SPECPOL

The Question of The Sovereignty of Antarctica

Committee: **SPECPOL**

Topic: **The Question of The Sovereignty of Antarctica**

Chairs: **Nathanial Teeton & Isty Cole**

Summary

Antarctica as a continent is owned by no singular country or entity, instead its use and access is governed under the Antarctic Treaty System which came into force in 1961. Prior to this there was no overarching agreement regarding Antarctica, and from the 1940s this uncertainty caused political tensions sparked by incidents such as the German capture of two Norwegian whaling ships in Antarctic Waters in 1941. By the 1950s, fears of militarisation, waste disposal or nuclear testing in Antarctica grew amid the global instability caused by the Cold War. However, after the International Geophysical Year in 1957-8 involving twelve countries (*Argentina*, *Australia*, Belgium, *Chile*, *France*, Japan, *New Zealand*, *Norway*, South Africa, the USSR, the *United Kingdom*, and the United States, (the ones in italics having previously made territorial claims in Antarctica)), negotiations between the twelve countries began to secure a peaceful future for Antarctica with the outcome being the Antarctic treaty which is now signed by 57 countries (as of 2026) and applies in all areas south of 60°S Latitude, including all ice shelves.

The treaty has the primary purpose of ensuring the peaceful use of Antarctica, scientific cooperation, and environmental protection. It's 4 fundamental pillars are:

- **Peace** (Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only and free from military activity & nuclear weapons testing/disposal)
- **Science** (Emphasises the importance of freedom of scientific investigation and cooperation, there are currently 80 scientific bases across Antarctica, operated by around 30 different countries)
- **Co-operation** (That scientific information obtained from Antarctica should be freely shared amongst nations and made available)
- **Stability & Security** (All disputes over territory are put aside for the life of the treaty, they are neither recognised nor disputed).

Laws & Governance:

Under the treaty system, Antarctica is governed by international law, therefore anyone visiting or working in Antarctica is subject to the laws of the Antarctic Treaty that have been ratified in their home country. Additionally, Antarctic Treaty Parties (Those who have signed the Treaty, invited experts and other parties/organisations) meet annually at Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCMs). They discuss issues facing Antarctica and share information about their recent activities there, making consensus-based decisions on matters which include scientific co-operations, field operations and environmental protection. An Antarctic Treaty Meeting of Experts (ATME) can also be called if an issue needs to be discussed in greater depth.

Of the current 57 members of the treaty, 29 are Consultative Parties (Including the original 12 members plus 17 other nations) who attend annual meetings and can vote on decisions about the governance of Antarctica whilst the other 28 are Non-Consultative Parties meaning they attend the meetings but cannot vote. Any Non-Consultative Party can become a Consultative Party "if they demonstrate a significant investment in scientific research"[1].

Any member of the United Nations can accede to the treaty and membership is still growing.

Issues:

Despite the treaty previously offering historically unseen levels of peaceful co-operation, recent global tensions and shifting interests have caused the effectiveness of the treaty to be somewhat reduced with the 2 main reasons being:

- **Geopolitical Pressures & Governance Challenges:** The Russian invasion of Ukraine alongside China expanding its Antarctic presence (Five research stations and two icebreaking ships) has disrupted the consensus-based operation of the treaty which is not helped by the US appearing to reduce its leadership role in Antarctic research and governance. There is also the potential for competitive rather than collaborative research and the position of the Consultative Party being used for the political and economic gain rather than for the benefit of Antarctica.
- **Resource Exploitation Risks:** Currently, mining and mineral resource exploration & extraction is banned under the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (Also called Madrid Protocol) but there's an increasing interest in Antarctica's potential mineral and energy resources, so some worry about potential future extraction attempts.
    - It should be noted that the potential of Antarctica's resources was first seen in the 19th Century with early visitors noting the abundance of natural resources in seals and whales, causing industries to spring up at the time around the subantarctic and the Antarctic Peninsula, exploiting seal pelts and whale blubber.

There are also growing issues surrounding the environment caused by climate change and hence the disruption that it is having on ecosystems and the biodiversity in Antarctica alongside growing tourism.

Definition of Key Terms

Consultative Party: A member nation of the Antarctic treaty who attends attend annual meetings and can vote on decisions about the governance of Antarctica
Non-Consultative Party: A member nation of the Antarctic treaty who attends annual meetings but can't vote.

Major Countries / Organisations Involved

Consultative Nations	Non-Consultative Nations
Argentina	Austria
Australia	Belarus
Belgium	Canada
Brazil	Colombia
Bulgaria	Costa Rica
Chile	Cuba
China	Denmark
Czechia	Estonia
Ecuador	Greece
Finland	Guatemala
France	Hungary
Germany	Iceland
India	Kazakhstan
Italy	DPRK (North Korea)
Japan	Malaysia
Republic of Korea (South Korea)	Monaco
Netherland	Mongolia
New Zealand	Pakistan
Norway	Papa Neu Guinea
Peru	Portugal
Poland	Romania
Russian Federation	San Marino
South Africa	Saudi Arabia

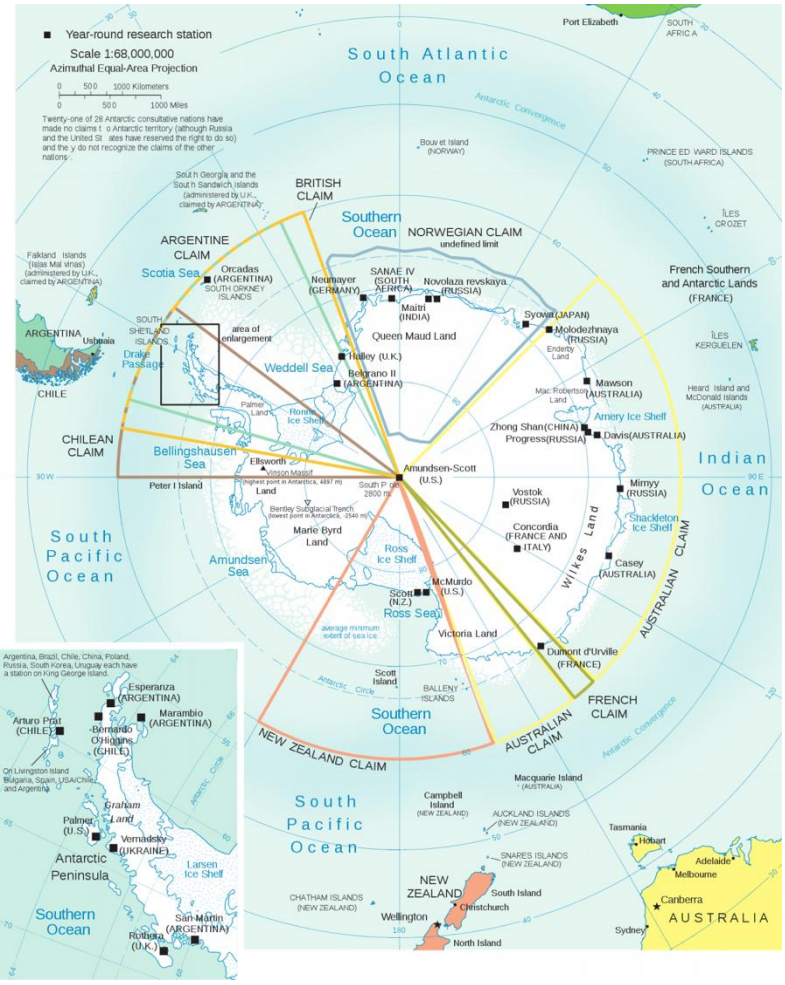
Spain	Slovakia
Sweden	Slovenia
Ukraine	Switzerland
United Kingdom	Turkey
United States of America	United Arab Emirates
Uruguay	Venezuela

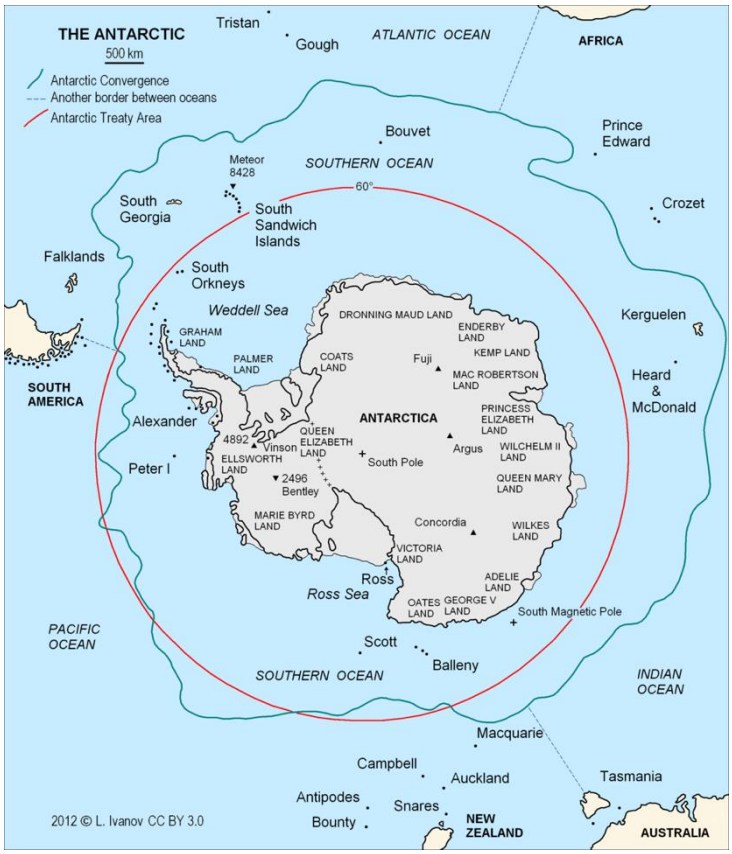
- Some of the organisations involved include:
    - **The Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty:** Helps to organise meetings and information exchange.
    - **The Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC):** A global coalition of environmental organizations that advocates for the protection of the Antarctic region and its surrounding oceans, founded in 1978.
    - **COMNAP:** The Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs comprises the heads of each of the national Antarctic operating agencies. It meets annually to exchange logistic information, encourage cooperation and develop advice to the Treaty Parties on a range of practical matters.
    - **The International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO):** An international industry body established by Antarctic tour operators, founded in 1991 to 'advocate and promote the practice of safe and environmentally friendly private-sector travel to the Antarctic.' It has developed extensive operational procedures and guidelines, many of which have been adopted as regulations by Antarctic Treaty nations and is an invited expert at Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings, representing the Antarctic tourism industry and its more than 100 member organisations.
    - *Groups with technical expertise relevant to Antarctic governance (Called experts) are also invited to participate in and contribute to Antarctic Treaty meetings, some of these organisations include:*
        - The International Hydrographic Organisation
        - The World Meteorological Organisation
        - The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO

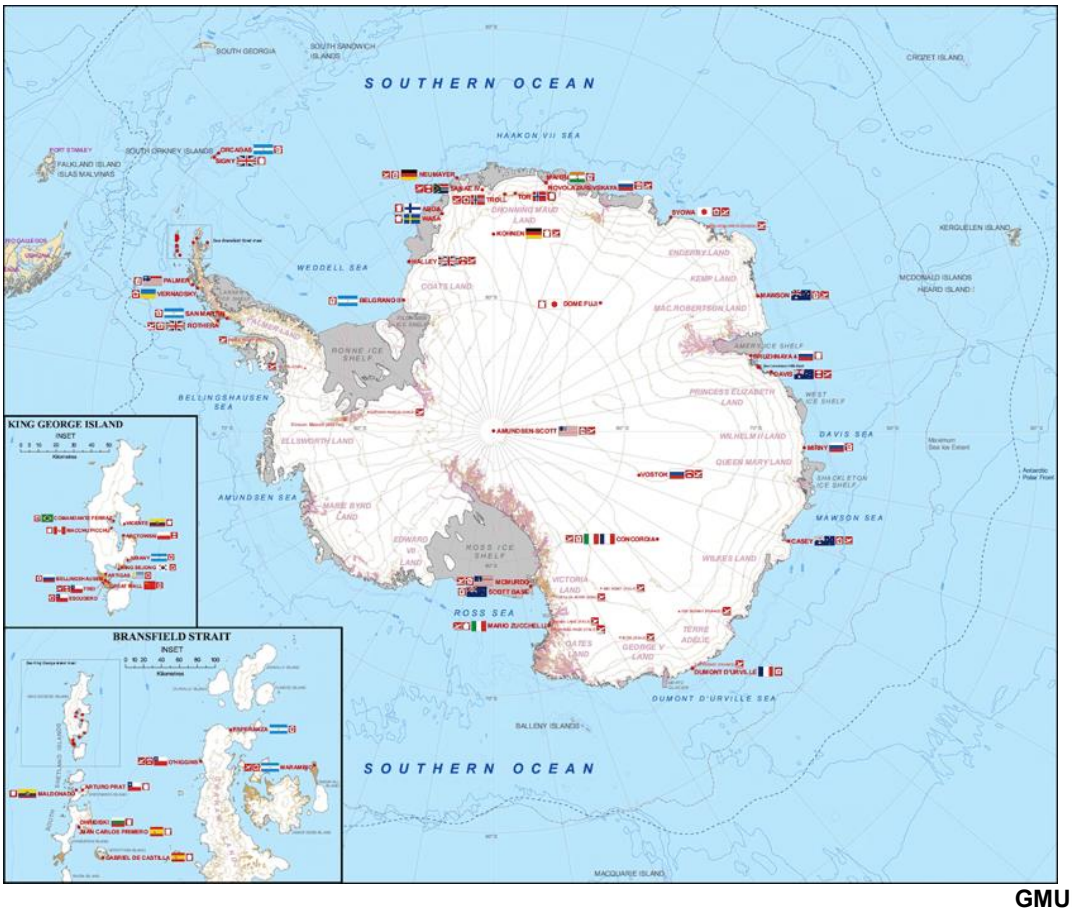
Brief Timeline of Events

1820: Antarctica is discovered.
19th Century: Industries spring up around the subantarctic and the Antarctic Peninsula, exploiting seal pelts and whale blubber, and decimating their population.
1908: The United Kingdom makes a territory claim in Antarctica.
1923: New Zealand makes a territory claim.
1924: France makes a territory claim.
1933: Australia makes a territory claim.
1939: Norway makes a territory claim.
1940s: Tensions grow about the uncertain status of Antarctica, not helped by German capture of two Norwegian whaling ships in Antarctic Waters in 1941.
1940: Chile makes a territory claim.
1941: Argentina makes a territory claim.
1950s: Fears grow about militarisation, nuclear testing and waste disposal amid the global instability caused by the Cold War.
1957-58: International Geophysical Year, largest and most important international scientific effort undertaken at the time involving 67 countries and over 4000 scientists with a focus on Antarctica's role in the earth system. This was a turning point for Antarctica.
1959: Antarctic treaty signed by the 12 countries of Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the USSR, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
1961: The Antarctic treaty enters into force.

Relevant Picture & Diagrams







Top left: Territorial claims made in Antarctica.
Top Right: The extent of the Antarctic treaty.
Bottom: Antarctic Research Stations.

All Images Credit: Wikipedia Commons

Useful Links

1: https://www.asoc.org/learn/antarctic-governance/ - Page from the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition on how Antarctica is governed
https://www.ats.aq/e/atcm.html - Page on the Antarctic Treaty Consultative meetings
https://www.cbc.ca/news/antarctica-treaty-1.7473433 - Article on issues with Antarctic treaty