

China's interest in Antarctica grows.

And what about Argentina?

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The Government of the People's Republic of China issued its first policy paper on its activities in Antarctica, reaffirming its growing strategic interest in the white continent, expressed over the last decades.



Going back to history, in 1983 China acceded to the Antarctic Treaty of 1959. Two years later, it became an advisory member of the Treaty and sent its first Antarctic expedition, after which its first permanent station was established. At present, China has four permanent stations:

Changcheng, Zhongshan, Taishan and Kunlun, having sent a total of 33 expeditions to date.

China already plans a fifth station, which would be located in the Ross Sea area and its construction would begin in 2018. In addition, the Asian power concluded the studies to establish its first airbase in the Antarctic, projected to be carried out towards the end of this Year, along with new land routes to improve the communication of its bases. Without specifying dates, it was also announced that new scientific research systems and instruments will be installed.

The new policy paper was released in the pre-event of the 40th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting, recently held in Beijing. The main topics discussed were the impact of climate change on Antarctica and the increasing tourist flows, as well as mechanisms for the protection and management of the various Antarctic regions.

It should be noted that, beyond the geostrategic aspects, tourism has acquired special relevance for China, as more and more Chinese are attracted to Antarctica as an 'exotic' destination to visit. An incipient industry promoting these trips is emerging in China, with enormous economic potential.

Argentina could take advantage of this, due to its favorable location and the attention that has

been given to the subject in the bilateral agenda with China. In fact, an Antarctic cooperation agreement was signed in Beijing by both countries, during the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting.

That said, the interest of the Chinese Government and the Chinese people in Antarctica is growing for various reasons, as evidenced by the recent release of the first policy paper along with significant announcements, coupled with the novel topic of tourism.

This is an issue be followed with great attention by the Argentine authorities, given our long record and interests in Antarctica. We are one of the 12 founding countries of the Antarctic Treaty and historically we have had important presence and protagonism in the continent, with remarkable scientific and humanitarian expeditions.

In this context, it is encouraging that the icebreaker ARA Almirante Irizar has returned to sailing last month, after several years of abandonment during the previous Cristina Kirchner's administration.

However, there is still much to invest and do to boost our Antarctic presence, while it remains unclear whether the issue is among the priorities of the new government of Mauricio Macri. Argentina is far away from minimally equating

what other countries like China, the United States, Russia or Chile are doing in Antarctica. Our neighbor could perhaps serve as the best mirror for improvement in this matter.