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Antarctic arms control as past precedent

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Abstract

The 1959 Antarctic Treaty made Antarctica the world's first and only demilitarised continent, the world's first denuclearised zone, and pioneered a comprehensive inspections system. This article explores Antarctic arms control as past precedent. It finds that the United States, which spearheaded the Antarctic Treaty negotiations, initially rationalised arms control in Antarctica as an isolated endeavour. Yet its potential elsewhere quickly appealed to various officials involved in the treaty negotiations and aligned with public perception. Subsequent initiatives for arms control took broad inspiration from the Antarctic Treaty, but regional differences limited specific adaptations.

The 1959 Antarctic Treaty preserved Antarctica's non-militarised status to make it the first and only demilitarised continent in the world. By banning nuclear weapons and peaceful nuclear explosions (later dubbed "PNEs") for scientific and industrial purposes, it also made Antarctica the world's first denuclearised zone. To ensure these provisions, the agreement pioneered a system of comprehensive inspections that allowed member states, through designated national observers, "complete freedom of access at any time to any or all areas" of the continent, along with total aerial surveillance (Antarctic Treaty, 1959).

This article explores Antarctic arms control as past precedent. It finds that the United States, which spearheaded the Antarctic Treaty negotiations, initially rationalised arms control in Antarctica as an isolated endeavour. Yet its potential elsewhere quickly appealed to various officials involved in the treaty negotiations and aligned with public perception. Subsequent initiatives for arms control took broad inspiration from the Antarctic Treaty, but regional differences limited specific adaptations. Overall, this article fills a historiographical gap by writing the Antarctic Treaty more fully into the international history of arms control (Musto, 2018). In doing so, it challenges the traditional view of Antarctica as "a pole apart" and adds to more recent scholarship that seeks to connect Antarctica with global systems and processes (Beck, 2012; Dodds, 2012; Quigg, 1983).

The United States spearheaded the Antarctic Treaty negotiations in part because of a fear that Antarctica could become a dangerous theatre of the Cold War. The International Geophysical Year of 1957–1958 (IGY), an 18-month venture in scientific collaboration among 65 nations worldwide, heightened the Soviet presence in Antarctica. With the expiration of the IGY at the end of 1958, US officials worried about Soviet militarisation of the continent, which they feared might include the deployment of nuclear weapons that could command large swaths of the Southern Hemisphere. As a result, the United States moved to secure a peaceful future for Antarctica (Musto, 2018).

Initially, the seeming isolation of Antarctic arms control appealed to the United States. As the predominant nuclear power of the day, the United States did not want to tie itself to provisions for disarmament in Antarctica that it might oppose elsewhere. Given Antarctica's uninhabited and remote existence, the United States believed that the Antarctic Treaty would not "influence [broader] disarmament negotiations, either favorably or unfavorably" (Farley, 1959). The United States and Great Britain, the only two Western nuclear powers in 1959, attached particular importance to the Antarctic exception as they hoped to keep the right to PNEs alive in the test ban negotiations underway in Geneva (Musto, 2018). Washington concluded that the Antarctic Treaty and test ban negotiations involved "such different issues that the draft treaty on Antarctica can be considered on its own merits" (Farley, 1959). Meanwhile, the US Defence Department informed the US State Department that it would only agree to arms control in Antarctica if it did not constitute a precedent for outer space (Musto, 2018).

And yet, Herman Phleger, the head US delegate to the treaty negotiations, quickly recognised the Antarctic Treaty's broader potential for arms control. In pushing for ratification of the treaty in 1960, he testified before Congress that the agreement "constitutes a precedent in disarmament, prohibition of nuclear explosions, and the law of space" (Musto, 2018, p. 662). He also told Congress that the Antarctic Treaty would "prove a valuable source of practical experience in the detailed process of international inspection," which he thought would help the United States to overcome the "principal stumbling block to successful [arms control] negotiations" with the

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Soviet Union (Shoemaker, 1989, p. 28). Privately, Phleger maintained that a failure to ratify the treaty would give the Soviets "the basis of an attack on the good faith" of the United States as Washington called for arms control with comprehensive inspections elsewhere (Musto, 2018, p. 664).

The potential precedent the Antarctic Treaty could set for arms control appealed to other officials involved in its negotiation as well. US observers speculated that the Soviet delegation sought to use a ban on PNEs under the Antarctic Treaty to secure a similar agreement in Geneva (Musto, 2018). Others more openly expressed their hopes for a trailblazing Antarctic Treaty. Adolfo Scilingo, Argentina's head delegate who led the ban on PNEs, thought that the treaty established "principles and precedents of historical significance" that "in one field, the nuclear one," went "beyond the greatest expectations." He ardently hoped that, "for the sake of the peace of the world," the "good examples set forth" by the treaty would lead to "results in broader fields of endeavor." Meanwhile, W. C. du Plessis, South Africa's deputy head delegate, lauded the potential for the Antarctic Treaty to free the rest of the world from "the destructive threat of war." As he explained, "If the olive branch of peace has to be carried into the world from the barren wastes of Antarctica then, paradoxical as it may seem, it is as good a starting place as any for so momentous a mission" (The Conference on Antarctica, 1960, pp. 43–44, 51–52).

Such thinking aligned with public perception. One US editorial thought that arms control in Antarctica "might well blaze the trail . . . in disarmament in all fields" (*The New York Times*, 16 October 1959). Another observed that "the treaty casts it shadow much farther than the icy wastes of the South Pole," especially given its provision for comprehensive inspections (*New York Herald Tribune*, 9 December 1959). "The treaty must inevitably have an influence on all future disarmament negotiations, in which Soviet objections to inspections have so far been the stumbling block," it concluded (*New York Herald Tribune*, 9 December 1959). *The Japan Times* agreed that an Antarctic inspection system "could naturally serve as a pilot system for an effective disarmament plan in the future" (15 November 1959). Capturing these sentiments, in January 1960 the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved its famed "Doomsday Clock" back five spots to 7 min to midnight in part because of the Antarctic Treaty, which it labelled as one of the "real signs of a [peaceful] turn in human affairs" that might lead to progress in other areas (Editorial, 1960, p. 3).

The impulse to use the Antarctic Treaty as a lodestar for arms control appeared greatest in consideration of other uninhabited regions. Outer space, a similarly vast, remote, and unpeopled frontier in which the nuclear dangers of the Cold War had yet to reach their full menacing potential, appeared to be the most important and logical region on which to graft Antarctica's arms control provisions. C. L. Sulzberger, the eminent foreign correspondent for *The New York Times*, called Antarctica the "test tube," "laboratory," "blueprint," and "pilot project" for outer space. In making the comparison, Sulzberger wrote during the Antarctic Treaty negotiations that "one can discern a profound warning in this barren, windswept, icebound deepest South. If man is incapable of establishing here a system of peaceful cooperation, instruments now whizzing through the upper skies may someday turn this entire world into an uninhabitable Antarctic-waste" (*The New York Times*, 26 October 1959).

Many policymakers agreed. In his final report on the Antarctic Treaty negotiations, Richard Casey, Australia's Minister for External Affairs and head delegate, wrote, "An obvious field in which the precedents established for the Antarctic might have relevance is outer space," especially with respect to arms control under an inspections regime. The Antarctic Treaty froze competing territorial claims in Antarctica, paving the way for comprehensive inspections without infringement upon a state's sovereignty. Casey ventured that such an arrangement "might provide useful precedents" for inspections of installations in outer space should territorial claims arise (Casey, 1959).

In a speech before the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 1960, US president Dwight Eisenhower urged the extension of the principles of the Antarctic Treaty to outer space as a means of preventing a cosmic arms race (Address, 1960). The US and Indian delegations to the Eighteen Nation Committee on Disarmament (ENDC) continued the call into the early 1960s, and the 1967 Outer Space Treaty took inspiration (ENDC/PV.36, 14 May 1962, pp. 8–9; ENDC/PV.37, 15 May 1962, p. 15; Dembling & Arons, 1967). Examining draft treaties for outer space submitted by the United States and the Soviet Union, UN under secretary C. A. Stavropolous highlighted for UN secretary-general U Thant the "analogous provisions" for arms control with the Antarctic Treaty (Stavropolous, 1966). In near-identical language, the final version of both agreements banned nuclear weapons, "military bases and fortifications," "military maneuvers," and "the testing of any types of weapons" (Antarctic Treaty, 1959; Outer Space Treaty, 1967).

In the late 1960s, the Antarctic Treaty also helped spur arms control for the sea bed. Looking to the ocean floor, the Soviet Union believed that the Antarctic Treaty demonstrated "the practicability and importance of carrying out disarmament in environments new to mankind" (ENDC/PV.395, 18 March 1969, p. 30). Likewise, US secretary of state Dean Rusk and Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency William Foster pushed arms control on the sea bed as a "thoroughly consistent follow-up" and "logical next step" to the Antarctic Treaty. Given the precedent of the Antarctic Treaty, the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT), and the Outer Space Treaty, Rusk thought that "an agreed restraint in this new environment would appear very real" (Record of Meeting, 1968, p. 613). Such thinking helped lead to the 1971 Seabed Treaty that denuclearised the ocean floor outside a 12-mile coastal radius (Seabed Treaty, 1971).

Beyond uninhabited "final frontiers," the Antarctic Treaty's provisions for arms control encouraged efforts in populated regions. As *The New York Times* noted in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the Antarctic Treaty, "there can be little doubt that this precedent helped to create the foundations of mutual confidence on which the great diplomatic landmarks of the past decade have been based," such as the LTBT and the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (*The New York Times*, 9 December 1969). Moreover, the Antarctic Treaty's regional focus ushered in an era of geographic-based arms control. Alva Myrdal, the prominent Swedish disarmament expert, noted that "the 1959 agreement on Antarctica may be hailed as the original model" of successful regional denuclearisation worldwide (ENDC/PV.156, 29 August 1963, p. 21). S. K. Tsarapkin, the Soviet representative to the ENDC, reminded his colleagues that the Antarctic Treaty showed denuclearised zones to be "quite practical and very desirable," with implications for inhabited regions. "If States, as experience has shown, can successfully reach agreement to exclude a particular area from the sphere of nuclear war, then why should we limit ourselves to concluding agreements which are applicable to those areas of the world where man is as yet a rare guest, and not a permanent inhabitant?" he wondered. "Do the thickly populated continents of Europe and Asia, Africa and Latin America deserve

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any less to be saved from the threat of nuclear destruction than, let us say, the icy wastes of Antarctica . . . ?" (ENDC/PV.209, 20 August 1964, p. 30).

Officials and politicians around the world took note of the Antarctic model. In the early 1960s, Polish diplomats, vociferous champions of denuclearisation in Central Europe, lauded the Antarctic Treaty as proof that their idea could be realised (ENDC/PV.93, 17 December 1962, p. 10; ENDC/PV. 118, 5 April 1963, p. 15). In 1962, Arthur Calwell, the leader of Australia's opposition Labour Party, called for Antarctic denuclearisation to be extended northward to cover the entire Southern Hemisphere, and received signatures of support from 200,000 Australian citizens (Hamel-Green, 2015). In 1963, Scilingo publicly criticised the Argentine government for its tepid response to an ongoing push to denuclearise Latin America given its leadership in securing that arrangement for Antarctica, and he floated the idea of extending Antarctic denuclearisation northward to cover Latin America (Serrano, 1992). A decade later, New Zealand's government studied the possibility of extending Antarctic denuclearisation to the South Pacific (Templeton, 2006).

Antarctic arms control also appeared attractive for the continent's polar opposite, the Arctic. One US editorial in late 1959 believed that an Antarctic Treaty for the Arctic would make it "considerably more difficult for Russia and the United States to shoot intercontinental missiles at each other" (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 December 1959). In 1964, the first jointly authored article on arms control between an American and Soviet scientist argued that the Arctic could follow the Antarctic model because both regions possessed relatively little "military value" (Rich & Vinogradov, 1964, p. 22). More recently, New Zealand's former Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control asserted, "The Arctic must be declared a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone for the sake of humanity, for the sake of the world's ecosystem. The wheel does not have to be reinvented. The model to achieve this goal exists in the Treaty of Antarctica and over 50 years of adherence by the whole world to its provisions" (Robson, 2010, p. 16).

But regional differences limited specific applications of the Antarctic precedent. For outer space, the United States sought the Antarctic Treaty's comprehensive controls that would allow freedom of access to all areas at any time, but the Soviet Union successfully countered that safety concerns in space necessitated reciprocal, pre-approved inspections (Antarctic Treaty, 1959; Paine, 2018). For the sea bed, the Soviet Union sought demilitarisation akin to the Antarctic Treaty, but the United States successfully limited it to denuclearisation by arguing that the greatest threat came from nuclear weapons, demilitarisation would be difficult to enforce, and the sea had broadly been used for military purposes "since almost the beginning of history" (Haig, 1969; ENDC/PV.414, 22 May 1969, pp. 4–5; ENDC/PV.409, 8 May 1969, pp. 10, 14).

In contrast to the Antarctic Treaty, Latin America's denuclearised zone, created by the 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco, kept the issue of PNEs ambiguous and incorporated the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into its control system (Treaty of Tlatelolco, 1967). While William Epstein, a Canadian arms control expert for the UN, broadly raised the precedent of the Antarctic Treaty in Tlatelolco's negotiations, Latin American delegations mostly used the Antarctic Treaty to define the geographic coordinates of Latin America's denuclearised zone (i.e. to separate the two) and to reference the slow progress of arms control worldwide (COPREDAL/AR/12, 26 August 1965; COPREDAL/GT.II/1, 30 April 1966; COPREDAL/S/INF.54, 14 February 1967). When Ecuador's representative Leopoldo Benites produced a foundational report listing antecedents to Tlatelolco, he omitted the Antarctic Treaty in favour of lingering proposals for inhabited continents like Europe and Africa (COPREDAL/CC/S/7 Anexo Add. 1, July 1965). By downplaying the significance of the Antarctic Treaty, Latin America's achievement could appear greater. Alfonso García Robles, a Mexican diplomat and the leader behind Latin America's denuclearisation effort, disparaged the Antarctic Treaty as having simply denuclearised a region "of eternal snow," whereas Tlatelolco became the first to denuclearise "inhabited lands" with a "dense human population extending almost over a whole continent" (ENDC/PV. 287, 21 February 1967, p. 29).

Overall, initial US support for Antarctic arms control as an isolated endeavour quickly contrasted with the viewpoint of various officials involved in the Antarctic Treaty negotiations and prominent public voices that the agreement could serve as an important precedent elsewhere. Initiatives for arms control in both uninhabited and inhabited regions subsequently took broad inspiration from the Antarctic Treaty, but regional differences limited specific adaptations. Nevertheless, the Antarctic Treaty represents an enduring precedent in peaceful coexistence over the past 60 years, and it may yet motivate future agreements in other areas.

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