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***Competing Paradigms: Antarctic Geopolitics in an
International Relations Theory Context***

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Abstract:

As a continent dedicated to peace and science, the role of politics and international relations is sometimes perceived to play a secondary role in Antarctica. To the contrary, this article argues that political and diplomatic considerations at the forefront of state interaction on 'the ice.' In doing so, the article uses traditional International Relations frameworks to analyse the actions of China, the United States and New Zealand in Antarctica over the last 10-15 years. An assessment of the three dominant theoretical traditions: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, alongside an examination of some of the key questions facing Antarctic geopolitics today, will enable a synthesis of theory and action within some major political debates. The promotion of Constructivism as the most convincing theoretical framework through which to view these Antarctic actions is largely due to the importance of national identity in each nation's Antarctic presence. Ultimately, the rise of China in both world and Antarctic politics presents distinct challenges to more traditional leaders like the US (and to some extent New Zealand) and could potentially threaten the established hierarchy that has for so long maintained peace in Antarctica.

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Introduction

World politics reflects an environment of competing, clashing, and cooperating ideas.¹ In many ways, Antarctic geopolitics is no different. Despite a relatively short historical relationship with humans – it was only around 250 years ago that Antarctica was first sighted, and with the signing of the Antarctic Treaty in 1959 a political and legal realm was created – international activity in Antarctica has given rise to a number of unusual dynamics and challenges for the global political community.² International relations (IR) theory looks to frame state motivations and behaviour in the context of normative theoretical traditions; in doing so, IR theory aims to explain and predict how and why actors in the international system behave the way they do. This article will assess Antarctic geopolitics within an IR theory framework and through a three-part approach. The first section will outline the three dominant theoretical traditions in IR theory today (Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism) and assess the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. The second section will cover the contemporary Antarctic foreign policy approaches of three nations: China, the United States, and New Zealand, providing a brief analysis of each nation's Antarctic activity. The third section will look to synthesise IR theory with information from these case study nations, addressing central questions in Antarctic geopolitics today. In doing so, the article will promote Constructivism as the most convincing theoretical tradition to explain state behaviour, due to its multi-utility approach and inclusion of normative considerations within the political realm of contemporary Antarctica.³

Theoretical Discussion

International relations theory is the study of international relations from a theoretical perspective, which aims to present a simplified picture of the interactions between states and other actors in the international system.⁴ In attempting to provide a

¹ Scott, S. (2004). *The Political Interpretation of Multilateral Treaties*. 1st ed. London: Martinus

² Andrews, J. (1957). Antarctic Geopolitics. *Australian Outlook*, 11(3), p. 3.

³ Sterling-Folger, J. (2000). Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and Neoliberal Institutionalism Compared. *International Studies Quarterly*, 44(1), p. 115.

⁴ Grieco, J., Ikenberry, G. and Mastanduno, M. (2014). Theories of International Relations. In: J. Grieco, G. Ikenberry and M. Mustanduno, ed., *Introduction to International Relations: Enduring Questions and Contemporary Perspectives*, 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 70.

conceptual framework in which to view international actions and relations, each theoretical tradition places different weight on what matters, and ascribes a series of assumptions and values to the actions being analysed.⁵ In this sense, “‘assumptions’ are postulates relied on as part of a theory's foundation, which the theory itself does not account for or explain”.⁶ This allows analytical discussions to move beyond elementary debates and engage in a more complex and dynamic analysis of state actions and interaction. As a result, each framework hopes to “bring order and meaning to a mass phenomena that without it would remain disconnected and unintelligible”.⁷

The three most prominent theoretical traditions in the international relations domain are Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism, and are the three frameworks that will be explored in relation to Antarctic geopolitics throughout this article. Why apply general IR theory to Antarctic geopolitics? As noted above, the value of this approach lies in the analysis these frameworks enable. Each theoretical tradition makes a number of different assumptions about the political environment which shapes the way the theory explains the behaviour of actors. The assumptions and features that each theory sets out lays down certain parameters within which to organise state and non-state actors behaviour, arguably navigating an ordinarily chaotic international political environment.⁸

(Classical) Realism

Classical Realism (or Realism) is one of the founding theoretical traditions within IR thought, dominating the study of IR for the past 70 years.⁹ Realism is closely associated with the term *Realpolitik* – a German term describing ‘pragmatism in politics’ – with both approaches based on the pursuit of power in an anarchic

⁵ Grieco, Ikenberry, and Mastanduno. *Theories of International Relations*, p. 71.

⁶ Forde, S. (1995). International Realism and the Science of Politics: Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Neorealism. *International Studies Quarterly*, 39(2), p. 144.

⁷ Morgenthau, H. (1948). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 7th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers, p. 2.

⁸ Weber, C. (2000) *International Relations Theory*, edited by Cynthia Weber, Taylor and Francis, ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 54.

⁹ Forde, *International Realism and the Science of Politics*, 141.

international system.¹⁰ Early thinkers in political theory such as Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes characterised the Realist tradition, through *The Prince* and *The Leviathan*'s occupations with the acquisition and maintenance of power, and a negative view of mankind as inherently self-centred and anarchistic; "...and because the condition of man is a condition of war of every one against every one, in which case every one is governed by his own reason, and there is nothing he can make use of that may not be a help unto him in preserving his life against his enemies".¹¹ These views make a number of negative assumptions about human nature and behaviour. Despite this pessimistic outlook, Realism has proven a highly useful theoretical paradigm for political analysis, as best exhibited by Hans Morgenthau's seminal 1948 essay, *Politics Among Nations*.¹²

Classical Realism assumes that human nature is inherently egoist, selfish, power-hungry, and ambitious.¹³ It also assumes that states are unitary actors and are the most important actor in international politics.¹⁴ According to realism, anarchy is the presiding condition of the international system, and with no overarching authority to constrain the interests of individual states or binding legal standard for which actors must follow, fear is endemic to interstate relations. As a consequence, the fundamental concern for states is security, survival, and the acquisition of power, which highlights the "primacy of self-interest and power in the relations among states".¹⁵ Hans Morgenthau observes that there is no objective or universal morality, as morality is specific to the state (*raison d'etat*), and therefore asserts that politics would ideally be kept distinct from the moral sphere.¹⁶ States inherently possess a certain amount of offensive military capability and are therefore capable of harming one another. Through these military capabilities, Morgenthau argues that states can affect and change the 'balance of power' within the international system.¹⁷

¹⁰ Parent, J. and Baron, J. (2011). Elder Abuse: How the Moderns Mistreat Classical Realism. *International Studies Review*, 13(2), p. 195.

¹¹ Hobbes, T. (1651). *Leviathan: or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*. 1st ed. London: Oxford University Press, p. 80.

¹² Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Forde, *International Realism and the Science of Politics*, p. 142.

¹⁶ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.7.

International political cooperation is possible, but limited, whereby alliances tend to be nothing more than transient marriages of convenience.¹⁸

In Classical Realism, two important distinctions should be made. First, while Morgenthau's Realist politics is loosely defined as 'interests defined as power', he himself felt the need to clarify political interests' ability to change and develop. The material weight attached to Realist interpretations of modern IR is in many cases misinterpreted, as Morgenthau reasserts:

The misunderstanding of the central element of power, which, after having been underrated to the point of total neglect, now tends to be equated with material strength, especially of a military nature, I have stressed more than before its immaterial aspects, especially in the form of charismatic power, and have elaborated the discussion of political ideologies.¹⁹

This point highlights the salient nature of Realism's 'hard power' and negates the instrumentalist and material associations' critics have attached to the Realist tradition. This interpretation also allows for Realist concepts of *interests* and *power* to develop and accommodate state actions in a changing international political environment. Second, despite arguments that statehood is in decline, the Realist assumption of states as primary actors carries equal weight today as laid out by Morgenthau in 1948. Ultimately, states remain the fundamental agents of change in the global political system – mere membership of the largest international organisation in the world proves this point; to gain full membership to the United Nations (UN), a party must primarily be recognised as state.²⁰ While the influence of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) are undoubtedly growing, the primary actors (and the motivations of those actions) remain state-centric and in the pursuit of power²¹. These distinctions cannot comprehensively account for every eventuality in the international system, but in re-clarifying some of Morgenthau's central points in regards to the motivations and outcomes of state behaviour in the Realist tradition, we can more accurately assess its assumptions in an Antarctic geopolitical setting.

¹⁸ Parent and Baron, *Elder Abuse*, p. 195.

¹⁹ Williams, M. (2004). Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization*, 58(04), p. 640.

²⁰ U.N Charter, art. 2, para. 2, rule 134.

²¹ Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. 1st ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing, p. 49.

Critics of Realism point to a number of issues within the Realist tradition and argue that the 'hard power' framework no longer adequately explains IR behaviour in a rapidly changing international environment. Further, critics note that classical Realism is inadequately structural and theoretical in today's international environment.²² The state-centric approach of realism arguably ignores the more recent proliferation of non-state actors – whether it be MNCs, NGOs, or regional institutions – in the modern international system, increasingly challenging this Realist classification of the international system as a state-centric environment.²³ Further, critics assert that a Realist perspective cannot account for new developments in the system, such as regional integration, humanitarian intervention or changing economic and social norms. Realism is therefore considered inflexible to modern international change and inadequate in explaining state behaviour under the contemporary demands of IR theory.²⁴

Liberalism

Liberal theorists' perceive international relations as a "potential realm of progress and purposive change", with substantial faith placed in the ability of human rationality and reason to facilitate harmony and cooperation in international affairs.²⁵ This generally optimistic view of human nature places fundamental importance on liberty, where moral values and legal norms play a crucial role in international politics.²⁶ While the those in the Liberal tradition concede that the international system is anarchic, they argue that the effects of anarchy can be mitigated by the spread of democracy, the rule of international law, commerce, and institutions. This is because Liberals perceive that social and political evils are not a given of the human condition and therefore can be remedied to mediate the causes of conflict. Principles like freedom, human rights, rationality, progress, and toleration alongside the central pillars of constitutionalism and democracy reinforce the idea that "where a

²² Parent and Baron, *Elder Abuse*, p. 193.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 206.

²⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 49.

²⁵ Griffiths, M., Solomon, M. and Roach, S. (2009). *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, p. 76.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 65.

liberal economic order prevails, states will be less inclined to use force in their relations with each other than would otherwise be the case”.²⁷

Early thinkers of Liberalism include numerous names familiar to political philosophy: John Locke, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Immanuel Kant is widely considered as one of the most influential modern thinkers, with his work *Perpetual Peace* considered the ‘standard bearer’ of Liberal thought in international relations studies.²⁸ Kant’s development of the Liberal philosophy in particular relation to democratic governance and its relationship with international peace has been both widely cited and analysed since its publication in 1795.²⁹ His influence on the broader themes of Liberalism – economic and political interdependence creating benefits for those involved with free trade, institutionalism facilitating forums for interaction and problem-solving – remain central to the Liberal argument in IR theory.³⁰

In defending the strengths and advantages of the Liberal tradition, Liberals point to the lack of significant world conflict since the middle of the 20th century, noting that during this time, economic growth and political interdependence has correlated with changing forms of conflict. The proliferation of international organisations and institutions alongside the emergence of a global economic market has arguably had a robust role in affecting the nature and frequency of international conflict.³¹ While it may be true that the impacts of economic structures on international security are subordinate to the use of force, the role they play in stabilising the international system is an important and truly contemporary one.³² The United Nations has played a vital role in shaping international ideals on basic human rights and subsequently creating ‘market norms’ by which states are relatively compelled to adhere to.³³ In this way, state perceptions of *raison d’état* have developed to encourage state actors to subordinate state authority and independence in favour of multilateral norms and procedures. Those who argue that a Liberal system is inherently unstable overlook

²⁷ Buzan, B. (1984). Economic Structure and International Security: The Limits of the Liberal Case. *International Organization*, 38(04), p. 598.

²⁸ Walker, T. (2008). Two Faces of Liberalism: Kant, Paine, and the Question of Intervention. *International Studies Quarterly*, 52(3), p. 451.

²⁹ Kant, I. (1795). *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, p. 133.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 452.

³¹ Walker, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 451.

³² Griffiths, Solomon, and Roach, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, p. 120.

³³ Grieco, Ikenberry, and Mastanduno, *Theories of International Relations*, p. 81.

the founding Liberal perspective that social and political evils are not a given, simply a possibility in the absence of reputable multinational structures. Liberalism looks to facilitate and support these kinds of institutions in the contemporary IR system.

Critics of Liberalism brand the framework as a Utopian and unrealistic view of the international system, whereby considerations of power are completely ignored. They argue that the system's moral values and legal norms (created by interdependence and democracy) not only underestimate the strength and importance of diverging ethnicities, culture, religion, and nationalism in the international system, but also predominantly reflect the perspective of those located at the top of the power hierarchy.³⁴ Liberal arguments on the peaceful power of democracy reflect an unquestionable acceptance of subtle but prevailing liberal western norms in the existing system, an inherently problematic approach for those whose ideals do not align. The economic basis of Liberal's interdependence argument creates a similarly weak case. The spread of a Liberal economic structure has neither a robust nor unconditional constraining effect on the use of force.³⁵ In this way:

Security considerations therefore cannot be used convincingly either as a major support for maintaining the contemporary international economic system or as a decisive point against moving towards a more mercantilist structure of international economic relations.³⁶

These observations highlight the limiting factors to the Liberal argument despite an increasingly interdependent international system.

(Structural) Constructivism

Structural Constructivism (or Constructivism) is based on assumptions about the nature of actors in the international system, the context in which they operate, and the way in which they interact, predominantly focusing on the social interactions of agents and actors in world politics.³⁷ Like Realists and Liberals, Constructivists agree that the international system is anarchical (i.e. that actors exist in the political context of anarchy). However, Constructivists argue that states are not the only actors in the

³⁴ Buzan, *The Limits of the Liberal Case*, p. 621.

³⁵ Walker, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 465.

³⁶ Buzan, *The Limits of the Liberal Case*, p. 623.

³⁷ Griffiths, Solomon, and Roach, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, p. 123.

system; International Governmental Organisations (IGOs), NGOs, MNCs, and social movements are influential and can affect change.³⁸ Central thinkers of structural Constructivism include Nicholas Onuf and Alexander Wendt, who claim, “national interests are constructed through processes of social interaction, in which states affected by and responding to norms, identities, and cultures in their domestic and global contexts define their national interest”.³⁹ This observation emphasises the social aspects of international politics (ideas, rules, norms, meanings) over the material aspects (military and economic strength), and highlights a unique factor in the Constructivist approach.

This role of social construction means that Constructivist actors do not have a fixed nature but are dynamic and fluid over time, as their perception of interests is based on their identity. Change can also be based on the international context. Different actors may have different ideas and values, and these can change over time, as arguably states value things other than power and security, such as human rights. Consequently, this transient nature also occurs in the context of the international system, as when the actors behave differently, they prove that they are not captive to their broader environment.⁴⁰ Identity can be constructed within a domestic context, through repeated patterns of interaction and in the larger social context in which an actor operates. The context – which is not an objective reality but something which has been constructed – shapes behaviour by dictating what is considered right or wrong, and possible or impossible. As it follows, actors have agency in constructing their own social contexts.⁴¹ Different types of interaction between actors can lead to different types of identity, interests, and behaviours, and this change in interaction can lead to changes in behaviour.⁴²

This ability for change and development in the international system is both a critique and a response to what Constructivists view as the static and material assumptions of more traditional IR theories. In focussing on the social construction of the conditions

³⁸ Griffiths, Solomon, and Roach, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, p. 124.

³⁹ Das, R. (2009). Critical Social Constructivism : "Culturing" Identity, (In)security, and the State in International Relations Theory. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 70(4), p. 963.

⁴⁰ Lezaun, J. (2002). Limiting the Social: Constructivism and Social Knowledge in International Relations. *International Studies Review*, 4(3), p.231.

⁴¹ Das, *Critical Social Constructivism*, p. 964.

⁴² Griffiths, Solomon, and Roach, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, p. 156.

that motivate actors' behaviour, Constructivism enriches the study of world politics by placing more emphasis on 'the why' and less-so on 'the what'. In turn, these agents play a central role in the production and reproduction of reality in the international system.⁴³ Crucially, Constructivism does not reject key aspects of Realism and Liberalism, like the existence of anarchy in the international system and states' desires for economic power and defence security, instead it contends that they exist within a state of social construction. In this way, this "bizarre" amalgamation of theories is essentially a broad theoretical criterion derived from the existing IR theories.⁴⁴ Consequently, Constructivists assert that they can more comprehensively account for the dimensions of contemporary foreign policy than more traditional IR theory approaches.

Three main criticisms dominate the debate in the Constructivist tradition. First, that the general methodology is problematic because it is intangible; questions arise around how analysts can even identify shared norms if they are by nature culturally and socially distinct and subject to change over time.⁴⁵ This criticism reflects a 'how-possible' approach that queries the representations of actors and their behaviour in the international system. It essentially asks: how the subjects, objects, and interpretive dispositions were socially constructed such that certain normative practices are at all possible. The mere possibility of practices presupposes the ability of an agent to imagine certain courses of action and therefore proves that some normative values must already be constructed within the system to influence actors and their practices in the first place.⁴⁶ Second, that the emphasis on the transferability of ideas and norms inevitably undersells the importance of material conditions. Historical events prove that narrative can be overwhelmed by physical reality despite the 'alleged' perspectives of the actors involved. And third, that while constructivism may be good at explaining change, it is conversely insufficient at accounting for stasis and stability within the international system when it occurs.⁴⁷

⁴³ Das, *Critical Social Constructivism*, p.974.

⁴⁴ Sterling-Folker, *Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather?* p.114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁴⁶ Das, *Critical Social Constructivism*, p.970.

⁴⁷ Lezaun, *Limiting the Social*, p.232.

Review of Contemporary Foreign Policy in Antarctica

Conditions are regularly changing in the Antarctic environment, reflecting the constant development of the political environmental. In identifying the contemporary geopolitical approaches of China, the United States, and New Zealand, this article looks to assess each state's foreign policy and activity in the Antarctic region. The research predominantly focuses on each country's approach to scientific research in the region over the last 10-15 years for two reasons. The first is to lay down some logical informational parameters, and the second is due to scientific activity in Antarctica's intrinsic links to Antarctic geopolitics.⁴⁸ Since the signing of the Antarctic Treaty in 1959, Antarctica has been a continent "devoted to peace and science".⁴⁹ This commitment to peace and science significantly limited the range of appropriate activities that states could commit in Antarctica, and consequently raised the currency of science to that of paramount importance.⁵⁰ Shirley Scott identifies this use of 'science' to legitimise Antarctic actions, with a reconfigured goal of states not to govern, but to use the Antarctic continent.⁵¹ Scientific activity today by each country's national programs represents this legitimization of presence for states on the ice, and is a key aspect of each nation's foreign policy and international behaviour within the international relations framework.

China

Since 2005, China has transformed its engagement with, and political approach to Antarctica, dramatically increasing both its domestic expenditure and presence on the continent itself.⁵² In 2005, work began on a third Chinese base situated in Dome Argus, while the two existing bases received significant upgrades. During the last 10 years, China has also set up a new research and logistics base in Beijing, and launched plans for an icebreaker vessel and two ice-capable planes.⁵³ This increased

⁴⁸ Howkins, A. (2011). Melting Empires? Climate Change and Politics in Antarctica since the International Geophysical Year. *Osiris*, 26(1), p.181.

⁴⁹ Howkins, *Melting Empires*, p. 185.

⁵⁰ Gilbert, N. (2015). A Continent for Peace and Science: Governance in Antarctica. In: D. Liggett, B. Storey, Y. Cook and V. Meduna, ed., *Exploring the Last Continent: An Introduction to Antarctica*, 1st ed. Cham: Springer, p.331.

⁵¹ Scott, *The Political Interpretation of Multilateral Treaties*, p.77.

⁵² Brady, A. (2012). *Emerging Politics of Antarctica*. 1st ed. London: Taylor and Francis, p.31.

⁵³ Brady, A. (2010). China's Rise in Antarctica?. *Asian Survey*, 50(4), p.759.

presence, spending, and overall approach towards Antarctic activity reflects the general trend of a rapidly developing China, which represents the country's growing economic and political power. Since 2010 China has been the world's second largest economy, with the recent global economic downturn only accentuating its growing presence in international affairs generally, and Antarctica more specifically.⁵⁴ A longer-term observation of China's increasing presence in Antarctic affairs notes the shift in Chinese priorities towards Antarctic research from as early as 1990, but Anne-Marie Brady argues that China has only begun to seek leadership roles in Antarctic politics since 2005.⁵⁵

Currently, there appears to exist a gulf between China's institutionalised and practical involvement in Antarctic politics. Allegedly 'shut out' of initial negotiations of the Antarctic Treaty in 1959 by the US (due to the country's communist leanings), China has struggled to foster institutionalised involvement since.⁵⁶ China then "became a consultative member to the Treaty in 1985, and joined the Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research (SCAR) in 1986", and more recently acceded to the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) in 2006, becoming a full consultative member in 2007.⁵⁷ While this progress indicates China's commitment to the current governing system, Chinese-language scholars and media analysis have been openly critical of the status quo in Antarctic politics, labelling the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) an 'old boys club' that favours the interests of Western Liberal democracy.⁵⁸ This disapproval indicates that if China's involvement and influence in Antarctica continues to grow, it would not only look to defend its interests and keep up with other Antarctic nations, but also take diplomatic steps to potentially redress the system's current power balance.⁵⁹

The political issues Chinese representatives identify – feeling on the outer rim of the ATS power structure, appearing to have vastly different interests around the available mineral resources in Antarctica, and what appears to be a particularly defensive

⁵⁴ Brady, *Emerging Politics of Antarctica*, p. 32; Brady, *China's Rise in Antarctica?*, p. 760.

⁵⁵ Brady, *China's Rise in Antarctica?*, p. 761.

⁵⁶ Brady, *Emerging Politics in Antarctica*, p. 36.

⁵⁷ Brady, *Emerging Politics of Antarctica*, p. 35; Brady, *China's Rise in Antarctica?*, p. 771.

⁵⁸ Bhattacharya, A. (2007). Chinese Nationalism and China's Assertive Foreign Policy. *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 21(1), p. 256.

⁵⁹ Brady, *China's Rise in Antarctica?*, p. 773.

stance towards other National Antarctic Programs (NAPs) – align well with China’s perceived challenges in the wider international system.⁶⁰ While China has consistently referenced economic growth and political stability as its core interests in the international system, in reality, this rhetoric thinly veils “China’s drive to remake global norms [which is] fuelled by a resurgent nationalism that hearkens back to the days when China was a world trading power”.⁶¹ In this way, the motivations driving both China’s international foreign policy and its Antarctic policy are the same. Recognising the role of Chinese nationalism in the state’s foreign policy objectives is crucial to unpick China’s dual notions of nation building and the attainment of great power status, and the way it has injected an assertive tone into Chinese actions in Antarctica and further afield.⁶² Despite significant increases in scientific activity and investment in spending, China is still perceived as a moderate power in Antarctic politics. Realists note that the balance of power would have to shift in order for China to achieve its aims in challenging US hegemony in Antarctica.⁶³ If a power shift were to occur, this may not necessarily equate to conflict, and while China’s Antarctic presence is increasing, it is still a long way from genuinely challenging the current power structures in place. Whether power politics are in fact a zero-sum game the way Realists claim they are also remains to be seen.

The United States of America

The United States (US) has been a central actor in the Antarctic geopolitical system since the original signing of the Antarctic Treaty. Though it does not have a territorial claim, the US was directly involved in the 1959 Treaty negotiations and thus secured the right to “maintain a basis of claim” to Antarctica, essentially establishing American involvement at the heart of Antarctic politics.⁶⁴ Today, US interests lie in preserving the ‘agree to disagree’ legal status of territorial claims in Antarctica, reflecting perhaps the country’s currently advantageous position within the ATS.⁶⁵ The United States Antarctic Program’s (USAP) robust commitment to Antarctic

⁶⁰ Brady, *China’s Rise in Antarctica?*, p. 775.

⁶¹ Economy, E. (2010). The Game Changer: Coping With China’s Foreign Policy Revolution. *Foreign Affairs*, 89(6), p. 150.

⁶² Bhattacharya, *Chinese Nationalism and China’s Assertive Foreign Policy*, p. 257.

⁶³ Brady, *China’s Rise in Antarctica*, p. 785.

⁶⁴ Antarctic Treaty, Dec. 1, (1959). 12 U.S.T 794, T.I.A.S. No. 4780, 402 U.N.T.S 71.

⁶⁵ Brady, *Emerging Politics in Antarctica*, p. 115.

science is demonstrated by America's three permanent year-round research stations, and the use of two scientific research vessels.⁶⁶ The overall annual expenditure from a 2010 report shows USAP spending at US\$387 million, a substantial amount more than the other NAPs operating that year, which provides a reliable indicator of the general annual expenditure of USAP.⁶⁷ In political terms, this resource and financial commitment reasserts America's strategic and scientific priorities, and its awareness of its position as a hegemonic power in the current Antarctic system.

Not unlike China, the US frames nationalist ideologies in their commitment to Antarctic research, and by association, politics. American exceptionalism as a national identity has been a mainstay in US foreign policy since the advent of the Second World War, as they assumed a position as 'leader of the free world'. This constructed an identity of America as exceptional in its blessing of liberty and republicanism.⁶⁸ The US has arguably carried this exceptionalism through to their policies and activities on the ice, and the peace and stability achieved by the status quo of the ATS as a whole, plays a key role in reinforcing their hegemonic status.

For the maintenance of their core national interests in Antarctica, the US looks to:

1. Maintain the Antarctic as a region of international cooperation that is reserved exclusively for peaceful purposes
2. Preserve and undertake unique opportunities for scientific research in order to better comprehend both Antarctica's and the earth's geophysical and environmental systems
3. Protect the relatively pristine environment of Antarctica and its associated ecosystems
4. Ensure the conservation and sustainable management of living resources in the southern circumpolar ocean⁶⁹

Embracing these national interests in relation to the ATS is underscored by the recognition of the US that the continued stability of the ATS simultaneously props up their own position in the Antarctic power dynamic, which is something they are undoubtedly eager to preserve.

⁶⁶ Usap.gov. (2017). *The USAP Portal: Science and Support in Antarctica - Station and Vessel Maps*.

⁶⁷ Brady, *China's Rise in Antarctica?*, p. 782.

⁶⁸ Restad, H. (2012). Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism. *American Political Thought*, 1(1), p. 61.

⁶⁹ Brady, *Emerging Politics of Antarctica*, p. 111.

The strategic importance of USAP's Amundsen-Scott south-pole station lies in its geographic positioning. The station is located on the "summit of the polar ice cap and at the point of intersection of the territorial claims that the US does not recognise".⁷⁰ This precise location means that the US permanently occupies the apex of Antarctica, a symbolically powerful location where all the territorial claims (aside from Norway's) converge on the continent.⁷¹ The location of the south-pole station presents a striking example of American exceptionalism through national identity in the Antarctic. American exceptionalism has taken on many meanings throughout the 20th century, but is best described as "the special and unique role the United States is meant to play in world history, its distinctiveness from the Old World, and its resistance to the laws of history".⁷² This powerful and persistent social construction has unquestionably played a role in navigating US foreign policy in Antarctica in recent history. The symbolic notions the location of the Amundsen-Scott station reinforce the idea that the US actively engages in the construction and reconstruction of social factors that fortify its place at the top of Antarctica's political power structure.

New Zealand

As a largely peripheral nation in world politics, New Zealand's position as a 'leading Antarctic state' developed (in many ways) out of a combination of happy factors. Unlike China and the US, New Zealand has strong geographic links with the Antarctica as one of five gateway cities to the continent. Additionally, Antarctica's geographic environment, and any changes that occur, are quite literally felt in New Zealand's oceanic and land-based domains.⁷³ New Zealand's territorial and political links to the continent are therefore a direct result of its proximity. The country's tenuous legal rights to territory in Antarctica are inextricably linked to New Zealand's colonial past, based on an arrangement that New Zealand (which was at the time a colony of Britain) would 'govern' the Ross Sea Dependency. This finally became a New Zealand claim in 1983, as a result of New Zealand becoming legally independent from Britain and defining the Ross Sea territory as part of the 'realm of

⁷⁰ Brady, *Emerging Politics in Antarctica*, p. 116.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 116.

⁷² Restad, *Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science*, p. 55.

⁷³ Brady, *Emerging Politics in Antarctica*, p. 147.

New Zealand'.⁷⁴ Despite some initial political reluctance to the Ross Dependency claim between 1950 and 1970, a strong contemporary awareness of the scientific and strategic value of New Zealand's claim in Antarctica has emerged.⁷⁵

Scott Base is New Zealand's sole year-round base located on Ross Island in the Ross Dependency, averaging populations of 70-85 people in summer and 11-15 during winter. Estimates indicate that 45%-50% of the total personnel travelling to Antarctica and Scott base through the New Zealand program each season are scientists.⁷⁶ This demonstrates that for New Zealand, science and research is a clear priority. Most of the Antarctica New Zealand's (ANZ) air support is provided by the US Air Force, and is viewed as substantial opportunity for and assistance with operations occurring both in Christchurch and Antarctica.⁷⁷ This cooperative relationship reinforces the importance not only of New Zealand's working relationship with the USAP, but also the value in Christchurch as a gateway city to ANZ's scientific, political and strategic interests in Antarctica. Further, more contemporary positions on New Zealand's foreign policy indicate a growing emphasis on the breadth of the country's security interests.⁷⁸ As a leading nation in the Asia-Pacific region, New Zealand's bilateral links to Australia have traditionally equated to a role of maintaining security in the northern areas of the region; however, changing geopolitical attitudes in the late 1980s reflected the perception that Antarctica was also becoming a central factor in New Zealand's area of strategic concern.⁷⁹ For the first time, New Zealand foreign policy began to see both the Asia-Pacific and South Pacific as regions where New Zealand had a role to play, and this has had contemporary implications for Antarctica and the Ross Sea Region.⁸⁰

The political implications of New Zealand's Antarctic research, physical presence, and institutional involvement in the ATS represents an unusually powerful political position for the country. Because of this, New Zealand is unsurprisingly keen to

⁷⁴ Brady, *Emerging Politics in Antarctica*, p. 149.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 150.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 153.

⁷⁷ Hall, C. (2000). The Tourist and Economic Significance of Antarctic Travel in Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Gateway Cities. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 2(2), p. 165.

⁷⁸ Ayson, R. (2000). New Zealand and Asia-Pacific Security: New Rationales for Engagement?. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 22(2), p. 395.

⁷⁹ Ayson, *New Zealand and Asia-Pacific Security*, p. 396.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 397.

maintain the current balance of power that in many ways conflates the country's perceived diplomatic capabilities outside of their realistic parameters.⁸¹ It is also essential for New Zealand to maintain its credibility as Antarctic nation and treaty party by continuing to engage in high quality science in the Ross Sea Region, and also gain leadership positions within the ATS.⁸² Political alignment with the US and in direct conflict to China means that New Zealand too relies on the structures of the ATS to reinforce the support of its territorial claim and presence in Antarctica, and therefore has a stronger interest than most nations to maintain the continuance of the Antarctic Treaty and its associated political systems.⁸³ Diplomatically, this position speaks to the advantages New Zealand's Antarctic connections afford to national representatives across the globe. Domestically, geographic and historic links to Antarctica are felt by New Zealanders in a personal manner, and this builds on the symbolic importance and nationalist pride of Antarctic activity undertaken by the small south pacific nation.⁸⁴

Despite each nation possessing distinct institutional linkages, historical relationships, and political interests with Antarctica, all three see the continent as a place where geopolitics remains a powerful and changeable currency. Through the co-option of scientific research, China, the US, and New Zealand all perceive themselves as playing an important political role in the future. Crucially, nationalism plays a part in defining each country's strategic interests, whereby each nation's foreign policy strategy is in some part derived from its own notions of nationalism. This results in nationally distinct foreign policy approaches aimed at both protecting security interests and shaping an environment conducive to each different nation's interests and future goals.⁸⁵

Assessments in International Relations Theory

This section will utilise the different strains of IR theory laid out in the first section to explore which theoretical framework most convincingly characterises state/actor

⁸¹ Brady, *Emerging Politics in Antarctica*, p. 154.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 157.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 160.

⁸⁴ Clements, K. (1988). New Zealand's Role in Promoting a Nuclear-free Pacific. *Journal of Peace Research*, 25(4), p. 406.

⁸⁵ Bhattacharya, *Chinese Nationalism and China's Assertive Foreign Policy*, p. 259.

behaviour in Antarctic geopolitics. It will then use the most suitable framework to assess three key questions; whether Antarctic politics aligns with global politics or operates in an exclusive environment, to what extent history has influenced the behaviour of the three focus states in this article, and how and why changing political dynamics may impact China, the US and New Zealand in an Antarctic political environment. This synthesis of IR theory and Antarctic politics aims to make sense of a highly complex and salient environment, and make some recommendations around the ways in which state actions and motivations can be both interpreted and predicted.

Which IR framework best characterises the way states interact in Antarctica?

If international relations is best understood by focusing on the distribution of power among states, then Realism has and will continue to make a convincing case. In Antarctica, 'power' is indeed distributed, however, it is debatable whether it remains the single most important motivating factor for states and actors within the system. Morgenthau indeed distinguished between political and military power, and different strands of Realism will focus on the application of one or the other (or both), but at its heart, Classical Realism advocates for states as unitary actors in an inherently anarchic environment.⁸⁶ Antarctica has seen too many examples of political cooperation, environmental protection, and scientific collaboration for Realism's power attainment argument to be convincing. Neo-realists also advocate the role of the ATS as the sole mitigating factor to conflict, but on one hand this only creates a stronger case for Liberalism, and on the other undermines itself through the reality that international law and conventions are not binding and therefore have no political impetus. Nothing in the ATS is binding – membership and subsequent compliance is voluntary – which means the only genuine consequences to damaging behaviour by states are those imposed by other states (i.e. sanctions).⁸⁷ Ultimately, the acquisition of power is undeniably a motivating factor for states in Antarctic politics, but it is not the sole motivation. The recent lobbying efforts by New Zealand and the US for the signing of the Ross Sea Marine Protected Area, while arguably not free of

⁸⁶ Griffiths, Solomon, and Roach, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, p. 3.

⁸⁷ Rosh, R. (1989). Antarctica's Increasing Incorporation into the World-System. *Review Fernan Braudel Center*, 12(1), p. 122.

geopolitical motivations, was largely driven by considerations other than the acquisition of power (i.e. resource protection and environmental management).

If we revisit the central thrust of the Liberal argument we find a framework that argues while an international system without organisation is anarchic and prone to conflict, the effects of anarchy can be mitigated by the spread of democracy, the rule of international law, commerce, and institutions.⁸⁸ On the surface, Antarctic geopolitics provide Liberal's case-in-point. The ATS has arguably provided the institutional framework in which Antarctica has been able to be preserved solely for scientific research and peaceful purposes. In reality, "the members of the ATS today draw upon a benevolent paternalism to argue that [in the commitment to their NAPs] they are conducting 'science for the good of humanity' in seeking to understand climate change and potentially mitigate the worst of its consequences".⁸⁹ This official narrative is the perfect smokescreen for Antarctic hegemons (the US, the United Kingdom, and Australia) to continue preserving their political interests on the continent. Genuine conflict is indeed yet to occur in Antarctica, but to argue that the ATS – a system relying on the political legitimacy which was established over 50 years ago – is actively preventing it remains to be seen.

The Liberal assumption that the spread of democracy is a central pillar of peace in international systems undermines the success of those countries operating in Antarctica who may not prescribe to the normative Western Liberal Democracy laid underlining the 1959 Antarctic Treaty.⁹⁰ As both China and Japan continue to transform their roles develop their positions within both the international and Antarctic system, they bring with them unique interpretations of 'socialist democracy'.⁹¹ These caveats of domestic political organisation have no real implications to each nation's Antarctic relations, however, for Liberals to place such weight in what can only be assumed as Western Liberal Democracy only becomes a limiting factor in exploring state behaviour and interactions under the Liberal framework.

⁸⁸ Buzan, *Economic Structure and International Security*, p. 598

⁸⁹ Howkins, *Melting Empires?*, p. 182.

⁹⁰ Bhattacharya, *Chinese Nationalism and China's Assertive Foreign Policy*, p. 256.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 255.

During section two, each state displayed a clear tendency to create foreign policy based on nationalist ideals. A useful description of the national identity follows: “the maintenance and continual reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that form the distinctive heritage of the nation, and the identification of individuals with that heritage and its pattern”.⁹² China’s construction of nationalism emerges from the perspective of historical humiliation has been carried through to its Antarctic relations, taking issue with the ATS as an ‘old boys club’ and showing intimations of its ambitions to become a major Antarctic power.⁹³ The United States’ longstanding projection of American exceptionalism is echoed throughout its foreign policy in the international system and Antarctic politics. The protection of American interests and general pursuit of hegemony in Antarctica echoes domestic sentiment around the US as being the ‘leader of the free world’.⁹⁴ For New Zealand, ideals around international leadership are central to the country’s national identity. On issues of human rights and nuclear testing New Zealand has arguably demonstrated a moral standard towards which it hopes other nations could strive.⁹⁵ Not dissimilarly, the country’s role in Antarctica as a nation undergoing high-quality science on a continent reserved for science reasserts the country’s nationalist ideals as an Antarctic leader. In this way, constructivist appears convincing in that it challenges the traditional theoretical focus on structural limitations. In bringing socially constructed factors like national identity into the analysis Constructivists are able to assess state motivations on more than just a desire for power.⁹⁶

Is Antarctic geopolitics simply a reflection of global International Relations?

In many ways, the dynamics of Antarctic politics echo those in the international system. A hierarchy of power exists that is not dissimilar to global politics, and trends in nations’ development or political decline have also had flow-on effects and thus been reflected in Antarctic geopolitics. A good example of this has been the rise of

⁹² Restad, *Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science*, p. 55.

⁹³ Bhattacharya, *Chinese Nationalism and China's Assertive Foreign Policy*, p. 257.

⁹⁴ Restad, *Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science*, p. 60.

⁹⁵ Clements, *New Zealand's Role in Promoting a Nuclear-free Pacific*, p. 406.

⁹⁶ Restad, *Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science*, p. 55.

China. In the past, China was internationally restricted due to lack of available funds and modern infrastructure, but now the world's second largest economy is on the rise in Asia, Africa, North and South America, the Caribbean, the South Pacific, in Western and Eastern Europe, and Antarctica. This rise reflects the country's growing political and economic power and China's increased presence in Antarctic politics reflects that Antarctica is not immune to the effects and trends operating in world politics.⁹⁷ Similarly, the Antarctic political environment reflects the global one in the leading role the US has assumed in power hierarchies and systems.⁹⁸ The fact that the US considers itself a vital player in Antarctic affairs, and has been centrally involved in the development of the ATS and its associated organs, gives further weight to the idea that Antarctic geopolitics indeed reflects global international relations trends.⁹⁹

Conversely, there are factors that indicate the Antarctic geopolitical environment experiences different phenomena to the world system. The lack of conflict in Antarctica is a rigorously studied area yet without academic consensus as to why. Some parties point to the ATS as the driver of success whereby it has enabled the powerful to achieve their strategic wishes, and served to minimise political and military conflict.¹⁰⁰ However, the UN effectively plays the same role on a larger scale in global politics and has not been party to the same 'success' as the ATS, indicating that the mere existence of overarching institutions is not the key to Antarctica's peaceful political history. Others note that the difference between the Antarctic and global systems lies in NAPs increased investment to activity the region, and the perception that the consequences of bad behaviour will be higher (i.e. removal from the ATS of other agreements) than in the global system (i.e. tariffs and trade limitations). As a result, nations are arguably more committed to peaceful and constructive diplomacy in Antarctica than in the global system.¹⁰¹ Some cases of power distribution in the Antarctic political system contrast or differ from that in the global one. New Zealand is a good example of a minor nation in international politics, which by mere circumstance, operates in a significantly elevated political position in Antarctica.

⁹⁷ Brady, *Emerging Politics of Antarctica*, p. 37; Brady, *China's Rise in Antarctica?*, p. 760

⁹⁸ Howkins, *The Significance of the Frontier in Antarctic History*, p. 15.

⁹⁹ Joyner, C. (2011). United States Foreign Policy Interests in the Antarctic. *The Polar Journal*, 1(1), p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ Rosh, *Antarctica's Increasing Incorporation into the World-System*, p. 122.

¹⁰¹ Brady, *Emerging Politics of Antarctica*, p. 157.

How has history influenced the way Antarctic states interact and perceive each other?

A constructivist interpretation of Antarctic geopolitics argues that the historical backgrounds of actors in the Antarctic system affect state behaviour and foreign policy. In this way, historical events shape an actor's perception and constructed reality, and as a consequence, its Antarctic aims and activity.¹⁰² Specifically, Abanti Bhattacharya argues, "Chinese nationalism cannot be interpreted in isolation and must be understood in its domestic and historical context", due to the effect historical events have had on the Chinese people and its leaders, and the way they perceive their nation.¹⁰³ As victims of imperialism, the people of China uphold sovereignty and integrity as supreme national interests, an approach reflected in China's contemporary foreign policy.¹⁰⁴ New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance in the mid-1980s also had a significant diplomatic effect that carried over into the Antarctic political realm. The ban on US vessels (due to their reluctance to declare nuclear materials) meant that American icebreakers left from Hobart, bypassing the closer and more feasible port in Lyttleton, and making something of a political statement at the same time.¹⁰⁵ Despite thawing tensions between the US and New Zealand in more recent times, this political stalemate demonstrated the way diplomatic histories between nations can significantly affect relations in Antarctica as well.

What do changing geopolitical dynamics mean for interactions between actors in the future?

The most significant geopolitical questions in Antarctica will be posed by China's continued rise, and how the rest of actors in the system respond to this change. China's recent general foreign policies indicate a fundamental shift intended to create an international system favourable to itself, and one in which the United States would no longer be the sole super power.¹⁰⁶ We can safely assume that China's political aims in the global system mirror those in the Antarctic environment. China is also extremely interested in the resources in Antarctica and is eager to claim any possible

¹⁰² Sterling-Folker, *Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather?* p.98.

¹⁰³ Bhattacharya, *Chinese Nationalism and China's Assertive Foreign Policy*, p. 237.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 257.

¹⁰⁵ Brady, *Emerging Politics in Antarctica*, p. 158; Clements, *New Zealand's Role in Promoting a Nuclear-free Pacific*, p. 404.

¹⁰⁶ Bhattacharya, *Chinese Nationalism and China's Assertive Foreign Policy*, p. 257.

opportunities of resource exploration. These resources include: minerals, meteorites, the intellectual property of Antarctic bioprospecting, locations for scientific bases, marine living resources, and access to the continent for Antarctic tourism.¹⁰⁷ China's approach to resources was made clear during its negotiations for signing CCAMLR, as its membership did not include Hong Kong, due the city being the main base for a known illegally practicing national fishing company. This demonstrates China's lack of genuine commitment in dealing with illegal fishing issues in the Southern Ocean.¹⁰⁸ If this approach is any indication of China's approach to resource management in Antarctica, this will fly in the face of many existing national programs and academia, where resource extraction and distribution are virtually taboo subjects.¹⁰⁹

How nations like the US (and by association New Zealand) will respond to China's aggressive strides in Antarctica remains to be seen. Whether the US will look to accommodate, contain, or cooperate with China is unclear, but America's response to China's increased international activity will undoubtedly have flow-on effects in both the global and Antarctic systems.¹¹⁰ These factors indicating change may not spell inevitable conflict, as Constructivists argue that international politics does not have to be a zero-sum game, that is, political power and influence does not have to be transferred in absolute terms. Ultimately China's approach and America's response will shape emerging norms, and the moderate and smaller states within the Antarctic system may need to adapt and develop new approaches to diplomacy depending on the outcome of this impending power struggle.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the ways in which international relations theory can aid in explaining and assessing the behaviour of actors within Antarctic geopolitics. There is little doubt that "the ATS has proved remarkably successful in preserving peace, promoting science, and protecting the environment in the Southern Continent"

¹⁰⁷ Brady, *China's Rise in Antarctica*, p. 775.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 772.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 775.

¹¹⁰ Bader, J. (2016). A Framework for U.S. Policy Toward China. In *Foreign Policy in a Troubled World*. Brookings, p. 3.

to date; however, emerging Asian powers alongside the recognition that the ATS ultimately props up historical, colonial, and liberal democratic ideals, may spell at best a shift in the current hierarchy of power and at worst open conflict in Antarctica's famously peaceful realm.¹¹¹ Through a selective examination of the dominant strains of IR theory, an analysis of the recent foreign policy in Antarctica by China, the US, and New Zealand, and a synthesis of IR theory and key Antarctic geopolitical discussions has informed the debate through an ultimately Constructivist framework. Ultimately, the addition of international relations traditions to the geopolitics of Antarctica has provided a distinct lens through which to analyse state behaviour on the world's fifth largest continent, and allowed unique conclusions to be drawn. Constructivists have faith that changing dynamic politics around human activity and science in Antarctica will not spell inevitable conflict due to social constructions of nationalism and identity encouraging harmony among Treaty nations; what will eventuate in real terms remains to be seen.

¹¹¹ Sterling-Folker, *Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather?* p.115.

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