The Antarctic Treaty

Why was Antarctica chosen to be a global scientific research hub?

By Emina Arella Haddlesey

The accepted explanation is that nowhere else offers such isolation from human activity and such scientific neutrality, but is such isolation necessary and is science not somewhat neutral by default?

Antarctica is fascinating because it is the only continent on Earth with no permanent human society and no ancient civilisations. Only temporary research stations exist, staffed by scientists and support personnel. It is a place of superlatives and extremes; it is the coldest, driest, highest, and most remote continent. However, the philosophy of the system under which it operates, and the contract binding the international community to that philosophy, is what has blown my mind. It is unlike any international contract I have ever seen.

Unlike any other region on Earth, Antarctica is intended to be a symbol of global cooperation, a living lab for science, and a model of peaceful governance. This intention was enshrined in the Antarctic Treaty, signed in 1959 by 12 countries and entered into force in 1961. The Antarctic Treaty System governs all human activity on the continent. As of now, 56 countries are signatories to the Antarctic Treaty. The countries are split into 29 consultative (voting) members and 27 non-consultative (non-voting) members, depending on the extent of scientific research conducted by that country in Antarctica.

The Antarctic Treaty forbids all military and nuclear activity on the continent.

Article I states: “Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only. There shall be prohibited, inter alia, any measures of a military nature, such as the establishment of military

bases and fortifications, the carrying out of military maneuvers, as well as the testing of any type of weapons."

Meanwhile, Article V stipulates that any nuclear explosions in Antarctica and the disposal there of radioactive waste material are prohibited.

While the treaty does not explicitly ban permanent civilian settlements, it does not recognise sovereignty or colonisation and explicitly reserves the land for cooperative, non-nationalistic use, allowing for only peaceful, scientific activity. No single country owns Antarctica, nor is any country allowed to.

Article IV states: "No acts or activities taking place while the present Treaty is in force shall constitute a basis for asserting, supporting or denying a claim to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica or create any rights of sovereignty in Antarctica. No new claim, or enlargement of an existing claim, to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica shall be asserted while the present Treaty is in force."

This makes colonisation or permanent national settlements legally problematic, as they could imply sovereignty.

The argument is that these restrictions are to reinforce international commitments to preserving Antarctica to operate solely as a global scientific research hub. However, even with this logic, questions linger: Is Antarctica truly neutral, or is it merely suspended in a geopolitical pause? And is the Antarctic Treaty an act of scientific utopianism — or strategic foresight disguised as cooperation?

In an era defined by territorial disputes, resource competition, and rising nationalism, Antarctica stands as a quiet anomaly. The Antarctic Treaty does not just govern a remote continent; it represents a collective act of restraint by humanity, a conscious refusal to claim, extract, or dominate. Whether this restraint is born of idealism, practicality, or temporary convenience, the preservation of Antarctica as a demilitarised, non-sovereign scientific haven forces us to imagine what other parts of the Earth, or our future beyond it, might look like if guided by principle rather than possession.