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## WORKING WITH DIPLOMATIC DOCUMENTS DURING MILITARY REGIMES: THE DYNAMICS BETWEEN BRAZIL, PARAGUAY AND ARGENTINA IN THE 1960S AND 1970S

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**Abstract:** This paper is about relations between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina during the military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s. The theme is related to the disagreements involving the three countries in the construction of the Itaipu Binational Hydroelectric Plant between Brazil and Paraguay. Argentina, being downstream from the hydroelectric plant, felt aggrieved. This resulted in disagreements that were only resolved in 1979 with the signing of the Tripartite Agreement. It was necessary to visit the diplomatic archives of the three countries and develop the work by analyzing diplomatic documents. The result is an enrichment of the subject.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The aim of this research is to study the direct relations between three nations that were protagonists on the international stage in a controversial episode involving the use of energy from the River Plate Basin<sup>1</sup> in the 1960s and 1970s. The outcome of this issue was fundamental for the climate of stability in South America to gain ground, enabling the creation of MERCOSUR in the early 1990s. These countries are Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay.

The object of this research is related to the issue surrounding the construction of the Brazilian-Paraguayan binational hydroelectric power plant of Itaipu, which is currently the second largest in the world in terms of size and energy production capacity, and the binational hydroelectric power plant of Yacyretá, which belongs to Paraguay and Argentina. The subject is well known to scholars in the field of relations between the three countries, but this research aims to go behind the scenes of the diplomacy of these nations, which began in 1962, when a border dispute involving

the states of Brazil and Paraguay began, and ended with the Tripartite Agreement in 1979. The aim is to continue the work carried out during my master's degree, the dissertation entitled *Os Saltos da Discórdia: o impasse entre Brasil e Paraguai em torno das Sete Quedas (1962-1966)*, analyzing the consequences of the outcome of the controversy involving the two countries mentioned in the history of the Platine Basin.

The time frame proposed for this project is between 1966 and 1979. The following lines will describe in more detail the episode proposed for study. However, it is important to briefly review the history of the previous period in order to understand the reasons that led to the controversy involving Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay in the period to be researched.

In the second half of the 1950s, under the government of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961), Brazilian researchers carried out studies in the Sete Quedas region in the west of the state of Paraná and on the border with Paraguay to find out about the territory's water potential. The country was undergoing a process of industrial growth and needed to increase its energy demand. In 1962, *Jornal do Brasil* published an article on the subject and this caught the attention of the Paraguayan embassy in Brazil, which immediately passed the news on to its government. The state of Paraguay, which had been dictatorially ruled by Alfredo Stroessner since 1954, repudiated Brazilian research in the region and warned the then government of Brazil, at the time administered by João Goulart, that such studies could not be carried out, as Sete Quedas did not yet belong to the Brazilian state. In response, in 1962, João Goulart's government claimed that since the Peace and Boundary Treaty

1. According to the website of the Agência Nacional das Águas (ANA), the A Bacia do Prata has a surface area of 3,200,000 km<sup>2</sup>, is the fourth largest river basin in the world and the second largest in South America. Its length is 275 km, its maximum width is 221.5 km and its flow is over 22,000 m<sup>3</sup>/sec. It covers large swathes of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia and Uruguay. Its main rivers are the Paraguay, Uruguay and Paraná, the latter being the most important.

of 1872 the region had belonged to Brazil. The Paraguayan government did not hold back and repudiated the Brazilian response. The Paraguayan claim was that despite the signing of the Peace and Boundary Treaty of 1872 and the Complementary Treaty of 1927, Sete Quedas had not been characterized and therefore did not officially belong to Brazil. It is important to note that the Treaty that defined the border in 1872 stipulated that the border markers between the two countries should be placed by a joint commission from both nations.

However, problems with setting the markers in the region of the Apa River and the outflow of the Black Bay into the Paraguay River, which also involved sovereignty claims by Bolivia, prevented the work from being completed. For this reason, in 1927 the Complementary Boundary Treaty was signed to characterize the region in question and other places that needed landmarks to be placed. However, during the 1930s, the Paraguayans on the then mixed commission did not agree with the placing of the markers in Sete Quedas in favor of Brazil because they claimed that the region in question did not have the 5th fall as its highest point, but the 1st<sup>2</sup>. And if this were true, Sete Quedas should be Paraguayan sovereignty. Because of this impasse, the characterization of the border was not completed again and this became a problem decades later.

However, given that since the 1940s both nations had been experiencing a process of rapprochement since the end of the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), the presidents of the two countries met in the state of Mato Grosso in January 1964 to resolve the

2. The demarcation process between states makes use of natural elements such as rivers, mountains and hills to make the characterization. In the absence of rivers, the demarcation follows the highest points, which can be mountains or hills. In the case of the border between Brazil and Paraguay, the dividing line of that region was demarcated between the summit of the Maracaju mountain range (in what is now southern Mato Grosso do Sul) and the 5th fall of Sete Quedas, which was considered the highest. Therefore, above that point the territory belonged to Brazil. However, during the characterization process after the *Tratado Complementar de Limites* of 1927, the Paraguayans disagreed and claimed that the highest point was the 1st fall. If this were true, all of the Seven Falls would belong to Paraguay.

impasse. After the meeting, Jango announced to the Brazilian press, as did Stroessner to the Paraguayans, that Sete Quedas would have its energy potential exploited jointly. But it's worth noting that this agreement was not signed in any way.

After the civil-military coup on Brazilian soil that ousted Jango from power months later, the military took over the Presidency of the Republic and maintained good relations with Paraguay. But in June 1965, a group of soldiers, on orders from the federal government, occupied Sete Quedas in a place called Porto Coronel Renato. Because of this, the Paraguayans repudiated the Brazilian attitude and the impasse over the sovereignty of the region was the subject of intense controversy between the two countries. And after almost a year of exchanging diplomatic documents that increased the controversy due to accusations from both sides, meetings were held in June 1966 between the foreign ministers of Brazil, Juracy Magalhães, and Paraguay, Sapeña Pastor, to resolve the dispute. At the end of the last meeting, the Cataratas Act was signed, which officially consecrated the use of Sete Quedas for energy by both nations and would be the basis for the signing of the Itaipu Treaty seven years later.

During the period in which Brazil and Paraguay were experiencing the border dispute, Argentina was attentive to every detail involving its neighbors. The then Argentine president Arturo Illia (1963-1966) took the initiative to convene all the nations of the River Plate Basin to discuss issues that would make it possible to reach a better understanding of how to use the Basin. This convocation took place in June 1966 and

this was fundamental for the governments of Brazil and Paraguay to speed up the process of understanding to resolve the impasse over Sete Quedas that same month. But what was Argentina's concern in the border dispute involving its neighbors? Quite simply, its dependence on the Paraná River.

Argentina, unlike Brazil, does not have an abundance of water resources and needed the Paraná River to continue its energy development project. The construction of a large power plant on the same river upstream could jeopardize its interests, given that in previous years negotiations had already been underway behind the scenes for the construction of the binational Corpus hydroelectric plant together with Paraguay<sup>3</sup>. This element was at stake when the Argentine state took the initiative to convene the Platine nations (Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia and Argentina) for a meeting in Buenos Aires, Uruguay. And although the Argentine call took place in the first half of 1966, the meeting of the countries bordering the Plata took place in February 1967. And it can be said that this event was historic because it was the opportunity for the diplomatic corps of each country in the region to demonstrate their point of view in order to overcome the obstacles to integration. According to Christian Caubet, "on February 27, 1967, the five countries, meeting in Buenos Aires, adopted a Final Act and made a Joint Declaration in which they set the fundamental objectives of their action and defined the structures that would have to strive to achieve them" (CAUBET, 1989, p.53).

The fourth meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the River Plate Basin was held in Asunción in 1971. The final minutes of the meeting contained 25 resolutions in which points 1 and 2 set out the following objectives:

1. On contiguous international rivers where sovereignty is shared, any use of their waters must be preceded by a bilateral agreement between the riparians.

2. On international rivers of successive courses, where sovereignty is not shared, each state may use the waters according to its needs, provided that it does not cause appreciable damage to another state in the Basin.

According to Elina Zugaib, "by Argentina recognizing this legal distinction, the principle of prior consultation with regard to successive rivers was legally excluded from the context of the River Plate Basin". Prior consultation would be "the need for exchanges of information and reciprocal consultations between all the states possibly affected by hydroelectric projects" (ZUGAIB, 2006, p.111). For Caubet, "points 1 and 2 of Resolution 25 therefore fully satisfy Brazil, both because they enshrine the legal rules to which its state practice corresponds and because the five basin states have formally approved them" (CAUBET, 1989, p.77). If Brazil apparently emerged victorious with Resolution 25, Argentina was defeated, and apparently by a misinterpretation. After all, according to the Resolution, because Argentina had successive rivers, it had no right to interfere in the projects of Brazil and Paraguay, which were making a bilateral agreement because they used a contiguous river. In the words of Maria del Carmen Llover,

Through this declaration, Brazilian diplomacy obtained a great deal of support for its policy, imposing its points of view at the level of the River Plate Basin Treaty and exchanging the principle of prior consultation for the simple point of sensitive prejudice. We should then ask ourselves what were the reasons that led Argentina to sign the Act of Asunción, which went against these principles; the same ones that,

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3. The Usina de Corpus power plant, although planned, was never built because of concerns about the environmental impact on the province of Misiones (located in northeastern Argentina). The states of Paraguay and Argentina are still negotiating the feasibility of its construction.

on the other hand, it had defended up to that point, and which it continued to defend. The Asunción Act was a total incongruity between what Argentina thought, discussed and defended, and what it signed up to (LLAVER, 1979, p.27).

In 1972, Argentina began the process of taking the issue of the energy use of Sete Quedas to forums beyond South America. In June, Argentina addressed the issue at the Stockholm Environment Conference in Sweden. Without much progress, the issue was discussed at the UN General Assembly in September, when Resolution 2995 was signed, with Brazil and Argentina representing Foreign Ministers Mário Gibson Barbosa and Eduardo Mc Loughlin. On that occasion, Brazil recognized that in the exploitation of natural resources, “States should not cause harmful effects in areas beyond their national jurisdiction”. It also recognized that all technical results relating to “the work to be undertaken by States within their national jurisdiction” should be published (ZUGAIB, 2006, p.114). However, despite the words written in the document, shortly afterwards the Argentinians denounced Brazil for not complying with those terms. On the domestic scene in Argentina, according to Caubet, Resolution 2995 was not well received by the press. *El Clarin* questioned whether “Argentina has abandoned the thesis of prior consultation”. Other newspapers asked those in charge of Argentine diplomacy for explanations and called Resolution 2995 “an agreement that maintains the disagreement” (CAUBET, 1989, p.101).

And while Brazil and Argentina couldn't agree on how to use the Paraná River for energy, studies were progressing on the construction of the Sete Quedas dam. The region of Santa Maria, located 13 km below Sete Quedas, offered attractive economic results, but it was concluded that the best economic return was to build a dam at Itaipu.

Finally, in April 1973, the Treaty of Itaipu was signed between Brazil and Paraguay in the city of Brasilia. This was the major consequence of the solution to the “Sete Quedas case” in 1966. This treaty, “in line with Brazil's bilateral policy, had as its objective the construction of the Itaipu dam, which would be built on the stretch of the Brazilian-Paraguayan border that extends from the Salto de Sete Quedas (Guaíra) to the mouth of the Iguazu River” (MELLO, 1987, p.202). When dealing with the energy use of this geographical stretch, the Itaipu Treaty enshrines the Cataratas Act of 1966, even stating in the first paragraphs of the document the aforementioned agreement signed seven years earlier.

The signing of the document had important significance for the “geopolitical interests of the ‘big two’ in the region. For Brazil, Itaipu was an essentially political project and, in the view of many analysts, it was part of the strategy of the War College to establish Brazilian supremacy in the region” (ZUGAIB, 2006, p.116). For Zugaib, by signing the Treaty of Itaipu, Paraguay for the first time since the end of the War of the Triple Alliance in 1870 abandoned its pendulum position between Brazil and Argentina and opted to move towards the Brazilian state. In this sense, Menezes points out that “when Brazil signed the Treaty to build Itaipú with Paraguay on April 26, 1973, the Argentinians really began to understand that the Paraguayans were actually escaping from their domination and historical dependence” (MENEZES, 1987, p.110).

Shortly after the signing of the Itaipu Treaty, still in 1973, the then Minister of Mines and Energy, Antônio Dias Leite, declared before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies that the “Itaipu project is essentially political”. He added that the realization of the Treaty “effectively fell to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which held political negotiations with the Republic of

Paraguay so that a fair, indisputable and politically acceptable solution could be found for both countries” (MELLO, 1987, p.206-207). In fact, Antônio Dias Leite was right, as Itaipu would not have become a reality without Itamaraty’s skill. And for authors such as Itaussu Mello, the location of the plant was not simply technical, but geopolitical.

The political importance of the project, in addition to its technical and economic aspects, is a strong indication that the choice of the location for the construction of the hydroelectric plant - next to the “living border” of the southern region of the country - as well as the Brazilian-Paraguayan condominium on Itaipu, were dictated by geopolitical reasons, namely the “satelitization” of Paraguay and the strengthening of Brazil’s presence in a strategic area of the River Plate basin (MELLO, 1987, p.206-207).

Itaussu Mello’s hypothesis is not ruled out, given that there were interesting conditions for the plant to have been built in Santa Maria, a few kilometers below the Seven Falls. The fact is that Itaipu put Brazil in a favorable position in the Platine scenario, increasing its axis of influence over Paraguay and being in advantageous conditions in relation to Argentina, which was increasingly reducing its bargaining power in the region.

In 1973, Juan Domingo Perón returned to the presidency of Argentina, replacing Hector Campora. According to Zugaib, with regard to diplomatic relations in the Platine region, “convinced of the ineffectiveness of legal battles and understanding ‘that the fundamental thing was the use of the rivers and not the rules that should regulate it’, Perón inaugurated a new era in search of recovering lost time”, and the country “should start expressing itself politically through facts and the realization of works, putting an end to the so-called *paper diplomacy* in the River Plate Basin” (ZUGAIB, 2006, p.116).

In 1974 Perón died and his wife, Izabel Perón, then vice-president, took power. But his government suffered a coup d’état in 1976, at a time of political instability on Argentine soil. General Jorge Rafael Videla took power, inaugurating a new period of dictatorship in Argentina that lasted for seven years. In the midst of successive domestic events, Argentinians were still concerned about the Itaipu project. And this time the problem was related to the height of the dam of the Brazilian-Paraguayan binational.

While there was no agreement between the three nations in 1977, when the Brazilian government insisted on not allowing Argentina to intervene in its bilateral relations with Paraguay over the Itaipu bi-national power plant, the situation worsened despite the possibility of a meeting between Brazilian President Ernesto Geisel and Argentine Jorge Rafael Videla. According to Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, diplomatic tension increased when the Buenos Aires government “closed the Cuevas-Caracoles tunnel, under the Andes Mountains, to road freight bound for Chile, which led Brazil, suspecting pressure because of Itaipu, to close its borders to 80% of Argentina’s truck fleet” (MONIZ BANDEIRA, 1998, p.318).

Although Brazilian-Argentine diplomatic relations reached a peak of reprisals on both sides, probably because of Itaipu, the Argentine military who were in office did not fail to deepen exchanges with Brazil in various areas. Taking bilateral trade as an example, it reached 750 billion in 1976, when Brazil became Argentina’s first buyer and second supplier (CERVO, 2001).

After intense negotiations between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina to regulate the use of the waters of the Paraná River, the Tripartite Agreement was signed in October 1979 in Puerto Presidente Stroessner (now Ciudad del Este). According to Moniz Bandeira, the solution to the crisis between these countries

was probably due to problems in Argentina's foreign policy in the second half of the 1970s. The Argentines had serious problems in their relations with the UK over the Malvinas Islands (resulting in a war in the early 1980s), and also with Chile. With regard to the latter, President Videla kept the country in a state of imminent war over the sovereignty of the Beagle Channel. Argentina's difficulties on the South American stage due to diplomatic disagreements with its neighbors probably accelerated understandings between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina, given that the Argentines probably didn't want to have to face several geopolitical problems simultaneously (MONIZ BANDEIRA, 1987).

The agreement represented an advance in the geopolitical aspect of the River Plate Basin, but in technical terms Itaipu would lose the capacity to produce around 880,000 kwa, or from 12.6 million to 11.7 million kwa.

Even so, it is undeniable that there were more benefits for Brazil's relations with its neighbors Paraguay and Argentina than the loss of production from the Brazilian-Paraguayan binational. For Menezes, "the most spectacular result of that meeting was that, for the first time, a 'memorandum of understanding' was signed between Brazil and Argentina in which it was stipulated that all future issues of interest to both nations would be immediately discussed in a special commission of Brazilians and Argentines" (MENEZES, 1987, p.118).

While there is a great consensus among various authors that the Tripartite Agreement was a great achievement for the integration of the Platine basin, Amaral e Silva points out that "the Tripartite Agreement more than put an end to the controversy, it contributed to stability in the Plata region which, a few years later, would be fundamental for the start of the agreements that would lead to regional integration through Mercosur" (AMARAL E SILVA, 2006, p.89).

This research is a work of International Relations History and in order to achieve the objectives presented in the previous topic, it is necessary to carry out a study with access to sources. According to John Lewis Gaddis, working with "surviving structures" involves images, texts, documents and memories that allow the historian to access the past and give its events meaning (GADDIS, 2003). The historian, as Sandra Pesavento has rightly pointed out, because he works with a temporality that has been drained away, with the unseen, the un-lived, can only gain access to the past through the sources used to write his narrative (PESAVENTO, 2004).

The sources, whether they are imagery or text, act as clues, traces that enable the historian to construct an explanation of the issues raised in his investigation. According to Borges, sources are fragments of reality, the result of the involuntary or even voluntary intentions of their producers. In this way, historical knowledge becomes a theoretical-methodological operation that aims to understand and interpret the meanings that social actors attribute to their material and symbolic acts (BORGES, 2005).

Historian José D'Assunção Barros proposes interpreting textual sources as both testimony and discourse. As testimony of an era, historical sources are characterized as a means of access to the past to be analyzed and reconstructed by the historian. As discourse, sources are considered to be what must be analyzed, as a discourse to be deciphered, understood and questioned (BARROS, 2004).

With these considerations in mind, the gaze to be directed at the sources is intended to be one of understanding and contextualization, in other words, neither condemnatory nor glorifying.

## WORKING WITH OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS

During our research, we worked with official documentary sources from the Itamaraty Documentation Center in Brasilia, the *Archivo Histórico del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Paraguay* (Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Paraguay), which is located in the building of the Vice-Presidency of this country in Asunción, and the *Archivo Histórico de Cancillería del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto de La República Argentina* (Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship of the Argentine Republic) in Buenos Aires. The use of these documents is fundamental to understanding how the diplomatic authorities of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina related to the historical process of harnessing the Paraná River between 1966 and 1979.

It's worth adding that the experience of the writer of this project at the Itamaraty Documentation Center in Brasilia came about during the 7th semester of my undergraduate degree in History, in 2009, when I was still developing a Scientific Initiation project on a diplomatic impasse between Brazil and Paraguay in the 1960s that resulted in the Itaipu Treaty in 1973. During the research for my master's dissertation, the project was continued and once again it was necessary to carry out research in the same archive two years later. In 2012, I carried out research at the *Archivo Histórico del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Paraguay*, in Asunción, to enrich the work. In other words, my experience with documents in archives demonstrates my ability to carry out this project. In January 2015, I contacted officials at the *Archivo Histórico de Cancillería del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto de La República Argentina* in Buenos Aires to find out if it would be possible to access diplomatic documents relating to Argentina's relations

with Brazil and Paraguay between 1966-1979. The research was carried out in October 2016 in Buenos Aires. Unlike the Foreign Ministry, for example, there is no separation between secret, top secret, confidential and ostensible documents. The same is true of the *Archivo Histórico del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Paraguay*, making it possible to find documents relevant to the research.

Carlos Bacellar points out that we need to know the documents in depth, or at least as well as possible, the history of that piece in our hands. In this case, "it's important to ask the object some questions, such as under what conditions was the document written? For what purpose? By whom? These questions are basic and primary in documentary research" (BACELLAR, 2005, p.63).

It is worth adding that it is essential to discuss the criteria possibly adopted by those who produced them, in order to better decipher the information they provide us with. In the paragraph below, Carlos Bacellar also points out the important role that historians play when using documents to develop work in their field.

Armed with the weapons and precautions set out above, and with prior knowledge of the subject (the result of a lot of bibliographical research into the period studied and the work done before it), the researcher is ready to proceed with the analysis and interpretation of their sources. They can now collate information, juxtapose documents, relate text and context, establish constants, identify changes and continuities and produce a work of history (BACELLAR, 2005, p.66).

It is therefore up to the researcher to problematize and explore these historical sources, whenever possible confronting them with others, so that he can use them to construct his historical thinking in a reasoned and coherent way.



## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Working with official diplomatic documents from the three countries studied makes it possible to interpret that the disagreements surrounding the construction of the Itaipu binational hydroelectric dam were the backdrop to the rivalries between Brazil and Argentina, which are the main powers in the Silver Basin and South America. The nationalism defended by both in times of dictatorial military regimes postponed the possibility of closer

ties in other strategic areas that would favor a greater process of integration in the South American region. Paraguay, also under military dictatorship, also made national interests an object in order to secure its space and gain benefits in that context. In short, working with documentary sources has made it possible to gain an in-depth understanding of the main dilemmas of the time and the consequences for the region following the signing of the Tripartite Agreement in October 1979.

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