

## Guest editorial—the 1959 Antarctic Treaty: reflecting on the 50th anniversary of a landmark agreement

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Commemorating a particular anniversary is always an arbitrary affair, an act of whimsy. After all, why acknowledge the 50th anniversary of someone or some event as opposed to the 48th? In terms of birthdays, we tend to celebrate each year as another rite of human passage. However, when it comes to events such as wars and diplomatic encounters, the media and political commentators like more substantial blocks of time: 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th and 100th anniversaries are particularly noteworthy. The year 2009 has proven no different in terms of representing a temporal marker for the 50th anniversary of the signing of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty. In December 2009 a so-called Antarctic Treaty Summit was held in Washington, D.C. to take advantage of not only such a milestone, but also “to highlight *lessons* learned about international governance ‘with the interests of science and the progress of all mankind’” (Antarctic Treaty Summit 2009, emphasis added).

Whereas polar scholars will have been thinking of this particular landmark prior to December 2009, the British Antarctic Survey website helpfully sought to put the year 1959 into a wider context for a broader readership.

1959. It was the year Fidel Castro’s army rolled victoriously into Havana, Cuba. Luna 3, the Soviet probe, gave humans their first view of the dark side of the Moon. In the UK, the first section of the M1 motorway opened and the first Mini car rolled off the production line; Alaska became the 49th state of the USA and the Barbie doll made her debut on the world’s toy stage.

Fewer people probably know that 1959 also saw the signing of the Antarctic Treaty, yet this unique international agreement has protected Antarctica for the past 50 years.

(British Antarctic Survey 2009)

At the same time that the Barbie doll and Castro transformed child’s play and the Cold War, respectively, plans were afoot for a conference designed to find some way forward through a series of political and scientific imbroglios. The 1959 Antarctic Treaty proved itself to be not only visionary, but also exculpatory (see, for example, the

near contemporaneous overviews by Hanessian [1960] and Hayton [1960]).

### Obstacles

What were the obstacles? At the most fundamental level, there was the thorny issue of the ownership of the Antarctic continent and surrounding seas. Who owns Antarctica? Between 1908 and 1943, seven claimants pressed claims on approximately three-quarters of the polar continental surface as well as maritime Antarctica. Notwithstanding an unclaimed sector, Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, Norway, New Zealand and the UK were an odd collection of bedfellows: a mixture of imperial and post-colonial states from the Northern and Southern hemispheres (Rothwell 2010). Some claimants recognized other claimants, but, critically, Argentina, Chile and the UK did not (Dodds 2002, 2008). Their three claims substantially overlapped with one another. The USA and the USSR, the new superpowers in the post-1945 era, did not recognize any of those claims. In the run-up to the Washington conference, a series of attempts to manage, let alone resolve, this uncertain territorial tapestry of claims, counter-claims and non-claims were moderately successful: the Chileans for example advocated territorial suspension, and the US government under President Truman played with the idea of condominiums (Beck 1986, 2010).

The Cold War itself was another complicating factor to this territorial uncertainty. By the early 1950s, it was abundantly clear that the Antarctic was embedded within this new global strategic matrix. On the one hand, the US Navy conducted so-called winter training operations (Operations High Jump and Windmill) in the late 1940s, and on the other, the Soviet Union made it clear that it was not going to be excluded from any political arrangement to manage the polar continent (Toma 1956; Gan 2009). Any suggestion that the Antarctic was removed from Cold War calculations is wide of the mark. Although it is true that the Arctic was by far the more important polar theatre for military–strategic plotting and planning, the Antarctic was also subject to Cold War anxieties, aspirations and fears. When the USSR discussed their plans to construct research stations in the Antarctic in the mid-1950s, Australian papers were swift to headline their stories with “Reds on the ice”, and to speculate that the Soviets might establish secret missile stations, which

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The South Pole, 30 October 1961, the year the Antarctic Treaty came into effect. Gordon Robin, director of the Scott Polar Research Institute, holds the left side of a commemorative plaque and Tore Gjelsvik, director of the Norwegian Polar Institute, supports the plaque's other end during a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the attainment of the South Pole by Amundsen and Scott, and their parties. Rear Admiral David M. Tyree, commander of US Operation Deep Freeze, is on the far right. (Photo courtesy of Norwegian Polar Institute Photo Library.)

might terrorize the unsuspecting Australian public, a polar equivalent of Nevil Shute's *On the beach* (Dodds 2010).

A third issue worth dwelling on was the resource value of Antarctica. The 19th and 20th centuries demonstrated that this apparently remote continent and its seas were filled with all kinds of exploitative possibilities. Offshore, seals and whales were valuable commodities, harvested and processed on the disputed island of South Georgia. Onshore, the post-war period ushered in new speculation about the mineral wealth of the continent itself. Coal, oil, gas and uranium were just some of the resources mentioned both by military and civilian commentators eager to make the case that the Antarctic was an under-exploited treasure house (for a critical review see Lewis [1963]). As an aside, it is worth noting how submissions pertaining to outer continental shelves in the Southern Ocean, especially close to the Antarctic Peninsula region, have resurrected this view of the polar continent (see, for example, Merrick [2007]; and for a short academic reflection, see Joyner [2010]).

Finally, we might just ponder upon, in terms of those messy factors, the double-edged nature of science itself. Even if science and scientists are often lionized in many accounts of the events and circumstances leading up to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, my own view is that we need to be a little more jaundiced. Science was, at it best, a mechanism for promoting cooperation and exchange. There are lots of heart-warming stories of personal and professional cooperation between scientists before, during and after the International Geophysical Year (see Belanger 2006). But it could also be used to promote aggressive forms of nationalism and territorial bellicosity. Argentina, Chile and the

UK were locked into a "science war" in the 1940s and 1950s: they mapped, surveyed and evaluated the Antarctic Peninsula so that they could then turn and announce to their competitors that they had the best maps, surveys and databases of this disputed region (Dodds 2008). Science and scientists were arguably making a bad situation worse, and were sustaining, albeit unwittingly, political leaders ever eager to celebrate "achievements". In Argentina and Chile, and other Southern Hemispheric countries, such as Australia, this mattered. Territorial claims were taken very seriously. But it also mattered to the UK—a familiar refrain being that British scientists did "better" science than their South American counterparts.

By the time of the 1957–58 International Geophysical Year (IGY), the 12 governments involved in polar research agreed that their scientists needed to be able to operate without restriction (Howkins 2008). In other words, every claimant state would have to accept that others, including the two superpowers, would indeed be able to establish research stations, without due regard for existing territorial claims. This was not an easy compromise, and some claimant states such as Argentina and Australia found it a bitter diplomatic pill to swallow. For the Australian government, it meant countenancing the presence of the USSR and their research stations in the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT). In Argentina and Chile, two countries with intensely developed territorialized public cultures, political leaders reluctantly accepted that the British and others, such as the Americans, were entitled to establish new scientific bases in the South American sector of Antarctica (at Halley Bay). The two superpowers, with their respective bases at the South Pole (USA) and the Pole of Relative Inaccessibility (USSR)

were determined to carry out their scientific and political business without too much regard for claimant states and their proclivities.

### Getting to Washington

The apparent stakes in the Antarctic and beyond were not, therefore, insubstantial. By the time the delegates met in Washington, D.C. on 15 October 1959 there were reasons to be cautiously optimistic, but, at the same time, wary of assuming that a treaty, let alone the *modus vivendi* established under the IGY, would transmogrify into something more sustaining. This is important to bear in mind because there is a tendency, both then and now, to assume that the success of the IGY was a “magic bullet” (Berkman 2010). This would, in my view, and others’, be mistaken (Bulkeley 2010). The working arrangements pertaining to the IGY, and the political status of the Antarctic, worked in part because all participants, including the claimant states, appreciated that they were committing themselves to a period of 18 months. Even if the IGY was extended beyond its initial period, under the guise of the International Geophysical Cooperation, this was still an additional year in duration. So, no party was committing itself to anything approaching perpetuity.

Clearly there were discussions in the preparatory meetings held before the Washington conference concerning arrangements in the post-IGY epoch. All the interested IGY polar parties, initially contacted by the Eisenhower government in June 1958, were acutely aware that the IGY was not intended to achieve political–territorial closure. When the delegates arrived in Washington, D.C. in October 1959, it was clear that some tough negotiating was necessary in order to secure any kind of new agreement over the status of the Antarctic. During the conference itself, there were moments of high drama and farce as delegates threatened to walk away from the discussions (Dodds 2008). Argentina, Australia, Chile and France were the most dogmatic over their sovereign rights. New Zealand was the only claimant to publicly and privately consider the possibility of renouncing their claim to the continent. The UK, desperate to reduce their financial commitment to the region, wanted to find a durable solution that would cement their presence without, if possible, decolonizing another part of the British Empire. Both the USSR and the USA were eager to protect their position on non-recognition of claims, but at the same time ensure that access was unfettered. For the USA, moreover, the right of inspection was also important within a period of growing suspicion over the intentions of the USSR more generally, following the Berlin crisis, the Hungarian uprising, the Cuban revolution and nuclear testing (Berkman 2010).

If the treaty emerged to enjoy public scrutiny, it was down to the simple fact that securing some kind of outcome was better than none. The treaty itself, as is well known, contains 14 articles, which declared *inter alia* the Antarctic to be a zone of peace and cooperation where scientific investigation would enjoy unfettered access to the continent. Article IV was pivotal, and allowed all parties to agree to disagree over the ownership of the region in question (Rothwell 2010). The rights of claimant and non-claimant alike were suspended for the duration of the treaty. The parties established, within the treaty, mechanisms for the future evolution of the treaty (including the option of a revision conference, 30 years after the treaty came into force), and the possibility of expansion of membership to the treaty, subject to certain caveats. The area of application, defined under article VI, applied to the area south of 60°S, including ice shelves, without prejudice to the rights of states within the high seas.

The treaty was unquestionably *avant-garde*, in the sense of establishing the world’s first nuclear-free zone and placing a continental region beyond the preserve of a few sovereign jurisdictions, but it was nearly not ratified in Argentina. Article XIII declared, “Upon the deposit of instruments of ratification by all the signatory States, the present Treaty shall enter into force for those States and for States which have deposited instruments of accession”. So, in order to enter into force, Argentina as one of the original signatories had to deposit “instruments of accession”. Politically, the Frondizi government had a torrid time trying to convince skeptical members of the Argentine political establishment and media that Argentina was not “giving up” its rightful territorial sovereignty (Dodds 1997). This was not really surprising given the emphasis placed by the Perón administrations in the 1940s and 1950s on securing Argentina’s rights in the Antarctic and South Atlantic. So although the ratification hearings within the US Senate heard that the treaty in question was comparable with the Magna Carta (Laurence Gould), the public reaction in Argentina was rather more lukewarm. Some 18 months later, approximately the same duration of the IGY itself, the treaty entered into force in June 1961.

So, the experiences both before and after the Washington conference were varied. Whereas the 12 original parties subsequently celebrated their achievements, there were moments of fracture and fissure both in Washington, D.C. and then further afield in places like Buenos Aires and, to a lesser extent, Santiago de Chile, Canberra and Paris. In the UK, the build-up to the conference was not unproblematic. Desperate to cut costs and mindful of imperial dissolution, the Macmillan government discussed the possibility of pulling out of Antarctica in 1958, and even again discussed this in the early 1960s. The Antarctic Treaty actually saved British Antarctic



The South Pole, 1974, the year Tore Gjelsvik was elected president of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research. Flags represent the original 12 signatory nations of the Antarctic Treaty. (Photo O. Orheim, courtesy of Norwegian Polar Institute Photo Library.)

science: although many within government were dismissive of the UK's territorial claims, they were more willing to be persuaded that science should be carried out in the Antarctic because of the intellectual importance of the research itself (Dodds 2008). Without the treaty, and its commitment to the pursuit of science and international cooperation, the UK could have lost its foothold in the Antarctic. Finally, we should not forget the contribution of other places: New Delhi, India, may not have been a signatory, but its decision to raise the "question of Antarctica" in the United Nations in 1956 and 1958 should be recalled. At the time it caused diplomatic panic, and served as a timely aide-memoire to the original parties that international interest in Antarctica was growing, notably within a state recently decolonized (Dodds 2006).

Looking ahead, we will on the one hand continue to see new research that further complicates our understandings of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty. Irina Gan's interventions, for example, have already shown that Russian language sources provide fascinating insights into how the Antarctic generated a series of political, economic, diplomatic and ideological engagements and commitments (Gan 2009). Socialist ideology, as with the Arctic, provided a critical resource for which Soviet planners understood and justified to domestic and international audiences the goals of their Antarctic programme in the 1950s onwards. A recent special feature in the journal *Signs* also reminds us that the Antarctic (and the polar regions more generally) can be profitably interrogated via a gendered analysis, especially when one considers how often the Antarctic seems to be visualized as a "testing ground" of men and their practices, including ideas (Rosner 2009). How would a gendered account of the 1959 Washington conference unsettle our received understanding?

The historiography associated with the 1959 Antarctic Treaty will evolve, and be ever more contested, with time. This will come about in part because of new research, but also through changes to the Antarctic Treaty System more generally, as different actors, issues and organizational challenges shape it. As India and China, for example, have cemented their presence in the Antarctic, so a new generation of scholars from these two countries, including the Indian political scientist Sanjay Chaturvedi, will contribute different perspectives on the 1959 Antarctic Treaty and its aftermath (see, for example, Chaturvedi 1996). This will inevitably unsettle the kinds of accounts routinely produced by English-speaking scholars in the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand.

### Final thoughts

The stories we tell about the 1959 Antarctic Treaty have changed over the intervening 50 years. What is clear is that the hegemonic narrative attached to the treaty favours particular actors, events and organizations, such as the USA, science and scientists (including the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research) and the IGY (1957–58), respectively. The preamble of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty reaffirms this particular understanding of how aspirations and circumstances combined fortuitously to transform the political–scientific landscape of the region (see Belanger 2006).

Although there is clearly much to be said for this assessment, it is fundamentally interpretative. One of the interesting things about the diplomatic papers to be found in the archives of the UK, Australia and New Zealand is the willingness of civil servants and ministers to contemplate a series of counter-factual possibilities in both the run-up to and in the midst of the Washington conference. Notwithstanding the confidence of many that science was a tool of diplomacy, there is no shortage of archival evidence of officials contemplating a series of different outcomes—including no treaty at all. The Antarctic continent could have become a nuclear testing zone during the Cold War had the treaty not been secured and subsequently applied. Even if we acknowledge the achievements of those responsible for the treaty, we should not lose a sense of how precarious and contingent it all was. A different outcome could have easily emerged, one perhaps we would less readily acknowledge in 2009 when we seek "lessons" (Berkman 2009).

As the treaty transmogrified into the Antarctic Treaty System, Antarctica itself is represented as a "scientific laboratory", with a vision being offered to the world featuring orderly and civilized investigations, being carried out by like-minded individuals and groups. By the 1970s and 1980s, this vision of the "scientific laboratory"

and the treaty as a “benign piece of statesmanship [sic]” was being openly challenged. For example, in UN debates on Antarctica, states such as Malaysia were challenging this view of benign, let alone enlightened, policy-making and management: for post-colonial states the treaty was an example (and not the only one at that) of a select group of countries determining the political future of an entire continent, with limited regard and reference for a world where the footprint of empire remained in Africa and Asia. Environmental groups, with their different agendas, also contested attempts by the treaty parties to determine current and future patterns of resource exploitation of the Antarctic continent and the Southern Ocean (Beck 1986). Thus, the treaty was considered to be indicative of inequality both of access and power: the power to decide, shape and manage. The eventual entry into force of the Protocol on Environmental Protection in 1998, with its prohibition on mining, did a great deal to restore the authority of the Antarctic Treaty consultative parties.

The 1959 Antarctic Treaty was an extraordinary achievement. My comments here are meant as caveats to those who would uncritically celebrate that achievement. Every treaty has its creation myths and the Antarctic Treaty is no different (Bulkeley 2010). It is striking that those commentators who seek to draw “lessons” from the treaty (including advocating the Treaty as a blueprint for the contemporary Arctic) often do so without really demonstrating any critical appreciation of the shaky circumstances leading up to the Washington conference, and its aftermath (see, for example, Berkman 2009). Buried within those arguments is often a rather naive view of science, unconnected to what Senator William Fulbright once termed the military–industrial–academic complex (Collis & Dodds 2008; Korsmo 2010). If there are lessons to be learned from the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, then they have to be contextualized historically, geographically and politically.

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