



October 28, 2023, Antarctica: NASA's Wallops Flight Facility C-130 aircraft delivers the agency's Galactic/Extragalactic ULDB Spectroscopic Terahertz Observatory (GUSTO) payload to McMurdo Station, Antarctica. The GUSTO mission will launch on a scientific balloon in December 2023. © picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | NASA.

passion and judgment”.⁹ What is needed in Antarctic affairs is more of this passion and judgement and the willingness engage with the emerging challenges from outside the Antarctic in a politically robust and yet cooperative manner. It is still possible to maintain international cooperation in the Antarctic while competing for power and influence outside of it—if Antarctic states want it that way.

FACING SECURITY SPECTRES

Traditionally, Antarctic security concerns have revolved around two issues. First, the potential ‘dual use’ of Antarctic facilities, either to conduct research or testing of systems that may be of military value, or the potential use of Antarctic facilities for military purposes in a conflict outside of the Antarctic region. Those concerned about such developments often point to the expansion of Chinese and Russian Antarctic facilities and activities, and in particular the relationship between Antarctic facilities and military-utility space-based infrastructure.¹⁰

Second, there have been fears that, in the event of substantial modification or even collapse of the Antarctic Treaty or its related agreements (including its Environmental Protocol, which prohibits commercial mining indefinitely), the Antarctic would be subjected to a ‘scramble’ for territorial sovereignty and resource rights, potentially leading to militarization of the continent. In this context, states’ Antarctic activities and investment in infrastructure such as civilian research stations are often suspiciously viewed as attempts to secure future access to resources on the continent.

Such a preoccupation with these traditional national and military security concerns is, however, mis-

placed. While it is technically possible for dual-use technology to be used in the Antarctic, it may actually be of little value. For example, Claire Young has argued that using Antarctic ground facilities to support China’s space infrastructure would be of little benefit, particularly given the number of ground facilities in other regions of the world and increasing capabilities with satellite-to-satellite relay.¹¹ Furthermore, the spirit and letter of the Antarctic Treaty provides a framework for facility inspections to ensure compliance with the demilitarization provisions of the Antarctic Treaty.¹² Indeed, inspections of Antarctic facilities, so far, have not identified any activities contravening the Antarctic Treaty.¹³ As Alan D. Hemmings urged, however, in order to recognise and confront activities that should be prohibited in the Antarctic, our understandings of ‘peaceful purposes’ and ‘measures of a military nature’ must be made fit for purpose in the 21st century, particularly as technologies with dual-use potential continue to develop at pace.¹⁴

Further, given the geographic isolation of the Antarctic, the current suspension of territorial claims, and the absence of offensive military hardware in the region, the conditions that give rise to crises elsewhere in the globe – for example, ‘hot’ border disputes, escalation due to misinterpretation of intentions and actions, or encroachments into airspace – are all substantively absent from the region.¹⁵

Finally, concerns about the imminent collapse of the Antarctic Treaty and consequent descent into militarization are far-fetched. Most experts agree that the ATS will remain relatively stable in the years to come.¹⁶ This is because, at present, the ATS still confers on all parties significant benefits aligned with

their national interests – a peaceful, stable southern continent, access to undertake scientific research, and significant and exclusive political authority in Antarctic affairs, from which outside rivalries and conflicts have been largely kept away. It is worth remembering that while geopolitics has never been entirely absent from Antarctica, major points of international contention – territorial claims, militarization, resource use, and environmental protection – have been skilfully mitigated and managed within the framework of the ATS, which only allows one legitimate Antarctic enterprise: scientific exploration.

In this regard, fears of looming armed conflict in or for Antarctica can be considered security spectres: terrifying phantom threats inspiring fear and speculation. While such apparitions may influence states' actions, they do not stand up to scrutiny in the cold light of day.

However, this does not imply that there are no challenges or tension in Antarctic diplomacy. Today, the Antarctic is increasingly a "contested space"¹⁷, similar to the conditions of the 1980s during the build-up to the planned but ultimately abandoned mining convention.¹⁸ While such open contestation of norms and goals is a departure from the de-politicized, technical nature of Antarctic management of the last three decades, it does not necessarily indicate weakness or the imminent collapse of the regime or the risk of militarization. Neither should such contestation be framed as threatening states' national interests or security. Rather, the answers to these political contestations should be political in nature – that is, states must be willing to *re-politicize* Antarctic affairs.

BEYOND SECURITY SPECTRES AND "LAWFARE"

The most recent example for such a contestation of norms and policies occurred at the October 2024 meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources. Not only was there no progress on new Marine Protected Areas in the Southern Ocean after many years of failure, but obstructionist behaviour by Russia and China meant that a long-running key measure for a precautionary krill fishery simply lapsed.

Recently, the Australian Antarctic expert Tony Press used the term "lawfare" to describe China's more assertive behaviour in Antarctic diplomacy,¹⁹ a concept that usually denotes the misuse of legal norms to damage, discredit, or otherwise disadvantage an adversary. In our view, while Chinese behaviour may be frustrating for Western diplomats, China is merely contesting the interpretation of the rules according to its interests. China has not open-

ly broken or disregarded any rules, and therefore it remains a political issue capable of being dealt with diplomatically through negotiation and compromise. After a "century of humiliation" at the hands of Western imperialism where China was forced to follow the rules of others, Beijing's ambition in international affairs has been to become a rule-maker itself.²⁰ The ATS is no exception here, and so the question is how to accommodate this new great power within existing governance arrangements, while ensuring environmental protection and preserving norms related to peaceful dispute resolution.²¹

Ultimately, the best way to strengthen consensus- and science-based Antarctic governance in such a tense environment lies in more ambitious diplomatic engagement with those contesting it, while being open-minded about the eventual outcome. This may require a re-interpretation of norms and principles that Western states perceive as less than favourable. Allowing for this norm contestation can look like a risk for environmental protections, but it may have the potential to re-strengthen the overall commitment of all Antarctic nations.²²

Importantly, Western states could easily still show some leadership on environmental issues, despite the lack of progress with new MPAs or other environmental protections, by coordinating to finally ratify the liability annex ("Liability Arising from Environmental Emergencies"),²³ for example. This Antarctic norm was agreed by consensus in 2005 but is yet to enter into force. This would be a simple and symbolic step to strengthen the ATS and to show the credibility of the Antarctic diplomatic community as environmental stewards of the southern continent.

Moreover, such a robust yet constructive contestation is only possible in a deliberately 'exceptional' setting, in which interests from outside of the Antarctic, often security spectres of strategic and military nature, are intentionally set aside. It has been this "coopetitive"²⁴ mindset – where rivals in the international system can nevertheless act like partners in a specific issue area – that made the ATS a successful geopolitical arrangement. Unilaterally focusing narrowly on Antarctic security spectres distracts from and hinders the political and diplomatic hard work necessary to strengthen the ATS.²⁵

CONCLUSION

In order to ensure that Antarctica, the continent of peace and science, continues to be governed peacefully and is not subject to a 'creeping militarization', journalists, political observers, and decision-makers alike are well advised to not spook themselves by chasing overblown security spectres down south. Viewing Antarctic issues in this way risks the secu-

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ritization of Antarctica, and ultimately encourages responses focused not on diplomacy and cooperation but on enhancing the national power and influence of individual states. A deliberate re-politicization of Antarctic affairs and a painful-yet-necessary openness to norm contestation are indeed very hard diplomatic boards that will need to be drilled, slowly, strongly, and with passion and judgment. Especially so, because contestation of Antarctic norms may not only be restricted to Russia or China but could plausibly also come from the new political leaderships in Buenos Aires or Washington, D.C., who show great disregard for climate science, environmental protection, and global governance alike. While there is no automatism behind the peaceful nature of Antarctic politics, the ATS remains a robust framework to weather geopolitical change. However, we will need more political investment, diplomatic initiative, and a certain pragmatism to strengthen the system for our tumultuous present. Antarctic Treaty parties from Europe, as well as Aus-

tralia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan can and should take the lead here. In addition to ratifying the Liability Annex and improving the inspections regime, further opportunities lie in science diplomacy in view of the approaching 2032-33 International Polar Year, in particular with China. Ultimately, focusing on these opportunities for cooperation and collaboration, while re-investing in hard diplomatic and political work, will do more to ensure the peaceful future of Antarctica than chasing fanciful security spectres at the South Pole.

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