Revisiting Antarctic Geopolitics: Continuity and Change

Revisiting Antarctic geopolitics involves looking back as much as looking forward. The former relates to factors such as various waves of imperialism, disputed territoriality of the continent and consequential jurisdiction over the surrounding Southern Ocean, resource diplomacy of the Antarctic regional regime during 1980s and 90s, and the key role played by the movers and shakers of the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS). Whereas the latter is shaped by unfolding global/regional dynamics in international geopolitical economy, trends in global demography, and contested issues of access, ownership entitlement and equity cutting across the issues of minerals, fisheries and bioprospecting. The seven territorial claims and counter claims, legally frozen, under Article IV of the Antarctic Treaty, not only remain geopolitically alive for all practical policy purposes but in some cases have become far more assertive.

With climate change making the Antarctic more accessible, geopolitically driven perceptions of resource-hungry Asian economies, intricately combined with the ethical imperatives of providing human security especially to billions in the ‘Majority World’ or the Global South are also on the rise and demand scrutiny. The broadening and deepening of ‘Asian’ interest in the Antarctic, despite the persistent gap between the physical/scientific presence in the region and geopolitical/ diplomatic influence at the ATCMs appears to have aroused a good deal of concern, bordering on anxiety, in some quarters over the ‘actual’ and ‘long-term’ intentions of Asian states like China, South Korea and India in the Antarctic. This kind of unexamined speculative geopolitics could result in functional paralysis in the ATS. The club mentality of the Antarctic regime and the twelve originals has been questioned in several ways including the fact that as of today the number of ‘latecomers’ –the new consultative parties with proven credentials of ‘substantial scientific interest’ – stands surpassed by seventeen, with a significant number from the Global South including India, China and Brazil. No doubt the ATS has earlier managed an extremely intense and divisive geopolitics of the Cold War better than anywhere else on the globe. But the future appears to be far more challenging. What would happen to a consensus-based governance system confronted with an increasingly complex agenda including climate change, bioprospecting and tourism is difficult to predict. Will the ATS, already showing the symptoms of ‘hollowing’ out remain robust enough to face new ethical and geopolitical challenges to its authority, legitimacy and effectiveness in an increasingly warming world, inhabited by 7 billion people (and even more by 2050), with a vast majority living on the continents of Asia and Africa.