



Antarctic Treaty

by *Levente Kardkovács*



History

The Antarctic Treaty (AT) was signed in Washington on 1 December 1959 by the twelve countries whose scientists had been active in and around Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957-58. It entered into force in 1961 and it is considered one of the most successful multilateral agreements. Article I of the AT declares that “Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only”, which is the most significant provision of the document. It further establishes the freedom of scientific exploration, as well as the free exchange of knowledge, and clarifies that it does not affirm or deny the territorial claims of any of the signatories. Any member state of the United Nations (UN) can also become a signatory, as of 2025 46 other countries have done so. The AT is only about 5 pages long, so delegates are encouraged to read it.

Of the 58 signatories, exactly half (so 29) of them are Consultative Parties due to them “conducting substantial research activity there”, which means that when the signatories meet to discuss any possible issues or amendments (Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings, ATCM as laid out in Article IX), they may participate in the decision making. The other 29 signatories (so called Non-Consultative Parties) may participate in the ACTM, but not in the decision-making.

The Environmental Protocol

The Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty was signed in Madrid on October 4, 1991 and entered into force in 1998. It is perhaps the most significant supplement to the original document. Article 3 of the Environment Protocol sets forth basic principles applicable to human activities in Antarctica and Article 7 prohibits all activities relating to Antarctic mineral resources, except for scientific research. The Protocol establishes in its Schedule the procedure for the constitution and function of a Permanent Court of Arbitration. The Environment Protocol also established the Committee for Environmental Protection (CEP) as an expert advisory body to provide advice and formulate recommendations to the ATCM in connection with the implementation of the Environment Protocol. The CEP meets every year in conjunction with the ATCM.





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For the first fifty years from the Protocol's entry into force (1998), it can only be modified by the unanimous agreement of all Consultative Parties to the Antarctic Treaty. After this point (from 2048), any of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties can call for a review conference into the Protocol's operation (Art. 25.2). The Protocol provides that if a review conference is called, it can be modified or amended by a majority of all Parties, including three-quarters of the Consultative Parties at the time of the Protocol's adoption. Any modifications or amendments will only enter into force with the agreement of all 26 Consultative Parties that adopted the Protocol in 1991. Additionally, the prohibition on Antarctic mineral resource activities in Article 7 cannot be removed or amended unless a binding legal regime on Antarctic mineral resource activities is in force. The introduction of such a regime would require consensus.

A Possible Future

India initiates a Review Conference of the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) in 2050, citing the need to revisit climate commitments, scientific collaboration, and resource governance amid dramatic changes in Antarctic ice conditions and increased global interest in deep-sea minerals and freshwater reserves. As a rising global power with growing environmental and scientific investments, India seeks to modernize the Treaty and promote equitable access. 19 countries (all of them being Consultative Parties) participate in the meeting, which includes the 12 original signatories (Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) and 7 others (Brazil, China, India, Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tuvalu). In the following we take a look at the different topics and who represents them.

Environmental Protection Bloc

Countries in this block are strong supporters of environmental protection and green policies that have characterized the Antarctic for nearly a 100 years. Recognizing that the conference was called in large part due to the effects of climate change on the Antarctic, they prioritize climate action and the preservation of the mineral mining ban that is outlined in Article 7 of the Environmental Protocol.





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Belgium, France, Sweden

These three countries have formed the so-called “Green Triad” in the late 2030-s, after it became obvious that the European Union (EU) will not meet its 2050 climate targets, which were adopted in line with Sustainable Development Goals 2.0 (SDG2) after the review and reassessment of the SDG-s in 2030. Their goal is to push for stricter environmental regulations both in Europe and worldwide. Belgium is a strong supporter of multilateralism and calls for harmonized EU-wide policy positions on Antarctic environmental protection and transparent data sharing among scientific missions. France proposes the establishment of a new Antarctic Climate Enforcement Agency (ACEA) and encourages ratification of stricter marine conservation laws. French scientists push for deep ice-core climate data access.

France also has a fragile diplomatic dialogue with China focused on preventing military-adjacent activities. Sweden is a neutral party, calling for enhanced environmental protocols and transparency, as well as universal access to open scientific data and peaceful cooperation. In the aftermath of the War in Ukraine France remained more Russia-skeptic, while Belgium and Sweden adopted a more neutral position and now often facilitate dialogue between Russia and the rest of the EU.

Australia, New Zealand, Tuvalu

The three countries from the Asia-Pacific have been staunch advocates of green policies for decades. Tuvalu, a small island nation, especially as the country faces an existential threat due to the rising sea levels. It demands legally binding climate action from all treaty parties, also calling for environmental justice and historical accountability from major emitters. Australia and New Zealand support indigenous voices in policy-making and propose the creation of Antarctic-native species sanctuaries, as well as turning large sectors of East Antarctica into a protected marine reserve.

Australia maintains strong defense ties with the United States and India. Its relations with China remain uneasy, following disputes about cybersecurity and trade. Tuvalu is wary of both China and the US, and pressures them to take a stronger stance on climate issues.





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United Kingdom

The country advocates for treaty preservation and calls for tighter control on dual-use scientific-military activity. Strongly allied with Australia, India and US, while maintaining uneasy relations with Argentina and Chile due to historical territorial disputes in the Antarctic.

The Global South

Brazil, South Africa

South Africa demands more equitable representation of the Global South in treaty governance and financial support for African polar research institutions. Brazil also supports improved access for emerging nations. It also wants more attention paid to tropical-polar climate feedback.

Strategic climate and infrastructure ties between South Africa, India, Chile and Brazil have intensified under the Southern Climate Compact (SCC). Brazil is cautiously cooperative with China on trade but wary of its influence in Latin America. Similarly Saudi-South African relations are strained due to competing interests in African infrastructure.

India, Papua New Guinea

India convened the conference with the aim of modernizing the Treaty and also a step towards reshaping global governance. The country seeks to become a global leader and advocates for more representation from countries in the global south. It proposes a Multilateral Antarctic Sustainability Charter, emphasizing equity, climate science, and resource-sharing. New to polar politics Papua New Guinea welcomes India's initiative and calls for funding for developing nations' participation in polar science. It also emphasizes sustainable oceans and cultural recognition of Pacific climate impacts.

India has strong ties with Australia, Japan, Brazil, and South Africa. It maintains a strategic and scientific partnership with the US and a competitive but cooperative relationship with





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China. Papua New Guinea is aligned with New Zealand and Tuvalu, both of them being fellow Pacific islands, and receives climate aid from Australia and Japan.

Sovereignty and Strategic Resource Extraction

Argentina, Chile

Both countries have long standing territorial claims in the Antarctic, which they are hoping will be recognized some day. They are also in favor of sustainable resource extraction, such as tightly regulated bioprospecting¹.

Tensions persist between them and the UK due to overlapping territorial claims. Chile cooperates closely with Brazil, while Argentina has close ties with China via the Belt and Road Initiative.

Russia, Saudi Arabia

Russia seeks expanded access to mineral survey data and wants to renegotiate the prohibition on resource extraction, framing it as an issue of sovereignty.. Saudi Arabia is also in favor, advocating for a cautious review of the mineral ban. As a new player in the Antarctic, it hopes to expand its role in logistics and infrastructure funding. Both oppose any external enforcement agency.

The countries are used to close coordination due to their participation in OPEC+. They also maintain friendly relationships with China. Russia has hostile relations with the UK and France, particularly over sanctions and military presence in international waters.

China

China now operates the most Antarctic research bases. It pushes for a "rebalancing" of influence and openness to mineral dialogue under UN oversight. Publicly supports environmentalism but quietly tests resource extraction technology.

¹ Bioprospecting is defined as a systematic and organized search for useful products derived from bioresources including plants, microorganisms, animals, etc., that can be developed further for commercialization and overall benefits of the society.





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The country maintains its friendly relation with Russia and its strategic cooperation with Argentina and Saudi Arabia. Tensions persist with India and the US over trade disputes.

Cautious Actors

Japan

Japan is an advocate for preserving peace in the Antarctic. The country holds that the first priority in the region ought to be scientific research. To this end it promotes technological solutions for low-impact research and proposes a multinational AI platform to monitor ecosystem change.

The country has strong economic ties with Australia and India.

Norway

Norway supports continued scientific cooperation and data transparency. It is also cautiously in favor of discussions on mineral surveys, provided strong environmental controls are enforced.

Maintains cautious collaboration with Russia over shared interests in the logistics of the Arctic, balancing it with disagreements over mineral rights.

United States

Following the second Trump administration, his successors worked hard to rebuild relationships with the rest of the world. The US is open to the modernization of the treaty, as long as the Antarctic remains demilitarized. Many in the country's leadership still maintain an "America first" attitude and oppose the creation of any supranational enforcement body.

This sentiment also led to increasing competition with China and Russia in polar infrastructure and remote sensing. The country still maintains its alliance with the UK and Australia.





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Questions the Resolution Could Address

1. Should the mining ban remain in force? If not, what are the next steps:
 - a. What resources are allowed to be extracted and where?
 - b. How much are countries allowed to extract?
 - c. What extraction techniques are permitted?
2. Should there be stronger environmental protections? If yes:
 - a. What type of protections and where?
 - b. Should they be legally binding?
3. Should there be a stronger voice given to island nations in the Pacific and more broadly countries in the global south? If yes, in what form?
4. Should the Antarctic remain demilitarized? If yes, should there be further steps taken to ensure that no country is using research bases for covert military operations? What should these steps be?

Bibliography

“Antarctic Treaty”, 2025, https://www.ats.aq/index_e.html

