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Is the Antarctic's Status Quo Being Challenged by the New Geopolitical Context with the Rise of China as a Global Power?

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Abstract:

The Antarctic has a special condition as peace reigns through science and cooperation as it was established due to the gravity and uncertainty of the Cold War situation and the threat of nuclear warfare. Although the status quo has been maintained since such stability was agreed back in 1959 by the Antarctic Treaty, current times had changed drastically. Asia is developing into a more influential player, especially China. In order to maintain this trend, a clear example is that economic and political strategies are being driven and oriented largely by the need to obtain and consume natural resources, where countries look toward Antarctica for its potentially large natural reserves, which still remain intact. This article tries to give reasons why the international community should be aware of the considerable rise and increasing predisposition of Chinese presence in the white continent by the great effort and investment that it has recently making, unnoticed. The end of this status quo could have serious consequences for the Antarctic Treaty System and, therefore, for the entire global community.

Keywords:

Antarctic, Antarctic Treaty, China, natural resources.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

In the uncertain and worrying development of the Cold War, a huge achievement was accomplished among the international community: the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), signed back in 1959. Science was used as an excuse to maintain peace and to make this continent the first nuclear-free area in the world¹. Nonetheless, it was a double-edge sword. The US and the USSR were the precursors of the establishment of a treaty to avoid its colonization by the seven claimant states (Argentina, Chile, the United Kingdom, Norway, Australia, France and New Zealand), but it was just an excuse to set themselves in the scenario. Far from an attempt to break up the status quo of the situation —as all the claimant countries recognised each other excepting Chile, Argentina and the UK—it was used as a tool to add a new level of complexity to the understanding and the legal and geopolitical conceptualization of the area, as the US and the USSR would then be able with full rights to get in the field despite their late arrival on the scene and without the approval of the claimant states by using soft power, as the modus operandi of the whole Cold War. Without a doubt, claimant states had to accept these conditions as the two major global powers were using their coercive supremacy disguised as 'peace settlers' in the area. It wasn't even worth it to consider the implementation of a contentious strategy due to the current international context made, as no one was willing to start another war that could develop into a third World War due to the context and just to claim a stake in an inhospitable land.

Legal contextualization and first confrontations for energy resources

The purpose of the treaty was, in short, to avoid the colonization of claimant states and to assure in the future, the legal and peaceful presence of the non-claimant parties by the prohibition of the establishment of a militarised area: the development and enhancement of peace by an international scientific cooperation and, specifically, created to avoid nuclear testing (art. V)². It was signed and ratified by the seven claimants, plus: the US the USSR, Belgium, Japan and South Africa. Article IV deserves

¹ DODDS, Klaus. (2012). *The Antarctic: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, pp. 49-50

² Antarctic Treaty. (1959). Retrieved from: www.bas.ac.uk/about/antarctica/the-antarctic-treaty/the-antarctic-treaty-1959/. (Accessed 10 December 2019).

a special mention, as it gives hope to the claimant states to be the sovereign countries of the claimed land in the future, as it states that the acceptance of the treaty didn't mean they renounced the claimed territory, and by forbidding new territorial claims from the new states. Knowing that no country was willing to remain at this situation forever, member states agreed to submit it for review in 30 years' time³.

Despite the fake *locus amoenus* scenario imposed, where every country had hidden — and not so hidden— interests, India was the only state who *dared* to stand up and speak out indirectly about these countries' true aims. India feared the Antarctic's fate due to the continent's natural resources. This was the reason why Indian Prime Minister, Mr Nehru, brought up the 'Question of Antarctica' in 1956 and 1958 to the UN's General Assembly, as he was concern about the Antarctic's richness in atomic energy minerals⁴, among other natural resources. In 1958, one year before the ATS, India's "bid to introduce an alternative imagination of the space and resources of the Antarctic at the un failed"⁵, as it proposed that the un should be able to decide as well about the decision-making concerning the Antarctic, and not only the signing countries. Lowering the tension on this topic, since the UN decided to step aside, the signing countries decided to add to the treaty a special mention to the un charter, as can be seen in its preamble.

Notwithstanding India's drop of interest about the Antarctic issue, it has always been a matter of review since not even the members of the ATS agreed completely: they reluctantly signed the treaty in order to avoid greater evils. So, it was the turn of the third world countries to try to change the status quo in the 1980's, when another attempt to reconceptualise the geopolitical imagination of this territory was suggested by Malaysia. In 1982, Prime Minister Mahathir Bin Mohamad proposed that if the UN wouldn't be the one ruling over the Antarctica, at least the "present occupants" of the territory should act as trustees. Malaysia led among the non-aligned countries the issue of changing the perception of the Antarctic and managed to make it appear on the final document of the non-aligned countries summit that took place in 1983⁶. They dedicated the issue in

³ DODDS, Klaus. (2012). *The Antarctic: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, p. 65

⁴ Idem, pp. 63-64

⁵ BRADY, Anne-Marie. (2013). *The Emerging Politics of Antarctica*, Routledge, p. 55

⁶ HAYASHI, Moritaka. (1986). "The Antarctica Question in the United Nations". *Cornell International Law Journal*, 19, pp. 275-276

paragraphs 122 and 123, in the Economic Declaration, where the use of the Antarctic for peaceful reasons was reinforced and maintained that it should be part of the UN'S Agenda, as the interest in the continent among other countries was increasing⁷. In the same year, 1983, China and India joined the treaty.

As there were new members joining and the situation was getting more complex as new interests and different aims were showing up, new legal instruments were developed to avoid confrontations or environmental damage. Among the Agreed Measures for the Conservation for Flora and Fauna in 1964, was signed the Convention for the Conservation of the Antarctic Seals in 1972 and in 1980 the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources; in 1988 parties agreed to establish a new legal instrument to avoid disputes about the continent's resources: the Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities⁸. Also, in the 1980s, as new problems arose over natural resources all over the world as countries were demanding them due to the oil crisis and technological advances allowed access to these resources—a topic that wasn't discussed previously within the ATS articles—, a new legal tool was created: the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, approved in 1991 and entering into force in 1998. The protocol banned the extraction of mineral resources and made the Antarctic a natural reserve. Nonetheless, article 25.2. points out that in 50 years' time, the protocol can be revised or modified⁹, that is in 2048, which is a threat as we can see the increasing presence of Asian countries in the continent (China, India, Malaysia and South Korea) in order to be strongly positioned in the area before 2048. Objectively, sensitive topics are not well addressed among the members to avoid discord, prevailing the status quo of the issue, what makes the Antarctic fragile and ineffective.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ccf2/c536a6d6b7c08cfc55be4a455dec9fc60395.pdf>. (Accessed 13 December 2019).

⁷ UN (1983). *7th Summit Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement*. New Delhi. Paragraphs 122-123. Retrieved from: http://cns.miis.edu/nam/documents/Official_Document/7th_Summit_FD_New_Delhi_Declaration_1983_Whole.pdf. (Accessed 13 December 2019).

⁸ Antarctic Treaty System. Retrieved from: www.ats.aq. (Accessed 13 December 2019).

⁹ Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty. (1991). The Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. Art. 25.2. Retrieved from: https://documents.ats.aq/recatt/Att006_e.pdf. (Accessed 18 December 2019).

End of the Cold War and current situation

With the end of the Cold War the US became the only global power and now, apparently, we are witnessing its fall; the empowerment of the developing countries — especially China— and the new ways of research conducted by leading-edge technology, is reshaping and questioning the Antarctic's future. Since such geopolitical contexts are over and new ones are emerging, it is time to adapt. Are the legal framework and institutions which once protected the white continent in the core and fear of a world-wide nuclear catastrophe obsolete? What is Antarctic's fate? Is the ATS old-fashioned nowadays? Are the revisionist countries, mainly the Asian ones, willing to change the continent's *statu quo* by taking advantage of this new era in order to transform the situation?

The geopolitical conceptualisation of the Antarctic is getting more and more complex as more countries are getting different interests in the area, more legal frameworks are established to preserve the status quo and the increasing 'soft power' strategy some Asian countries are carrying out in order to have more influence in the area —being the main concern, as it is unpredictable—. Discrepancies are multiplying as more countries become members, as there is a clear unwillingness to accept new participants and a more limited legal framework is trying to be developed. Without any doubt, China is the country that has attained the biggest achievements in recent years as it has a clear intention of becoming a key player in the white continent, in order to have a big role when the Antarctic's future governance will be reviewed. Its presence and influence in the Antarctic have increased at a dizzying speed since 2005, yet no one is becoming really concerned about the implications this will have in the long-term, implications that will affect everyone.

China: achievements and tendencies

“There appears to be an increasing mismatch between the nature and capacity of the present ATS and global realities, including in relation to the process and consequences of globalization”¹⁰.

¹⁰ HEMMING, A., DODDS, K. et ROBERTS, P. (2017). *Handbook on the Politics of Antarctica*. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, p.11

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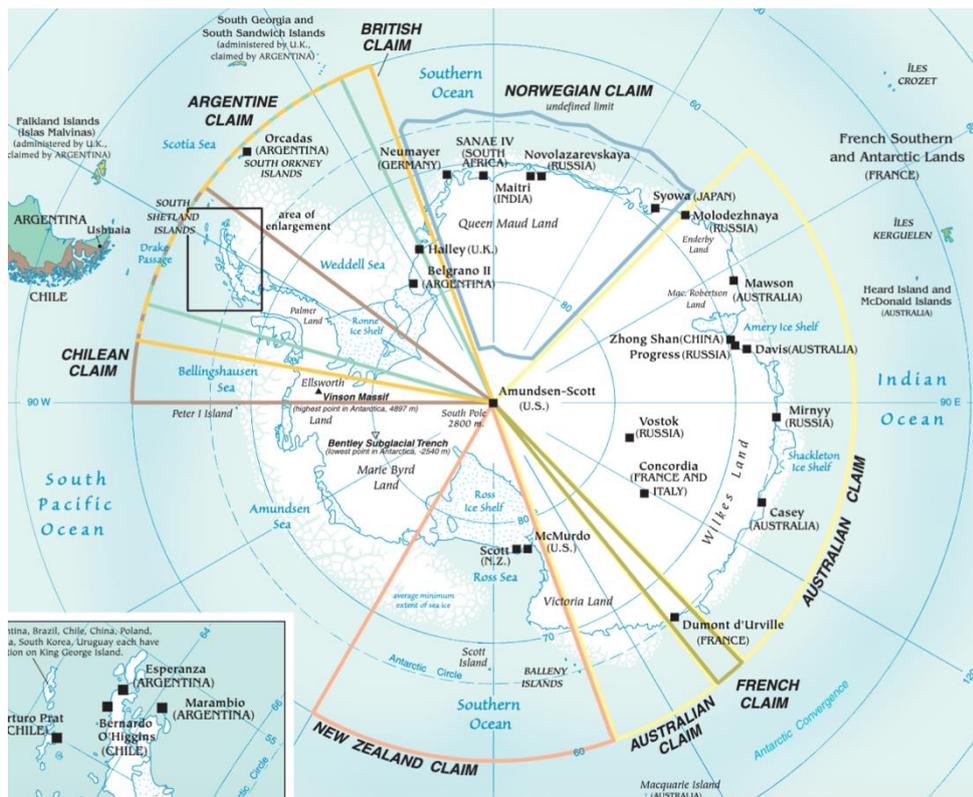


Figure 1. Antarctic claims and research stations*

Source: CIA (2009), Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection

*Please note that due to Copyright reasons, the most recent map available is from 2009, there are more research stations currently.

As already mentioned, there is a clear unwillingness for *traditional* and *second generation* (US AND USSR) ATS countries to study, consider and develop new paths and policy frameworks to deal with the rising and foreseeable interests towards the Antarctic by the states that have recently showed an interest; in an attempt to keep the inherited status quo from the Cold War period, amended with patches (legal instruments) as new political issues or economic interests were and are blooming. To turn a blind eye to the real situation will help little to avoid the consequences of what has already being introduced by these new players: the Asian countries, and especially, China. As the situation has stagnated despite the arrival of winds of change —as apparently this is indeed treated as a taboo topic— many countries are now fully aware of this threat and the ATS’ lack of authority and therefore opting to sign bilateral agreements with China (especially), in a hope of slowing, stopping or making them reconsider their progress; as countries are fostering polar diplomacy 'just in case'. That’s why, for example Australia —Antarctic’s largest claimant (42%)— decided in

2016 to create with its largest economic partner, China, the “Joint Committee on Antarctic and South Ocean Collaboration”¹¹, in an attempt to contain China’s influence and expansion with a fresh-looking strategic policy. Likewise, Chile signed a joint committee with China in 2019, as China is very keen on using Punta Arenas port to boost their Antarctic activities¹².

All Asiatic investments or activities in the white continent are deliberately future-oriented, motivated by the exploration of natural resources (and its exploitation, as they have a large population to supply with ambitious economic developments). Without a doubt, among the Asian countries that are increasing their interest in the Antarctic, China stands out by far, especially in the last 15 years since it is becoming more powerful than ever before and sees how other developing countries are also starting a race towards the Antarctic. In short, by all the activities and achievements that China is carrying out in the South Pole, it is clear that it is seeking to have an influential position in the continent.

China has a diversified strategy as it is involving itself more and more and, investing in many different areas and topics regarding the Antarctic. Here is a list of very different but yet much intertwined key points that prove China’s increasing presence and influence in the continent by ‘soft power’.

Infrastructure’s strategic logic

In 1978, China adopted an open-door policy, which rapidly placed it in a very influential position internationally. It was admitted into the ATS in June 1983 and carried out its first expedition in 1984; and achieved its position as a consultative member in 1985. To date, China has accomplished 36 expeditions, the last one taking place on December 2019, and has four stations —three of them placed in the Australian claimed area— with a fifth one expected to be built by 2022 in the Ross Sea area, in the territory claimed by

¹¹ HEMMING, A., DODDS, K. et ROBERTS, P. (2017). *Handbook on the Politics of Antarctica*. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, p.11

¹² ZHOU, Laura. (19 September 2019). “How Chinese access to Chilean port could give Antarctic exploration activities a boost”. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3027957/chinese-access-chilean-port-may-give-antarctic-exploration>. (Accessed 23 December 2019).

New Zealand. Its establishment in that specific area could be easily related to Ross Sea's great fish stocks and the supposition that it could be rich in deep seabed natural resources; in other words, it could be predicted that China is strategically positioning itself in key locations for when it is feasible to review or modify the legal tools that protect or regulate different issues and spaces within the Antarctic's territory. Currently, China is the country in the world that allocates the largest budget in the white continent in terms of scientific research and developing infrastructure —bases, planes, and icebreakers— which it is believed that will be used in the future as a strong reason to reinforce its rights on the Antarctic's natural resources and the continent's future governance¹³.

Air space and tourism

China has not only increased its 'soft power' by investing more in scientific research in the continent, but by increasing stealthily its presence using another activity permitted by the Antarctic Treaty: tourism. After the US, the second largest group of tourists to visit the Antarctic are the Chinese. The demand is so high that the first commercial flight with tourists from China took place in December 2017, which was seen as a huge achievement for the Chinese¹⁴. Along with the aircraft topic, since 2018 China is building their first permanent airport in the Antarctic, in order to not depend on the Russian facilities, they had to use until now. This will definitely put them at the same level as major polar actors. Plus, as the Chinese online newspaper *People Daily* hints, by setting themselves on top along with other key powers of the region, it could irreproachably grant them the right to participate in the management of the Antarctic's airspace management¹⁵.

¹³ CAPTAIN PHAM, Tuan N. (2019). "China's Activities in the Polar Regions Cannot Go Unchecked". *US Naval Institute*, 1.45/3/1,393. Retrieved from:

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2019/march/chinas-activities-polar-regions-cannot-go-unchecked>. (Accessed 23 December 2019).

¹⁴ LIU, Nengye. (24 January 2019). "Defining the 'Rise' of China in Antarctica. Australian Institute of International Affairs". Retrieved from: www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/defining-rise-china-antarctica/. (Accessed 28 December 2019).

¹⁵ People Daily. (29 October 2019). "Pronto comenzará la construcción del primer aeropuerto antártico permanente de China". *People Daily*. Retrieved from: <http://spanish.peopledaily.com.cn/n3/2018/1029/c92121-9512799.html>. (Accessed 28 December 2019).

Official public strategy

As very remarkable event, on the score of the 40th meeting of the Antarctic's consultative parties, which was hosted for the first time in Beijing, China issued its first white paper on the Antarctic in May 2017. Ever since Xi Jinping became president, when addressing to both poles, he had always stated "understand, protect and use" in what it has apparently become the country's motto within their strategies in these unique areas. Eight months later, China published its first white paper on the Arctic, which this motto appears. The difference between both papers is that, while China is clear on their intentions towards the Arctic, in the Antarctic one, by contrast, it is not. It can be seen as a policy paper being under 'construction', as it is mainly a summary of all the achievements China had attained ever since in the continent. In order to be efficient, China will need to define a clear policy towards the Antarctic, although everything indicates that it is being already carried out, but it isn't public. Maybe, we can expect another official and sharper white paper on the Antarctic when the fifth Chinese base will be built, by 2022¹⁶.

Notwithstanding, the symbology is clear: the officialization of their very ambitious intentions for the first time is a clear message full of connotations for the international community. Despite some countries believe that China has ulterior motives regarding the continent, many others believe that they are really trying to look for the most profitable role they can play within the Antarctic's policy and, until then, they will be cautious. The white paper's priority intentions are to invest (even) more in scientific research and to safeguard the Antarctic Treaty¹⁷. By protecting the ATS, it can be said that, apparently, China has a lack of interest in extracting natural resources (now), in militarising the zone or in claiming in a future territorial interest (unlikely), all of which are prohibited in the ATS, making the Chinese strategy very ambiguous for the rest of the world.

¹⁶ LIU, Nengye. (28 June 2018). "What Does China's Fifth Research Station Mean for Antarctic Governance?". *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from: www.thediplomat.com/2018/06/what-does-chinas-fifth-research-station-mean-for-antarctic-governance/ (Accessed 29 December 2019).

¹⁷ TIAN TIAN, Bai. (23 May 2017). "China releases 1st Antarctic paper". *Global Times*. Retrieved from: www.globaltimes.cn/content/1048187.shtml. (Accessed 29 December 2019).

Despite all, it is well known that one of the worries that concerns China the most is the energy supply for its growing population, and the capability of being able to continue on maintaining current rhythms of industrial and economic development. Which allow us to think that China is positioning itself in case Antarctic's vast natural resources are able to be exploited in the future, for example in 2048, when the protocol on natural resources has to be revised. In their Arctic white paper, it is clearly established their intention of establishing a "Polar Silk Road" as the Arctic is melting and a new maritime trade routes will be available¹⁸. China's eagerness at being both the most influential country and to be present in every possible scenario is evident. It is noticeable that China's strategies are very purposefully weaved: always waiting for the perfect moment to perform for their own benefit. It seems that we will have to keep waiting for an official statement about its true intentions for the Antarctic, and that won't happen at least until they have either their strategy well-defined or the ideal opportunity to make the official announcement. Nonetheless, in China's 13th 'five-year plan' it was clear their intention was the fostering of peace and cooperation in the region, along with the increase of budget for its Antarctic projects, very similar to the 12th plan, but more ambitious. Let's see what the 14th plan will bring.

Antarctic Specially Managed Area

Activities are regulated in some special areas in the Antarctic due to their significant environmental value and in order to promote collaboration, avoiding possible conflicts or environmental catastrophes. China proposed in 2013 —the same year Xi Jinping become President— to consider the Dome A area, where their scientific station Kunlun is located as an Antarctic Specially Managed Area (ASMA) status. However, this has been declined, although they are still fighting for it. Kunlun station is seen as a great success within Chinese media, as it is the highest station in the continent (located more than 4,000 metres above sea level), nearly at the very core of the southern pole and almost neighbouring with US' Amundsen–Scott Station, although Chinese base is the most difficult to reach. By considering Dome A as an ASMA status, it would indirectly

¹⁸ WOODHOUSE, Alice. (26 January 2018). "China outlines plans for 'Polar Silk Road' in Arctic". *Financial Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/a53ebabc-0268-11e8-9650-9c0ad2d7c5b5>. (Accessed 29 December 2019).

mean more influence and therefore power for China within decision-making strategies about Antarctic's most sensitive areas, a very threatening move¹⁹. China has had a consultative status since 1985, and it is obvious that seeks to be among the topmost influential members to the ATS.

Icebreakers

China is also pursuing its independence as it's currently constructing its own icebreakers, including its first nuclear-powered one, that would be the country's third icebreaker, and the second one being built in China. As the ATS prohibits nuclear or military activities, it is supposed to operate only in the Arctic, which would leave the other two permanently available to use in the Antarctic²⁰. Its first icebreaker, Xue Long, was built in the Ukraine in 1993. Looking for a more powerful one — with more international prestige—, China decided to build its first home-made icebreaker: Xue Long 2. It was introduced by Chinese authorities as “the first two-way icebreaking scientific research vessel”, which set off in October in order to achieve China's 36th expedition to the Antarctic, for the first time, using two icebreakers for one single expedition. The vessels are being considered with great admiration within Chinese national media (it was even included in President's Xi Jinping New Year speech²¹) as they are proudly commenting on their journey as both of them will be stationed at the South Pole until March and mid-April 2020²².

¹⁹ LIU, Nengye. (11 July 2019). “The heights of China's ambition in Antarctica”. *The Interpreter*. Retrieved form: www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/heights-china-s-ambition-antarctica. (Accessed 2 January 2020).

²⁰ EITERJORD, Trym Aleksander (5 September 2019). “Checking in on China's Nuclear Icebreaker”. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved form: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/checking-in-on-chinas-nuclear-icebreaker/>. (Accessed 2 January 2020).

²¹ Xinhua. (31 December 2019). “President Xi delivers 2020 New Year speech, vowing to achieve first centenary goal”. *The State Council: The People's Republic of China*. Retrieved form: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/201912/31/content_WS5e0b4c5fc6d07ec821d3ea88.html. (Accessed 2 January 2020).

²² The Economist staff. (28 November 2019). “The voyage of two icebreakers have been creating headlines in China”. *The Economist*. Retrieved form: www.economist.com/china/2019/11/28/the-voyage-of-two-icebreakers-have-been-creating-headlines-in-china. (Accessed 3 January 2020).

National and international rhetoric

China is wisely using another strategic tactic even more powerful and with greater implications and consequences: their own national narrative. According to the expert Anne-Marie Brady, China now includes the Antarctic within their broader national-identity literature as it has become a matter of great interest for the government. China addresses the issue the same way it addresses other traditional issues of national interest in order to justify itself and to stimulate their citizen's engagement by involving them emotionally, receiving popular support: the rhetoric of victimization backed by foreign abuse suffered in the past and, therefore, the right to speak in order to defend Chinese interests and *rights*. The government frequently brings up the topic of the Antarctic in all types of media and within the education system, so now it is a very familiar issue for all its citizens. Geographies of imagination, along with mass persuasion techniques, have an underestimated power as citizen's end up making out of the topic an intrinsic part of their identity, which gives the government more legitimacy for their policies. In this case, to convince the most populated country in the world about something in such a subtle way makes the development of policies easier in order to attain their objectives in reaching an unstoppable path, therefore being fully legitimised. It also has consequences for the countries that are involved in the Antarctic, since they end up believing this and, subconsciously allowing China's place, and thereby, considering China in a different way to the rest of the countries involved: being seen with suspicion, respect and fear. In the Antarctic race, China was late, but has managed to reach the same level —or higher— than the other players. Internationally, it is obvious that they want to be considered in a positive way as a key actor within the Antarctic, due to its commitment to peace, the willingness to cooperate and its cutting-edge tools when doing research to contribute to humanity. At the same time, its inner rhetoric changes, more focused-oriented on China's past exclusion in the continent, the large estimation of natural resources within the territory and their scientific and technological achievements, which is starting to be considered as a subject of national pride as they are seen as leaders in the scientific world²³.

²³ BRADY, Anne-Marie. (2017). *China as a Polar Great Power*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 284-292.

Media

Within the media, it is very interesting to note how frequently the Chinese press publishes numerous articles about their achievements, full of pride, with positive connotations and adjectives encouraging grandiloquence. China even broadcasted live the arrival of the first scientific expedition to reach Dome A, the most inaccessible region in the continent, back in 2005 at 3:16 am, Chinese local time²⁴. Just as the US broadcasted the arrival of the first man on the moon. According to Brady, this event inaugurated the fourth phase of what is called "China's great leap" in Polar Affairs (2005 - present), leaving behind second-class basic science (1991 – 2004) to position itself as a top team leader in the field.

Fake news?

In April 2019, the Chinese newspaper *South China Morning Post* blamed the US for having built a base near the Chinese station on dome A, considering it as a provocation to China. Dome A, the second highest point in the continent at more than 4,000 metres, is considered a strategic point in the globe since it is one of the best locations for space observation on the planet due to its natural conditions, as it is the continent's highest point. China is the only country to have a base there and, among its purposes, it is the establishment of several large-capacity telescopes for ambitious astronomical purposes and has, as mentioned above, since 2013 been trying to declare the area with the status of ASMA. The article states that the US has built this base "overnight" and reveals that the American aim has been driven by competitiveness due to their fear that Chinese escalation in the white continent is unstoppable, quote: "moving [the US] political rivalries to the Antarctic". They assume that the supposed US base would have been established to block the Chinese purpose of establishing the area as ASMA and for their own interests, since the polar orbit is used by satellites to have the greatest accuracy as possible in spatial and cartographic terms for military and espionage purposes, mainly. The Chinese scientists who had revealed this information had requested to remain anonymous²⁵. This article is criticized by the Australian ABC

²⁴ BRADY, Anne-Marie. (2017). *China as a Polar Great Power*. Cambridge University Press, p. 55.

²⁵ CHEN, Stephen. (29 April 2019). "Are China and the US jostling for position at the highest point in Antarctica?" *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3008034/are-china-and-us-jostling-position-highest-point-antarctica>. (Accessed 3 January 2020).

broadcasting corporation, which criticises precisely that the news is anonymous, and affirms that US' scientists are annoyed about the situation, denying the existence of any base near Dome A²⁶. Regardless of whether it is true or false, tension has already been created and a suspicious atmosphere may have been established in the Chinese collective imagination due to the impact of such emotional news. When its intention is precisely to surpass the US in space matters, it is evident China's fear of the US competing with them for space reasons in such a strategically key place for astronomical exploration. China aims to be able to offer space tourism services by 2040, as well as the exploitation of natural resources available in space²⁷.

Seabed

The intention to *conquer* the deep seabed was announced in 2015 by China as one of its new strategic frontiers, mainly for resource exploitation. It is known that there are large deposits in the surrounding areas of the Antarctic Ocean. China is expanding its mineral researches in the sea areas bordering the Antarctic, as it had already discovered nearby polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides and ferromanganese crust, all of them available in deep sea conditions and being highly valued by the international community for their long term commercial value. According to Dodds, it can be forecasted that in the next decades, underwater mining and deep-sea energy prospecting will be growing industries²⁸, so China could again be, positioning itself to take advantage of this anticipated future economic scenario. This pressure will be without a doubt a challenge for the ATS regarding the management or exploitation of the deep seabed.

²⁶ GOTHE-SNAPE, Jackson. (1 May 2019). "Chinese reportedly alarmed over Antarctic 'battle', but experts say 'new US base' doesn't exist". *ABC News*. Retrieved from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-01/chinese-territorial-battle-antarctica-dome-a/11061664>. (Accessed 8 January 2020).

²⁷ CHEN, Stephen. (17 November 2017). "China's nuclear spaceships will be 'mining asteroids and flying tourists' as it aims to overtake US in space race". *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2120425/chinas-nuclear-spaceships-will-be-mining-asteroids>. (Accessed 8 January 2020).

²⁸ DODDS, Kaus. (12 July 2018). "In 30 years the Antarctic Treaty becomes modifiable, and the fate of a continent could hang in the balance". *The Conversation*. Retrieved from: <http://theconversation.com/in-30-years-the-antarctic-treaty-becomes-modifiable-and-the-fate-of-a-continent-could-hang-in-the-balance-98654>. (Accessed 8 January 2020).

Eyes set on Antarctic's fresh-water and fishing trade

Currently, there is an increase in disputes and confrontations driven by the usage and consumption of fresh water, as it is becoming a scarce resource, starting to be a hot topic of concern among international policies. The lack of it due to climate change is already affecting human populations and ecosystems. Within this international scenario, China—which is already lacking fresh water— would be very keen on exploiting the Antarctic's freshwater ice for its citizens' consumption, a novel topic that has not been nor treated nor regulated before²⁹. Furthermore, China has great interest in fishing in the area, as it is the country in the world that consumes the most fish. Its efforts in being considered as a key factor in the Antarctic has been seen when it was invited as to negotiate the *Agreement to prevent unregulated high seas fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean* (2018), including major fishing countries: Canada, China, Denmark, Iceland, Japan, Korea, Norway, Russia, the US and the EU, remaining in force at least for 16 years³⁰, so the same could happen when the Antarctic's legal tools have to be reviewed in 2048. While countries like Australia, Norway or, especially, the EU members claim for more Marine Protected Areas (MPA) around the Antarctic, Russia and significantly, China, reject the idea due to the impact that would mean to their domestic fishing activities. Despite this, China seems to have a strategy within this topic, as it seems that is shifting its political intentions towards approving an MPA status in some areas. It is even accepting the creation of a new ocean partnership with the EU for the first time, signed back in 2018³¹. In 2017, New Zealand and the US proposed the establishment of an MPA in the Ross Sea, which was totally rejected by China, although it changed its mind rapidly when it was stated that it would have, at least, a validity of 35 years, when it will be revised. The Ross Sea is now the largest MPA on Earth, considered as such due to its rich and diverse fauna³².

²⁹ BRADY, Anne-Marie. (2017). *China as a Polar Great Power*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 95-97

³⁰ Agreement. (2018). "Agreement to prevent unregulated high seas fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean". *Official Journal of the European Union*, art. 13. Retrieved form: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:22019A0315\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:22019A0315(01)). (Accessed 8 January 2020).

³¹ Eco-Business. (25 July 2018). "EU and China agree on ocean partnership". *Eco-Business*. Retrieved form: <https://www.eco-business.com/opinion/eu-and-china-agree-on-ocean-partnership/>. (Accessed 15 January 2020).

³² LIU, Nengye. (28 June 2018). "What Does China's Fifth Research Station Mean for Antarctic Governance?" *The Diplomat*. Retrieved form: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/what-does-chinas-fifth->

Conclusions

We can say that China is going to be a challenge for the Antarctic's policy, future governance and its fate in general. Despite not having, apparently, a clear or official strategy concerning the white continent, it is making great efforts to place itself as a key actor in the region, already having a prestigious and advantageous position. China is not interested in the short term in exploiting the Antarctic's natural resources but in the long term, that possibility is very feasible, as the world natural resources will be in short supply. Their cautious and stealthy approach is giving them an advantageous position, in which they go unnoticed despite their ambitious investment in the continent. Chinese success lies in the diversity of its investments in technology and scientific research, along with its popular rhetoric, which is very efficient as it ends up shaping people's geopolitical imagination and, therefore, legitimising its strategy and policy making. It is also clear that China is considering the need for both energetical and biological supply of its population in the future, as well as the opportunity of developing potential new economies and industries that could take place in the near future, led by the mineral resources found in the seabed. To sum up, China is ready to promote and defend its ideals and rights when the right opportunity presents itself, given the great weight and influence it already has on the white continent and world-wide.

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