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The Southern Ocean and Antarctica as a strategic imperative for South Africa

Daniela Marggraff

The Southern Ocean – encompassing Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic territories – demands a more central place in South Africa's strategic planning and national policy priorities. Although the country launched its Antarctic and Southern Ocean Strategy in 2021, sustained and elevated attention to the region remains necessary. Assessing developments over the past decade, this report identifies both continuities and shifts in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Key findings

- The Southern Ocean's global environmental significance must be viewed alongside its direct impact on food security, livelihoods and climate stability in South Africa and across Africa.
- Challenges identified in the 2016 Sidiropoulos and Wheeler report remain unresolved, compounded by the rapid Antarctic thawing, consensus-based decision-making delays, rising politicisation and uncertainty around tourism.
- Major powers' growing commercial and geopolitical interests in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean contrast with South Africa's science-centred posture, raising questions about its strategy for a more contested region.
- South Africa's scientific presence in Antarctica could be one of its strongest diplomatic assets, but inconsistent engagement threatens to undermine this potential.
- Though South Africa's Antarctic and Southern Ocean Strategy commits to championing African and developing-world interests, its engagement at Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCMs) and the Commission for the Conservation of Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) (2017–2025) shows only modest advocacy.
- South Africa can pursue multiple roles – scientific leader, operational hub, or tourism gateway – each with trade-offs requiring careful consideration.

Policy recommendations

- South Africa should establish a consistent, active presence at ATCMs and CCAMLR through regular interventions and submissions, despite resource constraints.
- The country should actively insert African perspectives in ATCM and CCAMLR discussions, ensuring its gateway-state role facilitates broader African engagement, not just established actors' interests.
- An updated Antarctic and Southern Ocean Strategy (ASOS) implementation plan for 2026–2030 should be developed, focused on responding to rising major-power competition and resource-driven interests.
- South Africa should leverage its non-claimant status and scientific credibility to carve out a distinctive niche at this opportune moment.
- It should continue advocating for enhanced search and rescue and naval capabilities to keep pace with increased Cape of Good Hope traffic and growing Antarctic tourism.

Introduction

South Africa is a tri-oceanic state, bordered by the Atlantic, Indian and Southern Oceans. Yet this distinctive maritime geography is only weakly reflected in its strategic outlook. The 2011 Foreign Policy White Paper[1] makes only one reference to the ocean – through mention of the Indian Ocean Rim. None of the three oceans bordering South Africa is substantially engaged. Similarly, the National Development Plan[2] 2030 gives only sparse and largely generic attention to the maritime domain. Although the ocean is mentioned eight times, only the Indian Ocean is explicitly identified.

The pattern persists across other central government documents. Operation Phakisa: South Africa's Oceans Economy Strategy,[3] launched in 2014 to unlock the economic potential of South Africa's maritime space, makes no reference to the Southern Ocean. In recent years the initiative appears to have lost momentum.[4]

Only two key policy documents address the Southern Ocean maritime dimension in a notable yet limited way

The 2022 Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest[5] acknowledges the country's extensive coastline along the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, but this recognition is confined to a single paragraph within a much broader text. Once again, the Southern Ocean is absent. This omission is striking given South Africa's sovereignty over the Marion and Prince Edward Islands, which extends its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) by approximately 474 400 km^2 into the Southern Ocean.

Only two major policy documents give attention to the Southern Ocean maritime dimension. The Defence Review (2015)[6] explicitly references the Marion and Prince Edward Islands and recognises the additional enforcement responsibilities their associated maritime zones entail. The second is South Africa's Antarctic and Southern Ocean Strategy (ASOS)[7] of 2021, implemented by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment. Yet, despite the launch of this strategy, its priorities are not meaningfully integrated into the 2022 Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest, suggesting limited policy integration.

These documents reveal a concerning pattern. Not only does the Southern Ocean receive marginal attention, but the maritime domain more broadly has yet to be recognised as a central organising lens of South Africa's strategic vision.

This gap is particularly significant at a time when ocean space is becoming increasingly consequential in global geopolitics. Recent instability in the Red Sea, including Houthi attacks on commercial vessels since late 2023, has redirected shipping traffic around the Cape of Good Hope, elevating it as a pivotal maritime route.

On 1 March 2026, shipping companies such as Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd and CMA CGM began rerouting their vessels around Africa once more – abandoning attempted resumptions in services using the Suez – after the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran, which triggered the closure of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.[8]

This has provided South Africa with a golden opportunity to capitalise on increased traffic. However, its ports suffer from congestion and outdated infrastructure – so much of this rerouted traffic may bypass South Africa and instead stop in its neighbouring countries.[9]

Concurrently, the Southern Ocean and the Antarctic continent are attracting heightened international attention. Antarctic tourism continues to grow annually,[10] while additional states – some of which may in the future use Cape Town as a logistical gateway – are joining the Antarctic Treaty System as non-consultative members.

At the same time, krill fisheries are becoming increasingly lucrative while key conservation measures lapse,[11] and interest in marine resources[12] and prospecting[13] is intensifying. These developments highlight the expanding economic, environmental, and geopolitical stakes in the Southern Ocean region, and the need for South Africa to monitor and respond to these trends. South Africa is the sole African country party to the Antarctic Treaty (AT) and has an expansive search and rescue zone that stretches from its coastline to Antarctica.

Within this evolving geostrategic environment – marked by intensified traffic around the Cape and ever-growing activity in the southern polar region – it is imperative to revisit[14] the strategic importance of the Southern Ocean and Antarctica to South Africa.

This report is structured as follows. It begins with a contextualisation of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. It then outlines the global and national significance of the Southern Ocean, with a particular focus on its contributions to food security, climate change, and human security. It highlights why the region is becoming increasingly important to South Africa, then outlines the key challenges facing the region and their specific implications for South African interests.

Following this, the analysis maps the country's historical and contemporary role in the region, building in part on Elizabeth Sidiropoulos and Tom Wheeler's earlier analysis, while providing additional insight. It concludes by discussing the challenges between the strategic role it plays, and could play, versus the realistic constraints it faces in pursuing it.

Ultimately, while much has changed since 2016, including new actors in the Antarctic, much has also stayed the same. There is little evidence that South Africa considers Antarctica and the Southern Ocean as an important part of its foreign policy and broader strategic thinking yet; and efforts to promote the African Agenda into its participation has remained modest.

Contextualisation

Under the Antarctic Treaty, 'the Antarctic' refers to all areas south of 60° south latitude.[15] Beyond this line lies the Antarctic continent – the world's fifth-largest and the most recently discovered major landmass – surrounded by the Southern Ocean. Often called the 'White Continent' or 'The Last True Wilderness', Antarctica is defined by extreme remoteness and an extraordinarily inhospitable environment, with only 2% of the continent ice-free.[16]

Surrounding Antarctica is the Southern Ocean – home to over 9 000 identified species, including 17 penguin species, the highly fished Patagonian and Antarctic toothfish and krill.[17] Antarctica and the Southern Ocean are frequently characterised as one of the planet's most dynamic and physically unstable environments.[18] Seasonal variability results in extreme changes in this region (which includes both Antarctica and the Southern Ocean), which covers 9.7%[19] of the Earth's surface area.

In winter, sea ice expands to the point that the continent's size almost doubles, with ice extending up to 1 000 km from the coastline across the Southern Ocean. South Africa's own experience underscores this dynamism: the South African National Antarctic Expedition (SANAE IV) base, located in Norway's Queen Maud Land, has been replaced at least three times, after earlier stations repeatedly drifted out to sea while situated on moving ice shelves.[20]

It is crucial to consider the Antarctic and the Southern Ocean in conjunction. Article VI of the Antarctic Treaty stipulates that the treaty does not affect the rights of 'states under international law with regard to the high seas within that area.' However, the practical and geopolitical dynamics of activities on the continent and in adjacent waters are interconnected and cannot easily be separated. Likewise, from an environmental perspective, what happens on the continent impacts the ocean, and vice versa.

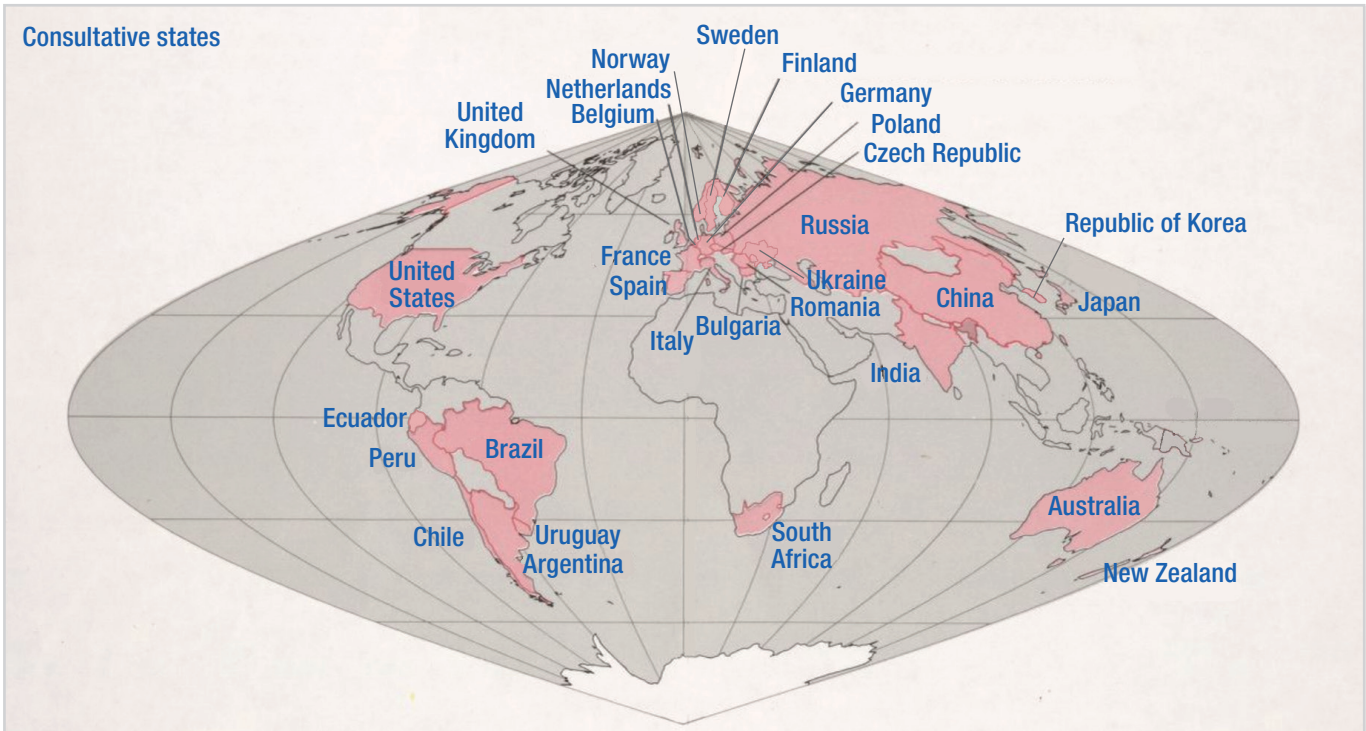
The Antarctic Treaty commits states to demilitarisation, scientific cooperation and the 'suspension' of territorial claims

Unlike the Arctic, the Antarctic has no indigenous populations, and its natural resources are subject to strict limitations as outlined in the Antarctic Treaty. The treaty was signed in 1959 in Washington by 12 countries (including South Africa) that were active during the International Geophysical Year of 1958–1959. These states became consultative parties and have decision-making powers at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCMs), which meet annually (see Chart 1).

The treaty commits states to demilitarisation, scientific cooperation and the 'suspension' of territorial claims. Indeed, although seven states – Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom (UK)[21] – maintain claims to the region, these remain literally and metaphorically frozen under the treaty.

Since the original signing, several other countries have acceded to the treaty, including China, Finland and Sweden, among others. They have become consultative parties as they have demonstrated substantial scientific research in Antarctica. States such as Belarus, Canada,

Chart 1: Parties to the Antarctic Treaty



CONSULTATIVE • Participate fully in decision making • Decisions and measures adopted are legally binding upon all consultative parties		NON-CONSULTATIVE • May not participate in decision making but can contribute to discussions	
Original	**Joined later**		
Argentina*	Brazil	Austria	Papua New Guinea
Australia*	Bulgaria	Belarus	Portugal
Belgium	China	Canada	Romania
Chile*	Czech Republic	Colombia	San Marino
France*	Ecuador	Cost Rica	Saudi Arabia
Japan	Finland	Cuba	Slovakia
New Zealand*	Germany	Denmark	Slovenia
Norway*	India	Estonia	Switzerland
Russia	Italy	Greece	Türkiye
South Africa	Republic of Korea	Guatemala	United Arab Emirates
United Kingdom*	Netherlands	Hungary	Venezuela
United States	Peru	Iceland	
	Poland	Kazakhstan	
	Spain	Democratic People's Republic of Korea	
	Sweden	Malaysia	
	Ukraine	Monaco	
	Uruguay	Pakistan	

* States with territorial claims in Antarctica
Source: created by author with Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty data, map updated from Library of Congress, Global Legal Monitor[22]

Iceland, and Türkiye, to name a few, have acceded to the AT in a non-consultative capacity, allowing them to participate in meetings as observers.[23]

More specifically, since 2016, several new non-consultative members have joined, including Costa Rica (11 August 2022), San Marino (14 February 2023), Saudi Arabia (22 May 2024), and, most recently, the United Arab Emirates (11 December 2024).[24] While expanding the geographic diversity of states represented in the Antarctic Treaty, no African states have sought accession.

Whereas the Arctic has seen extensive hydrocarbon development,[25] Antarctica's mineral resource activities are prohibited, and fishing and tourism are tightly regulated. This is due to the development of various legal instruments that supplement the Antarctic Treaty forming the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS): Agreed Measures for the Conservation of Antarctic Fauna and Flora (1964), Convention for the Conservation of the Antarctic Seals (1972), Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (1980) (CCAMLR) and the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (1991) (Madrid Protocol).[26]

South Africa is an original signatory to the Antarctic Treaty and remains the only African state represented. In its Antarctic and Southern Ocean Strategy (ASOS), it explicitly notes that this position provides a unique opportunity to represent not only African but also developing world interests. It participates in the annual ATCMs and the Committee for Environmental Protection (CEP) meetings, as well as those of the CCAMLR.

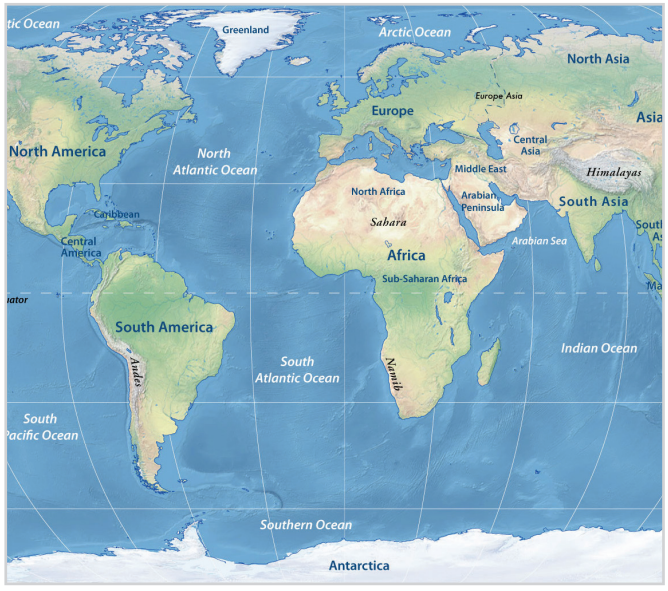
Southern Ocean: global and national significance

It is often viewed as situated at the bottom of the world (see Chart 2). However, the Southern Ocean – which is also the youngest ocean basin globally and the only one to flow uninterrupted by land[27] – is in fact at the centre of the global ocean system since it connects the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Ocean basins (see Chart 3).[28] At the heart of this system lies the Antarctic Circumpolar Current (ACC) – the world's largest ocean current. Driven by powerful winds and uninterrupted by landmass, the ACC circulates vast volumes of water, playing a critical role in sustaining food, climate and human security.[29]

Food security

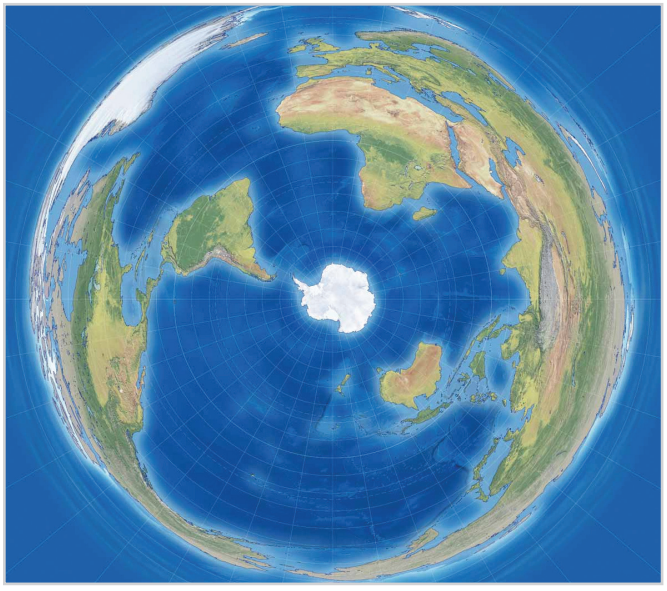
The Southern Ocean is vital for food security. It is a major engine of global ocean productivity – where ocean productivity refers to the generation of food and energy in the ocean mainly by phytoplankton.[30] Indeed, 85% of global ocean productivity is sustained by nutrients found in the Southern Ocean.[31] These nutrients are estimated to support 20% to 75% of global

Chart 2: Antarctica at the 'bottom of the world'



Source: Nations Online; background: Natural Earth, Tom Patterson[32]

Chart 3: Antarctica at the 'centre of the world'



Source: World map image by Frans Blok[33]

fisheries.[34] Even using the most conservative estimate, this contribution underpins more than R39.1 billion per annum in fisheries value.

The Southern Ocean not only contributes to food security but also plays an important role in water security. As outlined in South Africa's 2021 ASOS,[35] the Southern Ocean plays an indispensable role in regulating winter rainfall to the Western and Southern Cape, while Gauteng province receives water through snow melts in the Drakensberg. Water security is integral to food security, as it provides the essential water resources that sustain agriculture and support broader livelihoods.

Climate security

The climate-regulating functions of the Southern Ocean are just as critical. This ocean plays an essential part in regulating Earth's climate through processes such as ocean ventilation, circulation, heat and carbon storage, and sea-level regulation.[36] It therefore plays a role in buffering against climate change: the ocean disproportionately absorbs 75% of heat and 40% of anthropogenic carbon dioxide. This is largely due to the presence of phytoplankton – microscopic plants that perform photosynthesis – which are subsequently consumed by krill, small crustaceans that excrete faecal pellets filled with carbon that sink to the bottom of the ocean, where they remain.[37]

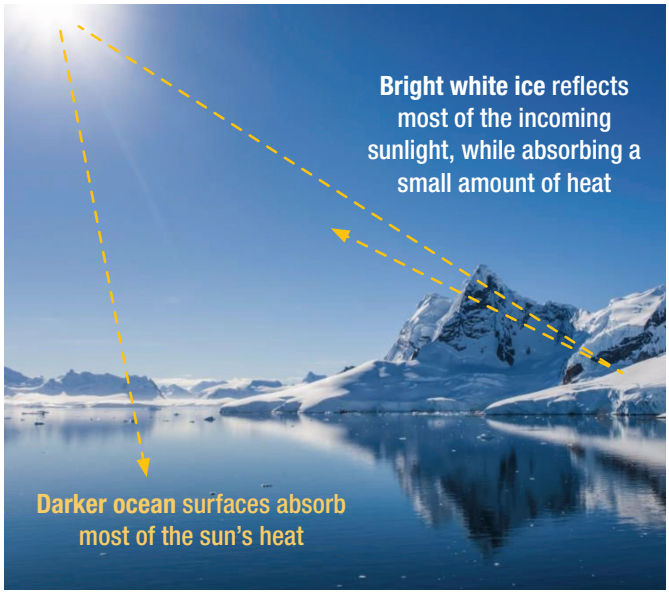
The Antarctic sea ice reflects 50% to 70% of incoming solar radiation, acting as a global 'air conditioner'

Along with the sequestration of CO_2, the Southern Ocean is also important for air quality regulation, where it absorbs chemicals and pollutants from the atmosphere, which are stored in marine sediments.[38]

Additionally, the Antarctic sea ice reflects 50% to 70% of incoming solar radiation, therefore acting as a global 'air conditioner'.[39] This is due to the 'whiteness' of Antarctica's ice sheets, which reflects a large portion of sunlight back into space (see Chart 4).[40]

Finally, the Southern Ocean plays an important role in determining regional and global weather patterns; it releases dimethyl sulphide, which is produced by phytoplankton, which, when released, facilitates cloud formation, which subsequently cools the climate.[43] However, with the Southern Ocean among the fastest-warming oceans in the world, this raises concerns about the ocean's capacity to continue acting as a climate buffer and how its diminishing ability to buffer might impact human security.

Chart 4: Antarctica's reflection of light and the Southern Ocean's absorbing of sunlight



Source: Author's recreation based on University of Canterbury[41] and National Snow and Ice Data Center[42] data

Human security

Human security is similarly intertwined with Antarctic systems. The Antarctic ice sheets store 90% of the world's surface fresh water. Large-scale melting could raise global sea levels by more than 70 m,[44] threatening coastal populations, infrastructure and wetlands.[45] Other reports suggest that sea levels could rise by 1.4 m by 2100.[46]

This is especially concerning for Africa, where it is reported that by 2030, over 116 million Africans may live in densely populated, low-lying coastal regions.[47] Considering Africa's vulnerability to climate change and sea-level rise, the fact that no African state, apart from South Africa, has acceded to the Antarctic Treaty is concerning.

As demonstrated above, the Southern Ocean plays a crucial role in climate, food, and human security. But its

ability to provide this security is under immense threat. Indeed, the region is regarded as one of the fastest-warming regions, with ocean currents in Antarctica already said to be slowing down.[48] Evidence indicates that Antarctic bottom water production has slowed down by 30% in two out of four basins. Model projections warn that a 25% decrease in global primary production could result in a 20% to 40% decrease in fisheries production.[49]

If the Southern Ocean's capacity to absorb carbon dioxide and excess heat continues to erode, the consequences will be far-reaching. These include intensified climate impacts affecting coastal infrastructure such as ports; rising ocean acidification, which suppresses marine productivity; and shifts in ocean temperature and circulation that drive fish stocks to migrate,[50] disrupting established landing sites, processing facilities and broader economic systems.

South Africa and the Southern Ocean: significance and challenges

The Southern Ocean has long been in South Africa's vision, although for different reasons. As outlined by Sidiropoulos and Wheeler,[51] during apartheid, South Africa's involvement in Antarctica was driven by the fact that it was one of the only forums in which it could participate.[52] The country also played on the fears of major powers during the Cold War that Soviet presence would increase in this region, and therefore aligned itself with Western allies, for example, by annexing Prince Edward and Marion Islands.[53]

Post-apartheid, South Africa's engagement was marked by a concerted effort to establish itself as having a vested scientific interest and no ulterior motives.[54] However, the country has not always consistently played an important role in governance matters, having failed to submit any independent research papers at ATCM meetings in both 2023 and 2024.[55]

This may be attributed to the fact that, as Sidiropoulos and Wheeler note, South Africa prioritises other regions, and maritime issues often receive little policy attention. This also calls into question South Africa's commitment to the region, and perhaps more so, whether it truly recognises the importance of the region, beyond the rhetorical framing of ASOS.

The Southern Ocean is becoming increasingly significant for several key reasons. On the one hand, with the instability in the Red Sea due to Houthi attacks, there has been an increase in traffic around the Cape of Good Hope.[56] Chart 5 illustrates the increase in daily transit calls for cargo ships from 2023 to 2026 at the Cape of Good Hope, compared to Bab el-Mandeb. Chart 6 illustrates the heightened level of trade transiting through the Cape of Good Hope, with figures almost doubling since 2023. The data suggests that this shipping route is not just an emergency detour, but is fast becoming a major shipping alternative.[57]

Chart 5: Number of daily transit calls at the Cape of Good Hope and Bab el-Mandeb (2023–2026)[58]

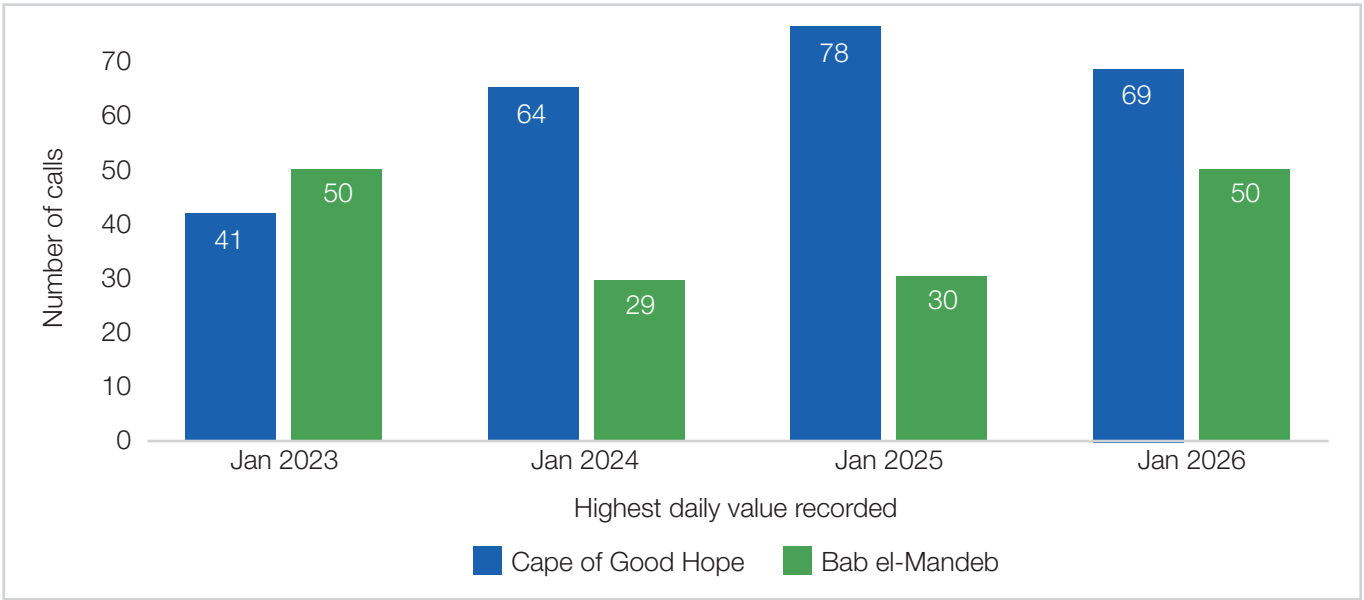
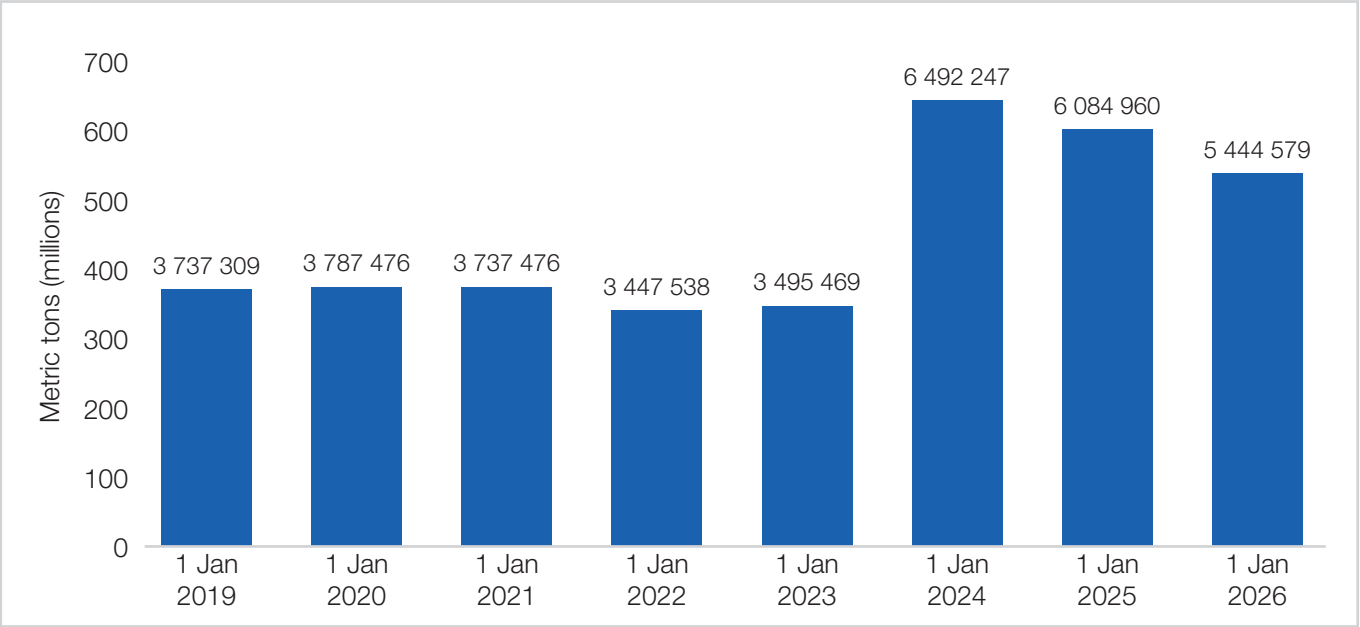


Chart 6: Transit trade volume around the Cape of Good Hope (2019–2026)[59]



Here, of course, it is important to note that while this increased traffic does not directly flow into the Southern Ocean, its rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope has increased ship volumes in South African waters, presenting heightened environmental and operational challenges. Increased traffic may increase marine pollution,[60] and place additional constraints on South Africa's already-stretched port and search and rescue capacities.[61] The country is responsible for a significant search and rescue area[62] (see Chart 7).

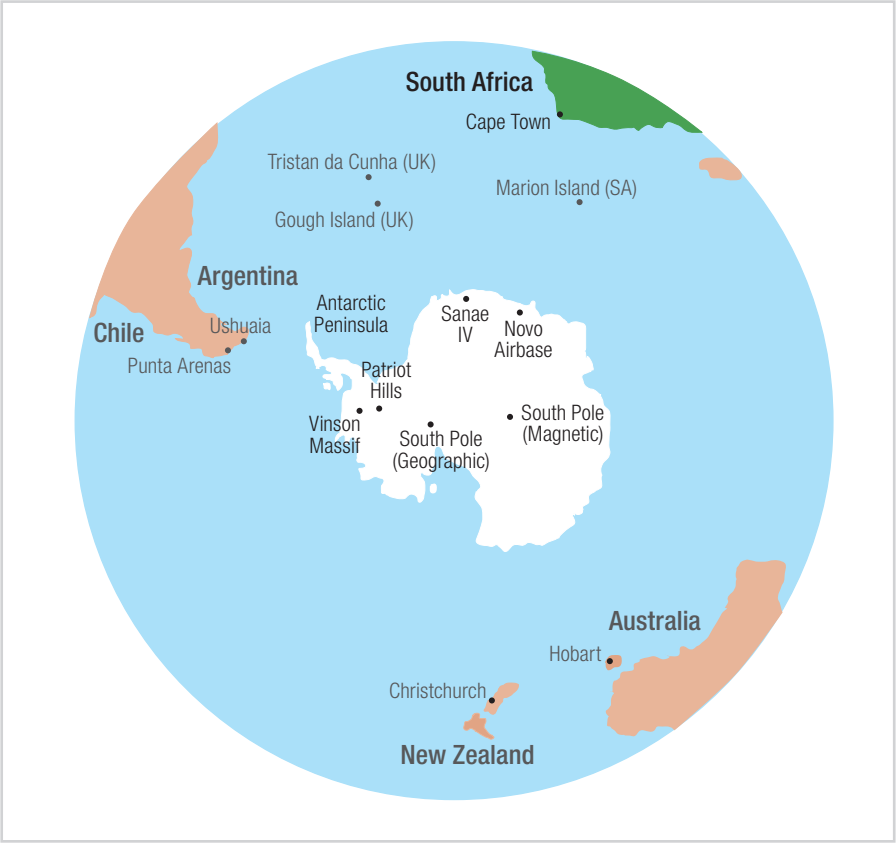
Chart 7: South Africa's search and rescue area[63]

A further reason why the Southern Ocean and Antarctica are gaining importance is the increasing appeal of tourism. Cape Town is recognised as one of the five gateway Antarctic cities – although compared to the other gateway cities such as Hobart, Punta Arenas, Christchurch and Ushuaia, it sits considerably further away from Antarctica at 3 811 km[64] (see Chart 8).

Cape Town therefore occupies a strategic position, both for logistical and tourism reasons. Regarding the former, South Africa serves as a crucial hub for scientific expeditions, including those led by states such as Russia, Germany, India, Belgium, Norway, and the UK.[65] In the case of the latter, it serves as a departure point for both ships and flights heading to the White Continent for tourism purposes.

The Antarctic region is seeing a significant upsurge in tourism activity. In 1993 and 1994, there were fewer than 8 000 visitors; in 2014 and 2015, there were about 37 000. In 2023 and 2024, this number had risen to over 120 000.[66] In 2016, Sidiropoulos and Wheeler noted that South Africa's environment department was working together with the tourism department to develop a tourism policy for Antarctica. While South Africa launched its ASOS strategy in 2021, there is no publicly available evidence that a tailored tourism policy for Antarctica has been finalised.

Chart 8: Antarctic gateway cities, and destinations potentially accessible for tourism from Cape Town[67]



Having one of the gateway cities means that South Africa is part of a small group of states, alongside Australia, New Zealand, Argentina and Chile, that facilitate global access to the continent. With increased commercial (through tourism) and scientific interest, South Africa's presence as a facilitator of access, especially to European states in the Northern Hemisphere, provides it with multiple opportunities, but also environmental and search and rescue responsibilities.

Finally, as alluded to earlier, the Southern Ocean faces increasing pressures from global warming. While the ocean acts as a climate buffer, its continued ability to play this role is under threat. This poses numerous challenges to South Africa, including:

Shifts in weather patterns and subsequent impacts on agriculture:

Warming in the Southern Ocean may alter weather patterns, disrupting rainfall,[68] which could impact farming activities. Recent research indicates that Southern Ocean warming may intensify drought conditions in Africa,[69] with direct consequences for water availability, crop yields and agriculture.

Heightened storm severity and subsequent risks to maritime safety:

While storms are a natural feature of shipping in the ocean, particularly around the Southern Ocean, climate change projections suggest that the

RESEARCH INDICATES THAT SOUTHERN OCEAN WARMING MAY INTENSIFY DROUGHT CONDITIONS IN AFRICA

intensity and frequency of extreme events may be increasing,[70] which poses a threat to vessel navigation in an already dangerous area. In 2024, the Ultra Galaxy's crew were forced to abandon their ship after it began listing in rough seas off South Africa's coast. It eventually ran aground, raising fears of oil spills. The CMA CGM Benjamin Franklin lost 44 boxes due to severe weather in South Africa's southeast on 9 July 2024.[71] While these incidents cannot be directly attributed to climate change, they illustrate the vulnerability of vessels and the potential consequences of increasingly severe maritime conditions.

Increased destructive coastal weather events:

Climate projections suggest that by 2100, sea-level rise could exceed 1 m in places such as Knysna and Cape Town – areas that also serve as tourist hubs.[72] Such changes – in both sea-level rise and storm intensification – may put at risk coastal infrastructure, economic activity, and communities that rely on the sea for their livelihoods.

Challenges facing Southern Ocean and Antarctic governance

South Africa views its interests in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica predominantly through the lens of science, which should support the African Agenda.[73] Unlike other states that have engaged in activities that may hint at plans of militarisation and commercialisation,[74] South Africa continues to advocate for the region to remain a common heritage of humankind, devoid of territorial claims, and not subject to mineral exploitation.[75]

However, the country's central challenge in this region is navigating a landscape shaped by actors with differing intentions and priorities. Notably, many of the risks identified a decade ago by Sidiropoulos and Wheeler – including possible mineral exploitation, biological prospecting, unsustainable commercial fishing and mass tourism – remain unresolved. If anything, these pressures have intensified, driven by technological advances and growing geopolitical competition.

Climate change and emerging resource pressures

The warming of the Southern Ocean and Antarctic regions is leading to the melting of ice, making visible, habitable and exploitable what was previously considered hidden, uninhabitable and unexploitable. Indeed, between 2002 and 2023, Antarctica lost 135 billion tonnes of ice mass per year, resulting in meltwater that drains into the ocean and contributes to sea-level rise.[76]

Klaus Dodds describes this phenomenon as 'accumulation by disappearance,'[77] whereby retreating sea ice 'exposes new frontiers for mobility and potential resource extraction.'[78] While the disappearance of ice is not yet at such a stage that an abundance of resources becomes available for exploitation by states, it is critical for South African policymakers to consider future possibilities, a concept captured by the 'logic of anticipation' which focuses on what the future 'might be' rather than 'what it is'.[79]

> It would be premature to dismiss that some states are positioning themselves for future contingencies

A decade ago, Sidiropoulos and Wheeler[80] suggested that the views of South African specialists, government officials and scientists considered mineral exploitation in Antarctica would be highly unlikely, given 'the inaccessibility and unknown quantities of the minerals in Antarctica.' This assessment remains broadly valid in the short term.

However, evolving geopolitical behaviour in the region suggests it would be premature to dismiss the possibility that some states are positioning themselves for future contingencies. In this regard, Russia's continued seismic surveying in the Southern Ocean – which has persisted despite the 1998 ban – has drawn particular attention.[81]

Two areas are especially noteworthy. First, in early 2020, Russian research vessels conducted approximately 4 500 km of oil and gas-related seismic assessment in the Riiser-Larsen Sea, located off Queen Maud Land in East Antarctica – a region proximate to South Africa's SANAE IV research station.[82]

Second, Russia has undertaken seismic surveys in the Weddell Sea, an area overlapping with the British Antarctic Territory claim and contested by Argentina and Chile, where surveys have allegedly indicated

511 billion barrels of oil.[83] The Weddell Sea is also the site of a long-proposed Marine Protected Area (MPA) under CCAMLR that has faced repeated blockage.[84]

Although, these surveys are formally framed as scientific research permitted under the ATS, these activities are generating concern within several treaty parties.[85]

The issue is not immediate extraction – which remains prohibited under the Madrid Protocol – but rather the strategic accumulation of geological data that could potentially acquire significance in a future regulatory environment.

Consensus-based governance challenges

The ATS and CCAMLR operate on a consensus basis, meaning that any consultative party can block adoption by formally objecting, giving each party effective veto power. This has repeatedly hindered progress, particularly in attempts to establish MPAs. In 2002, the CCAMLR set out to create a network of MPAs around the Antarctic. One of these is to be established to the north of South Africa's East Antarctic base.[86] However to date it has only established an MPA in the South Orkney Islands (in 2009) and Ross Sea (2016).[87] Objections have consistently come from China and Russia, which question these MPAs' effectiveness.

A similar challenge arises in the management of krill fisheries. At the 2025 ATCM, consultative parties failed to reach consensus on Conservation Measure 51-07 for the fourth year in a row. This mechanism ensures that krill catches are spread across a broad geographic area, specifically to prevent krill fishing in areas where other krill predators, such as whales, are also hunting.[88]

Both Russia and China have blocked consensus on revisions to krill fishing conservation. Russia argues that proposals to introduce a new catch limit for Subarea 48.1, while not introducing new measures for Subareas 48.2-48.4, are in contradiction to CM 51-01, which outlines that management in these areas must be coordinated.[89]

China proposes entirely different revisions to krill fishing.[90] As a result of a lack of consensus, at the end of the 2023/24 fishing season, conservation measures 51-07 expired.[91] The lifting of krill catch dispersal rules has allowed industrial fishing vessels to concentrate their efforts on the feeding grounds of whales and penguins, with shipping vessels effectively serving as an additional predator in the region. In 2025, the industry hit the annual quota of 620 000 metric tonnes for the first time in history, and the krill fishing region had to be closed three months early.

While certain states have strong commercial interests in krill exploitation, South Africa does not. In 2025 China launched its first domestically built krill fishing vessel, enabling it to process krill onboard.[92] The chief operating officer of the company that operates and owns the vessels has described krill resources as a 'gold mine', which starkly contrasts with the ideals of conservation and science promoted by South Africa.

In 2025, the industry hit the annual quota of 620 000 metric tonnes, and the krill fishing region had to be closed three months early

Norway, another major actor, has also expanded its krill fishing capabilities. In 2023, it set to introduce its first unmanned surfaced vehicle, the Mariner, which helps Norwegian crew members onboard fishing vessels to determine where exactly krill fish are located.[93] For South Africa, therefore, the challenge in terms of krill fisheries is two-fold: ensuring that expanding krill fisheries do not harm the Southern Ocean ecosystem or exacerbate climate change, and preventing conflict over krill management from creating governance stalemates that could set problematic precedents for other Antarctic issues.

Politicisation of science-based decision making

A defining feature of the Antarctic Treaty System has been its capacity to insulate the annual ATCM from broader geopolitical disputes unrelated to Antarctic governance.[94] This separation has historically preserved the treaty's scientific and cooperative mandate.

Notably, it enabled South Africa to continue participating fully in ATCM proceedings during the apartheid era, despite facing extensive international sanctions.[95] In this sense, the ATCM has remained insulated from global geopolitical issues.

However, this notion of insulation has come under significant strain since Russia's 2022 invasion of

Ukraine. For the first time in the history of the treaty, two consultative parties are engaged in a full-scale war while simultaneously participating in ATCM deliberations.[96] This development represents a significant challenge to the long-standing aspiration of the ATS to remain detached from intruding political issues.

The integrity of Antarctic governance is further compromised by interests that intrude into decisions that should be guided by science. At the 47th ATCM, Canada and Belarus faced politicised opposition in their bids to become consultative parties. Canada's requests were met with objections from China and Russia, who both argued that Canada had not met the standards and requirements under Article IX (2) and Decision 2 (2017).

In this regard, there is growing speculation that Canada's bid for consultative party status has become entangled in broader geopolitical dynamics linked to the war in Ukraine. Some observers suggest that China and Russia's continued opposition to Canada's application may be strategically connected to the resistance faced by Belarus, implying that progress on Canada's status could be contingent on a resolution of Belarus's bid.[97] Such dynamics reinforce concerns that decisions regarding consultative status are increasingly influenced less by scientific merit, and more by political bargaining.

Belarus' request was met with opposition by Ukraine, the UK, Germany, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and the Netherlands, among others, who shared the conviction that supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not respect the conditions as set out by Article X of the Antarctic Treaty.[98] Such instances highlight the ongoing tension between political agendas and the Antarctic Treaty System's scientific and cooperative mandates.

Tourism on thin ice

Tourism is a growing challenge (or opportunity) for the Antarctic. In the 2024–25 tourism season, 43 224 visitors travelled to the region via cruise ships, although not all disembarked. Meanwhile, 80 251 individuals set foot on the continent, and 787 went inland beyond the coastal landing sites.[99] Projections indicate that by the 2033–34 season, annual visitor numbers could exceed 452 000.[100]

At the most recent ATCM in 2025, discussions focused on a proposed tourism framework. In particular, certain concerns in tourism trends were highlighted, such as the rise of deep-field tourism, which focuses on reaching more remote areas. This not only introduces the risk of environmental damage to these pristine areas but also poses significant challenges for search and rescue operations. Germany also raised concerns about media-driven tourism that promoted norms incompatible with the ATS.[101]

For example, 'rule-breaking' activities are sometimes promoted that do not uphold the values of the ATS. Videos circulated on social media show visitors engaging in prohibited activities.[102] In 2023, actor Zoey Deutch shared a photo on Instagram of herself sitting near penguins, despite restrictions due to avian influenza protocols.[103]

Projections indicate that by the 2033–34 season, annual visitor numbers to the Antarctic could exceed 452 000

Concerns about non-compliance are not new. At the 2017 ATCM, South Africa recounted an incident during the 2016/2017 summer season involving a well-known adventure tourist who refused to adhere to established procedures and undertook an unauthorised solo Antarctic crossing. This followed a previous unapproved expedition in 2008. Although the individual maintained that he would not require assistance from South Africa's National Antarctic Programme, the challenging icy conditions ultimately necessitated support to reunited him with his yacht.[104]

In response, there have been calls to develop clear guidelines addressing social media engagement and influencer activity in Antarctica, as well as a comprehensive tourism framework.

South Africa's role: past, present, future

To understand how South Africa should engage diplomatically with the issues identified above, it is crucial to examine its past and current roles.

Historical role: apartheid era

As mentioned earlier, South Africa has played various roles in Antarctica, with roles remaining consistent

even when motivation differs. While still under the apartheid government, South Africa expressed the importance of the Southern Ocean and Antarctica, explaining that it had a 'lively interest.'[105] As this report mentions earlier, South Africa's role was partially motivated by strategic reasons. Sidiropoulos and Wheeler[106] explain that 'South Africa's political leadership saw its Antarctic Treaty policy as part of its alignment with the West during the Cold War' as well as a means to maintain unimpeded freedom of navigation around the Cape of Good Hope 'without fear of militarised Soviet bases on the [White Continent].'

Along with this, or as a part of this, during apartheid, South Africa was open to positioning itself as a gateway to Antarctica. This became evident early in 1961, when the leader of South Africa's delegation addressed the ATCM and explained that South Africa had an association with Antarctica in both geographical and scientific senses.[107]

Cape Town has historically been the last port of call for voyages to Antarctica, and it remains the last port of call for many voyages.

'South Africa's political leadership saw its Antarctic Treaty policy as part of its alignment with the West during the Cold War'

During the International Geophysical Year, visits to Cape Town were frequent.[108] This position was maintained throughout the years. In an address to the ATCM in 1991, the South African delegation head noted: 'Cape Town is ideally located for rendering logistic support to ships, aircraft and expeditions to Antarctica. The SA government will gladly assist in accommodating interested parties wishing to use Cape Town as a support for their expeditions.'[109]

At the same time, however, South Africa showed a vested interest in the region for scientific purposes. In an address by the South African delegation in 1966 at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Antarctic Treaty Powers, Ambassador R.H. Coaton explained, 'We in South Africa have long regarded weather phenomena South of the 60th parallel as of the utmost consequence to our weather in more northern latitudes.'[110]

Already then, there was widespread recognition that South Africa's severe 1966 droughts required extensive attention to be paid to understanding the Southern Oceans. As such, meteorological research was of utmost importance to the country, and it positioned itself as a key player in this domain.

An analysis of the types of submissions made to the ATCM from 1960–90 also provides insight into the role South Africa played during this period and how it evolved (see Chart 9). In the 1960s, South Africa's submissions were highly procedural. Submissions were related to treaty administration, early governance issues and expert meetings. This decade was thus devoted to

CAPE TOWN IS IDEALLY LOCATED FOR RENDERING LOGISTIC SUPPORT TO SHIPS, AIRCRAFT AND EXPEDITIONS TO ANTARCTICA

foundational diplomatic engagement, which makes sense since the ATS was only founded in 1959.

In the 1970s, South Africa became increasingly concerned with the potential for mineral exploration, citing fears that it could cause widespread environmental damage. Its interest in preserving the natural environment also became more strongly ingrained, with it contributing significantly to conservation discussions.

In the 1980s, environmental consciousness became more explicit. The submission shifted to a focus on oil spill contingency plans and environmental protection proposals. There was also an introduction of regional cooperation. Finally, in the early 1990s, before the end of apartheid, South Africa highlighted its strategic logistical position and the importance of preserving the fragile ecosystem.

Chart 9: Independent paper submissions to ATCMs by South Africa (1961–1993)[111]

Year	Meeting	Title
1961	ATCM I	Application of Nuclear Energy in the Treaty Area
1961	ATCM I	Speech by His Excellency Mr. H.N. Woodward, Leader of the South African Delegation, at the opening session of the Meeting. 10 July 1961
1962	ATCM II	Other Matters – Formation of Working Group
1964	ATCM III	Antarctic Treaty: Administrative arrangements between Consultative Meetings
1964	ATCM III	Application of Article IX paragraph 2 of the Antarctic Treaty
1964	ATCM III	Questions concerning meetings of experts. (Submitted by South African delegation as second paragraph to draft recommendation proposed by New Zealand delegation)
1964	ATCM III	Statement by the Chairman of the South African delegation
1966	ATCM IV	Opening Statement delivered by Ambassador R.H. Coaton, Head of the South African delegation
1968	ATCM V	Conditions of Access for tourist expeditions to South African Stations in Antarctica
1972	ATCM VII	Antarctic resources – effects of mineral exploration
1972	ATCM VII	National reports of experience and remedial action: South African Antarctic base at Sanae
1972	ATCM VII	Cooperation in Transport
1972	ATCM VII	Action taken by South Africa to adopt the Treaty recommendations related to the conservation of fauna and flora
1975	ATCM VIII	Opening statement from the Head of the South African delegation
1977	ATCM IX	Draft of the Convention for the Conservation of living resources of the Southern Ocean
1977	ATCM IX	Opening statement by HE Mr M.I. Botha, Head of the South African delegation
1979	ATCM X	Opening statement by the leader of the South African delegation
1981	ATCM XI	Opening statement by the Head of the delegation of South Africa, Mr P.D. Oelofsen
1985	ATCM XIII	Improvement of telecommunications in Antarctica and collection and distribution of meteorological data
1987	ATCM XIV	National Contact Point of South Africa
1989	ATCM XV	Development of an oil spill contingency plan for the Antarctic region
1989	ATCM XV	French-Australian proposal on the protection of the Antarctic environment (comments by the South-African Delegation)
1991	ATCM XVI	Opening Statement by the Head of the South African delegation
1992	ATCM XVII	Opening statement by Mr Naude Steyn, Head of the South African delegation to the XVIIth Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting

Contemporary role: 1994–2025 – 'consistent inconsistency'

South Africa's engagement in Antarctica in the post-apartheid era was devoid of any inklings of engagement driven by narrow geopolitical value. It has made clear that it views the White Continent 'through the prism of science and research.'[112]

Post-1994, South Africa emphasised the fact that it was a non-claimant country. In the opening statement of the 21st ATCM meeting in 1997, Dr Francois Hanekom, head of the South African delegation, specifically positioned South Africa as 'an original signatory to the [treaty], a non-claimant gateway and environmentally sensitive country.'[113] Through this, South Africa's role as a gateway state is differentiated from other gateway states that are claimant states. At the same time, while acknowledging its role in providing access to the White Continent, it also emphasises its vulnerability to climate stress.

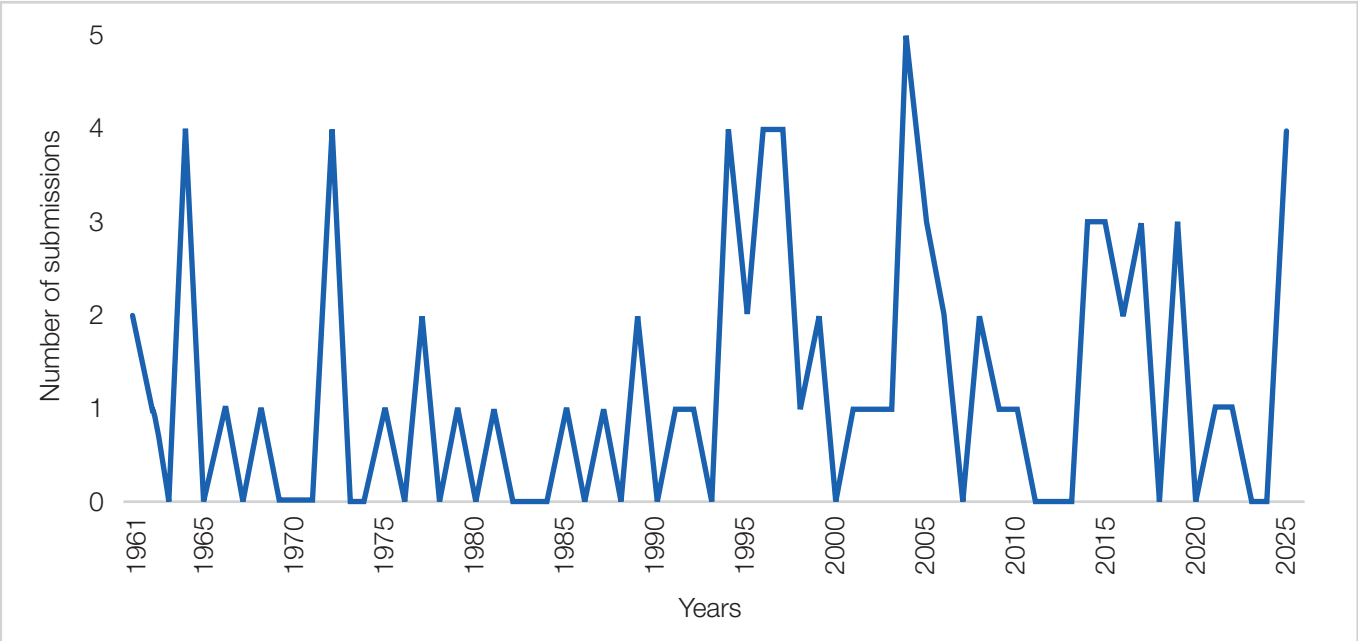
However, South Africa's engagement at the ATCMs and CCAMLR meetings over the years has been inconsistent, mirroring its engagement during the apartheid era (see Chart 10). Following the political change in 1994, the country experienced several years of high ATCM activity. In 1994, 1996 and 1997, it submitted four independent papers each year to the ATCM. However, in 1998, 2001 and 2002 this dropped to one, and none in 2000.

Such inconsistent engagement has persisted. Between 2011 and 2013, South Africa again didn't submit a single independent paper, while in 2014–2015 it submitted three. In 2023–2024, it again submitted none, while in 2025 it submitted five. No explicit explanation has been publicly provided for its inconsistent ATCM and CCAMLR engagement. But it is important to situate this pattern within the broader hierarchy of the country's foreign policy priorities.

Antarctica has not traditionally occupied a central place in South Africa's strategic thinking. As Wheeler and Sidiropoulos argue, since 1994 South Africa's foreign policy has largely been oriented toward consolidating its African identity, deepening its reintegration into the international community, and addressing pressing domestic socioeconomic and political challenges.

There were indications, however, that Antarctica was gaining renewed prominence under the leadership of Dion George, then minister of the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, who publicly framed it as a national priority. That trajectory now appears uncertain following George's 2025 dismissal and his replacement by Willie Aucamp. To date, Aucamp has not articulated a clear prioritisation of Antarctica, and his public record suggests a more traditional, conservation-oriented approach[114] that may not translate into sustained diplomatic engagement within the ATS.

Chart 10: Number of independent submissions made by South Africa to the ATCM (1961–2025)[115]



In the first democratic decade (see Chart 11), South Africa's engagement was dominated by discussions concerning the construction of SANAE IV and the need to demonstrate responsible environmental stewardship and compliance. This period was used to maintain its reputation as a responsible actor in Antarctica, by emphasising technical compliance and showcasing its enduring commitment to the region through the opening of its new research station.

In the 2000s, South Africa broadened its focus beyond just its own research station and showed advanced research capabilities by reporting on research conducted on Marion Island. It also showed commitment to the ATS by submitting annual reports to the Committee for Environmental Protection.

From 2019 onwards, South Africa's interventions increasingly centred on compliance and operational matters

Between 2010 and 2020, South Africa arguably shifted towards strategic capability building. It unveiled its new South African Polar Research Vessel – the *SA Agulhas II*, participated in search and rescue exercises with the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, introduced unmanned aerial vehicles in Antarctica, and underwent digital upgrades of the radar at SANAE IV. Finally, from 2021 onwards, there was a distinctly more policy-driven South African presence, evident by the gazetting of its first Antarctic and Southern Ocean Strategy and discussions on its Antarctica Legislative Framework.[116]

These years have hinted at a South Africa that is intent on institutionalising Antarctica governance. However, what has been noticeably absent in these submissions[117] is the African Agenda it commits itself to. In none of its independent submissions to the ATCM in 2025 was there any explicit mention of Africa, or ensuring broader participation of the continent. Trends in CCAMLR reveal a similar pattern.

From 2017 to 2025, South Africa's engagement within CCAMLR reveals an uneven trajectory of advancing the broader African Agenda it advocates for in other forums, and espouses in its foreign policy. Notably, at CCAMLR 36 (2017)[118] and 37 (2018),[119] both chaired by South Africa, capacity-building concerns were explicitly raised.

In 2017, South Africa co-submitted a paper with Chile, India, Namibia and Ukraine, highlighting the needs of developing countries and calling for support – one of the only instances between 2017 and 2025 where development and broader Global South concerns are explicitly raised by South Africa.[120]

Here, the states developed a proposal for funding support from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to strengthen participation in CCAMLR by GEF-eligible states. This emphasis in 2017 and 2018 suggested potential for South Africa to position itself as a conduit for African and developing countries within the ATS. However, this emphasis, especially on advocating for Africa, was not sustained in subsequent years.

From 2019 onwards, South Africa's interventions increasingly centred on compliance and operational matters, particularly regarding port inspection shortcomings.[121] South Africa's identity as a developing country was clearly evident here, with it attributing the challenge of inspecting ports within 24 hours to limited human capacity. However, it misses the opportunity to frame these as broader constraints facing African countries.

Similarly, South Africa's statements during this time were largely technical and generic, lacking explicit reference to African food security, sustainable development goals, or shared Global South vulnerabilities. This is notable given that other members, such as Uruguay and Chile, draw clear links between Antarctic governance and the broader development and climate agenda. The absence of opening statements from South Africa between 2022 and 2025 further reduced opportunities to shape a narrative connecting Antarctic governance to African priorities.

Broader African participation in CCAMLR during this period was sporadic and fragmented. While South Africa is the only African consultative party to the Antarctic Treaty, at CCAMLR, Namibia (as a contracting party) and Mauritius (as an observer) attended inconsistently. In 2023, South Africa and China supported Namibia's fishing notification process of the *Helena Ndume* – the first time Namibia has achieved this in 15 years.[122]

This was a welcome yet rare example of coordination between two African states at CCAMLR.

Mauritius has maintained a consistent observer presence in recent years, while countries such as Angola, Nigeria, Cabo Verde and Gambia were periodically invited as observers, but only Angola attended once. This presents an opportunity for South Africa to encourage broader African engagement.

A parallel trend has been the strengthening of South Africa's partnerships beyond Africa. In recent years, South Africa's cooperation with India has become more pronounced, particularly in 2025, as well as its broader engagement with BRICS scientific initiatives. At the 47th ATCM in 2025, South Africa and India co-authored an independent paper titled 'Enhancing Antarctic Collaboration: Contributions of the National Meteorological Services to National Antarctic Programmes'. They also contributed, alongside the World Meteorological Organisation and Italy, to a paper on 'Advancing Climate Resilience: Establishing the Antarctic Regional Climate Centre-Network (AntRCC-Network) and Antarctic Climate Forum (AntCF)'.[123]

This growing collaboration with India may be linked to the developments within the BRICS Working Group on Ocean and Polar Science and Technology. Cooperation in this field was institutionalised in 2015,[124] and South Africa hosted the fifth iteration of the Working Group in 2023. In 2024, the Working Group met in Russia to discuss future joint field research, including international cooperation cruises to the polar regions between 2025 and 2028, focused on ecological processes in the Southern Ocean.[125]

This pattern suggests that while South Africa's Antarctic diplomacy has become increasingly institutionalised, its external partnerships appear to be consolidating along BRICS and broader Global South lines rather than through an explicitly articulated African continental framework.

Chart 11: South Africa's independent paper submissions to ATCM (1994–2025)

Year	Meeting	Title
1994	ATCM XVIII	Opening address by the Head of the delegation of South Africa, Mr Thomas Wheeler
1994	ATCM XVIII	Comprehensive Environmental Evaluation of SANAE VI
1994	ATCM XVIII	Comments on the report of the International Hydrographic Organisation
1995	ATCM XIX	The development and implementation of an Environmental Health and Safety Management System in the South African National Antarctic Programme
1995	ATCM XIX	Opening statement by the representative of South Africa, Dr F Hanekom
1996	ATCM XX	Environmental Health and Safety Management System (EHSMS)
1996	ATCM XX	Environmental Health & Safety Management – SANAE IV
1996	ATCM XX	SANAE IV – Environmental health and safety management system. Document 6: Code of Conduct 1995/1996 for the construction phase and related activities
1996	ATCM XX	Opening statement by Dr F Hanekom, Head of delegation of South Africa
1997	ATCM XXI	Environmental health and safety management system (EHSMS) Follow up report 1997 on the implementation of the Final Comprehensive Environmental Evaluation (CEE) for Sanae IV, Queen Maud Land, Antarctica
1997	ATCM XXI	Update on acquiring ISO 14001 Certification
1997	ATCM XXI	Opening statement by Dr Francois Hanekom, Head of the delegation of South Africa
1998	ATCM XXII – CEP I	Environmental, Health & Safety Management System (EHSMS)
1999	ATCM XXIII – CEP II	Annual Report pursuant to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty

Year	Meeting	Title
1999	ATCM XXIII – CEP II	Opening Statement by Head of Delegation
2001	ATCM XXIV – CEP IV	Annual Report pursuant to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty
2002	ATCM XXV – CEP V	Annual Report pursuant to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty
2003	ATCM XXVI – CEP VI	Annual Report pursuant to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty
2004	ATCM XXVII – CEP VII	Annual Report pursuant to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty
2004	ATCM XXVII – CEP VII	Draft Antarctic research strategy for South Africa
2004	ATCM XXVII – CEP VII	Influence of climate on seabirds at sub-Antarctic Marion island, Southern Ocean
2004	ATCM XXVII – CEP VII	Environmental management during the construction of a new base facility at sub-Antarctic Marion Island. Phase One, 2003
2005	ATCM XXVIII – CEP VIII	Annual Report pursuant to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty
2005	ATCM XXVIII – CEP VIII	Towards the creation of a Marine Protected Area around South Africa's Sub-Antarctic Prince Edward Islands
2005	ATCM XXVIII – CEP VIII	Annual List of any Initial Environmental Evaluations prepared in accordance with Annex I, Article 2, of the Protocol (Annex I, Article 6, lit. b, of the Protocol) and also ATCM Resolution 6 (1995) 2004/2005 Season
2006	ATCM XXIX – CEP IX	Annual Report Pursuant to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty
2006	ATCM XXIX – CEP IX	Report of the Decommissioning of the Emergency Base (E Base) in Antarctica
2008	ATCM XXXI – CEP XI	Annual Report pursuant to Article 17 of The Protocol on Environmental Protection to The Antarctic Treaty
2008	ATCM XXXI – CEP XI	Recent operational developments within the South African National Antarctic Program (SANAP)
2009	ATCM XXXII – CEP XII	Propagule transport associated with logistic operations: a South African appraisal of a regional issue
2010	ATCM XXXIII – CEP XIII	New State of the Art Polar Research and Supply Vessel for South Africa
2014	ATCM XXXVII – CEP XVII	Joint South African National Antarctic Programme (SANAP) / Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre Search and Rescue (SAR) Exercise
2014	ATCM XXXVII – CEP XVII	Implementation of Annex VI of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty: A South African update
2014	ATCM XXXVII – CEP XVII	Digital Upgrade of SuperDARN radar at SANAE IV

Year	Meeting	Title
2015	ATCM XXXVIII – CEP XVIII	Special WG on Competent Authorities Issues - Summary of South Africa's Antarctic Authorisation Process
2015	ATCM XXXVIII – CEP XVIII	South Africa's use of unmanned aerial vehicles in Antarctica
2015	ATCM XXXVIII – CEP XVIII	Workshop on Education and Outreach - South Africa's Antarctic Education and Outreach Activities
2016	ATCM XXXIX – CEP XIX	25th Anniversary of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty: South African Accomplishments
2016	ATCM XXXIX – CEP XIX	Upgrade of SANAE IV Base Systems
2017	ATCM XL – CEP XX	Gateway Access: Transit Visa Developments in South Africa
2017	ATCM XL – CEP XX	Creating Awareness: the Role of the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa (ALSA)
2017	ATCM XL – CEP XX	South African National Antarctic Program (SANAP): Science Highlights 2016/7
2019	ATCM XLII – CEP XXII	South African National Antarctic Program (SANAP): Science Highlights 2018/9
2019	ATCM XLII – CEP XXII	Follow-up to the Recommendations of the Inspection at the SANAP Summer Station
2019	ATCM XLII – CEP XXII	Follow-up to Recommendations of Inspection at SANAE Station
2021	ATCM XLIII – CEP XXIII	South Africa's first Antarctic and Southern Ocean Strategy gazetted
2022	ATCM XLIV – CEP XXIV	South Africa's Antarctic Treaties Regulations
2025	ATCM 47 – CEP 27	South Africa's Antarctic Legislative Framework
2025	ATCM 47 – CEP 27	Environmental compliance monitoring of the South African National Antarctic Programme (SANAP) operations
2025	ATCM 47 – CEP 27	South African National Antarctic Programme's (SANAP) 2024 to 2026 Scientific Research in the Antarctic and Southern Ocean
2025	ATCM 47 – CEP 27	High pathogenicity avian influenza monitoring, detection and response on Marion Island, a subantarctic island

Strategic role

Based on its historical and contemporary role, South Africa possesses numerous avenues to enhance its strategic presence in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. Scientific leadership is a natural and credible role. South Africa's extensive meteorological and research infrastructure – spanning Gough Island, Marion Island and the Prince Edward Islands – positions it as a leading scientific actor in the region. By leveraging this scientific capacity, South Africa can reinforce its reputation as a non-claimant, knowledge-driven state committed to Antarctic research and environmental stewardship.

A logistical hub represents a second strategic opportunity, especially given the presence of new actors such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Türkiye. Cape Town's position as the last port of call for numerous Antarctic expeditions offers the potential to serve as a gateway for research missions. Indeed,

since at least 2017, Türkiye has been attending all ATCM meetings in its status as a Contracting Non-Consultative Party, while the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have joined since 2025.

These states may increasingly rely on Cape Town for staging and resupply. In 2018, South Africa offered assistance to a damaged Russian vessel, Ivan Papanin, near East Antarctica, and the vessel eventually returned to Cape Town, highlighting the city's important role.[126] By formalising this role, South Africa could consolidate its influence in regional logistics and operational coordination.

Tourism facilitation represents a third dimension. With Antarctic tourism steadily increasing, South Africa could capture economic benefits by positioning Cape Town as a hub for expeditions, cruises or even educational tourism. This could support the broader tourism economy while integrating Antarctic engagement into national development priorities.

Realistic role

Each of these strategic pathways, however, carries significant limitations and potential trade-offs that must be carefully considered. South Africa's Antarctic and Southern Ocean Strategy appears to prioritise positioning the country as a scientific leader within the Antarctic Treaty System.

However, in its role as a scientific leader, South Africa will have to navigate complex interests. While it has continuously presented itself as a non-claimant, research-oriented state, it must reconcile this identity with the growing commercial and geopolitical ambitions of other actors in the region.

Concerns have mounted over the alleged proliferation of dual-use technologies embedded in research infrastructure. Ground-station receivers capable of communicating with satellites, infrared telescopes and Global Positioning System technologies are reportedly increasingly integrated into Antarctic research stations. While these serve legitimate scientific purposes, they also have strategic applications, including satellite interfacing, data interception and surveillance capabilities.[127]

With South Africa adopting a scientific leader role, committed to preserving Antarctica as a space free from geopolitical competition and aligned with its original purpose as set out in the Antarctic Treaty, this stance becomes increasingly difficult to maintain when scientific activity can be instrumentalised to advance strategic and geopolitical interests.

As a logistical hub operator, South Africa would confront both ethical and operational challenges. Strategically, allowing vessels from states with divergent Antarctic priorities – such as commercial exploitation – risks undermining South Africa's commitment to environmental protection and Antarctic governance norms.

Concerns have mounted over the alleged proliferation of dual-use technologies embedded in research infrastructure

For example, past controversies highlighted by Tiara Walters,[128] such as permitting a Russian vessel allegedly conducting oil surveys to dock in Cape Town, illustrate the reputational risks of enabling activities contrary to South Africa's Antarctic principles. Facilitating access, even indirectly, may be perceived as enabling activities inconsistent with the spirit of the ATS, which South Africa firmly supports.

Operationally, increased vessel traffic necessitates robust search and rescue capabilities. Yet South Africa's navy (one of the entities that can support search and rescue if called on) is currently underfunded and under-resourced, calling into question its capacity to meet these obligations effectively should incidents occur in the Southern Ocean.

Notably, at the launch of the 2019/2020 Antarctic season, former environment minister Barbara Creecy emphasised the intention to capitalise more fully on South Africa's position as a logistical gateway.[129] At the same time, plans for the establishment of an Antarctic Centre at the Port of Cape Town were reportedly delayed, and it remains unclear whether this initiative was ever realised. Thus, while this role might well suit South Africa, it is unclear whether it is has the capacity to pursue it.

Finally, tourism facilitation presents a further layer of complexity. While economically attractive,

expanding Antarctic tourism from South African ports could exacerbate environmental pressures and conflict with the principles of maintaining the continent's pristine condition.

The potential reputational and ecological risks must be weighed against the economic benefits, ensuring that tourism strategies align with both national priorities and Antarctic conservation commitments.

Importantly, there is little indication in its ASOS that tourism is envisioned as a central pillar of its Antarctic engagement; it is not explicitly mentioned. Although the document recognises that the Antarctic region may advance South Africa's economic interests, this is not framed in overtly tourism-driven terms.

In 2023, Cape Town Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis launched an initiative to brand the city as the 'Gateway to Antarctica',[130] and earlier plans proposed the construction of an Antarctic Centre. However, these ambitions have not materialised in substantive infrastructure. This may reflect a deeper strategic orientation: South Africa appears to conceptualise its Antarctic role primarily in scientific, environmental, and logistical terms, rather than as a tourism-driven gateway state.

Conclusion

The Southern Ocean is not a peripheral space in South Africa's strategic landscape, and it should not be treated as such. Rather, it constitutes a central aspect of its climate resilience, food security and maritime safety – even when this is not always acknowledged.

While South Africa has historically maintained a science-driven and normatively principled presence in Antarctica, this has been undermined by periods of inconsistency. This risks the credibility of its position at a time when the region faces increasing geopolitical interest and climate strain.

As shipping volumes increase around the Cape of Good Hope, Antarctic tourism sets to expand, and efficiency of the Antarctic's governance faces mounting pressure, South Africa must make a deliberate and strategic decision about how it intends to position itself. The country has the capacity to assume multiple roles – as a scientific leader, and a gateway state – but it cannot afford passivity. The Southern Ocean will endure irrespective of South Africa's policy posture; South Africa, however, cannot remain secure and prosperous if the Southern Ocean's ecological integrity is fundamentally compromised.

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Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo

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About the author

Daniela Marggraff is a Junior Research Officer in the Department of History, Heritage and Tourism at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, and a research consultant on maritime security at the Institute for Security Studies. Her research focuses on ocean governance and maritime affairs, including the foreign policy of Small Island Developing States and Large Ocean States, the militarisation of islands in the Indo-Pacific, and the strategic significance of the Southern Ocean and Antarctica.

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