



Turkey: A New Polar Power?

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Turkey is rapidly expanding its interests and activities in the Arctic and Antarctica as it seeks to become a polar power.

In the past decade, Turkey's approach to foreign policy has evolved. New political, military and commercial relationships have been forged with countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Venezuela, Cuba and Libya. Underpinning this approach is the [idea](#) of using Turkey's 'central geopolitical position and extensive historical experience' to advance the country's influence across the world. Turkey's claims to geopolitical importance and historical significance are unprecedented in modern times but it is its recent activity in Antarctica and the Arctic that surprises.

Turkey has shown little interest in the polar regions. This changed rather abruptly in 2015, when a Polar Research Centre (PolRec) was established at Istanbul University. Since then, Turkish scientists have embarked on numerous national expeditions to both Antarctica and the Arctic. In 2018, the Ministry of Science, Industry and Technology devised the country's first '[National Polar Science Program and Strategy: 2018-2022](#)'. As that document made clear, Turkey no longer wished to be on the periphery of polar affairs.

In this article, we examine this rapid upsurge in Turkish interests in Antarctica and the Arctic. We argue that polar activities are connected to Ankara's broader foreign policy ambitions to expand national reach and influence: scientifically, commercially, and perhaps even militarily. We conclude that, although activities in the polar regions have not yet been fully integrated into Ankara's foreign policy, what is achieved in the polar regions will be meaningful in establishing Turkey's status as a global actor.

Antarctica

In March 2020, a Turkish research team returned from the country's fourth National Antarctic Science Expedition. The accompanying [press statement](#) explained that the team had been 'working on the secrets of "the White Continent", conducting 15 projects involving earth, life and marine sciences'. During Turkey's [first Antarctic science expedition](#) in 2016, the scientific team had been supported by Ukraine's Vernadsky station, which is located on an island near the Antarctic peninsula. For the 2020 expedition, most of the scientists worked from Turkey's own temporary research base, which had been established on Horseshoe Island in 2019. The [aim](#) is to eventually have a permanent scientific presence.

Once a permanent station has been established, Turkey [plans](#) to send increasing numbers of scientists to Antarctica and for longer periods. A new national Polar Research Institute (KARE) – comparable to the British Antarctic Survey – was [founded](#) in 2020 to oversee this effort. These are significant steps and prerequisites for Turkey to become a 'Consultative Party' to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty. There are presently 54 signatories to the Treaty but only 29 countries – the so-called 'Consultative Parties' – can participate in decision-making about Antarctica and so influence events on the continent. Turkey acceded to the Treaty in 1996 but consultative status is only granted to those countries that demonstrate interest in Antarctica by 'conducting substantial research activity'. The Consultative Parties have typically interpreted this to mean a national 'permanent' scientific presence on the continent: this usually

involves regular expeditions and the maintenance of at least one scientific station.

This drive for 'Consultative Party' status appears to be coming from the highest echelons of government. In December 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that: 'Our ultimate goal is not to be an observer country within the framework of Antarctic agreements, but to become one of the countries that have a say about the future of the continent'. To further bolster Turkey's 'polar credentials', Dr Burcu Özsoy, who was the director of PolRec and now heads KARE, [suggested](#) last year that Turkey had carried out more activities in Antarctica in the last three years than many countries which had ostensibly been active in the region since the 1900s. Turkish polar ambition was exhibited again in December 2019, when Turkish parliamentarians were among those from 13 countries that attended the first-ever [Antarctic Parliamentarians Assembly](#) in London. The Assembly is designed to encourage national parliaments to support and encourage their governments to address the challenges facing Antarctica.

The Arctic

Even though the National Polar Science plan makes it clear that Antarctica is the priority, Ankara also has ambitions in the north. Although Turkey is closer to the Arctic, much of this region falls under the national jurisdiction of the eight Arctic states. Antarctica, by contrast, is recognised internationally as a global commons and therefore easier to access from a geopolitical perspective. Turkish scientists have actually been engaged in Arctic research since the 2000s, albeit



A scientific base on Horseshoe Island in Antarctica. Turkey's most recent National Antarctic Science Expedition operated out of a base on Horseshoe Island. Turkey hopes to establish a permanent base in Antarctica in the future. *Courtesy of eupbro/Flickr.*

on a modest scale. In 2015, Turkey applied to become an observer to the Arctic Council (the application is yet to be approved). The application itself is significant as, since 1996, the Arctic Council has become the preeminent intergovernmental forum for the discussion of regional affairs in the Arctic. It sets standards for environmental protection, as well as for sustainable development and champions the rights of indigenous peoples across the region.

Turkey has not been alone in wishing to join the Council. As interest in the Arctic has grown around the world because of climate change and the promise of commercial opportunities, many more countries have applied to become observers. While the principle role of observers is quite literally 'to observe' the meetings of the Arctic states and Permanent Participants (representing various Arctic indigenous peoples groups), it is a status that is coveted. Being an observer provides a degree of legitimacy to those seeking to increase their engagement with and in the region.

Applicants are expected to show due deference to the primacy of the Arctic states, the interests of the Permanent Participants, and the international legal framework governing the Arctic Ocean. More importantly for our understanding of Turkey's actions, the Arctic Council's [criteria](#) for admitting observers also makes it clear that applicants must have demonstrated substantial interest and expertise relevant to the work of the Arctic Council. This revolves principally around making scientific contributions in the Arctic Council's working groups. Here, Turkey is somewhat behind other applicants, and this may explain why the Arctic Council is yet to reach a decision on Turkey's application. In contrast, Switzerland's application was [approved](#) in 2017 after Swiss representatives demonstrated a long history of scientific engagement with the Arctic and particular expertise on ice conditions and glaciers. In 2019, aware of the need to enhance Turkey's polar 'credentials', Turkish scientists [embarked](#) on their first national scientific expedition to the Arctic.

Positioning Turkey as a Polar Power

Ostensibly, the principle motivation behind Ankara's activities in the polar regions is a desire to acquire scientific knowledge. This will be of value in at least two ways. Nationally, concerns have emerged over the impacts of climate change on Turkey's glaciers in eastern and central parts of the country, with potential implications for water security. Global environmental shifts are also being felt in Turkey through intensifying storms in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. There is then good reason for Ankara to seek to better understand the global [cryosphere](#) (connecting the cold regions of the world) of which Turkey is a part, how it is changing in response to global warming and what the environmental consequences are. Internationally, Turkey might also see scientific activity in the polar regions as a means for engaging in 'science diplomacy'. Playing an active part in the international scientific community that is trying to address global challenges also enables Turkey to enhance its international standing.

But Turkey's activities in the polar regions are not just about prestige. They are also linked to burgeoning commercial interests. The Arctic Ocean's rich resource potential and emerging trade routes have already been [remarked](#) upon in Turkey. The country already benefits from growing commercial activity in the Arctic across several sectors. For example, Turkish construction companies have sent hundreds of engineers to work on key infrastructure projects in the Russian Arctic, including [Yamal LNG](#) and [Arctic LNG 2](#). [Turkish shipyards](#) have meanwhile been taking orders from the Arctic Ocean littoral states (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Russia and the US) for state-of-the-art fishing vessels, offshore support vessels and passenger vessels that are capable of operating in Arctic waters. As commercial activity in the Arctic grows, so too will Turkey's interests.

More controversially, perhaps, although Ankara would not be unique in taking such a pathway, it surely must also be considering resource prospects in Antarctica. It has long been [believed](#) that the Antarctic continent and surrounding seas possess vast mineral wealth. However, in 1991, an internationally agreed Protocol on Environmental Protection, which forms a key part of the Antarctic Treaty System, explicitly banned the exploitation of Antarctica's mineral resources. Although the ban is indefinite, from 2048 it is technically possible for the Consultative Parties to negotiate a new agreement relating to mineral exploitation. While the barriers to doing so are high, there is a good deal of speculation that the Antarctic Treaty may not prove to be as robust as had been hoped. Any such frailty has not gone unnoticed in Ankara. Indeed, in 2018, the Industry and Technology Minister Faruk Özlü [observed](#) that 'there are rich energy resources on the [Antarctic] continent. Plus, the continent provides around 70% of the world's resources. We will have a say in all these sources in the future'.

Turkey's expanding scientific and commercial interests in the polar regions clearly reflect Ankara's stated ambition to modernise and grow the country's economy by becoming a leading producer of new science and technologies. In 2019, Erdoğan [declared](#) that Turkey

was 'determined to become a country that produces new technologies and exports them to the entire world' and aims to become a 'centre of attraction for all scientists in the world'. This year, Turkey also [plans](#) to establish a national space programme as a further sign of its scientific and technological ambitions. Ankara has already embarked on several other major scientific projects, including research into electric cars, aerospace technologies and unmanned systems to support agriculture and improve mapping and surveillance. Polar research, to the extent that it involves generating new knowledge and capabilities while operating in an extremely harsh and remote environment, can similarly be used to advance national scientific and technological expertise. Turkey may also be looking to mimic other polar powers such as the UK, which have linked the need for polar science to the possibility of generating commercial spinoffs.

Alongside Ankara's scientific and commercial interests in the polar regions are potential military interests, especially in the Arctic. Military activity is growing, especially in the European High North where the tempo of Russian and NATO exercises has been increasing over the past decade. Notwithstanding recent tensions, Turkey remains firmly committed to NATO and Euro-Atlantic security, and as the Alliance has renewed its focus on the High North, Turkish armed forces have been sent to the region to participate in training and exercises. Most notably, the Turkish Navy has participated in NATO's Dynamic Mongoose Exercise, an annual anti-submarine warfare exercise which takes place in the North Atlantic and the High North. Turkish warships have sailed north of the Arctic Circle as part of this exercise. While Turkey has no immediate security interests in the Arctic, it is building at least some operational experience in the High North, demonstrating that it is both able and willing to support its allies on the northern flank as part of a wider commitment to Alliance solidarity.

Conclusion

Ankara's foreign policy ambitions have expanded significantly in recent years as part of an effort to position the country as a modern, innovative and economically

successful state, with an influential voice in international affairs. Turkey's growing scientific, commercial and potential military activities in the polar regions are very much part of this project, even though it is yet to be articulated fully. Notably though, whilst many countries have positioned themselves as 'near' Arctic powers or as 'friends' of Antarctica, Turkey has chosen to expand its interests in both regions. Ankara certainly has good justification for doing so since its glaciers make it part of the global cryosphere. However, Turkey's investments in the polar regions are also allowing it to pursue a bigger mosaic of interests which are scientific, commercial and military. As such, Turkey joins both China and India in pursuing more ambitious activities in frozen lands.

Most interesting, though, is what is to come. Through its interventions in Libya, Somalia, Syria and elsewhere, Ankara has gained confidence in its ability to further its national agenda in parts of the world which have been traditionally dominated by Western as well as Russian and Chinese power. Turkey has become particularly adept at interacting, co-opting and competing with different actors in these spaces. Through expanding its scientific, commercial and military activities in the polar regions – or, in other words, becoming a polar power – Ankara hopes to uncover new opportunities to establish itself as a global rather than regional actor.

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