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The Option for U.S.–China Cooperation in Antarctica

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The U.S. and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have diametrically opposed interests on several critical issues, particularly outside the economic sphere. Taiwan’s defense, freedom of the seas, and American advocacy for universal liberal democratic values are just a few. There is no prospect that the two governments will come to an agreement on any of these political and security issues in the near or even medium term.

However, there are other limited areas, physically far from Chinese sensitivities, where agreement and cooperation are possible. One example is anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Another could be scientific cooperation in Antarctica. The Obama Administration ought to explore these possibilities as a means of promoting mutually beneficial cooperation.

The Chinese have demonstrated growing interest in the Antarctic. This level of interest has been of fairly low visibility, as there are few immediate benefits that are likely to accrue. Unlike the Arctic, no trade routes traverse the frozen seventh continent. Nor is this region likely to conceal major strategic weapons systems, unlike the Arctic where the Soviets deployed their ballistic missile submarines under the polar ice cap.

It is this low strategic priority and visibility that make the Antarctic an attractive target for U.S.–China cooperation.

China’s Growing Antarctic Presence

China is now completing its fourth Antarctic research station, in Antarctica, while conducting surveys on where to build a fifth station.¹ Once completed, it will give China one of the largest Antarctic presences. With its Antarctic budget growing from \$20 million to \$55 million, China clearly has the wherewithal to expand its presence even further.²

Why is China making such an effort in Antarctica? A common assumption is that China is interested in the potential mineral and energy resources buried under the Antarctic ice cap. Estimates range as high as the world’s third largest hydrocarbon reserves may lie beneath the southern polar region.³ While the Antarctic Treaty prohibits all drilling and exploitation, that treaty will be up for renewal in 2048, and states with a larger presence are likely to be more influential.⁴ China signed the treaty in 1983, nearly 25 years after the treaty entered into force and is clearly concerned that its voice and views be heard in any treaty review.

Meanwhile, efforts at establishing new marine reservations in the Antarctic to preserve global fisheries have also foundered in the face of Chinese, Russian, and Ukrainian opposition. Moscow and Kyiv opposed the creation of maritime reservations in the Ross Sea and the eastern Antarctic region, while Beijing withdrew its support for the latter in the 2013 meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources.⁵ Beijing is concerned that such limits would affect its ability

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to provide protein to the increasingly wealthy Chinese population, which is already the single largest market for seafood in the world. With a per capita fish consumption of some 33 kilograms in 2010, growing 6 percent annually, Chinese demand for fish will likely be a significant consideration for Chinese decision makers.⁶

Another important factor in China's growing commitment to Antarctic research is the political perception of contributing to global scientific knowledge. Chinese officials have often argued that scientific research is integral to advancing a nation's "comprehensive national power." Therefore, China must undertake basic scientific research, whether in interplanetary exploration, oceanography, or Antarctic research to elevate its scientific and technological levels, which in turn will support its status as a major power. Conversely, to expand its comprehensive national power, China must also be *seen* as fielding a world-class scientific and technological establishment. Given the limited number of players, the Antarctic arguably imposes lower costs for entry than some other areas. The Large Hadron Collider particle accelerator, for example, cost some \$4 billion, making China's Antarctic investment pale by comparison.⁷

While Antarctica has been, and remains, demilitarized, China's growing presence may also con-

tribute to Chinese national security. The Chinese Kunlun station, located at Dome-A, is part of a multinational effort engaged in deep-space observations.⁸ The telescopes there may contribute to broader Chinese space situational awareness, especially since polar orbiting satellites play key roles in earth observation functions. Some have suggested that the Chinese facilities may allow for eavesdropping on satellite communications.⁹

Implications on U.S. Policy

None of this suggests that China is on the verge of staging an *Ice Station Zebra*¹⁰ confrontation. China's efforts are largely public, even if their motivations are unclear. Indeed, unlike outer space, Antarctica offers an opportunity to deepen U.S.–China cooperation with minimal strategic risk to the United States. The U.S. can foster this cooperation in several ways:

- **Promote greater coordination.** Neither China nor the United States, nor any of the other interested parties to the Antarctic Treaty, are devoting enormous sums to Antarctic exploration. This would suggest that a lot could be gained by coordinating investments. China, for example, is believed to be interested in building a runway at their fifth station to facilitate resupply. Engag-

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 9. Rick Wallace, "China 'Poses Threat to Treaty in Antarctica,'" *The Australian*, November 22, 2014, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/china-poses-threat-to-treaty-in-antarctica/story-fn59nm2j-1227131151273> (accessed December 10, 2014).
 10. Alistair MacLean, *Ice Station Zebra* (New York: Doubleday, 1963). A film with the same name, loosely adapted from the popular Cold War thriller novel, was released in 1968.

ing China in this regard would benefit a number of research facilities that are located near the planned new Chinese base.

- **Engage in flexible relations.** Because the U.S.–PRC relationship is not a zero-sum relationship, unlike the U.S.–Soviet relationship during the Cold War, it is essential for the United States to be prepared to tangibly deepen engagement when an opportunity arises. Joint scientific cooperation in the Antarctic could not only provide a political signal of warming relations between the two states, but also offer much more equality in the relationship for limited costs (and strategic implications). Given the importance that Chinese leaders place on political parity, this would seem to be an ideal set of first steps for the proverbial 1,000-mile journey.
- **Sustain American Antarctic research.** However, for Washington to engage Beijing regarding the Antarctic, it must be able to sustain the American presence. This militates for the ability to field systems capable of supporting operations in the unique environment of the Antarctic (and

Arctic). This would include provision for additional icebreakers and aircraft suitable for operations in the polar regions. It also argues for continued research into other areas—such as clothing, lubricants, and human activity—to sustain operations in these extreme conditions.

Conclusion

U.S.–China cooperation in Antarctica is a positive, admittedly limited, opportunity. There are few implications for grand strategy. Cooperation there is highly unlikely to impact, for better or worse, disputes closer to China's shores. Consequently, like cooperation in the Gulf of Aden, the Antarctic is an area where the U.S. and China have much to gain through greater cooperation and little to lose. Antarctic cooperation is therefore well worth exploring, to help improve bilateral ties without infringing upon either side's core interests.

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