

## **BOLIVIA REACHES FOR A SLICE OF THE COAST THAT GOT AWAY**

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LA PAZ, [Bolivia](#), Sept. 23 — From his penthouse office in a tightly guarded nine-story building here, where architects designed the watchtowers to look like small lighthouses, Vice Adm. José Alba Arnez oversees a military force with more than 5,000 sailors, cadets and officers.



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Bolivia lost its coast after an 1879 war. It hopes to get back a bit of it.

His waiting room has oil paintings depicting men-of-war in choppy waters, an old wooden ship's wheel made by John Hastie & Company of Scotland and waiters clad in bow ties who serve coca tea on fine china.

All that is lacking for Admiral Alba, the commander general of the Bolivian Navy, is a sea. "We've been in this unfortunate condition since the late 19th century," he said in an interview, gesturing toward a map on the wall from 1859 showing Bolivia with almost twice its current territory and a swath of Pacific coastline.

Today's maps show that coast as part of [Chile](#), thanks to the 1879 conflict known as the War of the Pacific, or the Saltpeter War, which helped cement Chile as a regional power and, some here say, put Bolivia on the path to becoming South America's poorest nation.

In a diplomatic push combining nostalgia and shrewd nationalist politics, President Evo Morales has begun lobbying to regain a small part of that coastline for Bolivia. The navy, which patrols Bolivia's rivers and the waters of Lake Titicaca, finds itself in the middle of this quest. Mr. Morales took the spotlight at the summit meeting of the Nonaligned Movement of countries this month in Havana, where he led a parallel meeting of a 31-member organization called the Group of Landlocked Developing Countries. Members include countries like Bhutan, Burkina Faso and Moldova.

“We hope in the near future to be able to leave this group,” Mr. Morales told delegates in Havana.

Notwithstanding Chile’s historic intransigence to cede even one inch of its territory to Bolivia, such comments play well in Bolivia, where textbooks portray that 1879 war as a Chilean land grab, and where each May the nation commemorates a Day of the Sea.

Naval officers, meanwhile, pine for a corridor to the Pacific.

“We don’t want it all back,” said Admiral Alba, clad in dress uniform. “All we want is a 10-kilometer strip to call our own.”

The current navy, though ensconced in society, is a relatively recent creation. In a fit of nationalism in 1963, President Víctor Paz Estenssoro decreed it back into existence. Military officials were sent on educational exchanges to naval schools in Argentina, Brazil and the United States, institutionalizing Bolivia’s wish for a coastline.

Now the navy patrols Amazonian rivers, assists in efforts to limit contraband and distributes medicine to remote communities. An elite unit formed to combat drug trafficking, the Blue Devils, operates near the border with Brazil.

The navy’s proudest outpost is found on the southern banks of Lake Titicaca, more than two miles above sea level.

A monument near the entrance to the Titicaca Naval Base depicts a Bolivian soldier thrusting his bayonet into the throat of a Chilean soldier beside the words, “What once was ours, will be ours once more.”

The base’s commander, Capt. Carlos Vallejo Crespo, said in an interview that the naval base’s purpose was to “exercise sovereignty.”

Carefully choosing his words, Captain Vallejo said Bolivia was not “mediterráneo,” Spanish for something that is surrounded by land, but was instead “enclaustrado,” or forcibly cloistered. On touring the base, which was filled with blue naval uniforms and white hats, he pointed to a fleet that included two rusting patrol boats donated by China and a hospital boat to take government pediatricians, gynecologists and dentists to far-flung villages on the lake.

Watching recruits, mainly Aymara-speaking Indians, emerge shivering after a swim in the lake’s 46-degree water as part of a punishing high-altitude diving course, he explained, “We now guarantee that almost all of our sailors learn how to swim.” Though they swear off any involvement in politics, naval officers closely follow every ripple in Bolivia’s effort to regain access to the Pacific, a prickly issue that has grown more serious in recent years.

In 2003, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, already unpopular for yielding to pressure from the United States to eradicate coca, pushed for plans to export Bolivian natural gas to North America through Chile. Protests forced him to flee the country.

Mr. Morales, who was elected late last year on a platform of protecting coca farming for nondrug use, has reaffirmed his support for a “gas for sea” policy. That conditions the possible supply of Bolivian gas to Chile or its export through Chilean ports to winning access to the sea. But Bolivia and Chile have not had full diplomatic relations since 1978. Mr. Morales has appealed to the [Organization of American States](#) to help broker a solution, but received a tepid response even though his ally, President [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela, has stated that he longed to swim on a Bolivian beach.

Some Chilean legislators and Jorge Arancibia, the former commander in chief of the Chilean Navy, have backed finding a resolution with Bolivia, but polls show that most Chileans oppose a settlement.

Still, Mr. Morales recently told people attending the commemoration of the 43rd anniversary of the reformation of the navy that they should be prepared “to return at any moment to the Pacific Ocean.”

Though Mr. Morales remains popular here, strikes and road blockades by groups dissatisfied with the pace of his government’s changes have grown more common.

Such unrest, though, does not seem to have affected sentiment at the Museum of the Coast, a collection here of old maps, war correspondence and books by marólogos, or sea specialists, on the consequences of the War of the Pacific, which was fought over control of nitrate deposits in the form of guano and saltpeter.

“This is about part of us,” said Mauricia Yapura, an attendant at the museum for 10 years, “a part that Chile took away.”