



Antarctica is a long way from becoming a contested space, the Coast Guard has a role ensuring it doesn't (Polar Insights 02-24)



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[“The Antarctic Treaty System is on thin ice—and it’s not all about climate change.”](#) Australian Strategic Policy Institute, November 2021

[“China's New Antarctic Research Station Renews Concerns About Potential Security Threats.”](#) Voice of America, February 2024

[“Spies or scientists? China opens Antarctic base on America’s doorstep.”](#) The Times, February 2024

[“How Russia sparked fears of an oil grab in British Antarctic territory.”](#) The Telegraph, May 2024

[“Despite Mining Ban, Russia Scours Antarctica for Massive Fossil Fuel Deposits.”](#) PBS, May 2022

Antarctica has been subject to global geopolitical and economic pressures since its first exploration by northern hemisphere powers in the early 1800s. These pressures have been effectively managed, even amid the Cold War, since the Antarctic Treaty went into effect in 1961. Today, that treaty, and the follow-on agreements within the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), continue to survive contact with a range of evolving and emerging pressures as a model of policy making focused on anticipating future sources of friction and guided by multi-stakeholder consensus. For the Antarctic’s future, the primary challenge is scaling up presence, domain awareness, and treaty enforcement when needed, to adapt to a changing physical environment, developing geostrategic competition, and evolving societies, economies, and technologies. The U.S. Coast Guard will continue to play an integral role in maintaining U.S. interests and the low-conflict, high-cooperation environment south of 60 degrees in a future with increasing human interest and presence.

Understanding the ATS is fundamental for recognizing why – despite what media headlines such as those referenced above imply – the region is at very low risk for conflict but will only remain so with commitment and action by a multitude of organizations and international partners committed to sustaining the ATS.

The Antarctic Treaty System and Antarctic Governance in a Snowflake

A key feature of Antarctica that is different from any other land mass on the planet is that there is no history of permanent human settlement and thus no sovereign government. As a result, there are no inherent rights to land, exclusive economic zones (EEZ), or continental shelf access that countries can claim. The closest analogue could be the Svalbard archipelago off the northeastern European coast in the high Arctic, which under the 1920 Svalbard Treaty (originally the Treaty of Spitsbergen) is Norwegian territory though other signatory countries can conduct their own economic activities.

In contrast, the Antarctic Treaty, the foundational agreement in the ATS, explicitly freezes territorial claims (and rights to make these in the future) which by extension includes assertions to an EEZ and sovereignty over the continental shelf, prohibits most military activity (except to assist in scientific or other peaceful activities) and dumping of radioactive waste and testing of nuclear weapons, and encourages scientific exploration and scientific information sharing. This is why

headlines such as those above mentioning phrases like “America’s doorstep” and “British Antarctic territory” are simply incorrect – the U.S. does not own a door to Antarctica and the United Kingdom and the other six original claimants (Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, and Norway) do not have sovereign rights.

The Treaty applies to the collective area south of 60 degrees and provides a structure for international collaboration and decision-making. The Treaty also establishes the need for parties to give advance notice of expeditions and establishes a right to conduct unannounced inspections by observers from any treaty party as a mechanism of treaty enforcement (including of vessels that would be considered sovereign, and thus immune in other parts of the world). Although any treaty party could have called for a treaty review beginning in 1991, no party has ever done so to date, leaving claims of imminent treaty dissolution short on action.

The ATS includes the 1959 Treaty plus three others which have built out the Antarctic governance system. These include the 1972 Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals, the 1982 Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (or CCAMLR), and the 1991 Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (sometimes referred to as the Madrid Protocol). The 1972 agreement focuses on six seal species, as the name implies. CCAMLR, though inspired by krill fishing (and associated concerns about food web impacts) that started in the 1970s, enables broader ecosystem management measures to be undertaken such as the negotiation of catch limits of various species (e.g., Antarctic Toothfish or Chilean Sea Bass) and the proposal and establishment of marine protected areas (MPAs).

Finally, the Madrid Protocol covers several areas related to the Antarctic environment though it is perhaps most well-known for explicitly prohibiting non-scientific mining. It does not expire in 2048, though the rules for changing the mining prohibition become different in that year. Furthermore, the Protocol requires no action to maintain the mining prohibition even after 2048. The consultative parties have reaffirmed their commitment to the mining ban, most recently by resolution at the 2023 Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in Helsinki, Finland.

There are two other important agreements that shape activities in the Southern Ocean. The first is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). UNCLOS applies to the High Seas in the far south as it does elsewhere in the world with some additional stipulations as outlined in the ATS that apply to those that are party to the ATS. The other is the International Maritime Organization’s Polar Code also augments and/or emphasizes goals within parts of the ATS (e.g., regarding ship design, fuel use, and safety procedures) for the types of vessels and activities it applies to.

Current Coast Guard Role and Potential Areas for Expansion in the Future

Today, most of the public discourse about Antarctica is focused on global climate change and local environmental and biodiversity goals. However, geopolitical issues remain as active and relevant as ever.

For the U.S., the State Department conducts important diplomatic dialogues, and the National Science Foundation is the lead federal institution for the U.S. Antarctic Program. The Coast Guard enables access to McMurdo Station, by far the largest facility on the southern continent, through

Operation Deep Freeze which breaks out a channel in the sea ice for logistics purposes. The break out of ice in the approach to McMurdo also indirectly provides for re-supply of other research stations via air from that point, principally the U.S. South Polar station, which also has significant geopolitical importance. The Coast Guard also leverages the long route of the USCGC Polar Star which is homeported in Seattle to conduct partner engagements with countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Chile.

The Coast Guard's presence and authorities, as the primary U.S. maritime law enforcement and naval presence in the Southern Ocean, can also be used to deter would-be threats to stability (e.g., by countries not party to the ATS that assert regional interests, or from bad actors that seek to violently disrupt lawful fishing and scientific activities), maintain watch on fishing to enable enforcement of treaty provisions (e.g., on catch limits and regarding protected areas and species), and coordinate search and rescue (e.g., of tourist vessels, if a research station needs to be rapidly evacuated).

Demands on the Coast Guard and its U.S. and international partners could grow in the future as interest in these areas persists and if human presence in the region grows. Scientific monitoring and assessment could expand with the physical effects of climate change, which are profound in the Antarctic region and Southern Ocean, though somewhat different than those observed and experienced in the far north primarily due to physical geography. Demands on the Coast Guard might also increase with growth in legal and any illegal fishing activities, increased capacity to bring tourism to the region, and as countries consider whether it is in their respective national interests to one day raise the question of pursuing additional economic exploitation.

Although scientific activities can sometimes appear suspicious, they have always been fundamental to maintaining safety as well as environmental and economic security through activities such as weather prediction, geological/hydrographic mapping, and global navigation satellite systems (GNSS). The U.S. and its like-minded partners rely on such science routinely, and the data, knowledge, and instruments associated with science can always theoretically be used for nefarious or adverse purposes. The key is understanding the context in which they are being used and the conditions under which they can be conducted, as laid out in the ATS.

If provided a broader range of capabilities and capacity in the future, the Coast Guard may conduct additional and/or expanded activities in support of U.S. interests in the Antarctic region. These could include:

- Continued enabling of logistics around U.S. and potentially other land-based research stations
- Facilitation of scientific station and capability (e.g., vessel) inspections
- Expanded presence to:
 - Monitor legal and illegal fishing of key species, such as through inspection of catch on U.S. vessels and the observation and documentation of foreign vessels that may be out of compliance
 - Observe and flag violations of the Polar Code
 - Engage with an expanding range of partners, including in South America
- Enabling partnered response to safety and environmental incidents at sea

- Aiding in domain awareness to facilitate:
 - Activities related to logistics, inspections, fisheries monitoring, Polar Code compliance, and incident response (as outlined above)
 - Understanding the context of ongoing scientific activities
 - Indications and warning in the unlikely event that an actor that is not party to the ATS could be engaging in activities adverse to the shared interests of ATS parties

The need for expansion of Coast Guard activities south of 60 degrees is not necessarily imminent, though given each of the items on the list above is germane today (at least at a low level) it isn't difficult to envision immediate uses for additional Coast Guard assets and personnel in and around Antarctica. Recent renewed global recognition of the poles as strategic spaces as well as desirable places to visit, continued growth in demand for sustainable protein, and technological breakthroughs that have both increased demand for minerals and the ability to extract them have ushered in the question of what is next for Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. Even if some human activities are physically and politically infeasible for many years or decades to come, the legitimate science and baseline presence (such as through coast guards and research stations) needed to reaffirm the credibility of the ATS and leave the door open for the future is already relevant.

For further information –

On the ATS: <https://www.bas.ac.uk/about/antarctica/the-antarctic-treaty/the-antarctic-treaty-explained/>

Regarding recent geopolitical challenges: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/no-28-ukraine-conflict-likely-intrude-antarctic-diplomacy>

On the history of Antarctic geopolitics: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3486143?seq=6> *Note that although this was published almost four decades ago, it raises some of the same questions that are being asked today – a useful reminder that many Antarctic issues are not new and have been managed thus far.*