

IS ANTARCTICA STILL EXCEPTIONAL?

The Case for “Co-opetition” at the South Pole

Antarctic diplomacy has famously shielded the continent of peace, science, and environmental protection from outside conflict and war. This “exceptionalism” is now being tested by Russia’s war against Ukraine and the belief that international strategic competition between great powers is spilling over into the Antarctic. In order to keep the Antarctic exceptional, however, it would be wise to refocus on what has made Antarctic diplomacy so successful in the first place: cooperation in order to compete, or “co-opetition.”



Danco Island, Antarctica: The small island in the Errera Channel is a landing spot for tourists and home to a Gentoo penguin colony (Photo: Derek Oyen via Unsplash, Unsplash License).

by Patrick Flamm

Aided by the region’s extreme environment, apparent remoteness from centers of population, and the rule book of the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, Antarctic players have for decades conducted their affairs through consensus-seeking and scientific cooperation, even during the height of the Cold War. This separate set of norms and practices has become known as “Antarctic exceptionalism.” The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the biggest challenge to this Antarctic exceptionalism since the 1980s: for the first time ever, one Antarctic Treaty Consultative Party

(ATCP) waged a full-scale war against another. Despite initial fears¹ to the contrary, the Berlin ATCM (Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting) in late May 2022, the first in-person gathering after two years of COVID-19 disruptions, did not spell the end of the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS): both Ukraine and Russia attended the meeting, which proved still able to make decisions via consensus. Russia remained largely isolated, however, and many delegates left the meeting room in protest in a coordinated demarché when the Russian delegate tried to justify the Russian war against Ukraine.² Russia’s full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine clearly violated the very norms and constitutive principles that have underpinned international law and Antarctic conduct for decades. Most importantly, the war’s official rationale denies Ukrainian statehood and sovereignty and thus its recognition as an equal Antarctic Treaty Partner and fellow Consultative Party. Further, the indiscriminate shelling and bombardment of civilian infrastructure has also resulted in destruction and disruption to the Ukrainian national Antarctic program.³ This disastrous impact on Ukraine’s Antarctic program, affecting its staff, infrastructure and its data, will be felt for many years to come. Not calling out and opposing the Russian attack against Ukraine’s status as a sovereign equal and its Antarctic program at the Berlin meeting, which might be suggested by a simplistic understanding of Antarctic exceptionalism as “keeping the politics out”, would have eroded the constitutive norms of Antarctic diplomacy and the foundation of Antarctic exceptionalism. A failure to take such actions would only encourage and embolden great polar power unilateralism and “might makes right” attitudes, contrary to the celebrated “Antarctic spirit of cooperation,” not to mention the interests of

The “Exceptional” Antarctic Treaty System

For over sixty years, the Antarctic Treaty System kept Antarctica a nuclear free and demilitarized zone. It “froze” all previously existing territorial claims, banned all mining activities and established strict environmental protections, with the only legitimate activity being scientific exploration. The Antarctic Treaty entered into force in 1961 and currently has a total of 56 signatories. Of these, only 29 countries have qualified through their scientific credentials as Consultative Parties, which enjoy decision-making powers at the annual Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings. Together with the Antarctic Treaty, later agreements such as the 1980 Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) and the 1991 Protocol on Environmental Protection make up what is generally considered to be one of the most successful multilateral agreements.

the non-great power Consultative Parties, which do, after all, constitute the large majority of signatories. More fundamentally, it can be plausibly argued that the public condemnation and *démarche* by the host country and several other Consultative Parties at the Berlin meeting was not a politicized response (as argued by China⁴), but a normative defense of the sovereign equality and mutual recognition of Antarctic Treaty partners. All the more so, because although the war against Ukraine had begun with the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the invasion in 2022 marked the first time that Ukrainian sovereignty and the country’s integrity as a Consultative Party had been jeopardized. While Russia is a longstanding supporter of the ATS, it remains to be seen how its relative isolation within the system since last year will play out in the future.

The Narrative of Strategic Competition in Antarctica

For some time now, however, polar observers in the West had already begun questioning whether increasing strategic competition in the international system had made the exceptional “Antarctic spirit of cooperation” a thing of the past. This increasingly prominent narrative suggests that peaceful Antarctic affairs will also be significantly shaped by spillover from the three-way rivalry between the great powers the United States of America, Russia, and China.

U.S. Air Force General Charles Q. Brown, for example, argued that the Antarctic, similar to the Arctic today, will soon be a focal point for great power competition.⁵ As great powers in the international system are “increasingly operating under the basis of ‘might is right,’” New Zealand academic Anne-Marie Brady also

argues that “the rules established under the Antarctic Treaty cannot be taken for granted anymore.”⁶ Finally, Australian security scholar Elizabeth Buchanan asks whether in Antarctica we “seriously expect China’s playbook to depart from its assertive and coercive behavior elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region?”⁷

As the last sixty years of Antarctic diplomacy have shown, however, rival and warring states from the international system still managed to cooperate peacefully in the region, chiefly through science and infrastructure. Strategic competition in Antarctica has not been a mirror image of strategic competition elsewhere, but rather “what states made of it.”⁸ By turning science into the political currency of influence, the ATS had always allowed for competition, but contained it largely within the realm of science, logistics and infrastructure. The ATS had been built to buffer and re-channel competition rather than overcome it. The established arrangement of informal consensus-finding, the trust-building through often very personal relationships, and the “freezing” of territorial claims has kept Antarctica a relatively stable and peaceful continent, with environmental protection at the center of attention since the 1990s.

Arguably, by demilitarizing and declaring the Antarctic to be the first “Nuclear Free Zone” in the world, the Antarctic Treaty ensured that the southern polar region was spared nuclear weapons testing. Nuclear testing continued in other parts of the world, of course, including the neighboring South Pacific. Even when faced with major international conflict, Antarctic exceptionalism had been relatively stable: neither was the internationally isolated rogue state of apartheid South Africa excluded from Antarctic meetings, nor did the war for the Falklands/Las Malvinas in 1982 between Argentina and the United Kingdom lead to any major political repercussions within the Antarctic Treaty System, although the two countries maintained overlapping territorial claims at the South Pole.

A Democracy-Autocracy Divide in Antarctica?

Further, there is a danger in framing strategic competition in Antarctica as one between the United States and its allies against the authoritarian states of Russia and China.⁹ This may prove useful for the domestic politics of some Western states, as it is easy to blame stasis and contestation in the system on bogey states, but the emergence of democratic vs authoritarian blocs can be found neither within nor outside the ATS: Russia and China are competitors in the ATS, while the Republic of Korea, a close security ally of the United States, did not join the *démarché* at the Berlin meeting. But even outside Antarctica, there is little evidence that competition between democratic and authoritarian systems is imminent: Vietnam, for example, is not

aligned with China despite the two countries' similar types of communist autocratic regimes, while democracies like South Africa, Brazil (under neither Bolsonaro nor Lula), and India have not been straightforward condemning Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. What is more, analyzing Antarctic geopolitics through a lens of democracy vs autocracy could have disintegrative political effects. If a Consultative Party's regime type—democracy or autocracy—becomes the main prism through which its behavior in Antarctica is interpreted, rather than its behavior in the ATS itself, the Antarctic community of Consultative Parties is likely to disintegrate. In order to become a Consultative Party, a country needs only to sign the Antarctic Treaty and its related conventions and show "substantial research activity" in the Antarctic. For further influence and power within Antarctic meetings, a strong scientific track record, solid polar infrastructure, and active participation in Antarctic meetings is sufficient. Regime type has not been the decisive issue here.

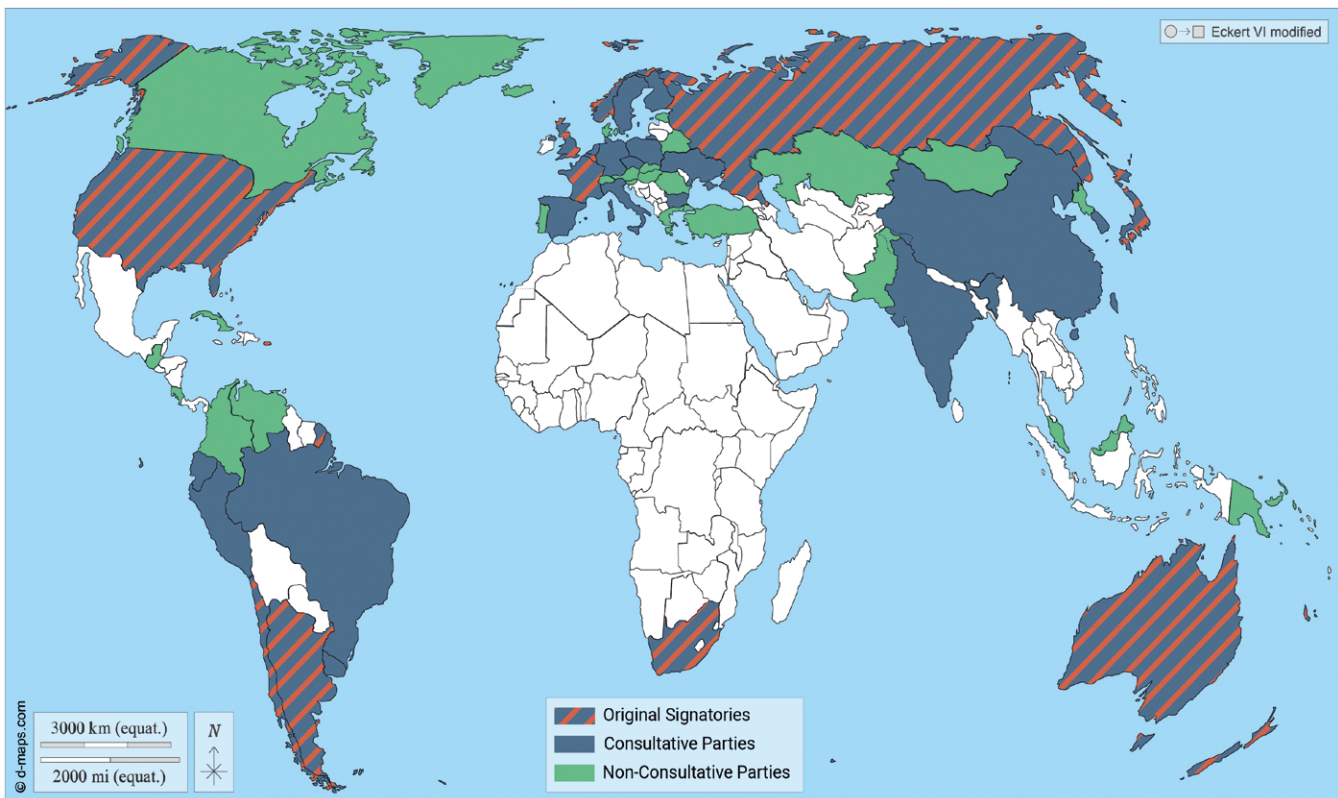
Assuming that strategic competition between the West and Russia/China will unfold in Antarctica in the same way as in the international system would be simplistic and highly consequential¹⁰: it would be a self-fulfilling prophecy upending exceptional Antarctic norms and principles. In contrast to the narrative of strategic com-

petition, a more analytically suitable and less geopolitically counterproductive framing could be that of Antarctic co-opetition.

"Co-opetition" as a Formula from the Past, for the Future

Arguably, the recipe for a peaceful Antarctic all along has been "co-opetition": cooperating in order to compete. In the business world, co-opetition has gained traction as a way to save costs and avoid duplication of effort.¹¹ Facing the harsh Antarctic environment, this is exactly what Antarctic explorers and scientists have practiced for decades, and what has in fact grown into the often mythologized "Antarctic spirit of cooperation." During the Cold War, there were other policy fields where the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, saw enough aligned interests to cooperate in order to compete, be it in arms control negotiations or space exploration, as was the case with the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project in 1975, which laid the ground for the International Space Station decades later.¹²

Given the current crisis of international affairs, it is rather unlikely that a more effective set of cooperative Antarctic rules could be negotiated today.¹³ Co-opetition would be the strategy to retrench and rein-



Parties to the Antarctic Treaty: There are 56 states parties to the treaty, 29 of which, including the 12 original signatories, are Consultative Parties (Map source: https://d-maps.com/m/world/centreeurope_de/centreeurope_de21.svg; personal editing. Data source: <https://www.ats.aq/devAS/Parties?lang=e>).

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force cooperative relations in spaces where they have already been established.¹⁴ Antarctic co-opetition could potentially limit strategic competition (and systemic confrontation between democracy and autocracy) to other parts of the planet while allowing for ongoing peaceful scientific exploration in the Antarctic as well as environmental protection of the continent. What could the adoption of a co-opetitive mindset in Antarctica look like? Sovereign equality and the UN Charter as treaty partners would be a red line, as shown in Berlin. Defending this base line for treaty partnership should be seen not as undue “politicization,” but as affirming the very foundations of the ATS. A co-opetitive approach deliberately draws a line between an exceptional space, the Antarctic, and the rest of the international system, with different and established sets of norms for acceptable and appropriate behavior. In contrast to the narrative of strategic competition, which sets incentives to plan for (and bring about) the eventual demise of the ATS, a co-opetitive mindset has the potential to embolden Antarctic delegates and experts

to explore new areas of shared interests, such as reinforcing a permanent hydrocarbon ban,¹⁵ and building internationally shared large-scale infrastructures such as research stations¹⁶ or aerodromes, as well as marine protected areas. This way the Antarctic Treaty System could reinvent itself as a model for co-opetition in the 21st century.

In a short video published on the official webpage of the upcoming Helsinki ATCM from 29 May to 8 June 2023, the hosting nation Finland welcomes all signatories to the Antarctic Treaty and ends with a public call to all participants, voiced by a Finnish girl: “Tekää viisaita päätöksiä! Make wise decisions!”¹⁷ In this context, it would be wise to bid farewell to the self-fulfilling narrative of strategic competition as well as to the all too lionizing¹⁸ notion of the “Antarctic spirit of cooperation,” and to embrace a more realistic and nuanced notion of Antarctic geopolitics in order to reinforce established areas of cooperation: Antarctic co-opetition.

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References and further reading:
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DOI: 10.48809/prifspot2305

