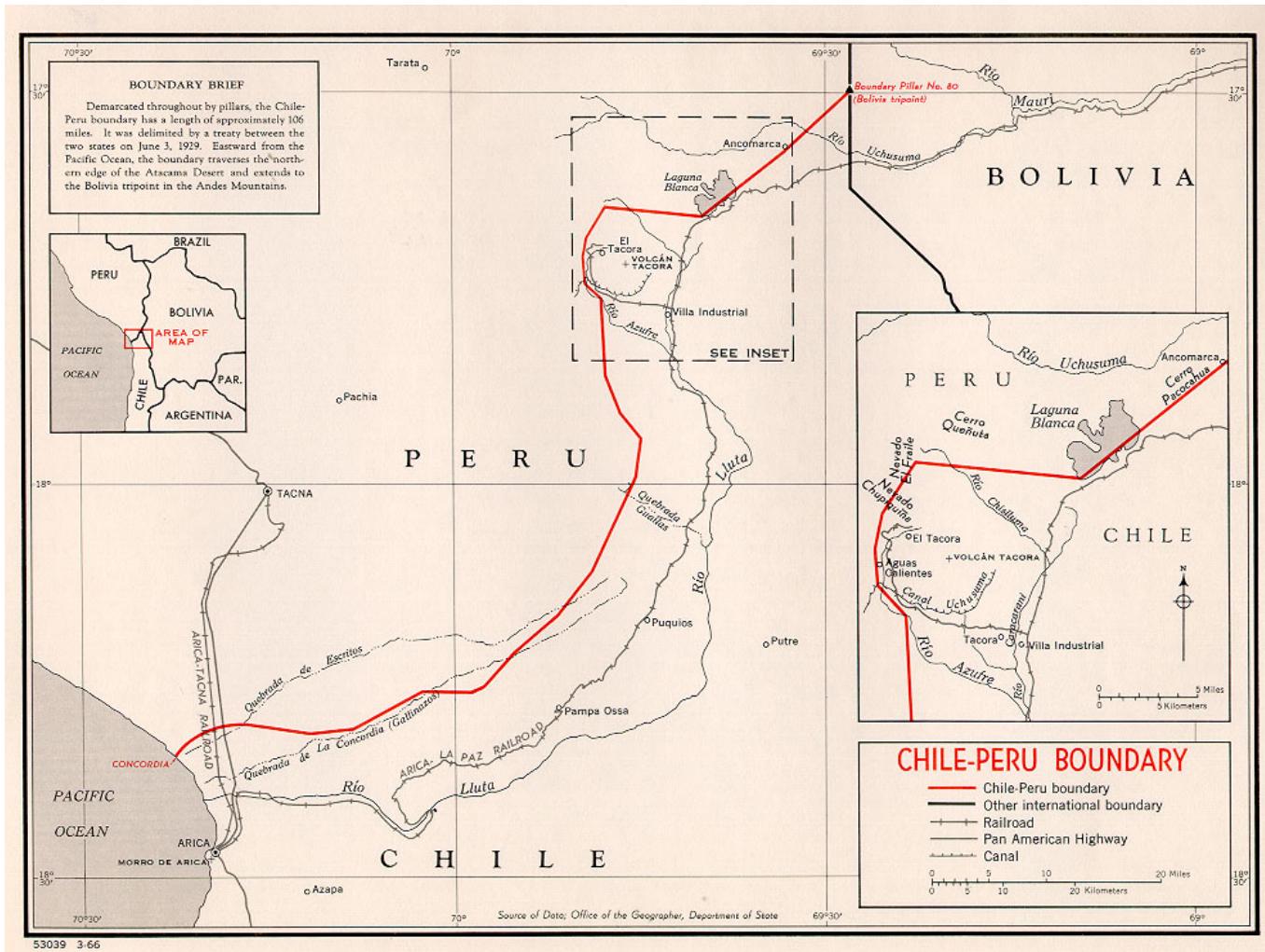


Figure K: Map produced by United States Department of State. U.S. served as arbitrator during Peru-Chile negotiations that led to 1929 Treaty of Lima.

Source: Department of State, USA. "Border Peru-Chile acc. 1929 Treaty." 1929. *Wikimedia Commons*, 11 Sep. 2016, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Border_Peru-Chile_acc._1929_Treaty.jpg. Accessed on 10 Nov. 2022.

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