

RUSSIA, ANTARCTICA AND OIL

The discovery of a large oil deposit in Antarctica has raised alarms in London and Buenos Aires. Does Russia's discovery represent a threat to the stability of the White Continent?

On May 12, 2024, the BRICS group published on its X account the news that Russia had discovered gas and oil reserves in the British Antarctic Territory. According to the post¹, it would be around 511 billion barrels of oil: to put it in perspective, that is ten times more than what has been produced in the entire North Sea area over the last half century, twice the reserves of Saudi Arabia in 2022², and thirty times more than Argentina's Vaca Muerta reserve. The information published on X is complemented by that provided by the company that made the discovery, the Russian geological company Rosgeo³. There, the company clarifies, among other details of the expedition that its research was carried out within the framework of strictly scientific exploration⁴. Now then, what is the legal framework that regulates international relations in Antarctica? Why the discovery is considered problematic by some countries? Are there practical possibilities for resource exploitation? And if so, what might the consequences be?

Statements

It is important to mention that Russia has not made any official statements about the discovery (neither denying nor confirming) what was published by the official account of the BRICS group, of which Russia is a member. Argentina, for its part, stated that it had already been aware of Russian research in the region for years, mentioning that there was nothing new in this discovery. However, it highlighted that the matter was being studied by the national Ministry of Foreign Affairs, without further declarations or details⁵. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland addressed the issue in a

¹ Original tweet: <https://x.com/BRICSinfo/status/1789767884358504752?lang=es>

² OPEC data 2022.

³ Rosgeo (Rossyiskoe Geologicheskoe Obshchestvo) is a Russian state-owned scientific organization founded in 1992, dedicated to geological research and the promotion of geological education. Website: <https://rusgeology.ru/en/press/news/>

⁴ Original article in Russian: <https://rusgeology.ru/press/news/rosgeologiya-vedet-nauchnyu-deyatelnost-v-antarktide-v-strogom-sootvetstvii-s-mezhdunarodnymi-sogla/>

⁵ Official statement by Argentine presidential spokesperson Manuel Adorni. May 16, 2024.

parliamentary hearing where the “problematic” nature of Russian research activities in the territory was highlighted, accusing that the Russian investigations in the territory may have an interest that is not solely scientific⁶.

Currently, there are two international documents that regulate activities in Antarctica: the Antarctic Treaty and the Madrid Protocol. **The Antarctic Treaty** was signed in December 1959 by twelve countries⁷, including Argentina, the Soviet Union (today represented by Russia), and Great Britain. The treaty, intended to define the legal framework for the international use of the White Continent, was signed in Washington, and its permanent secretariat is located in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It has no predetermined expiration date, although this can be defined by unanimous agreement among original and subsequent signatories. Now then, for the purposes of our analysis, we highlight Article 1, which indicates the exclusive use of Antarctica for peaceful purposes, prohibiting any kind of weapons testing. It is not a problem that Russia has allegedly explored territories claimed by other countries, since free movement across the continent is permitted according to Article 2. **The Madrid Protocol** (or Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty on Environmental Protection) was signed in 1991 as a supplement to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty. It emphasizes the protection of fauna, waste management, and the preservation of the White Continent (and its surrounding seas) as a territory free from anthropogenic pollution. Among its provisions, we highlight Article VII, which prohibits the exploitation of minerals for economic purposes, only allowing those for scientific purposes. This treaty was signed by most of the original signatories (along with many other countries).

Both documents could undergo modifications in their provisions and articles starting in 2048, when (according to what is stipulated in the original treaty) issues such as the ban on the exploitation of mineral resources could be reconsidered in light of the discovery of these deposits. It should be noted that according to Rosgeo, the discovery of the deposits in May 2024 by the Russian mission occurred within the framework of scientific exploration, since specifically, the exploration of mineral resources for scientific (non-economic) purposes is allowed.

⁶ Kinyua, B. (2024) – *UK's Parliament probes Russian oil exploration in Antarctica*. Available in: <https://maritime-executive.com/article/uk-s-parliament-probes-russian-oil-exploration-in-antarctica>

⁷ In addition to those mentioned, the treaty was also signed by Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, the former South African Republic, and the United States of America.

Now then, **the area claimed in Antarctica by Argentina partially overlaps** with the zones claimed by Chile and by Great Britain, this being the only case of overlapping claims. Argentina expressed its claim in 1940⁸ based on historical arguments of continental continuity and geographic proximity, while the United Kingdom did the same in 1962. Currently, although Argentina is the country with the highest number of bases on the continent, Chilean and British facilities coexist nearby with the Argentine ones. **Part of the conflict lies** in the fact that the finding of these reserves in a zone of overlapping claims could eventually generate disputes between the two countries involved, regarding who would have the right to exploit the resources.

Would exploitation be possible?

Assuming we are not currently facing the exploitation of the resources—since that would constitute a violation of both the Antarctic Treaty and the Madrid Protocol—there are and would be issues to resolve beforehand, such as:

- **The overlapping of claim zones where the deposits were found:** Argentina and Great Britain would need to resolve the matter. In an extreme case, one cannot rule out the possibility that—although quite unlikely—the dispute could lead to military confrontation. Argentina and Great Britain last faced each other militarily in 1982 during the Falklands/Malvinas War, in which the Anglo-Saxon power was victorious. This territorial dispute includes an undeniable strategic geographic component, based on the proximity of the aforementioned archipelago to the disputed Antarctic area.
- **The undeniable environmental impact** that oil extraction in the area would have (both maritime and continental), risking coastal regions in the event of oil spills and damaging the fragile ecosystem that has remained largely unaffected by serious anthropogenic impact for centuries.
- The **logistical difficulties** involved in extracting oil located beneath kilometers of ice, transporting it across the continent and the long distance to the nearest mainland, the adverse climatic conditions, and of course, international opposition due to the inherent risks.
- The risk that, should the exploitation of this deposit be enabled, it **could trigger claims from other countries** to exploit the mineral resources present in their zones.

⁸ The first Argentine explorations in the White Continent date back to 1902; the first permanent base was established in 1904 (Orcaas Base), and in 1906 the first official mention of Antarctica (without defining specific boundaries) as a constituent part of Argentine territory was made.

In any case, it is unlikely that we will see a change in the Antarctic situation before 2048. To this day, the Antarctic Treaty is considered a milestone in international relations, since there have been no serious disputes that have led, in the entire history of human presence on the White Continent, to armed conflict. The legal, social, economic, and political nature of Antarctica makes it a place where, even though there are flags, borders are virtually nonexistent, and the spirit of scientific collaboration that dominates the continent shapes human relations based on shared interests such as science and cooperation. It is important to note that for this balance to be maintained, the agreement and will of all involved parties is essential. The discovery of the deposits was, as we have seen, received with concern by some countries, while the same oil exploration company emphasized that its research was carried out within the legal frameworks authorized by the Antarctic Treaty, without exceeding the agreed limits.