THE GLOBAL RACE FOR ANTARCTICA: CHINA VS THE REST OF THE WORLD?

edited by Giulia Sciorati
As Earth’s southernmost continent, Antarctica lives by norms of its own. It is a de facto condominium over which seven sovereign states maintain territorial claims, but that is governed by a multilateral Antarctic Treaty System (ATS). China’s growing interests in the “White Continent” have spurred responses from the actors that have much at stake in Antarctica, such as Australia, Brazil and Russia, as well as the European Union. These actors conduct joint activities on Antarctica’s harsh land in the fields of tourism and scientific research. Which are the specific interests of these powers? What is the geopolitical status of the continent? And what’s in store for one of the last sanctuaries left on Earth?

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The rise of China in Antarctica

SOURCE: CCAIIR, FINANCIAL TIMES, NASA, NORWEGIAN POLAR INSTITUTE, ROYAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY, USGS.
The rise of China in Antarctica
The rise of China in Antarctica

1960-70

SOURCE: CGMIR, FINANCIAL TIMES, NASA, NORWEGIAN POLAR INSTITUTE, ROYAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY, USGS
The rise of China in Antarctica

1980

The Global Race for Antarctica: China vs the Rest of the World?
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1990

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2000

The Global Race for Antarctica: China vs the Rest of the World?
The rise of China in Antarctica

2010

The Global Race for Antarctica: China vs the Rest of the World?

Since the launch of Xuě Lóng 2 (literally, China’s “Snow Dragon 2”) in late 2018, images of Chinese icebreakers on the Polar route of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have become more and more common on media outlets around the world. Images that leave a sweet-and-sour taste, as they imply that one of the few sanctuaries in the world (that is, the Polar region) is no longer immune to large-scale human activity. Global commons have now become central in debates between civil society and national governments with people taking to the streets for the protection of the atmosphere, high oceans, outer space and the fair use of the Internet. Antarctica, the other end of the Arctic’s looking glass, seems to remain untouched by worldwide commotion. At least, for the moment.

Antarctica is one of the few places in the world where human activity has been strictly regulated since the early 1960s, when the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) came into force (specifically, it was signed in 1959 by 12 countries). Simply put, one of the key aspects of the ATS is that Antarctica is supposed to be “untouchable.” In fact, the sole human activities allowed on the continent are tourism and scientific research, and even those are subject to a regulatory system.

Antarctic tourism for the 2017-2018 season counted almost 52,000 visitors, most of whom arrived from the US and China. According to estimates from Ctrip, China’s biggest provider of travel services, Chinese tourists in Antarctica for the 2018-2019 season are bound to increase up to 10,000 against the 8,200 of the previous season. If these estimates are correct, this year one out of five tourists in Antarctica will have been Chinese.
Moreover, China has been the only country to build research stations on the continent from the 2000s onwards, since other states with an interest in Antarctica ceased construction works in the late 1990s (see the map below for a longitudinal visualization of active research stations in Antarctica by country of origin). China currently maintains four active research stations in Antarctica, all of which were built after 1983 when the country formally entered the framework of the ATS. The “Kunlun station” (established in 2009), in particular, made the news a few months back when China put forward the proposal for a “code of conduct” or an “Antarctic Specially Managed Area” (ASMA), aiming to limit (non-Chinese) activities around the station: an operation that remains in a “grey zone”, as it raises the issue of sovereignty in the continent. Indeed, Antarctica is “a continent with no government” composed of territories that are claimed by “Antarctic powers” – i.e., New Zealand, Australia, France, Norway, the UK, Argentina and Chile. The US and Russia have also built research stations in Antarctica, despite not enjoying the status of claimant states. Three out of four active Chinese research stations, including Kunlun, are located on the Australian claim, thus further complicating the matter of sovereignty over the areas surrounding research stations. On the border of the Australia/New Zealand claims is a fifth Chinese station, currently under construction, specifically located in Terra Nova Bay where the Italian research station “Mario Zucchelli” also is situated. China’s fifth station is scheduled to become operative in 2022, and capable of accommodating up to 80 people when in full capacity.

With China paying increased attention to Antarctica, the ambiguity of the country’s strategy in the polar region has the potential to become an increasingly pressing matter at the international level. In fact, although the ATS forbids military and mining activities, it does not offer any indication on the consequences of violations from the part of ATS signatories. A serious flaw, as Antarctica, after all, continues to play host to an unestimated amount of untapped natural resources in a global economic system that is moving towards a scarcity of raw materials and that is already foreseeing China’s future quest in the mineral sector to support the pace of its industrialization. China’s hunger is primarily stressed by the country’s proposal within the annual Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCMs) of a re-interpretation of the “inviolability clause” contained in the ATS in favour of a “responsible use clause” of Antarctica and its resources. Still, natural resources are not the sole characteristics of the continent to kindle China’s interest: a station by the South Pole, in fact, would be perfectly positioned to increase the accuracy of China’s global navigation satellite systems (GNSS), thus to better sharpening the country’s ability to geo-spatial position electronic devices.

As in many issue-areas of today’s world, the vagueness of the ATS’ provisions runs the risk not to champion with efficacy Antarctica. As this “vagueness” is surely less politically costly for ATS signatories, it ensures higher levels of compliance in collegial decision-making amongst ATS member states. At the same time, though, it exposes the ATS’ provisions to interpretation, and Antarctica to lose its “untouchable” status with repercussions on the values that inspired the core character of global commons as a whole.
It was on 20 November 1984 that China dispatched its first Antarctic research expedition team, and by the end of this expedition, the country established its first Antarctic research station, the Great Wall Station on 20 February 1985. So far, China has done 35 national Antarctic expeditions and established two year-round research stations, namely the Great Wall Station (1985) in West Antarctica and the Zhongshan Station (1989) located in the Larsemann Hills, East Antarctica; one inner land summer station, the Kunlun Station (2009) located on “Dome A”, the highest place in Antarctica; and one camp, namely the Taishan Camp (2014) located in Princess Elizabeth Land.

CHINA’S ANTARCTIC ADMINISTRATION AND PROGRAMMES

A very unique system to administer, supervise and manage Chinese Antarctic activities has been adopted in China. Both Arctic and Antarctic research expeditions, international cooperation and other activities are under two subsidiary bodies of the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), respectively the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration (CAA) and the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC). The CAA takes the responsibilities of organizing Chinese Arctic and Antarctic expeditions, administering the related Arctic and Antarctic affairs, drafting laws, regulations, standards and guidelines of Arctic and Antarctic affairs, coordinating with related international organizations. The PRIC is the other institution responsible for Chinese Antarctic activities: the main functions of the PRIC are to conduct research on science, technology and strategic issues in the Polar Regions, undertake environmental monitoring and conservation in the Polar Regions, operate research stations, vessels and aircrafts, and provide logistic sup-
ports to Arctic/Antarctic research expeditions, and carry out education programmes on polar science and promote international cooperation.

The Chinese National Antarctic Program is largely organized into a 5-year program called the “Chinese Polar Environment Comprehensive Investigation and Assessment Programs” (2015-2020). For Antarctica, the Program comprises three parts: the Antarctic Marine Environment Survey, the Antarctic Terrestrial Environment Survey and the Comprehensive Assessment of the Antarctic Environment. The program is implemented through a series of surveys and assessments, involving various disciplines. In addition, China continues to conduct routine observations at the Great Wall Station and the Zhongshan Station. To strengthen international cooperation in Antarctic research, international participants are encouraged to join in the Program through collaboration with national institutes and universities. Notably, China has been preparing to launch its fifth Antarctic research station, which is expected to be finalized by 2022.

After the establishment of the Great Wall Station, China obtained the status of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Party. In order to implement the Antarctic Treaty, the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty and other related legal instruments under the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), China had been updating its domestic law-making process. In 2004, the State Council issued No 412 Order diverting the licensing right of polar research expeditions to SOA. On 8 February 2018, SOA adopted and published the Regulations of the Environmental Protection over Activities in Antarctica in order to protect the Antarctic environment and ecosystem, safeguard and promote the secure and orderly development of China's activities in Antarctica. On 10 September 2018, the 13th Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) published its programs of legislation, including the Antarctic Activities and Environmental Protection Law (AAEP).

**IMPACT ON THE ANTARCTIC TREATY SYSTEM**

Since the accession to the Antarctic Treaty in 1983, China has been strengthening its power and influence over the Antarctic continent and the Southern Ocean through various activities such as insular fishing, ocean expeditions, annual Antarctic research expedition and tourism. In other words, Chinese involvement in Antarctica has been deepening consistently and constantly over the past four decades. At the same time, China's Antarctic policy has also been evolving. Specifically, China's national strategy, the "New Frontiers" national strategy, was presented worldwide in the speech “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” given by China's President Xi Jinping at the United Nations Office at Geneva on 18 January 2017. In his address, President Xi revealed that China continually calls for a better regime to promote international cooperation in the Polar Regions, the deep sea, the outer space and the Internet.

With regard to China’s international policy, China always advocates and supports international peace and cooperation, which is also the standpoint of China's Antarctic policy. As an Antarctic Treaty Consultative Party with decision-making powers, China steadily upholds and safeguards the basic framework and principles of the ATS. Accordingly, China's interests in Antarctica have been in-
creasing, as China’s Antarctic activities have been constantly upgraded. Relying on its consultative status, China could have maintained and proposed more initiatives since 1985, but failed to do so. In recent years, however, attention toward Antarctic issues is rapidly increasing in China, as highlighted by the Fortieth Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in Beijing in 2017. More and more policy-makers, scholars and civilians has now shown an interest for Antarctica: it is thus legitimate to believe that China will play a more proactive role in Antarctica for the time being.
THE FUTURE OF THE WHITE CONTINENT AND THE NEED FOR ITS DEMOCRATIZATION

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When a huge iceberg broke away from Antarctica in 2017, the New York Times reported that “maps will need to be redrawn”. The 7th continent is warming due to climate change, and it is on its way to becoming more accessible and habitable by the end of the XXI century. Future exploitation of minerals and marine resources, increased tourism, and the possibility of environmental refugees relocating to the “White Continent” present challenges to the current governance regime secured by the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS). Established in 1959, the Treaty dedicated Antarctica to peace and science by freezing seven territorial claims (Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom) and preserving the continent from military activities. The 1991 addition to the Treaty, the Protocol on Environmental Protection, banned mining on the continent until at least 2048 (when it will be up for a revision) ensuring the preservation of its pristine environment. The ATS has been celebrated as one of the most successful international regimes. However, the reality is that geopolitics have never left Antarctica, and science (or the pretense of it) has been used to advance the national interests of the signatories of the ATS.

The ATS was established on a shaky foundation, a land that lacked defined borders and clear titles. The absence of an established and recognized territorial sovereign resulted in a failure to attribute responsibilities and to implement law-enforcing mechanisms. In the context of this jurisdictional vacuum, the increasing number of interested parties contributes to the worry of Antarctica becoming a place of conflict over resources. The continent is estimated to be rich in oil, gas, precious minerals as well as fishing stocks and freshwater reserves. Furthermore, the continent is of strategic importance for the accuracy of the GPS systems.

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It is of no surprise that many states are more and more interested in the governance of Antarctica and the management of its resources. In fact, back in 1982, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad during the UN General Assembly suggested that Antarctica should be declared “the common heritage of all nations of this planet” so that riches of the continent benefit all. Between 1945 and 1960 three dozen new states in Asia and Africa gained autonomy from the European colonial rule, thus the development of the ATS regime did not involve a significant proportion of current states. In fact, the ATS has been referred to as an exclusive club, participation in which was contingent on scientific activity on the continent, which many developing states cannot afford. The latecomers to the ATS such as China have been shaking up the status quo of the system that is reminiscent of colonialism.

China has evolved from a minor player in the polar affairs to a major actor in the last decade. From gaining a consultative status within the ATS in 1983, China has emerged as a rising polar power in just over a few decades. Chinese government spends more than any other country on its Antarctic research program and infrastructure. It has the technological underwater capacity to search for gas hydrates in the deep sea. Furthermore, China is in the process of building its fifth research base, which has steered up some controversy. The construction started before the environmental impact assessment was complete, which was in violation of the Protocol. The case highlighted the weaknesses of the ATS, i.e. lack of enforcement and punishment mechanisms. China’s 1st Antarctic paper released in 2017 caused anxiety among established Antarctic players such as Australia. A report published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute stated that China has been engaging in undeclared military activities and mineral exploration, which might have breached international law.

Another player in the race for control of Antarctic resources that has drawn some criticism for wanting to exploit Antarctica post 2048 is Russia. Russia has been a great polar power long before China. Unlike China however, Russia is not prioritizing investing in infrastructure on the White Continent. The Arctic gets prioritized when it comes to Kremlin funding the polar regions. It is no surprise that Moscow is interested in investing in the Arctic and should continue doing so; it contributes to one fifth of Russia’s GDP. The North holds a key to Russia’s economic future with its oil and gas reserves as well as the potential of the Northern Sea Route. That being said, Russia has played a key role in discovery of the 7th continent and the development of the ATS. Moreover, the Soviet Government at the time of the creation of the Treaty pressed the importance of participation of all interested parties in the regime of a region of international significance such as Antarctica. To counterbalance China’s expansionism and to prevent China from having a technological superiority and potential monopoly in mineral exploitation, Russia should exercise its consultative status power and push the ATS toward a more inclusive and global regime.

Democratization of the ATS is the only way forward to avoid potential post 2048 conflict over the resources of the 7th continent. First step in this direction would be to lax the scientific activity requirement. This would enable interested parties to participate in the decision-making process. A common heritage approach similar to the International Seabed Authority is the most optimal for an Antarctic mineral regime. The reality is that China is not going anywhere and will maintain its presence in Antarctica.
ca. To avoid unregulated mining, it is essential that the ATS adapts to the new challenges and evolves into a system with enforcement mechanisms to fill in the jurisdictional vacuum. The system was based on an “agree to disagree” principle but it is time to draw maps and borders that the international community agrees on rather than having a few selected states calling the shots.

13. Ibid.
22. H. Robertson, "China and Russia are eyeing up Antarctica — and experts say Australia should be more concerned", ABC, 27 October 2018.
24. L.E. Flake, "Russia’s Security Intentions in a Melting Arctic", Military and Strategic Affairs, vol. 6, no. 1, March 2014.
28. Ibid.
Some have seen Brazil’s recent increased interest in the South Atlantic\textsuperscript{1} as also involving a growing interest in Antarctica. Certainly, the construction of a brand-new Antarctic research station with an investment of nearly 100 millions USD, the announcement of the acquisition of a new polar auxiliary vessel costing about 30 million USD and the allocation of a new triennial budget of about 20 million had strengthened the view that Brazil is rising its stake in the southern continent. As China, another emerging power and fellow-member of the so-called BRICS, Brazil would be intending to transform its increased economic relevance to a refurbished strategic position and political prominence.

However, a closer look to Brazil’s Antarctic policy shows a rather different story. In contrast with China, to whom the investment in new bases and equipment obeyed to a plan to extend their activities in Antarctica\textsuperscript{2}, and which had been developed for the last three decades, reaching a wider geographical scope and occupying vacant regions such as Dome \textit{A}; in the case of Brazil the construction of the new base obeyed to the total destruction of the previous station due to an accidental fire that accounted for the life of two military\textsuperscript{3}. At the same time, the allocation of funds for research had been achieved only when the situation reached a critical level and menaced the continuity of the research undertaken there, including long-term series of research going back more than three decades.

That situation is hardly new and obey to structural conditions of the Brazilian Antarctic Program (PROANTAR)\textsuperscript{4} and the way in which political decisions related to it are taken. The decentralization of Brazil’s Antarctic institutional setting gives more freedom to scientific institutions and universities, but with the associated cost of having no special-
ized agency, no institutional memory of Brazil’s Antarctic involvement and no politically intertwined body that could lobby for resources. To make things worse, the current political situation does not seem to signal a favourable turn for Brazil’s involvement in Antarctica.

**PRESENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES**

As an active member of the political governance system for Antarctica known as the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), Brazil is intrinsically involved with the challenges that such system is facing. Long standing issues that had concerned the ATS members include illegal fishing, bio-prospecting and the environmental footprint of human activities in Antarctica, including tourism and scientific research. New, emerging issues that the ATS could have to address in the near future include the impacts of global climate change in the Antarctic environment; the possibility of increased interest in Antarctic natural resources exploitation, including minerals; and the questioning to the regime legitimacy in the face of the rest of the world.

Political challenges arising from differences between the ATS parties and from questions aroused from outsiders of the system are not critical but have showed a tendency to be incremented in the near future. Of particular concern to some western countries have been the increasing involvement of China with Antarctica, something that has been many times interpreted as a signal of a possible interest on the frozen continent’s resources.

While Brazil have had a relative outstanding environmental performance in Antarctica and have contributed significantly to increase the corpus of knowledge in relevant scientific questions such as climate change and Antarctic oceanic biology; it is in relative disadvantage to actually deal with the more political challenges that the ATS is facing. The lack of a specialized body in the Foreign Relations Ministry (Itamaraty) – there is a single department that deals with the deep ocean, Antarctica and outer space – and of experts in Antarctic politics that could inform and assist the decision-making process and the development of political strategies is a serious limitation to the adoption of an active attitude by Brazil.

To aggravate the situation, the general policy of the actual government has been detrimental to scientific activity, particularly to federal funded programs. While no specific attack has been directed yet to the PROANTAR, the general tendency and the relative weaken position of the PROANTAR within the science and technology system of Brazil is anything but encouraging.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

While Brazil’s limitations are important, there are also several opportunities that could be used to increase its presence within the Antarctic politics. Brazil’s relevance in the international arena; the traditional capital of its diplomatic ranks; Brazil’s participation in regional and multilateral organisms; its Antarctic tradition and the relevance acquired by its Antarctic scientists and scientific production are factors that can favour a greater involvement.

However, in order to face the described challenges seems necessary that Brazil overcome its internal limitations, altering significantly its Antarctic policy in order to update it to the present times and needs. In a merely preliminary
base, some measures that need to be studied are:

- Strengthen the funding of its scientific program through specific predefined funding and long-term programs.
- Reviewing the Antarctic Strategic Plan and establishing more efficient mechanisms for its management and funding.
- Enforcing the already existent structures for Antarctic policy decision-making through the training of officials, the creation of incentives and the creation of a specialized division within the minister of Foreign Relations or any other institutional setting that could be created for such specific role.
- Supporting the creation of centres specialized in Antarctic politics and the training of specialists in that area.
- Use Brazil’s links with China as commercial partner and member of BRICS as a way to operate as intermediary and facilitator between the other ATS parties and China, reducing uncertainties about China’s intentions. That could include promoting closer scientific cooperation between the two countries or even within the framework of the BRICS.
- Use Brazil’s regional partnerships such as MERCOSUR and the already existent Antarctic regional interfaces such as the RAPAL in the search for join programs that can enforce the regional presence and distribute costs.

In conclusion, what is needed for Brazil’s Antarctic future is a better planed and managed funding, a better informed political decision-making and the definition of clear and updated political goals. In brief, a better-defined vision for Brazil’s role in Antarctica.

3. The year 2012 marked the end of a relative long period characterized by the absence of incidents. Along with the fire, in 2012 there were a sank of a fuel transport raft and a Brazilian flag tourist motorboat. Just two years afterwards, in 2014, the Brazilian Air Force C-130 that was operating between Punta Arenas and Antarctica had an accident when landing, leaving the aircraft inoperable. Eventually, all remains of such accidents were successfully remo-

10. We are referring to the Divisão do Mar, da Antártida e do Espaço Exterior (DMAE) usually in charge of a single person and with high rotativity.

11. Brazilian definition of policy for Antarctica POLANTAR date from 1987 and it is almost identical to a preliminary version elaborated in 1975.

12. Brazilian scientists have acquired a prominent place within Antarctic science and occupied relevant places on international Antarctic institutions. That is the case with the former exercise of the SCAR presidency by the geologist Rocha-Campos; the present exercise of the vice-presidency of the SCAR by the glaciologist Jefferson Simões and the Presidency of the CCAMLR by the late biologist Edith Fanta.


14. The RAPAL is the Annual Meeting of Administrators of Latin-American Antarctic Programs.
AUSTRALIA'S KEY ROLE IN ANTARCTICA, IN DEFENCE OF ITS ENVIRONMENT

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Australia is one of the founders of the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), a claimant state and the country that, together with France, contributed the most to the birth of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. In "Politics Among Nations", Hans Morgenthau wrote: "A nation whose foreign policy tends toward keeping power and not toward changing the distribution of power in its favour pursues a policy of the status quo". This statement provides a comprehensive description of Australian policy in Antarctica: the one of a powerful state aiming to preserve its status of key actor.

The Antarctic Regime is regulated by peculiar membership and decision-making mechanisms. Members of the ATS are divided between Consultative Parties and Contracting Parties; the former have decisional power in all Antarctic matters, while the latter do not have any role in shaping policies within the Southern continent. Consultative Parties regularly meet during Antarctic Meetings, and decisions are taken through consensus rule. For decades, this meant that ATS founders had veto power and exclusive sovereignty over decision-making. But the situation has recently changed, since a growing number of countries has acquired the status of Consultative Party, weakening the privileged position of ATS founders. The three main countries that, by becoming Consultative Parties, changed the Antarctic balance of power, were Brazil (1983), India (1983) and China (1985).

Moreover, Australia's status of key actor in Antarctica has further been challenged by emerging world powers (China in primis), which recently started to build new scientific stations and infrastructures in Antarctica. These powers have also been more active during Antarctic Meetings: in 2017, for instance, the Chinese delegation of the 40th
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Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) promoted a more “balanced approach” towards exploitation and conservation in the Southern Continent.

This doctrine is a symptom to the rhetoric that Beijing adopts to legitimize its desire to strengthen its position and presence in Antarctica. In practical terms, the fact that China is currently building the first-ever permanent Antarctic airfield is nothing but an example of China’s strives in this direction.

Canberra's priorities in Antarctica are twofold: on the one hand, the preservation of its status of key actor; on the other, the forestalment of the regional influence of any new actor. The Australian government pursues these two objectives by defending and promoting the principle of environmental conservation within the Antarctic Treaty System. This is reiterated, for instance, in the Australian Antarctic Division official website, which claims that “gaining recognition as the international leader in Antarctic environmental management is one of the Government’s priorities for the Australian Antarctic Program”.

The Australian strategy was taken up during Antarctic meetings. In 2016, during the 39th ATCM in Santiago (Chile), the Australian delegation and 20 other countries submitted a joint statement entitled “Confirming the Ongoing Commitment to the Prohibition of Mining Activity in Antarctica, Other Than for Scientific Reasons”, which was signed by all the founders of the ATS except Russia, and was not supported by China and India. Furthermore, in the 40th ATCM, Canberra responded to the Chinese promotion of a “balance” between use and conservation in Antarctica by stressing the principle of environmental conservation as a priority of Antarctic policies in light of the fact that “the Environment Protocol created a comprehensive protection regime for Antarctica”.

By acting as a champion of environmental protection, Canberra attempts to confirm its status of key actor and “guardian” of Antarctic wilderness and, at the same time, to hinder emerging actors (China especially) that are trying, through the increase of their scientific and human presence in the region, to change the Antarctic balance of power.

Another channel through which Canberra implemented its Antarctic strategy was its scientific program. Science has often enabled countries to increase and legitimize their presence and influence in Antarctica. In July 2010, Canberra elaborated the Australian Antarctic Science Strategic Plan (ASSP) which has led Australian research in the Southern Continent for ten years, and three of the four main thematic areas covered in the ASSP focus on the environment. The plan identifies as a priority those research projects that focus on the role played by Antarctica in stabilizing the climate worldwide; that measure the impact of local and global human activities on the Antarctic ecosystem; and that assess the effects of climate change on the ecosystems of the Southern Ocean with the final aim to elaborate a plan for the sustainable management of fisheries.

Canberra is not just trying to re-focus its research efforts, but also to increase them. In the 2017 ATCM, the Australian delegation expressed its commitment to transform Tasmania in a leading East Antarctic gateway and research hub, while the building of Nuynia (the 160m and 25000 tons icebreaker that will be finalised in 2020) is proof of Australia’s determination to remain an active and powerful actor of Antarctic politics. Nuynia will be the lifeline connecting
Australian scientific stations in Antarctica, while the marine science research labs will play an important role in the Southern Ocean research.

Australian policy in Antarctica is developed both through diplomatic statements and scientific research projects, and its main objectives are the defence of the principle of environmental protection in Antarctica and the limitation of human activities in the continent. In pursuing these two objectives, Canberra aims to strengthen its status of key ATS actor as well as defender of the Antarctic environment. At the same time, the Australian government aims to counter emerging powers that seek to increase their presence in the continent.

This policy will be effective only if Australia will oppose any attempt to loosen environmental constraints to human activities. A more permissive environmental regime in the continent, in fact, would allow China, India and other emerging countries to expand their presence and investment projects in Antarctica to an extent that Australia cannot equal. Canberra’s strategy might be ironically defined as a “less-is-more approach”, since more stringent limitations in states’ activities in Antarctica will translate in an increase of Australian presence and influence in the Southern continent. The main arena for the application of this approach is the issue of mineral exploitation: the Australian government will have to strenuously oppose any attempt to lift the ban on mining activities in the continent.

The cornerstone of this strategy is the preservation of the consensus rule: any attempt to implement majority rule in Antarctic decisions might weaken Canberra’s influence in the Antarctic decision-making, and it has to be perceived as a threat to the Australian status in the continent. However, Australia cannot pursue this strategy alone, and it needs to build stronger diplomatic bonds with other actors that share similar interests. Canberra’s “natural allies” are other claimant states: countries that claim sovereignty over a portion of the Antarctic territory, that see the increase of other countries’ activities in Antarctica as a weakening of their influence and that are jealous of their veto power on Antarctic decisions.

Amongst the claimant states, New Zealand is likely to be the most valuable ally for the pursuit of this “less-is-more” strategy, mostly because the two country have very similar priorities in Antarctica: defence of the principle of environmental conservation, protection of territorial sovereignty claims and maintenance of the ATS and its current governance mechanisms. Wellington’s 2016-2020 Statement of Intent for Antarctica advocates for the protection of the Antarctic environment in the name of its intrinsic value, reaffirms its sovereignty over the Ross Dependency and affirms New Zealand’s “Strong and vested interest in ensuring that the Antarctic Treaty System continues to be recognized as the appropriate mechanism for the management and government of the region”. Australia, New Zealand and other claimant states will need to create a cohesive diplomatic front that promotes the strengthening of the environmental protection mechanisms, while strenuously opposing against any attempt to change the decision-making processes of Antarctic meetings, in order to preserve the consensus rule.
2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
The first of December (Antarctica Day) 2019 will not only mark the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Antarctic Treaty; it will also mark the 10th year since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. This second treaty furthered the EU on its path towards becoming a major actor on the global stage by establishing inter alia the function of High Representative and the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU’s own diplomatic network. Indeed, as the European integration project has advanced, the EU has increasingly turned its gaze outwards, toward the world. Already in 2001, the European Council solemnly declared in its Laeken Declaration1 that “Europe needs to shoulder its responsibilities in the governance of globalisation.” Today, the question remains whether the EU can deliver on its continuously growing ambitions. Given the overlap of these special days and the growing recognition of Antarctica’s importance to the Earth system (Will Steffen has an interesting podcast episode2 on this topic), there seems no better place to start answering this question than Antarctica.

THE EU’S HISTORICAL ENGAGEMENT

Somewhat surprisingly, the EU’s engagement in the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) has historically been relatively limited. The EU has only participated in the four special Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCMs) in which the Environmental Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty was negotiated, while playing a minor role in the debate on the Protocol’s Liability Annex. In part, this is due to legal factors. Although the legal basis under Union law for the EU to participate is indisputable, the Antarctic Treaty and its Protocol limit accession to States. Political reasons are also at play, however: it is clear that the EU’s Member States

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prefer the Union not to encroach on what they consider their sovereign domain (which can be taken quite literally in the case of the UK and France who maintain territorial claims in Antarctica). It is therefore unlikely that the EU’s relationship to the ATCM will change anytime soon.

However, the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources and its Commission (which I will refer to as “CCAMLR” to avoid confusion with the European Commission) are the exception. The EU has ratified the former and is full member to the latter. Moreover, the EU has been quite active in CCAMLR. Perhaps most famous has been its joint proposal with France and Australia to establish an “East Antarctic representative system of marine protected areas” (the EARSMPA-proposal). Unfortunately, this proposal’s progress has been frustrated over the last couple of years by Russia and China. Both countries seem to base their resistance on (pseudo-)scientific grounds. In the most recent CCAMLR meeting (report available here, see paras 6.19-6.21), Russia has argued that “the quality of available baseline data was not suitable”, while China invoked five general principles (necessity, certainty, measurability, accountability and rigidity) which more or less apply to the process of developing MPAs as a whole. Yet, the proposal as such and the actions that the EU has taken in support thereof have clearly demonstrated the EU’s ability and willingness to put its shoulder to the wheel of an ambitious Antarctic project.

ENHANCING THE EU’S ROLE

Strong engagement from the EU does not only make sense, it could also benefit both the EU and Antarctic governance. The alignment of the EU’s external policy goals and the objectives of CCAMLR makes EU involvement in CCAMLR a matter of common sense. The Treaty on the European Union commits the EU to contribute to “the sustainable management of global natural resources” and to promote “multilateral solutions to common problems”. CCAMLR, as a multilateral organization dedicated to the protection of the Antarctic marine ecosystem, presents a means to achieve these EU objectives in Antarctica. It also presents the EU with an opportunity to demonstrate the global environmental leadership it frequently touts. Vice versa, the EU’s engagement in CCAMLR can contribute to CCAMLR’s sustainable management of the Antarctic ecosystem and the long-term stability of this multilateral regime. This remarkable concurrence of objectives even presents a compelling arguments for enhancing the EU’s role in CCAMLR. Whether an enhanced role is possible still depends on certain factors.

First, science equates to political capital in Antarctica. The EU needs solid scientific research, not only to back up its proposals, but also to demonstrate its commitment to the central role of scientific research to Antarctic governance. EU-funded research projects, such as the deep ice-core drilling project, Epica, and the network project, EU-PolarNet, are indispensable for the EU’s political standing in Antarctica.

Secondly, the EU needs to maintain a united internal front. In this regard, Brexit could considerably impinge upon the EU’s leverage in CCAMLR. The UK has great experience and expertise in both Antarctic research and governance, while maintaining strong connections with other influential States, such as Australia and New Zealand. The UK’s absence from EU coordination meetings could lead to a loss of information and influence. Ideally, the EU would find
some practical way to prevent such losses from occurring, even in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Furthermore, it is essential that the EU keeps its other member states on board. They too provide the EU with valuable input in terms of research, information and connections. In this sense, the cases brought by the European Commission against the Council before the European Court of Justice (CJEU) seem ill-advised. In two cases, the European Commission claimed exclusive competence over CCAMLR matters. The CJEU rejected these claims in its on sound legal grounds\(^6\), but had it not, the European Commission’s claims could have hurt its representation in CCAMLR rather than reinforced it. Member States stay engaged in CCAMLR partly because it enhances their national prestige. Therefore, mixed representation in CCAMLR, for all the coordination woes it may entail, might have its advantages.

Finally, the EU needs to be willing to expend political capital on getting Antarctic things done. It took former US president Barack Obama’s direct intervention with Chinese president Xi Jinping and the former US secretary of state John Kerry’s direct intervention with Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov to convince China and Russia not to oppose the Ross Sea MPA. It might require similarly high-level engagements from the EU to move forward the EARSMPA-proposal, as Geneviève Pons and Pascal Lamy have recently argued\(^7\) in relation to the April EU-China summit. Such moves, preferably in concert with allies such as Australia, could not only push forward the Antarctic MPA process. It could also demonstrate the EU’s willingness to do what it takes to ‘shoulder its responsibilities in the governance of globalisation.”

2. Polar Geopolitics. A podcast on the Arctic and Antarctica.
4. European project for ice coring in antarctica (EPICA), European Union.
5. EU-PolarNet - connecting science with society, EU-PolarNet.