



The Guayana and Venezuela issue

Welcome delegates to the United Nations Security Council of Shark MUN 2026.

This committee will address one of the most significant territorial disputes currently affecting South America: the controversy between Guyana and Venezuela over the Essequibo region. This dispute has evolved from a historical border disagreement into a major international security concern due to the discovery of extensive oil and natural resources in the contested territory.

Delegates will debate issues involving sovereignty, international law, territorial integrity, resource competition, regional security, and the role of international organizations in preventing escalation between states. The Security Council must examine whether the dispute threatens regional peace and determine how diplomacy and international law can be used to avoid military confrontation. Delegates are encouraged to engage in strategic diplomacy, realistic geopolitical negotiation, and crisis-oriented debate throughout committee sessions.

Introduction

The territorial dispute between Guyana and Venezuela centers around the Essequibo region, a territory of approximately 160,000 square kilometers that represents two-thirds of Guyana's land area. The region is rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, gold, timber, and freshwater reserves. The origins of the conflict date back to the colonial era. In 1899, an international arbitral tribunal established the border between Venezuela and British Guiana, granting the Essequibo territory to British Guiana. However, Venezuela later rejected the ruling, arguing that the decision was fraudulent and imposed under colonial influence.

Tensions intensified significantly after the discovery of major offshore oil reserves near the disputed territory. In recent years, Venezuela has increased its political and territorial claims over the region, including holding a referendum to support the incorporation of Essequibo into Venezuelan territory. Guyana maintains that the 1899 arbitral award legally settled the border dispute and has brought the case before the International Court of Justice. Venezuela, however, rejects the ICJ's jurisdiction and argues that the dispute should be resolved through direct bilateral negotiations under the 1966 Geneva Agreement. As countries continue to strengthen military preparedness and diplomatic alliances, concerns about regional instability and potential conflict have increased.



Key terms

Essequibo Region

A resource-rich territory currently administered by Guyana but claimed by Venezuela.

Territorial Sovereignty

The legal authority of a state over its land, borders, and resources.

International Court of Justice (ICJ)

The principal judicial organ of the United Nations is responsible for resolving disputes between states under international law.

Arbitration Award of 1899

The international ruling that established the border between Venezuela and British Guiana, granting the Essequibo region to British Guiana.

Current situation

The Guyana–Venezuela dispute has become increasingly important due to its geopolitical and economic implications. The Essequibo region contains vast natural resources and lies near major offshore oil discoveries that transformed Guyana into one of the world’s fastest-growing oil economies. In 2018, Guyana formally brought the case before the ICJ seeking confirmation that the 1899 border ruling remains legally valid. The Court later affirmed its jurisdiction over the dispute despite Venezuela’s objections.

Tensions escalated in 2023 when Venezuela organized a national referendum asking citizens whether the Essequibo region should become a Venezuelan state called “Guayana Essequibo.” The Venezuelan government later announced administrative and electoral measures related to the territory despite provisional orders issued by the ICJ requesting that Venezuela avoid actions altering the status quo. The dispute has also attracted international attention because of energy interests. Foreign oil companies operating in Guyana’s offshore fields have become part of the geopolitical tension surrounding the region.



Several countries and regional organizations, including CARICOM and the United States, have expressed support for Guyana's territorial integrity and international legal processes. Venezuela, meanwhile, continues emphasizing historical claims and sovereignty arguments. The possibility of military escalation remains a major international concern. Although both governments publicly support peaceful resolutions, military exercises, naval incidents, and aggressive rhetoric have increased fears of regional instability.

Timeline of Key Events

Year	Event
1899	Paris Arbitral Award grants Essequibo to British Guiana
1966	The Geneva Agreement was signed, establishing a negotiation framework.
2015	Major offshore oil discoveries by ExxonMobil
2018	UN refers dispute to ICJ; Guyana files application.
2023	Venezuela holds a national referendum on Essequibo.
2024	ICJ issues provisional measures; Venezuela announces administrative measures over territory

Main Countries Involved

Guyana

Guyana currently administers the Essequibo region and argues that the 1899 arbitral award legally resolved the border dispute. The country relies heavily on international law and ICJ proceedings to defend its territorial sovereignty.





Venezuela

Venezuela claims historical ownership over the Essequibo territory and rejects the validity of the 1899 arbitration. The government insists that the dispute must be resolved through bilateral negotiations rather than international judicial rulings.



United States

The United States has strengthened defense cooperation with Guyana and supports a peaceful resolution in accordance with international law. The issue is also linked to major American energy investments in Guyana.



Caribbean Community

CARICOM strongly supports Guyana's territorial integrity and has repeatedly called for peaceful diplomatic resolution of the dispute.



International Court of Justice

The ICJ currently oversees legal proceedings regarding the territorial controversy and has issued provisional measures intended to prevent escalation.

Additional Stakeholder Positions

Country/Entity	Position
Brazil	Shares borders with both countries; fears regional spillover; supports dialogue but opposes foreign military intervention.
United Kingdom	Colonial-era power that administered British Guiana; supports the ICJ process and Guyana's territorial integrity.



Country/Entity	Position
China	Emphasizes non-interference; calls for bilateral negotiation; holds economic interests in both countries
Russia	Likely to oppose UNSC intervention; supports Venezuela's position against ICJ jurisdiction; advocates negotiated settlement.

Previous attempts to solve the problem

The 1966 Geneva Agreement established a framework for peaceful negotiations between Guyana and Venezuela regarding the territorial controversy. However, decades of bilateral discussions failed to produce a final settlement.

In 2018, the United Nations referred the dispute to the ICJ after diplomatic mechanisms were unsuccessful. The Court has since issued multiple provisional measures requesting that Venezuela avoid unilateral actions capable of changing the status quo in the region.

Regional organizations, including CARICOM and the Organization of American States, have also encouraged diplomatic dialogue and peaceful resolution.

Possible Solutions

- Strengthening diplomatic negotiations under UN supervision.
- Expanding confidence-building measures between both states.
- Increasing international monitoring in the disputed region.
- Reinforcing ICJ-led legal resolution mechanisms.
- Establishing temporary joint resource management agreements.
- Preventing military escalation through regional security cooperation.
- Encouraging mediation efforts by neutral international actors.
- Promoting economic cooperation initiatives to reduce geopolitical tensions.



Guiding Questions for Delegates

1. Under what circumstances should the UNSC intervene in a dispute already before the ICJ?
2. Can economic sanctions be justified before any military action has occurred?
3. Does foreign oil investment (US, Chinese, European) change the UNSC's responsibility to act?
4. How should the Council respond if Venezuela ignores ICJ provisional measures?
5. What role, if any, should military deterrence play alongside diplomacy?
6. Can joint resource management be implemented without implying sovereignty?



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