

Meeting of the Augustine Blue Ribbon Panel
On the U.S. Antarctic Program

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U.S. Strategic Interests in Antarctica

Introduction

The United States has a critical interest in all matters related to Antarctica. Our Nation has the largest presence of any country there. That large presence and the scientific activities we undertake on the continent directly support our strategic and foreign policy interests in Antarctica. In fact, our success and influence in the Antarctic Treaty system (which includes both the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting and the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources) relies on our demonstration of substantial scientific activity. It is therefore essential that we continue to maintaining an active and influential U.S. presence in Antarctica.

A June 1994 Presidential Decision Directive outlined four fundamental Antarctic policy objectives for the United States that remain relevant today. In brief, they are: environmental protection, scientific research, international cooperation, and sustainable management of living resources. However, to fully understand the broader U.S. policy interests, one should understand the mutually dependent roles of diplomacy and science in Antarctica.

The Antarctic Treaty

To pursue these objectives, the United States strongly supports the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, and we participate actively in all aspects of the Antarctic Treaty system. The United States was a strong proponent of the Treaty from its inception, which was negotiated here and signed in Washington on December 1, 1959. The first major arms control treaty of the post-World War II period, it remains one of diplomacy's most successful multilateral treaties. The Treaty guarantees freedom of scientific research and bans military and nuclear activity in the Antarctic, with rights of onsite inspection to assure compliance. Its Environmental Protocol and

related regulations prohibit mining, promote the conservation of marine resources, and limit fishing in the Southern Ocean.

Perhaps the best known element of the Treaty is its freezing of existing territorial claims. Seven states claim territory in Antarctica: Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom, while the United States and Russia maintain a “basis of claim.” The Antarctic Treaty also prohibits the assertion of new claims. A key element of U.S. Antarctic diplomacy is to act as a bulwark against territorial claims.

Concluded during a period of intense political rivalry between the United States and the former Soviet Union, the Treaty stands as a model for international cooperation in areas of scientific inquiry for the benefit of the whole of humankind. In setting aside disputes over territorial claims which could otherwise place us at odds with important allies, the Treaty enables cooperation for peaceful purposes across the entire continent. Over the years, the Treaty has proven to be a dynamic and durable basis for addressing new scientific, environmental and resource management issues, and has also accommodated a large expansion in the number of Treaty Parties. There are currently 48 Parties to the Treaty. 28 of the Parties, including the United States, have the status of Consultative Parties and the right to participate in decision-making on the basis of their substantial scientific research activities.

The Role of Science

Our active and influential presence in Antarctica maintained through the U.S. Antarctic Program directly advances our foreign policy objectives in the Antarctic Treaty system and globally. The fact that we have the largest presence of any nation in Antarctica – as measured by personnel, funding, logistics and station size – underscores and promotes the commitment of the U.S. Government to Antarctic peace and security on the continent. From a geopolitical point of view, it is important to emphasize the practical and symbolic importance of the United States being the only country to maintain a station at the South Pole. Not only is this the spot on the globe where the territorial claims have their terminus, but operating a station at this important and symbolic location demonstrates a U.S. Government commitment to the political stability of the entire continent.

The presence of the United States through its science stations plays a critical role in how the United States is perceived in Antarctic diplomacy, which places a

premium on conduct of science. Our physical presence continues to send a robust signal of our interests in the Antarctic region.

More Than A Presence

Beyond the value of this physical presence, NSF and its U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP) also directly advance foreign policy goals in Antarctica in other tangible ways. USAP logistical support makes it possible for the United States to exercise our right set forth in the Antarctic Treaty to conduct periodic inspections of foreign facilities and vessels. These inspections demonstrate that the United States and others can go where they wish in Antarctica (despite the existence of territorial claims) and help ensure that Treaty Parties observe environmental and other rules. NSF support for visits of foreign officials and dignitaries, such as the planned visit of the Norwegian Prime Minister in December to mark the Centennial of Amundsen's arrival at the South Pole, promote bilateral ties between the United States and other Treaty Parties. Such support also reinforces strong scientific research partnerships, including our 2007-2008 International Polar Year cooperation with Norway. While some of these efforts are outside the scope of the U.S. Antarctic Program's core mission, they are another example of how the Program contributes to our foreign policy objectives in Antarctica and globally.

Scientific Collaboration

Finally, the international scientific cooperation facilitated by the U.S. Antarctic Program also advances our broader foreign policy objectives. Aside from the scientific benefits, this collaboration also strengthens relationships with governments and builds people-to-people ties. It helps to ensure that U.S. scientific standards and practices play a substantial role in the establishment of international benchmarks. Scientific collaboration has significant indirect foreign policy benefits as well, contributing to solutions which encourage sustainable economic growth by promoting good will, strengthening political relationships, helping to foster democracy and civil society, and advancing the frontiers of knowledge for the benefit of all.

Future

In 1982, former President Ronald Reagan issued a memorandum on the United States Antarctic Program that stated that:

- The United States Antarctic Program shall be maintained at a level providing an active and influential presence in Antarctica designed to support the range of U.S. Antarctic interests.
- This presence shall include the conduct of scientific activities in major disciplines; year-round occupation of the South Pole and two coastal stations; and availability of related necessary logistics support.
- Every effort shall be made to manage the program in a manner that maximizes cost effectiveness and return on investment.

It remains essential that the United States continue to maintain an active and influential presence in Antarctica, as this presence demonstrates U.S. commitment to assert our rights and carry out our obligations in Antarctica, to conduct cutting edge scientific research there, and to promote international cooperation and good will. Our foreign policy and national interests need to be considered in budgetary decisions affecting the U.S. presence in Antarctica. When viewed from the perspective of overall national objectives, the investment of adequate resources in this presence will be seen as cost-effective as well as necessary.