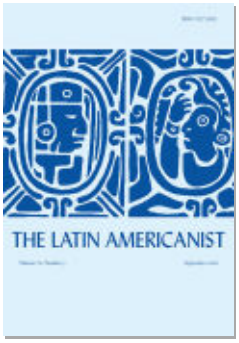
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Latin American Countries and the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace Held in Buenos Aires: the Italian Perspective (1936)

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THE LATIN AMERICANIST

Latin American Countries and the Inter-American Conference For The Maintenance of Peace Held in Buenos Aires: The Italian Perspective (1936)

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Abstract

The research provides a historical interpretation of the preparations for the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace, which convened in Buenos Aires in December 1936. The initiative was proposed in January 1936 by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the aftermath of the Good Neighbor Policy and the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay. The conference had two main objectives: first, to strengthen the existing framework of inter-American peace instruments, and secondly, to address the contentious relationship between Latin America and the League of Nations. As evidenced by several boxes kept archival records preserved in the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, the Italian diplomatic authorities operating in provided exhaustive commentary produced extensive reports on the developments in the preparations for the conference. They identified two ideal to main alignments, led respectively by the United States and Argentina, which in some way reflected the contemporary balance of power and diplomatic relations in the Americas: the "Washington line" (isolationist) and the "Buenos Aires line" (pro-League of Nations). Within the first group, two positions were identified by Italians. The first position – regarded as "moderate" – was endorsed by Brazil, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, who advocated for a dissociation from the League of Nations. The second position of the first alignment was regarded as "extremist": it was spearheaded by Guatemala and supported by Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Honduras. This second group exhibited a proclivity for the establishment of an American League of Nations, or a counterpart to the Geneva-based organization. In contrast, the pro-League alignment – or "Buenos Aires line" – endorsed by countries such as Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, argued for the need for America to remain linked to the League of Nations and pursue a synthesis between economic Pan-Americanism and European politics. In this intricate power dynamic, the Italian authorities adopted a proactive stance. They in fact sought to impede – in an anti-United States, anti-Guatemala, and anti-Argentina perspective – the formation of

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a Pan-American bloc that would have undermined the regional balance of power that the fascist regime regarded as favourable to its interests.

Keywords: Latin American history; Latin American politics; Pan-American Conferences; diplomatic archives; fascist diplomacy

Introduction

Since 1899, the Pan-American Conferences have been a key platform for international discussions on critical issues.[1] These have included the negotiation of treaties aimed at fostering harmonious relations between American nations and contributing to the preservation of peace.[2] During the mid-1930s, the matter of consolidating international legal instruments to preserve peace among American states was of the utmost importance. During this period, Latin America experienced political and social instability,[3] due to the Argentinian and Brazilian *coups d'etat*, the Chilean naval mutiny, the Leticia dispute between Peru and Colombia[4] and, above all, the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay (1932–1935).[5] Efforts to peacefully resolve this final conflict were a significant factor in accelerating the search for a permanent inter-American settlement of boundary disputes.[6] A notable precursor in this regard was the Chaco Peace Conference, which was convened in Buenos Aires in July 1935. Among the participants were the Argentine President Carlos Saavedra Lamas, as well as ministers from Chile (Félix Nieto del Río), Brazil (José Bonifacio de Andrada e Silva), Peru (Felipe Barreda Laos), Bolivia (Tomás Elío), Paraguay (Gerónimo Zubizarreta), and the United States (Hugh Gibson).[7] The presence of a North American representative, which Brazil had strongly desired[8] based on the previous successful collaboration between Washington and Rio de Janeiro in resolving the Leticia dispute,[9] assumed great symbolic significance in the search for a new, entirely American, mechanism for maintaining peace.

In January 1936, the United States took the lead in organizing a Pan-American conference, building on discussions from the conference held in Montevideo in December 1933. That conference had failed to address the urgent issue of peace between American nations. The initiative originated on January 30, 1936, when US President D. Roosevelt sent a letter to all the heads of state in the Americas. In this letter, Roosevelt used the Chaco War as an example to highlight the need to strengthen security among the American states. Roosevelt's invitation letter received a predominantly favorable response from Latin American countries, marking a significant step towards improving relations between the United States and Latin America. The generally positive response to Roosevelt's invitation was one of the fruits of the Good Neighbor Policy,[10] whose "cornerstone" can be traced back to the term of President Herbert Hoover (1929–1933).[11] At the beginning of his presidency, Hoover, in fact, delivered a series of "twenty-five speeches promising to reduce US interference in Latin American affairs".[12]

Although the origins of the 1936 Pan-American Conference in Buenos Aires can be officially traced back to Roosevelt's letter (January 30, 1936), the conditions that led to the conference were established over the previous forty years. During this period, Argentina and Mexico undertook, in fact, "a hemispheric effort to constrain the ability of the United States to deploy military force in Latin America".[13] In particular, over the years, Latin American jurists and politicians, including Luis María Drago, Alejandro Álvarez and Baltasar Brum, contributed to the redefining of U.S. hemispheric hegemony along the lines of multilateralism and non-intervention.[14] Non-intervention was indeed the central question of inter-American diplomacy.[15] This principle was extensively debated and became the subject of significant controversy during the Sixth Pan-American Conference held in Havana in 1928. On that occasion, two different positions on the matter were represented by the Argentine delegate, Honorio Pueyrredón, and by the Peruvian diplomat, Víctor Manuel Maúrtua: the first one "defended the principle of non-intervention as absolute and not subjected to any other superior principle", while the second "sought to establish exceptions and to give an important scope to authorize and legitimize interventions".[16] Following in Pueyrredón's footsteps was Carlos Saavedra Lamas, Foreign Minister (1933–1936) and then President of Argentina, who would have assumed a prominent role in the Pan-American Conference of Buenos Aires. In particular, Saavedra Lamas conceived the *Tratado Antibélico de no-agresión y de conciliación*[17] after the Chaco War: a treaty that "adhered to the principle of absolute non-intervention as a South American and Argentina doctrine, referencing the so-called Drago Doctrine".[18] The so-called Saavedra Lamas pact would have had a great impact at the Pan-American conference in Montevideo when "the principle of non-intervention was consolidated in the Americas along with inter-American multilateralism".[19]

At the beginning of 1936, the Pan-American Conference in Buenos Aires was set to play a pivotal role in two key themes: firstly, it was expected to reinforce the existing framework of inter-American peace instruments; secondly, to resolve the then-contentious relationship between Latin America and the League of Nations.[20] This was, in fact, a sensitive issue that necessitates brief discussion. The League of Nations, established in 1919 with the objective of "to maintain the newly agreed status quo and guarantee collective security",[21] initially comprised only eleven Latin American countries among its signatories,[22] with additional six ones joining in 1920.[23] The main obstacle to the political co-operation of the Latin American States in the League of Nations was represented by the Article 21 of the Covenant,[24] which "had approved the idea that the pact did not affect the status of the Monroe Doctrine as 'regional' understanding for the maintenance of peace in the Americas".[25] For this reason, the participation of Latin Americans in the League of Nations has been characterized since the beginning by an "ambivalent" stance: on one

side, it provided "a counterweight to the United States in the Western Hemisphere"; on the other, however, it "proved unwilling to address the question of the Monroe doctrine enshrined in the Covenant".[26] The relationship between Latin American countries and the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s was characterized by ups and downs. During the initial decade, three significant setbacks emerged. In 1921, the League opted against intervening in the Tacna and Arica dispute, while in 1925 and 1926, first Costa Rica and then Brazil decided to withdraw the Covenant.[27] Therefore, in 1927 only five states were actively engaged in the primary functions of the League of Nations.[28] From 1929 to 1935, there was a period of positive development, marked by the return of Peru, Bolivia, and Honduras to the Geneva Conference (1929), the entry of Mexico and Ecuador (in 1931 and 1934, respectively),[29] and, most significantly, its pivotal role in resolving the Leticia dispute[30] and the Chaco War.[31] Of particular importance was the resolution of the dispute between Colombia and Peru over Leticia, which represented "one of the few examples of successful interventions by the League of Nations to maintain international peace" alongside the resolution of the Åland Islands dispute (1920–1921) and the Incident at Petrich between Greece and Bulgaria (1925).[32] After this "apotheosis", commencing in 1936, a new deterioration ensued, resulting in the withdrawal of seven members within a span of three years: Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua (in 1936), El Salvador (in 1937), Chile and Venezuela (1938) and, finally, Peru (1939).[33] The underlying motivations for these withdrawals can be attributed to the apprehension that Latin American governments might be engulfed in a conflict that was perceived as external and unrelated to their interests.[34]

It was precisely this dynamic interplay between Latin American countries and the League of Nations that in 1936 became the main focal point of the reports and correspondence of Italian diplomatic authorities, who – from Mexico to Chile – closely followed the preparations for the Pan-American Conference of Buenos Aires. Despite some Latin American countries approving the sanctions following the League of Nations' vote, Italian ambassadors and plenipotentiary ministers from Mexico City to Santiago noted with satisfaction the "disgust felt throughout the Americas for Geneva".[35] Considering the prevailing disillusionment with the League of Nations, the Italian diplomatic authorities categorized the American countries into two groups based on their expected role at the Pan-American Conference, scheduled for December 1936. One group was labelled "isolationist" ("isolazionista") and was led by Washington, while the other was labelled "*pro*-League of Nations" ("societario") and was led by Buenos Aires.[36]

The period between Roosevelt's letter (January 30, 1936) and the formulation of the final program for the Buenos Aires conference (July 22, 1936) is of particular interest.[37] During this period, the Italian authorities did not simply passively record the developments in the preparations

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according to the polarization between Washington and Buenos Aires "lines". With an operation ignored by historians to date,[38] Italian authorities also sought to influence the participation of Latin American countries in an *anti*-League of Nations perspective. Drawing upon unpublished archival sources from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this work provides a comprehensive analysis of the behind-the-scenes politics of the Pan-American Conference in Buenos Aires (December 1–23, 1936).

The "Washington line"

According to Augusto Rosso, the architect of the so-called "Washington line" that Roosevelt promoted in the run-up to the Buenos Aires conference was Sumner Welles, who at the time was the Assistant Secretary of State. Welles was a staunch "opponent of Geneva" and *de facto* director of the State Department's Pan-American policy.[39] This thesis advocated for an "entirely American" policy, one that would be immune to any potential European political or economic influences.[40] In practical terms, this current primarily envisaged maintaining peace through the consolidation and "synthesis" of five existing international peace instruments, namely: the Treaty to Avoid or Prevent Conflicts signed in Santiago on May 3, 1923 (Gondra Treaty);[41] the Pact of Paris for the Renunciation of War signed in Paris on August 28, 1928; the General Convention of Inter-American Conciliation and the General Treaty of Inter-American Arbitration signed in Washington on January 5, 1929; and finally, the Saavedra Lamas Pact,[42] also known as the anti-war treaty, signed in Rio de Janeiro on October 10, 1933. Secondly, the establishment of new instruments of peace was proposed. As emphasized by Renato Bova Groppa, the Italian delegate in Geneva, it was precisely on this ambiguous point that "potential, if not actual, hostility between Geneva and Washington" became evident.[43]

Following the ideological schism identified by the Italian authorities, several Latin American countries aligned themselves with the isolationist position of the United States: Cuba, Guatemala, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Ecuador, and Brazil.[44] Within this camp, Brazil, Nicaragua and Ecuador were designated as "moderates": in a manner akin to the United States, these three Countries confined their advocacy to the principle of withdrawing from the League of Nations and the promotion of enhanced Pan-American solidarity.[45] In contrast, Guatemala, Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Costa Rica embodied "the extreme tendencies of Pan-American isolationism".[46] As will be analyzed later, these Central American republics were interested in establishing an American institutional *counterpart* to the Geneva-based organization.

According to the Italians, Brazil under the leadership of Getúlio Dornelles Vargas would have played a pivotal role in the moderate "Washington line". Roberto Cantalupo, the Italian Ambassador in Rio de Janeiro, provided a contextual analysis of Brazil's support for the United States.

He characterized this support as a "pro-Yankee policy", drawing parallels with the precedent set during the resolution of the Leticia dispute.[47] In that occasion, in fact, the United States supported "the Brazilian mediation".[48] In his reports, Cantalupo emphasized how, since April, Brazilian public opinion had become increasingly *anti*-Geneva. This shift was attributed to two key factors: the perceived "catastrophic failure" of the League of Nations in the Italian-Abyssinian conflict and the "unprecedented defeat" suffered by British diplomacy.[49] In a private conversation between Cantalupo and the Brazilian Ambassador in Washington, Mario de Pimentel Brandão, Vargas (in line with Sumner Welles) at the same time expressed opposition to the concept of an American League of Nations: according to Vargas, this institution would have risked becoming a "branch" ("succursale") of the Geneva-based organization. According to Pimentel Brandão, the maximum objective that *may* have been pursued was the establishment of a "permanent American arbitration tribunal".[50] For reasons pertaining to prestige, Brazil was dissuaded from aligning with the most extreme tendencies of the "Washington line". As revealed to Cantalupo by the Brazilian Foreign Minister José Carlos de Macedo Soares, the establishment of an American League of Nations would have raised concerns regarding the "exclusive American friendship" between Rio de Janeiro and Washington. Therefore, it was imperative for Vargas to "*limit* the political objectives" of the Pan-American Conference in Buenos Aires and, *at most*, to lend support to the creation of an American Permanent Court of Arbitration and Conciliation.[51] Panama was also classified as one of the "moderates" because Harmodio Arias was similarly uninterested in the idea of creating an American League of Nations. As Italian Minister Plenipotentiary Italo Capanni highlighted, the Panamanian press was "completely opposed" to the idea of an American League of Nations:[52] for example, Nacho Valdés wrote in *Panama Americana* that the new institution would have been manipulated by "Ubicos, Carias, Sacasas, Benavides, Trujillos y otros lacayos del imperialismo anglosajón".[53]

Jorge Ubico's Guatemala led the more "extremist Washington line", which advocated withdrawal from the League of Nations *and* the creation of an American League of Nations. The development of the project was initiated at the Pan-American Conference in Montevideo in 1933, drawing upon a preceding Uruguayan proposal that had been rejected in Santiago in 1923.[54] Re-proposed in anticipation of the Buenos Aires Conference in 1936, Ubico's project envisioned establishing an "Association of American Nations" or "American League of Nations" as an *anti*-Geneva measure.[55] This new institution would have been predicated on the tenets of the Briand-Kellogg Pact[56] and the Monroe Doctrine, which would have acquired "the character and scope of a collective policy' of the American countries".[57] As demonstrated by Ubico's response to Mussolini's congratulations on the project demonstrates, Guatemala's primary objective was to establish a Central American bloc based on its vision of an *exclusively American* League and Court of Justice.[58]

Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras and Cuba endorsed Guatemala's proposal,[59] as evidenced by a series of bombastic public statements in the following months. Manuel Francisco Jiménez, the Costa Rican Foreign Minister, articulated his endorsement of Guatemala's stance from San José, asserting: "after the formation of the American League of Nations, *all* the republics of Latin America would have left the League of Nations".[60] From Santo Domingo, Rafael Trujillo emphasized that the nascent American League "would be more effective and beneficial for our countries than the League of Nations".[61] Ultimately, Ubico would have abandoned his project due to a lack of complete support from Colombia, Mexico, and Peru.[62] As will be demonstrated in the following paragraph, these countries would have adopted a more conciliatory position towards the League of Nations based in Geneva. This lack of support for the Guatemalan project revealed to Ciano the limits of the "illusion of being able to revive democratic, humanitarian, and pacifist principles in America that were being liquidated in Europe".[63]

The "Buenos Aires line"

The movement led by Saavedra Lamas in Argentina aimed to "stride across the Atlantic, *balancing* between the New and Old Worlds" as articulated by Raffaele Guariglia, new Italian Ambassador in Buenos Aires since August 1936.[64] This expression warrants initial contextualization. Saavedra Lamas –with a view to Argentina's more energetic international projection[65] – aimed to extend the scope of the Buenos Aires Conference to encompass economic, commercial, and social cooperation issues within its agenda.[66] In this regard, Argentina's stance corresponded to that of Vargas' Brazil, which sought to incorporate the inter-American customs issue into the agenda of the Buenos Aires conference[67] and to establish a "Pan American political, *economic*, and *financial* bloc".[68] Saavedra Lamas's insistence resulted in the inclusion of several key points in Part V of the Conference, which were designed to promote the development of enhanced economic relations among the American Republics.: "tariff truce and customs agreement; agreement on sanitary regulations affecting the interchange of animal and vegetable products; equality of trade opportunity; financial cooperation; international aspects of problems of immigration; promotion of travel; other measures".[69]

Concurrently, and this marks a salient difference with Vargas' position, Saavedra Lamas proposed to continue its collaboration with the League of Nations at the political level. In summary, as Ciano's summary asserts, "Buenos Aires line" sought to achieve a conciliation between "economic Pan-Americanism with European politics".[70] Despite aligning with the viewpoint of other leaders of the "Washington line", including Roosevelt, Vargas, Ubico, and Trujillo, who recognized the shortcomings of the League of Nations, Saavedra Lamas advocated for the reinforcement of both the Geneva-based organization and the sanctions mechanism.[71] It is evident that this position was not immune to strategic interests. It is

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important to note the observations made by Mario Arlotta, the Italian Ambassador in Buenos Aires, on the Argentine economy's interdependence with Great Britain during that period.[72] This economic reliance would have introduced significant complexities in Argentina's withdrawal from the League of Nations. Arlotta referred to the historical context of Argentine railways, with particular emphasis on the processes of their construction, management, and ownership by British capital. Furthermore, he highlighted the pivotal role of British investment in the country's meat exports, emphasizing that 90% of these exports were financed by British capital.[73] Secondly, Arlotta's analysis indicates that Argentina's opposition to isolationist policies, stemmed from a concern over the potential dominance of the United States in South America. This prompted the establishment of a "pan-Iberian bloc" in Buenos Aires, which would serve as a counter to Washington.[74] This group, which notably excluded Portuguese-speaking Brazil, would have been formed, according to Italian diplomatic authorities, by countries that had a vested interest in countering the *potential* for heightened US intervention in Latin America.

This explains why – according to the Italian diplomatic authorities – countries such as Uruguay, Peru and Colombia had adopted the "Buenos Aires line". The support provided by these actors was not necessarily in favor of the Geneva Agreement, but rather, it was intended from an *anti*-Washington perspective. Notwithstanding the pervasive skepticism surrounding the efficacy of the Geneva peace system, it is noteworthy that President Gabriel Terra expressed concerns regarding the potential implications of a heightened isolation from European affairs. This apprehension, as articulated by the Italian Minister Plenipotentiary in Montevideo, Serafino Mazzolini, pertained specifically to the fear of supporting the "supremacist tendencies of the United States".[75] Hence, the dense and concise opinion expressed to Mazzolini by Foreign Minister José Espalter: Uruguay, confronted with the dilemma of selecting "between Washington and Geneva", would have ultimately opted for the latter.[76] In a similar manner, during Óscar Benavides presidency, Peru demonstrated a clear aversion to any weakening of its ties with the Geneva Institute. Furthermore, Lima exhibited a strong sense of opposition to any proposal for an American League of Nations, due to concerns regarding the "aggressive North American Monroeism".[77] Lima's prejudices against potential "excessive interference by the United States in the life of the South American republics"[78] were firmly entrenched in the intervention of the United States in the Chaco War. The underlying rationales for Colombia and Mexico's adherence to the "Buenos Aires line" bear a striking resemblance to those of Uruguay and Peru. Despite the echoes of the Leticia dispute, Colombia endeavored to achieve an accord with Peru for a "joint action" at the Pan-American conference scheduled for December 1936.[79] In contrast to Gabriel Terra and Óscar Benavides, who adopted an *anti-Washington* stance, Alfonso López Pumarejo adopted a more general

anti-hegemonic position. As the Colombian president himself noted in his response to Roosevelt, Bogotá regarded "grandes o *pequeñas* hegemonías" as a hindrance to Pan-Americanism.[80] This allusive reference was directed not only at the United States,[81] but also at Guatemala, where Ubico's concept of establishing an American League of Nations to counterbalance the League of Nations was gaining traction. López Pumarejo rejection of Ubico's proposal for a "divorcio total con Ginebra"[82] was not due to technical reasons pertaining to the mechanisms of the League of Nations; instead, he maintained his position "closer to that of Argentina".[83]

In a manner analogous to Colombia, Mexico also adopted the "Buenos Aires line" to oppose both major and minor hegemonies. According to the Italian Minister Plenipotentiary in Mexico City, Alberto Marchetti di Muriaglio, Mexico's adherence was due to its "very difficult position" with the United States (the leader of the "moderate Washington line") and its total distrust of the project to create an American League of Nations (the flagship policy of Guatemala and the "extreme tendencies of the Washington line"). As Marchetti di Muriaglio noted, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río was concerned that the establishment of "a Central American bloc" centered on Ubico's initiative would result in the formation of "a South American bloc".[84] Mexico's opposition to Ubico's project should be contextualized within the broader framework of Mexico's historical antagonism towards Guatemala's pro-American oligarchies.[85] Consequently, Cárdenas del Río adopted a more a conciliatory stance towards the League of Nations.[86] According to Marchetti di Muriaglio, Cárdenas del Río so became "one of the most ardent defenders of the Argentine thesis".[87] Cárdenas del Río's endorsement of Saavedra Lamas' "pro-Geneva" line can be elucidated by the fact that Roosevelt's "recognition of the doctrine of non-intervention in the Western Hemisphere had increased the utility of the League as a place for Mexican negotiations and diplomatic initiatives".[88]

Chile's adherence to the "Buenos Aires line" confirms, at last, that fears of a new Pan-Americanist hegemony outweighed recent Inter-American conflicts[89]. Therefore, Chile and Argentina, which had respectively provided support to Bolivia and Paraguay during the Chaco War, found themselves in the same group.[90] Nonetheless, although the Italian authorities in Santiago reported that Chileans harbored "aversion" towards the League of Nations,[91] President Arturo Alessandri's "ever-present sympathy for the Geneva-based institution" was well known.[92] Chile's decision to align with the "Buenos Aires line"[93] was driven by a strategic approach to international relations, characterized by a strong opposition to the establishment of both an American League of Nations and an international court of justice.[94]

The Italian strategy

Initially, Italy regarded the "Washington line" favorably, particularly Guatemala's ("extremist") proposal.[95] In this regard, the telegram sent

by Mussolini to Ubico on April 12, 1936, is of pertinence. In this document, the Italian dictator expressed his support for Guatemala's project to create an American League of Nations to counterbalance the Geneva-based organization, which he declared to be "at the service of British imperialism".[96] The concept of an American League of Nations, initially endorsed by Ubico and supported by Mussolini, swiftly provoked reservations from Italian diplomatic authorities in Central and South America. It could be argued that these reservations, which were not aligned with Mussolini – who supported Ubico's proposal – represented one of the final instances in Latin America where "Italian diplomacy had resisted the fascistization" [*fascistizzazione*]: shortly thereafter, in fact, "this independence [would] have suffered a severe setback", when on June 1936 Count Galeazzo Ciano replaced Dino Grandi.[97]

Among these authorities was Cantalupo, who expressed concerns that a new Pan-American grouping could emerge as a hybrid of the US "plutocratic-imperialist-pacifist ideology" and the (British) "democratic-humanitarian-Masonic ideology still triumphant in Latin America". The Italian Ambassador's reservations concerning the notion of an American League of Nations stemmed from the concern that Latin American countries should have remained "the object of other people's politics" and susceptible to exploitation by the fascist regime.[98] In the subsequent month, just two days prior to the formal establishment of the Fascist Colonial Empire through the annexation of Ethiopia, Cantalupo proceed to expand upon his previously articulated concerns. He asserted that the formation of an American League of Nations could have created "a hotbed of Geneva-style, and therefore *anti-Italian*, infection"; this would have served as a significant impediment to the effective dissemination of fascist propaganda within South America.[99]

As the Italian authorities emphasized, Latin American countries associated with the Washington line exhibited a reluctance to adopt overtly *anti*-Geneva stances, partially motivated by concerns pertaining to "civilization" ("civiltà"). Notwithstanding the "disgust for Geneva" expressed by certain countries, such as Brazil, it is noteworthy that Americans from Mexico to Chile were collectively designated as "Latin" thereby indicating a stronger affinity with Latin culture over Anglo-Saxon influences.[100] Any Italian action intended to influence the preparations for the Buenos Aires conference would have been justified because of Latin "origins", "traditions", "culture" and "blood".[101]

The strategy delineated by Cantalupo and implemented since February 1936 comprised three phases. Firstly, it was to exacerbate dissent in South America against the League of Nations and to "incite" ("eccitare") Latin American countries against the sanctions so that they themselves would have declared "on their own behalf the immediate dissolution" of the Geneva-based organization. Secondly, it was to ensure that these countries would have left the League of Nations, "ideally in a dramatic

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manner". Finally, the strategy was intended to appeal to those countries that had become disillusioned with Geneva, drawing them to Italy on the grounds of its "Latin" character and the considerable rise in prestige that the fascist regime was experiencing during that period from Mexico to Chile.[102] The strategy under discussion was encapsulated as follows: "bring Americans against Geneva, yet not against Europe". Cantalupo's activities were not confined to Brazil; rather, he collaborated with other diplomatic representatives from Central and South America, who were entrusted with the mission of "inciting the withdrawal of Latin American states from Geneva".[103] In the countries in which Cantalupo operated directly, the initiative proved successful in Brazil – where dozens of newspapers had adopted a pro-fascist agenda since 1934[104] – but not in Chile,[105] which, as we saw, would have maintained a favorable stance toward cooperation with the League of Nations (the "Buenos Aires line").

According to Cantalupo, the key to achieving this difficult dual objective – namely, "the cessation of sanctions [against Italy] by Latin America" and, simultaneously, the prevention of the establishment of a South American "hegemony" – laid in the prevention of any consolidation, whether around the "Washington line" (isolationist) or the "Buenos Aires line" (pro-Geneva): "it is my opinion that the most effective course of action would be to let them *disoriented* and subsequently attempt to attract them to Italy at a later time".[106] It was therefore necessary to "incite" Latin America against Geneva, *yet not to the point* of "throwing them into Washington's arms"[107] or, even worse, towards the formation of an American League of Nations (as proposed by Guatemala): strategia con

In the fall of 1936, Italian diplomats in Latin America found themselves confronted with the challenge of opposing both Roosevelt's isolationist tendencies and Saavedra Lamas' pro-Geneva ones until the day when "the bonds between the Latin world and Rome" would have reconstituted "a unity stronger than any Pan-American ideology".[108]

Conclusions

During the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace, which took place in Buenos Aires in December 1936, delegations from the twenty-one American republics[109] deliberated on six issues, for which ad hoc commissions were established: Organization of peace; Neutrality; Limitation of armaments; Legal issues; Economic issues; Intellectual cooperation.[110] The conference culminated in the signing of two treaties, eight conventions, one protocol and sixty-two resolutions and recommendations. While the work and results of the conference were extensively covered in detail at the time and received commendation, it is currently opportune to offer some concluding reflections on its lesser-known facets.

The Italian diplomatic authorities did indeed express critical reservations, which should be compared further with Latin American archives. As Raffaele Guariglia's observations indicate, "the real activity took place

in private meetings between the various foreign ministers" and was evidently not fully reflected in official publications.[111] For instance, the Italian ambassador had expressed a lack of confidence in the implementation of the conventions and recommendations that were examined and voted on at the Conference.[112] A notable caveat is that the political situation in Paraguay and Bolivia received comparatively little attention. Following the overthrow of the liberal Eusebio Ayala by the Febrerista Revolutionary Party, Rafael Franco – the new head of Paraguay – had in fact made an explicit request to the Pan-American Conference in Buenos Aires that the Chaco War *not* be addressed.[113] This relative impasse and the absence of significant practical results can be attributed to the final balance between the "Washington line" and the "Buenos Aires line" positions. As Ciano observed on December 11, an initial "prevalence of the Washington line" and "violent anti-European Pan-Americanism" in the six commissions' discussions was followed by a rebalancing because of Argentina's "strong resistance to the North American line".[114]

In the period spanning eleven months from the date of Roosevelt's letter to the Conference, Central and South American nations adopted divergent stances on issues pertaining to peace and their relations with the League of Nations. Some of them advocated withdrawal from the Geneva-based organization, while others favored maintaining cooperation with the League of Nations. The so-called "Washington line" and "Buenos Aires line" were ideal alignments that reflected the contemporary balance of power and diplomatic relations in the Americas to some extent. In the context of the isolationist group, Roosevelt (United States) and Vargas (Brazil) embodied the "moderate" tendency; while Ubico (Guatemala), Gómez (Cuba), Vincent (Haiti), Trujillo (Dominican Republic), Carías Andino (Honduras), and Cortés Castro (Costa Rica) represented the "extremist" tendency, which advocated the creation an American League of Nations. Conversely, the "pro-Geneva" thesis was led by Saavedra Lamas (Argentina) and supported by Terra (Uruguay), Benavides (Peru), López Pumarejo (Colombia), Cárdenas del Río (Mexico), and Alessandri (Chile).

In this game, the Italian diplomatic authorities did more than passively record developments in the preparations; they endeavored to exert influence on the course of events behind the scenes. Indeed, they did not adhere to Mussolini's original enthusiasm for the "extreme isolationist" proposal by Ubico. Instead, the Italian Ambassador, Roberto Cantalupo, devised a strategy summarized by the motto "bring Americans against Geneva, yet not against Europe". This entailed the promotion of "Latin" identity by Italian diplomatic authorities in Latin America, whilst fostering discontent with the League of Nations. The Italian authorities sought (I) to thwart the establishment of an American League of Nations, (II) to distance the "Latins" from the "Anglo-Saxons" and (III) to discredit the League of Nations, respectively in anti-Guatemala, anti-United States and anti-Argentina function. According to Cantalupo, the objective was to ensure that Latin American countries remained "disoriented". Only in

this manner the Italians would have been able to forestall the formation of a bloc under the leadership of Roosevelt or Saavedra Lamas. Such a bloc would have the potential to imbue the Pan-American Conference in Buenos Aires with a profound political significance, thereby effecting a shift in the strategic balance of power in Latin America, which had heretofore favored the fascist regime.

Abbreviations

ASMAE: Historical Diplomatic Archive
AP: Political Affairs (ASMAE)
FRUS: Foreign Relations of the United States
ME: Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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Notes

[1] (Castañeda, 1926).
[2] (Guy Inman 1923, 1965). On Panamericanism and Pan-American conferences, see also: (Scott, 1923; Lockey, 1925; Lockey, 1925; Mange, 1928; Lloyd Mecham, 1961; Caicedo Castilla, 1961; Salisbury, 1989; Sheinin, 2000; Marichal, 2002; Park, 2014; Petersen, 2022; Scarfi & Sheinin, 2022; Toledo, 2025).
[3] (Vega Muytoy, 1928).
[4] For a history of the Leticia dispute between Peru and Colombia, see: (Woolsey, 1933; Ciccarelli, 1973; Camacho Arango, 2016). On the relation between United States and Latin American Wars, see: (Wood, 1966).
[5] Since the early 1930s, there have been multiple interpretations and readings of the Chaco Boreal issue and the positions taken by Paraguay and Bolivia, as evidenced by two works published in Uruguay (in Montevideo) in 1931 and 1934, favoring Paraguay and Bolivia, respectively Arbo (1931) and Antokoletz, (1934). On the history of the Chaco War and its interpretations see: (Migliorini, 1939; Wehrli, 2006; Herrera León, 2009; Chesterton, 2016; Roniger and Senkman, 2019; Niebuhr, 2021; Rout, 2022).
[6] *Panama America*, February 17, 1936.
[7] (Rout, 2022).
[8] L. Cortese to ME, January 21, 1936, ASMAE, AP; 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[9] "Programma formulato dal governo argentino per i lavori della conferenza panamericana per il coordinamento degli strumenti di pace", 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.

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[10] On Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, see: (Roorda, 1998; Stuckey, 2013; Gellman, 2019).
[11] (Schuler, 1998, p.12).
[12] (Friedman, 2018, p.214).
[13] (Friedman & Long, 2015, p.135).
[14] (Scarfi, 2016, 2020, 2023, 2025).
[15] I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for this observation.
[16] (Scarfi, 2018, p.8).
[17] (Saavedra Lamas, 1933).
[18] (Scarfi, 2018, p.9).
[19] (Scarfi, 2023, p.700).
[20] On the relationship between the League of Nations and Latin America see: (Perez-Guerrero, 1936; Wehrli, 2011; Goebel, 2013; McPherson & Wehrli, 2015; Herrera León & Wehrli, 2019).
[21] (Tollardo, 2016, p.2).
[22] Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru and Uruguay (Edwards, 1929).
[23] Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, El Salvador, Venezuela.
[24] (Edwards, 1929; Mamolea, 2026). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for identifying this central issue.
[25] (Scarfi, 2018, p.6).
[26] (Pernet, 2015, p.136).
[27] (McPherson, 2015).
[28] (Cleven, 1927).
[29] (McPherson, 2015, p.3).
[30] (Bourneuf, 2017).
[31] One may consider the agreement on the exchange of Bolivian and Paraguayan prisoners in January 1936. *The New York Times*, January 22, 1936.
[32] (Bourneuf, 2017, pp.592, 607).
[33] (McPherson, 2015, p.3).
[34] (Wehrli, 2015, p.34).
[35] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 25, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[36] G. Ciano, "Appunto", October 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.1.
[37] "Program and regulations of the inter-American conference for the maintenance of peace to be held at Buenos Aires", 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.2.
[38] On fascist foreign policy in South America see: (Mugnaini, 1986; Ciccarelli, 1990; Newton, 1994; Bertonha, 1999; Zanatta, 2003; Grillo, 2006; Savarino, 2010; Finchelstein, 2010; Goebel, 2014; Alpini, 2015; Giannattasio, 2018; Giannattasio, 2019; Giannattasio, 2022; Nocera and Trento, 2023).
[39] A. Rosso to ME, April 22, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP; 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[40] R. Guariglia to ME, October 24, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.

[41] So-called because it was proposed by Manuel Gondra, head of the Paraguayan delegation. The treaty was ratified by all American states except Brazil.
[42] It is so-called because it was proposed by Carlos Saavedra Lamas, the head of the Argentine delegation. It was ratified by Bolivia, Cuba, Chile, the United States, Honduras, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador. Italy was the first European power to ratify the pact.
[43] R. Bova Groppa to B. Mussolini, February 27, 1936, p.2, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[44] The identification of countries favorable to Washington's position was obtained through a cross-analysis of the following documents: A. Marchetti di Muriaglio to ME, April 15, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1; R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, p.1, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.1; Department of State, Confidential release for publication in newspapers for Monday Morning (April 13), April 11, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1; I. Capanni to ME, June 17, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1; I. Capanni to ME, September 28, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1;
[45] R. Cantalupo to ME, May 1, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.; G. Ciano, "Appunto", cit.
[46] G. Ciano, "Appunto", my trans., cit.; "Programma formulato…", cit.
[47] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 28, 1936, p.2, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.
[48] (Bourneuf, 2017). For on overview on the diplomatic relations between Brazil and United States in that period see: (Smith, 1991).
[49] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 25, 1936, p.1, my trans., cit.
[50] R. Cantalupo to ME, May 6, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.
[51] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 27, 1926, my transl., my italics, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[52] I. Capanni to ME, July 18, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.
[53] *Panama Americana*, July 29, 1936.
[54] (Alcubierre Moya, 2002).
[55] F. Suvich to ME, April 20, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[56] R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, cit.
[57] A. Rosso to ME, April 22, 1936, my trans., cit.
[58] R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, pp.4–5, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.1.
[59] A. Marchetti di Muriaglio to ME, April 15, 1936, cit.; R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, p.11, cit.
[60] I. Capanni to ME, September 28, 1936, my trans., cit.
[61] Department of State, "Confidential release…", cit.
[62] R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, p.12, cit.
[63] G. Ciano, "Appunto", cit., my trans.
[64] R. Guariglia to ME, October 24, 1936, p.3, my trans., my italics, cit.
[65] (Pérez Stocco, 2014).
[66] A. Rosso to ME, April 22, 1936, p.1, cit.

[67] R. Cantalupo to ME, March 7, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[68] *Estrella de Panama*, February 19, 1936, my italics.
[69] "Pan American Peace Conference", ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[70] G. Ciano to all the Embassies and Legations of Central and South America, November 7, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.3.
[71] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 27, 1936, p.2, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[72] M. Arlotta, "Situazione annuale politica ed economica della repubblica argentina", 1935, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1. For a historical overview of British Argentine economic relations see: (Robertson, 1930; Ferns, 1950).
[73] M. Arlotta, "Situazione annuale…", p.6, cit. For an overview of British trade with Latin American countries see: (Bulmer-Thomas, 1998).
[74] M. Arlotta, "Programma della Conferenza", 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.2.
[75] S. Mazzolini to ME, February 26, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[76] S. Mazzolini to ME, December 5, 1936, p.2, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.1.
[77] G. Talamo Adenolfi to ME, December 1, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.1.
[78] R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, p.3, my trans., cit.
[79] R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, p.4, cit.
[80] *Panama America*, February 25, 1936, my italics.
[81] On the relation between Colombia and the United States with a focus on "hegemony" and "interdependence" see: (Randall, 1992).
[82] *El Tiempo*, June 11, 1936.
[83] M. Arlotta, "Programma della Conferenza", 1936, my trans., cit.
[84] A. Marchetti di Muriaglio to ME, November 6, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.3.
[85] (Buchenau, 1996).
[86] A. Rosso to ME, April 22, 1936, cit.; R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, cit.
[87] A. Marchetti di Muriaglio to ME, August 20, 1936, p.2, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.
[88] (Schuler, 1998, p.15). On Mexico's relations with League of Nations see also: (Herrera León, 2014).
[89] About Chile and Panamericanism see: (Petersen, 2016).
[90] M. Arlotta, "Situazione annuale politica…", p.3, cit. see also: (Migliorini, 1939).
[91] Italian Embassy in Santiago to ME, November 9, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.3.
[92] Italian Embassy in Santiago to ME, March 6, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.
[93] R. Guariglia, "Sviluppo cronologico dei lavori preparatori", 1936, p.13, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.2.
[94] G. Persico to ME, October 28, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.

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[95] M. Arlotta, "Programma della Conferenza", cit.
[96] R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, p.4, my trans., cit.
[97] (Silva Seitenfus, 1984, p.508).
[98] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 27, 1936, pp.5–8, my trans., cit.
[99] R. Cantalupo to ME, May 6, 1936, p.6, my trans., my italics, cit.
[100] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 25, 1936, pp.3–5, my trans., cit. Cantalupo considered Latin Americans to be "second-class Latin who were unrefined and somewhat backward in religious, social, and economic terms" (R. Cantalupo to ME, April 25, 1936, p.5, my trans., cit.). His racist interpretation, steeped in fascist rhetoric, based his opinion that Latin Americans were an "object" of European countries' foreign policies, as stated in his diplomatic correspondence.
[101] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 25, 1936, pp.5–6, my trans., cit.
[102] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 27, 1936, pp.6–7, my trans., cit.
[103] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 27, 1936, p.4, my trans., cit.
[104] (Bertonha, 2015).
[105] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 27, 1936, cit.
[106] R. Cantalupo to ME, April 27, 1936, p.7, my trans., my italics, cit.
[107] R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, p.6, my trans., cit.
[108] G. Ciano, "Appunto", December 14, 1936, p.4, my trans., cit.
[109] The heads of delegation were: Carlos Saavedra Lamas (Argentina); Enrique Finot (Bolivia); José Carlos de Macedo Soares (Brazil); Miguel Cruchaga Tocornal (Chile); Jorge Soto del Corral (Colombia); Manuel F. Jiménez (Costa Rica); José Manuel Cortina (Cuba); Max Henríquez Ureña (Dominican Republic); Humberto Albornoz (Ecuador); Manuel Castro Ramírez (El Salvador); Carlos Salazar (Guatemala); H. Pauléus Sannon (Haiti); Antonio Bermúdez M. (Honduras); Francisco Castillo Nájera (Mexico); Luis Manuel Debayle (Nicaragua); Harmodio Arias M. (Panama); Miguel Anger Soler (Paraguay); Carlos Concha (Peru); Cordell Hull (United States); José Espalter (Uruguay); Caracciolo Parra Pérez (Venezuela).
[110] A. Rosso to ME, August 8, 1936, ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.
[111] R. Guariglia to ME, December 14, 1936, p.4, my trans., cit.
[112] R. Guariglia to ME, December 24, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.9, f.1.
[113] M. De Angelis to ME, October 29, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.10, f.3.
[114] G. Ciano, December 11, 1936, my trans., ASMAE, AP, 1931–1945, b.8, f.1.

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