

What Lies in Store for Antarctica, the World's Last Repository?

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A historic discovery was made on January 28, 1820. A Russian navy expedition under the command of Faddei Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev sighted the last of the remaining unexplored continents – Antarctica.

Consequently, Russians were the third and last nationality, after the Spaniards who discovered America and the Dutch who found Australia, to discover an unknown continent.

Today, Antarctica is interesting because it is legally “no one’s,” property, i.e. no one country owns its territory and it is not divided into any zones or sectors. It is accessible to all. The only question is how much longer this status will continue.

Antarctica is humanity’s last unspoiled repository. Under the ice, under the continental shelf, there are enormous mineral resources and the surrounding seas are full of bio-resources. In addition, the glaciers of Antarctica contain 90% of the world’s fresh water, the shortage of which becomes all the more acute with the growth in the world’s population. Therefore, Antarctica is attracting more and more attention.

The recorded history of the continent started by its not being found for a long time, and once it was found, nobody wanted to live there. The voyage of the sloops Vostok and Mirny was the first high-latitude expedition sent to the southern seas after renowned English seafarer James Cook was unsuccessful in his attempts to find the southern continent. In the expeditions of 1768-1771 and 1772-1775, Cook was able to penetrate the southern polar circle (66° 33’ 39”S), but he said that further navigation to the south was impossible.

The Russian expedition was charged from the very beginning with penetrating as deep as possible to the south to finally answer the question of whether or not there was a southern continent. On January 28, the coast of Antarctica was first sighted at the coordinates 69° 21’ 28” S and 2° 14’ 50” W. Then the Russian ships circumnavigated Antarctica, discovering many neighboring islands and mapping parts of the continent.

Earnest interest in Antarctica grew later, in the 20th century, after a number of expeditions into the interior of the continent, during which man first set foot on the South Pole (Amundsen’s expedition of 1911-1912) and mapped the surface of the continent.

In the mid-20th century, many countries established scientific research stations in Antarctica. In 1961, a treaty went into effect stipulating the demilitarization of Antarctica and its use for exclusively peaceful purposes. The treaty’s signatories officially relinquished territorial claims to the continent’s land.

Nevertheless, this did not mean the end of plans to develop Antarctica's natural riches. Official territorial claims were merely shelved. With the passage of time, the resources of the south seas and the Antarctic continent itself have grown more interesting to many countries and a number of experts believe that the Antarctic Treaty's years in its present form are numbered, regardless of it having been recently renewed for another 50 years.

Although Antarctica itself is a demilitarized zone, armed conflicts did arise in its vicinity. Its worth mentioning the lengthy conflict between Chile and Argentina over an island near Cape Horn, as well as the overlapping territorial claims of these two countries in Antarctica, where both of them are expanding their presence and are moving towards organizing permanent settlements.

Another thing worth mentioning is the conflict between Argentina and the U.K. over the Falkland Islands. In and of themselves, the islands are not of significant interest, but they include and imply control of vast resource-rich areas of the ocean. In addition, along with the neighboring islands controlled by the U.K., the Falklands are the de facto gateway to the Antarctic, which explains London's tenacity in maintaining sovereignty over them and the South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, as well as territorial claims regarding the South Shetland and South Orkney Islands under the Antarctic Treaty.

In turn, Argentina also insists on its rights to these territories, which include control of considerable tracts of continental shelf and sea. At present, the conflict is frozen; however, many analysts believe that it has a reasonable chance of flaring up again in the future.

Russia, the discoverer of Antarctica, is currently one of the most widely represented countries there. At present, Russia has five polar stations and one polar base, where a wide-ranging scientific research program is carried out. There are also plans to re-open three previously closed stations.

Russia is in favor of maintaining the status quo in Antarctica.

"In the interests of all countries, this is the only stance for the Antarctic Treaty's signatories – to avoid any action that would attempt to scuttle this agreement," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the subject.

At present, the countries directly bordering the Antarctic region continue to pay lip service to the agreement; however, there are activists in Chile, Argentina and New Zealand that hold that their country has lawful rights to ownership of Antarctic territories and are working towards this goal.

It is possible that the fate of Antarctic territories will depend on the coordinated stance of major powers, including Russia. If such a coordinated stance is not achieved, then the carving up of Antarctica could become a reality in the next 20 to 30 years. Under such conditions, Russia will need weighty arguments to defend the status quo of Antarctica with other countries, or, if this is not possible, ensure its participation in the development of Antarctica's riches.

It is impossible to name a specific timeline for a possible "War for the Antarctic." But conjecture is possible based on the following factors – for example, the appearance of technology allowing rapid and cost effective supply of fresh water from Antarctic glaciers to arid and tropical regions; a new increase in oil prices and growing demand for crude, which

will make oil extraction on the Antarctic shelf economically viable or an increase in demand for food because of the growing global population, which would require fishing in the south seas, etc.

For the time being, there has been no such convergence of interests. But it is ever more likely.

Accordingly, expansion of Russia's presence in Antarctica and development of its polar infrastructure is absolutely justified. These actions will provide Russia with a base on which it can rely in defending its stance on Antarctica's status.

The author is a RIA Novosti military commentator. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.

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