The Geopolitics of the Antarctic:

The Land Is Free for Scientific Work But Its Wealth of Minerals Has Excited Imperialist Claims

By JOSEPH S. ROUCEK*

ABSTRACT. After space, the *Antarctic Continent* of more than 5 million square miles surrounding the *South Pole* is humanity's last relatively unexplored *frontier.* Its *land* appears only where the 15,000 foot peaks of giant mountain ranges break through the ice. The most isolated of the world's seven continents, it was discovered by whalers but was explored only in the present century. Successive *explorations* and finally establishment of research stations by 12 nations led to conflicting *territorial claims.* In 1959, 12 nations, including the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., (joined later by 8 others), concluded a treaty suspending claims, banning military activity and opening up the continent for free use for scientific work. The danger of a clash between socialist as well as capitalist *imperialism* was illustrated by the *Falkland Island* War of 1982 when *Argentina* invaded the dependency and was overwhelmed and expelled by *Great Britain.* Mutual commercial interests, however, limited military action.

I

Introduction

THROUGH MUCH OF HISTORY, the extremely high latitude lands and seas at the polar ends of the earth were important only to a few Eskimos, Indians, traders, missionaries and explorers. Most nations were either completely indifferent to those distant places or were satisfied to read the tall tales of their frosty terrors in the comfortable glow of their fireplaces. It has been only in very recent decades that the importance of the Antarctic has grown far more rapidly than has our knowledge of it. Especially military developments have moved it to the focus of strategic considerations—although much of this newly-discovered information is also kept secret.

* [Joseph S. Roucek, Ph.D., was professor emeritus of sociology, City University of New York, and international president of the social science honor society, Delta Tau Kappa, 395 Lakeside Drive, Bridgeport, Conn. 06606.] [Professor Roucek was working on this article when he died on October 29, 1984. In his last notes to me he indicated that in Section IV he wished to discuss the call of some non-claimant nations for Antartica to be declared a "common heritage of mankind." EDITOR]

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II

Geographic Background

LARGER THAN EUROPE, Antarctica is a continent of from 5 to 6 million square miles surrounding the South Pole. Encircling waters, sometimes called the Antarctic Ocean, challenge navigation. A roughly circular outline broken by the Ross and Weddell Seas and the Palmer Peninsula, about 600 miles from South America, is the only land relatively near the Pole. Coasts are circled by a pack of ice hundreds of miles wide and ending in sheer ice cliffs. Giant mountain ranges (with peaks over 15,000 feet) surround the perpetually ice-capped central plateau. The land appears only where great mountains break through the frosty crust of the interior.

One central fact about the geographical location of Antarctica is that it is the most isolated of the world's seven continents. To oceanographers, Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americans, and Australia all stand on a common "continental slope." The Antarctic alone is not, however, on this continental slope; it is cut off from the other continents by an ocean which plunges to abysmal depths of at least 12,000 feet. It is a circumpolar ocean surrounded by land.

Antarctica is the world's highest continent. Its mean altitude of 6,000 feet is almost double that of Asia, the next highest continent which, in spite of its Himalayas, has a mean altitude of only 3,200 feet. The South Pole itself is situated in a spreading plateau whose average heighth is about 9,000 feet. The continent is the land which is probably the coolest in the world.

The ice that covers Antarctica extends out in some places in huge sheets attached to the mainland. The largest of these sheets is the Ross Shelf which cuts inland to 300 miles from the Pole. Many Polar explorers have used its smooth surface; on its edge Admiral Byrd built his main camp, Little America. The closely packed ice extends many miles out from land into the ocean, affecting the weather of Australia, South Africa, and South America.

There are no known areas in which plant life of any kind exists. Bases for fishing fleets are not located on the Antarctic mainland itself but on nearby island groups, such as the South Sandwich and South Orkney islands and Deception Island.

The ocean that surrounds Antarctica teems with microscopic floating plants and animals which provide food for hordes of shrimplike creatures; these, in turn, are eaten by fish and whales. A large number of birds and seals feed on the sea life around the edges of the continent. Around these edges, a few

varieties of simple plants and insects eke out a meager living. But the interior of the ice-packed land is empty of life.

Antarctica and the ocean that surrounds it have the coldest and fiercest climate on earth.[1]

III

Explorations

ANTARCTICA HAS REMAINED, until very recently, a mere geographical curiosity (though the sea has yielded a little whale oil to a few venturesome men). But the situation has changed in the last few decades. Discovered by whalers, all systematic explorations had been scarce until the present century when modern technology made it possible for Amundsen,[2] Scott, and U.S. naval expeditions (led by Admiral Byrd)[3] to learn more about the various areas.

The Air Age has finally been finding ways of crossing this unfriendly realm. Since 1957, lights have been burning year round across the silent white desert that surrounds the South Pole. As new equipment and technology have helped to subdue the hazards of this hostile land, the United States and nine other nations—Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, the Soviet Union, and South Africa—have set up more than 35 permanent research stations where scientists and servicemen who "winter" here enjoy most of the comforts of home as they try to unlock the secrets of the earth's ice-age continent.

Especially fruitful were the explorations of the International Geophysical Year (1957-1958), carried out jointly by several nations. They yielded a host of hitherto unknown facts about Antarctica. Scientists from 12 nations established research stations on the Antarctic ice. (One station, maintained by the United States, was located exactly over the South Pole). Studies established that the icecap of Antarctica averaged more than a mile in thickness and that some of the mountains standing above it rose to heights of nearly 15,000 feet. Many valuable minerals were found on the exposed rocks of the mountains, in addition to immense seams of coal, ores of manganese, molybdenum, uranium, iron, copper, lead and other metals. A way of making weather maps of the entire earth was also discovered.[4]

In December, 1959, the representatives of Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the U.S.S.R. concluded a treaty, the main effects of

which were to suspend all territorial claims and disputes in the area, to establish free use of the Continent for scientific work, and to set up a mutual inspection system to prevent any military activities, including nuclear explosions.

At the same time, Antarctica was already the centre of international politics as seen from the fact that, during the same month, Argentina sent a seasoned diplomat to New York to open a campaign at the United Nations to take the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands from Britain.

The issue of territorial claims had already become troublesome in 1954 when England, with 16 bases in the Antarctic, claimed sovereignty over most of these Dependencies, with Chile with 4 bases in the area, claiming sovereignty over the western part of the Dependencies (including some of the areas claimed by Argentina) and over a sector further to the west. Britain's offer in December, 1954, to refer the matter to the International Court of Justice was not accepted by Argentina and Chile. In March, 1956, the Court rejected a British request for the recognition of British sovereignty and for a declaration against Argentina's and Chile's "pretensions and encroachment," on the ground that it had no powers in the matter since Argentina and Chile would not accept the Court's jurisdiction.[5]

IV

The Question of Sovereignty

ANY SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE about Antarctica dates only from the late 17th century, when Captain James Cook circumnavigated it (but never saw it) and British and American sealers ventured into Antarctic waters to hunt seals on islands and on the ice. The continent itself was not spotted until the early 19th century when sealers, whalers, and explorers from several countries discovered the Antarctic Peninsula (called Graham Land by the British, the Palmer Peninsula by the Americans, Tierra O'Higgins by the Chileans, and Tierra San Martin by the Argentines).

The first formal claim to Antarctic territory was made by Britain in 1908. Since then six other countries have made formal claims: New Zealand, 1923; France, 1924; Australia, 1933; Norway, 1939; Chile, 1940; and Argentina, 1943.

Of all the customary bases for claims to territory under international law, the only one with any validity in the Antarctic is discovery and effective occupation. Since discovery is obviously difficult to prove and occupation difficult to make it "effective," other principles have been formulated. Best known is the sector principle, propounded in 1907 by Canada that Canada

should take possession of all lands, including islands, lying between her northern coast and the North Pole. This concept was adopted by the United Kingdom for the Antarctic first in 1917. But this concept has not been generally accepted. Other theories have been presented: the continuity doctrine, continuity and hinderland, patrimony and *uti possidetis*.[6]

On December 1, 1959, the Treaty of Antarctica was signed in Washington by 12 states that participated in the International Geophysical Year (IGY) activities in Antarctica. (Since then seven more states have acceded to it and Poland, by virtue of her own research there, has been accepted as a Consultative Party, equal to the 12 original signatories; Brazil, Czechoslovakia, German Democratic Republic, Netherlands, and Romania). The treaty went into effect in 1961 and is renewable after 30 years. It proclaimed three fundamental principles: (1) suspension of territorial claims, (2) freedom of scientific research, and (3) a ban on all military activities, including nuclear testing and the depositing of radio-active materials, all for a duration of 30 years.

The United States has never made any claims in Antarctica, although claims have been made in its behalf by private citizens. But, at the same time, Washington has refused to recognize the claims of any other nation.

V

The U.S.S.R. Interest

ON JUNE 7, 1950, the Soviet government presented a note to the governments of the United States, Britain, France, Norway, Australia, Argentina and New Zealand, arguing that it could not agree that the administration of the Antarctic should be decided without Moscow's participation, and referred to the Russian navigators, Admiral T. von Bellinghausen and Michail Lazarov, who, at the beginning of the 19th century had circumnavigated and first reached the shores of the Antarctic continent. As the territories of the Antarctic and the waters surrounding the area are of great economic value (nine tenths of the world's whaling takes place in these waters), the U.S.S.R. wished to participate in their administration. Moreover, meteorological observations in the polar regions are of great significance to the northern hemisphere. Therefore, the U.S.S.R. declared, it could not recognize a legal decision that might be adopted without Moscow's participation.

In March, 1980, the Soviet Union disclosed the opening of its 7th Antarctic base, the first research center on the virtually unexplored coast of West Antarctica. Located on Cape Burks, about 1,000 miles from the American McMurdo station, *Russkayar* base is expected to focus on surface and upper-

air meteorology. (The Soviet outpost is in a sector which had remained unclaimed by any state).

VI

Air Routes

IN RECENT YEARS, there have been discussions regarding transatlantic civil air routes. In December, 1956, the first commercial air flight over Antarctica was made from Chile over the Palmer Peninsula by the Chilean National Airlines; a year later, Pan American flew a passenger plane on a Navy-chartered flight from New Zealand to McMurdo Sound. The commercial successes achieved have raised the possibilities of establishing regular air traffic across the Antarctic. The importance of controlling bases and air lanes has been discussed by Australia and New Zealand. The current distribution of stations provides a reliable communication network as well as meteorological data on a continental scale. But little progress has been made since there has been limited passenger interest; southern hemisphere populations are small and the cities are located in low latitudes.

An historical air crossing of Antarctica by the U.S. Navy was launched in October, 1963, when the first direct flight from Australia to the Antarctic was successfully completed. A U.S. Navy Hercules aircraft reached the South Pole in 12 hours. The initial phase was carried out by 3 ski-equipped Hercules transports that reached McMurdo Sound from their starting point of Punta Aranas (Chile), Christchurch (New Zealand), and Melbourne (Australia).

This was the first time flights had been made to Antarctica from Australia and South America. The first leg of the flight covered 3,600 miles to the South Pole; but when bad weather closed the U.S. base at McMurdo Sound, the planned Antarctic touchdown, Rear Admiral James E. Ready, Commander of the U.S. Navy Antarctic Support Force, ordered a diversion to the Byrd Station in Marie Byrd Land. This second leg brought the total distance of 4,420 miles, the longest flight in Antarctic history—flight time being 15 hours and 39 minutes. (In flying along the 150th meridian, broadly speaking, the U.S. Navy aircraft passed over the south magnetic pole long before it reached the south geographic pole. The magnetic pole is located near the head of the Mertz Glacier on the Antarctic coast).

Admiral Ready demonstrated in this venture (and by his former similar long distance Antarctic flight launched from Cape Town, terminating at McMurdo Sound in 1963) that through these long-range flights any U.S. station in the Antarctic could be supported by air from developed areas.

VII

Limited War Over the Falkland Islands

ON APRIL 2, 1982, Argentine forces invaded the Falkland Islands, creating a textbook example of a limited war—limited in time, in location, in objectives and in means. It ended with Argentina's surrender to British forces 10 weeks later, with the cost of 800 to 1,000 Argentine and 250 British dead. The sinking of the *General Belgrano* was the greatest naval casualty.

The "de facto cease-fire" in the Falklands was, de facto, an Argentine surrender.

Britain's campaign to recover the Falklands lasted 75 days. This costly war did not arise from any threat to either Britain or Argentina. President Galtieri thought that a popular land grab could save his faltering junta from Peronist mobs. He never dreamed that the British would fight to win, a miscalculation that cost him his job. The British fought precisely because no one thought they could or would. They claimed to be striking a blow against aggression anywhere; but they also bled for national pride and for Prime Minister Thatcher's own recovery from political weaknesses. The United States, after failing to push Argentina toward a rational solution, stood squarely with Britain and against the emotional outburst of Latin friends throughout the South Hemisphere. (It did so because Britain is a much more important ally than Argentina—and because the British had the better case in the Falklands. It was imperialism that unfurled the Union Jack over those remote rocks; but Argentina's claims arose from nothing more than the wholly exploitative colonialism of Spain.)

VIII

The Future?

THE FALKLANDS are occupied by 1,800 people, who shear the sheep, shoot the geese and occasionally eat penguin eggs. Almost all residents are of Scottish, Irish or Welsh descent and passionately claim allegiance to the distant British monarchy that many of them have never seen.

As Freedman points out: "The war was a strange and atavistic interlude for Britain, a curious and enthralling distraction from its economic troubles. What it did not do was solve the problem of the Falkland Islands. It made a diplomatic solution virtually impossible for many years, as the Islanders' feelings about Argentina have become even more hostile. Britain will now have to provide properly for the islands' defense and try to improve their

economic viability in the face of persistent hostility from Argentina and non-cooperation from the rest of Latin America. Having retrieved the Falkland Islands, Britain is well and truly stuck with them."[8]

At the same time, Great Britain has mixed feelings about the support the United States provided her during the Falklands war, in which she lost 5 ships and approximately 250 men. The British contend that when war broke out in April, Washington diplomatically advised London not to request the loan or lease of American AWACS, the type of advanced warning radar planes that Washington had previously sold to Saudi Arabia. London feels that if the U.S. had loaned them those same sophisticated Boeing E-3As, not a single enemy plane could have taken off from Argentina without being tracked. Britain is developing her own AWACS (Airborne Warning And Control System), known as Nimrod, but it was not ready in time for the Falklands conflict. As a result, Argentine's Etendards and Exocet missles got through the British air defense to sink the HMS *Sheffield* and the *Atlantic Conveyor.*

Neither the United States nor the British care to reveal the extent of material, intelligence and refuelling support America provided—largely because the U.S. is seeking to dampen anti-U.S. sentiment throughout Latin America.[9]

Notes

1. For more details, see: Robert M. Monier and Herbert J. Vent, "Antarctica," *Journal of Geography,* 57, 6 (September 1958); Isaac Asimov, *The Ends of the Earth: The Polar Regions of the World* (New York: Weinright & Talley, 1975); Paul A. Carter, *Little America: Town at the End of the World* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979); Eliot Porter, *Antarctica* (New York: Dutton, 1978); Ian Cameron, *Antarctica: The Last Continent* (New York: Cassell, 1974); C. J. Dufek, *Operation Deep Freeze* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1957); Norman Kemp, *The Conquest of the Antarctic* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957); R. A. Suan, *Australia in the Antarctic: Interest, Activity, and Endeavour* (Melbourne: Melbourne Univ. Press, 1962); National Academy, *Antarctic Research Series* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy); Eliot Porter, *Antarctica* (New York: Dutton, 1978); Frank A. Simpson, ed., *The Antarctic Today: A Mid-Century Survey of the New Zealand Antarctic Society* (Wellington: New Zealand Antarctic Society, 1952); John Hanessian, Jr., "A Note on the Polar Regions," American Universities Field Staff, Reports Service, *Polar Area Series,* Vol. III, No. 2 (General), 1963, pp. 23-32; Barney Brewster, *Antarctica, Wilderness at Risk* (San Francisco, Calif.: Friends of the Earth, 1982), bibliography, p. 120; F. M. Auburn, *Antarctic Law and Politics* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982).

2. Roald Amundsen (1872-1928), Norwegian polar explorer, commanded the first negotiation of the Northwest Passage (1903-6), was the first to reach the South Poles (1911). He flew over the North Pole with Lincoln Ellsworth (1926). Died in attempt to rescue a former associate, Umberto Nobile. See: Roland Huntford, *Scott and Amundsen, The Race to the South Poles* (New York: Putnam, 1980).

3. Richard Evelyn Byrd (1888-1957), American aviator and polar explorer, took part in notable polar and transatlantic flights from 1925, being the first man to fly over both North

and South Poles. (Led expeditions to Antarctica, 1929, 1933). In 1933, from the Little America base, he moved 123 miles closer to the South Pole to spend several winter months alone, making observations. Led three government expeditions to Antarctica in 1939–40, 1946–1947, and in 1955–1956. In 1955 he was placed in charge of all Antarctic activities of the United States. Byrd's fifth Antarctic expedition, along with those of several other nations, aimed to further explore Antarctica in preparation for the activities of the International Geophysical Year (1957–1958).

4. Polar explorations have given us some of the most fascinating books on modern geography. One of the most interesting modern studies on Antarctica made by the scientists of the International Geophysical Year is Walter Sullivan, *Quest for a Continent* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957). Patrick D. Baird, *The Polar World* (New York: Wiley, 1964) is one of the best summaries of the physical aspects of Antarctica.

5. Peter A. Bernhardt, "Sovereignty in Antarctica," reprinted from: *California Western International Law Journal,* Western School of Law, reprinted in Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, *U.S. Antarctic Policy,* Hearing, Subcommittee on Oceans and International Environment, May 15, 1975 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975). Howard J. Taubenfield, *A Treaty for Antarctica* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1961), deals with the Antarctic Treaty of 1959); Gustav Catharinus and Hofgaard Smedal, *Acquisition of Sovereignty over Polar Areas* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1931); Gerald S. Schatz, *Technology and Sovereignty in the Polar Regions* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1974); Joseph S. Roucek, "Geopolitics of Antarctica and the Falkland Islands," *World Affairs Interpreter,* 22, 1 (April, 1951), pp. 44–56; John Hanessian, Jr., "A Note on the Polar Regions," American Universities Field Staff, Reports Service, *Polar Area Series,* Vol. III, No. 2 (General), (1963), pp. 24–32; H. E. Archdale, "Claims to the Antarctic," in *Yearbook of World Affairs, 1958* (London: Stevene and Sons, 1958), pp. 242–63; P. A. Toma, "Soviet Attitude Towards the Acquisition of Territorial Sovereignty in the Antarctic," *American Journal of International Law,* (July 1956), pp. 611–25; Martin Ira Glassner and Harm J. de Blij, *Systematic Political Geography* (New York: Wiley, 1980), Chapter 28, "Antarctica and Outer Space," E. W. Hunter Christie, *The Antarctic Problem: An Historical and Political Study* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1951); Clarence Fiske & Mrs. Clarence Fiske, "Territorial Claims in the Antarctic," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings,* 85, 1 (1959), pp. 82–91; John Hanessian, Jr., "Antarctica: Current National Interests and Legal Realities," *Proceedings, American Society of International Law,* 52 (1958), pp. 145–64; Robert D. Hayton, "Polar Problems and International Law," *American Journal of International Law,* 52, 4 (October 1958), pp. 746–65; Walter Sullivan, "Antarctica in a Two-Power World," *Foreign Affairs,* 36, 1 (October 1957), pp. 154–66.

6. Martin Ira Glassner and Harm J. de Blij, *op. cit.,* pp. 430–32.

7. Lawrence Freedman, "The War of the Falkland Islands, 1982," *Foreign Affairs,* 61, 1 (Fall, 1982), pp. 196–210; M. B. R. Cawkell, *et al.,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960); Robert D. Hayton, "The Antarctic Settlement of 1959," *American Journal of International Law,* 54 (1960), pp 349–72; Joseph S. Roucek, *op. cit.,* pp. 44–55.

8. Freedman, *op. cit.,* p. 210.

9. "Mixed Feelings," *Parade,* October 3, 1982.