

# India and Antarctica in 1956

## ABSTRACT

Based on Chilean and other newspaper sources, as well as relevant diplomatic correspondence, this paper analyses the context and content of the 1956 Indian initiative related to the Antarctic at the United Nations. India called for Antarctica to be dedicated only to peaceful uses and all nations should agree not to extend to that region of the world international tensions existent at the time of the Cold War. Antarctica would be internationalized and become the world's only region in which all atomic and thermonuclear tests were to be forbidden. It is amazing that the former British colony, which had only just achieved independence and was trying to build-up the still weak membership of the Non-Alignment Movement, would be able to provoke such international commotion at the time of the preparatory meetings for the International Geophysical Year (IGY) and, according to the Chilean historian Mario Barros van Buren, the alarm it generated acted as a strong element of cohesion which led to the strengthening of a common front of opposition among nations with Antarctic interests.

This paper attempts to clarify why India threatened to table its proposal, and what it expected to gain if it were to do so. Did she want to split the Afro-Latin American bloc –at the time the most important alliance within the UN General Assembly– or play upon the US-USSR confrontation, or the different Anglo-Saxon and South-American approaches towards an Antarctic settlement, or was the Indian objective mostly seeking to gain international “prestige”?

As indicated in this paper, the outcome was that the Indian proposal was met by a very strong opposition and the alarm it generated acted as a strong factor of cohesion which ultimately led to the political and legal accommodation accomplished by the 1958/59 Washington Conference.

## THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE IN THE FIFTIES

During the first seven years of the 1950s three different events, apparently linked with each other, had a significant impact on the development of Antarctic negotiations initiated by the 1948 American proposals for internationalization, either through a trusteeship or a condominium, subsequently superseded by the Chilean initiative leading to a *status quo* or moratorium declaration. At the beginning of 1950, the State Department had handed to the British and Chilean representatives a revised draft of the moratorium declaration, but showed reluctance to circulate the text to the other claimants, indicating that they foresaw that interested powers not parties to the arrangement or agreement might cause complications in the future. They were not wrong since the scenario would rapidly become more complex in the light of new and to a certain extent unexpected events, but the decision to delay consideration of the proposal being canvassed by the US, Chile and the UK was a serious tactical mistake.

Those events included:

a) the launching of the International Geophysical Year (IGY) on the basis of a suggestion made to the Joint Commission on the Ionosphere by an American and a British scientist, Lloyd Berkner and Stephen Chapman respectively, and the subsequent decision taken in July 1950 by the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) to propose a tentative programme for a Third Polar Year, afterwards enlarged by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) into an International Geophysical Year which would encompass all geophysical phenomena in the earth;

b) the diplomatic note sent by the Soviet Union to seven countries, in June 1950, in which they stated “their desire to claim rights and to participate in the international discussions over the future system of administration of the Antarctica”<sup>1</sup> and;

c) the unexpected and somewhat confusing Indian proposal on 12 February 1956 to the eleventh session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, which stated that all nations should commit themselves to the use of Antarctica exclusively for peaceful activities but was generally interpreted as aimed at “preventing the nations of the world from competing for the uranium that might exist in the Antarctic Continent”.<sup>2</sup>

The first initiative resulted in various countries preparing a great world tournament or scientific event in diplomatic meetings –the Antarctic Conferences held at Brussels and Paris during the years 1954 to 1956– and in the following two years saw a logistical and technological project in the area of Antarctic science never before known that also involved the political and territorial interests of the participating states, especially the Soviet Union and the United States. However, at the plenary session of the 1955 IGY Conference in Paris, it was accepted that the Conference had “exclusively scientific overall aims and a technical character”. The Argentine and Chilean delegations gave their accord to the recommendations for the coordination of existing and new bases, with the proviso that, agreeing to the goal and spirit of the resolution taken at that first plenary meeting, these were temporary measures calculated to achieve the best results of the IGY and adopted in the interests of scientific development, and that these resolutions did not modify the “existing status” in the Antarctic regarding the relations of the participating countries. Ambassador Paul Daniels, the diplomatic negotiator of the US, contended that “the various governments had reached a sort of “gentleman’s agreement” whose effect would be later transmitted to the Antarctic Treaty negotiation.

Soviet aspirations and demands in the Antarctic were bluntly stated: “The Government of the USSR cannot agree that such issue as the question of a regime for the Antarctic should be decided without its participation. In this connection the Soviet Government considers it necessary to recall the outstanding services of Russian navigators in the discovery of the Antarctic. The fact is generally recognized that the

Russian navigators Bellingshausen and Lazarev at the beginning of the nineteenth century first reached the shores of the Antarctic, sailed round the continent and in this way showed the error then widely spread that there was no land within the South polar circle. The service of the Russian navigators is no less important than the later explorations carried out on the Continent itself and its shores by expeditions of certain lands, the representatives of which declare at the present time their interest in the determination of a regime for the Antarctic." The Russian initiative led Argentina and Chile to publicly assert their exclusive rights in the "American Antarctic" rejecting any Soviet claim to Antarctic territory. The UK and the United States were led to rethink their respective strategies in order to secure their definite installation in the Antarctic. Australia, extremely concerned with the Russian "démarche", observed the Anglo-American reaction to undo or counteract the hegemonic aspirations of the Soviet Union in the Antarctic, without damaging Anglo-American interests in that region and paradoxically without upsetting peaceful coexistence during the Cold War as a contradiction between means and ends.<sup>3</sup>

The third event on the other hand, when India meddled in the Antarctic question in 1956, was nothing less than astonishing for both the Chilean and the world press and public opinion, as it involved a recently independent nation that had never before shown any interest in the Antarctic.

What were India's intentions when it presented a request to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld on 17 February 1956 to include "The Question of Antarctica" in the provisional agenda to be discussed during the XI<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the General Assembly? Did India actually imagine that this proposal could resolve the complex situation through which the Antarctic was moving at that time, and which was due, fundamentally, to the diverse positions in conflict of Anglo-Saxon and South American countries?

Although it is difficult to understand why an Asian state without any past involvement in the Antarctic could be interested in a proposal which presented a sort of ultimatum to the claimant nations and did not satisfy either the interest of world powers involved in the issue with the exception, perhaps and in certain aspects, the Soviet Union. Through the combined analysis of certain press notices of that time, of relevant diplomatic correspondence and of the current developments taking place at the United Nations, it is possible to understand better the context in which the Indian presentation took place.<sup>4</sup>

At this time, the English specialist in international law, C.H.M. Waldock, called on the authorities of his country, in an interview granted to *The London Times* in early February 1956, to take all measures necessary to defend their Antarctic claims before Russia could insert itself on the Antarctic scenario. It appears that there were suspicions that something was going to happen in the near future and Waldock had emerged already in 1948 as the legal authority in the defence of British Antarctic claims, which received a prompt reply from the Chilean international lawyer José Daniel.<sup>5</sup> The British suspicions were quickly confirmed when the landing of a Soviet Union party in the Antarctic was uncovered having

taken place already on 5 January 1956. A few days after Waldock's demand for British action, the commander of the Soviet expedition Mikhail Mikhaylovich Somov, head of the IGY station, responded: "that all the interested countries should be invited to discuss the territorial provisions for a zone of such international importance". Immediately afterwards, on February 14, 1956, in an act of great symbolic value, Somov raised the Russian flag in the Antarctic.

Almost simultaneously, according to information published in the Australian newspaper "The Mirror", it became known that India was close to starting a movement in the United Nations to have the Antarctic proclaimed a fully international zone.<sup>6</sup> Initially India wanted action that would prevent the Antarctic from being used for undefined activities labeled as not peaceful, apparently meaning, being used as a site for nuclear tests. Subsequently, without showing any particular discomfort, the Indian position drifted towards the internationalisation of the continent.<sup>7</sup> With this confusion, naturally, what it probably expected was to gain time and stir up trouble between Britain, the United States and the South American countries. They hoped to move the discussion to a new and respectable arena such as that of the United Nations, one that would at the same time allow Jawaharlal Nehru, his representative at the UN, Arthur Lall, or Krishna Menon his Defense Minister suspected to be the brain of the initiative by Indian diplomats and civil servants as Ambassador Hussain, Head of the UN Department at the Indian Foreign Office, to play leading roles on the stage of world diplomacy.<sup>8</sup>

A form of international pressure that appealed to world peace under the philosophy of "dynamic nonalignment", strengthened at the Bandung Conference and the meeting of Nehru, Nasser and Tito at Brioni in 1955, accompanied by a certain measure of journalistic coverage, enabled India to try and convert itself into a leader of international opinion -or at least that of South Asia- quite independently from other members of the British Commonwealth in ways that the British government considered unacceptable interference. The Commonwealth group of countries interested in the Antarctic requested without success that India reconsider and withdraw their agenda item. On 12 September, India substituted the item "The Question of Antarctica" by another one entitled "Peaceful Utilization of Antarctica" and maintained the accompanying explanatory memoranda.

As soon as the Latin American Group, which included Chile and Argentina, learned of the new situation provoked by India, they organized a meeting where Óscar Pinochet, a Second Secretary at that time, made a substantial presentation on the importance of the South American Antarctic bounded by the American Security Zone as established in the Rio Treaty. The meeting, headed at the time by the veteran Ecuadorian diplomat, Juan Vicente Trujillo, decided to firmly oppose the Indian proposal. The Ecuadorian Ambassador told the press that he had met several times with the Indian Ambassador Lall and that he remained confident that the proposal would not be discussed by the General Assembly.<sup>9</sup> The twenty Latin American countries constituted more than one third of the UN membership and their vote, combined with those of their allies from the African Group, the group of Asian countries

close to the United States including Japan, Korea and the Republic of China (Taiwan) and other friends or allies such as Australia and Canada could easily defeat the Indian initiative at any time. India retreated to a more cautious position conditioning the presentation or withdrawal of its proposal to the opinion of the UN Secretary General Hammarskjöld with whom the Chilean Ambassador Ortega would have a lengthy conversation on the subject.<sup>10</sup>

The United States, on the other hand, opted for a “noisy silence”. The State Department considered, under some pressure from the Australians, the possibility of giving India some assurance that they did not intend to use the Antarctic as a testing ground for nuclear devices but finally did not take the matter up with their Atomic Energy Commission. Through most of 1956 the US remained undecided and resolved only shortly before India withdrew its proposed item, mainly under the pressure of the Latin American Group as well as a successful *démarche* by the Chilean Ambassador Miguel Serrano with Prime Minister Nehru. At the same time the US initiated an active reinforcement of its presence in Antarctica to counter the open rivalry with the Soviet Union spreading into both the technological-scientific field and the ideological, especially due to the significant Soviet expansion to cover all sectors of Antarctica.<sup>11</sup>

The withdrawal of the Indian proposal on 14 November 1956<sup>12</sup> with the excuse that they did not want to produce any more international controversies involving the Antarctic than the already existent, was due in part that as 1956 advanced India was losing prestige within the United Nations not just with the Latin American countries, but with the international community. In the face of this situation, India had no better way of escape than to withdraw its request and to try and improve its image as an international actor through the elimination of the impression that they had acted as Moscow’s cat’s paw. It must be explained that, in addition to the bloc politics that dominated the General Assembly, the complex series of factors and interests in play in that year meant that finally India had to desist from its un successful Antarctic project once the eleventh session was convened on November 12, 1956, dropping the Antarctic topic two days after the opening ceremony. The late start of the sessions and overcoming events, the invasion of Egypt on 29 October 1956 by Israel, Britain and France led the General Assembly into an emergency or special session which, according to the rules of procedure, would be chaired by the country that had presided over the last year’s General Assembly (Chile). The fact that Chile would preside over the two Special Assembly Sessions (Suez and afterwards Hungary invaded by the Soviet Army) under the rules of procedure and using the *Uniting for Peace* resolution, was certainly not favourable to India’s design. The issues involved in both emergency sessions severely tested the credibility of Indian Non-Alignment ideals. India was able to pass the first test with the Suez Canal Crisis, but failed the next one. When the Soviet tanks crushed the Hungarian rebellion, Nehru expressed “concern and distress” but India abstained on the vote condemning Soviet aggression and opposed a resolution demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. After several weeks, India joined in

the criticism of the Soviet Union and Nehru declared: “The great majority of the Hungarian people wanted a change of government, revolted and were suppressed, after very brave fighting by Soviet forces”. His statements came too late and damage to the Indian image had already been done.

The story of the Indian Antarctic initiative had started with the first request on 17 February 1956, proceeded under a different name on 12 September, was supported by an explanatory memoranda on 16 October and effectively included in the provisional agenda under number 8 and afterwards number 59, but was withdrawn at session 107 of the Board of the Assembly at the request of the Indian Delegate on 14 November 1956, and was never discussed. It is probably appropriate to indicate that events on the surface do not always reveal other trends under that surface. The US had anticipated the possibility that the Indian initiative might be revived at the 1957 session, which did not happen, and within the State Department it was suggested that “a UN debate would leave the US free to explore once again a policy of internationalisation along the lines taken in 1948 as perhaps offering the best means of limiting the activities of our probable enemies in that region and of resolving the claims issue”. Moreover, India did include the item in the provisional agenda of the thirteenth UN Assembly under number 64, but again withdrew the item before the definitive agenda was established.<sup>13</sup>

Did India’s proposals have any consequences on the development of negotiations leading towards the Antarctic Treaty?

The Indian stand probably influenced the discussion of Article V (Nuclear Activities) of the Antarctic Treaty, prohibiting nuclear explosions and disposal of radioactive waste. As the Chilean historian Mario Barros maintains, it probably contributed to the rapid acceptance by all the invited parties of the US invitation to the Washington Conference.<sup>14</sup> There is an intriguing resemblance between language used in the Indian memoranda and the Preamble to the Antarctic Treaty which, according to the records of the meeting, was drafted by New Zealand. The Indian declared objective -because some unacknowledged end may have been envisaged- was best served by Article I (Peaceful Uses) of the Washington Treaty: “Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only”. The memoranda attached to the Indian proposal stressed the global climate role of Antarctica, thus anticipating in many years the Environmental Protocol of 1991.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper has been funded by Fondecyt Project nº 1040187.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Russian Antarctic claims” *La Unión de Valparaíso* (11 June 1950), 1 “Consultations concerning Soviet Note on Antarctica” *La Unión de Valparaíso* (15 June 1950), 4; “A Russian newspaper takes issue again with Antarctica” *La Estrella de Valparaíso*

(20 July 1950); M. Whiteman, *Digest of International Law*, v.2 (1963) 1254-5.

<sup>2</sup> "A request that Antarctica becomes a United Nations Trusteeship", *La Estrella*, 24 January 1956; "Chile does not accept India's Antarctic proposal"; "Chile opposes the inclusion of the Question of Antarctica in the United Nations agenda" *La Unión*, March 2 1956; UNGA, Official Documents, Doc. A/3191.

<sup>3</sup> Domeyko (Chargé d'Affaires in Australia) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister), Santiago, report n° 62-30, 12 March 1956. Archivo General Histórico, Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs Vol. 4:296.

<sup>4</sup> The press reports used in this paper include 15 documents selected from the newspaper *La Unión de Valparaíso*, distributed in: 6 United Nations, 1 Organization of American States, 2 United Kingdom, 6 from *El Diario Ilustrado*, Santiago, twenty-nine (29) press news originated in Oslo (1), Moscow (2), United Nations (9), United Kingdom (6), Paris (2), and Chilean sources (9); from the Historical Archives of the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs del *Archivo General Histórico del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Chile* 12 documents drawn from correspondence with the United States and Australia, the Chilean Embassy in Delhi and the Chilean Misión to the UN.

<sup>5</sup> "London objects to the pretense of Russian rights to Antarctica" *El Diario Ilustrado* (7 February 1956), includes the reference to Waldock's interview. See also C.H.M. Waldock. "Disputed Sovereignty in the Falkland Islands Dependencias" in *British Yearbook of International Law*, v. 25, 1948 and José Daniel. "Conflict of Sovereignties in the Antarctic" in *Yearbook of World Affairs*, v. 3 (1949). 11.

<sup>6</sup> Domeyko (Chilean Chargé d'Affaires in Australia) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister, Santiago), report n° 46-22, 25 February 1956. Archivo General Histórico, Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 4.296.

<sup>7</sup> Domeyko (Chargé d'Affaires in Australia) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister, Santiago), report n° 76-34, 16 March 1956. Archivo General Histórico, Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 4.296.

<sup>8</sup> Juan Domeyko (Chargé d'Affaires in Australia) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister, Santiago), report n° 51/24, 29 February 1956. Archivo General Histórico, Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 4.296.

<sup>9</sup> "Success of the Chilean Position at the UN: the Antarctic issue will not be considered" *El Diario Ilustrado* (7 October 1956); "Indian recommendation to the UN on the peaceful uses of Antarctica" *El Diario Ilustrado* (17 October 1956). Pinochet (1994) *Medio Siglo de recuerdos antárticos*: 83-89.

<sup>10</sup> "India withdrew the Question of Antarctica from the United Nations agenda" *El Diario Ilustrado* (15 November 1956), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ortega (Ambassador to the United Nations) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister, Santiago), report n° 449/9 of 17 August 1956. Archivo General Histórico, Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. s/n°.

<sup>12</sup> UNGA Official Documents. Doc. A/3350.

<sup>13</sup> UNGA Official Documents. Doc. A/3846, 18 July 1958.

<sup>14</sup> Barros Van Buren, Mario (1990): 857.

## REFERENCES

### PUBLISHED MATERIAL

Ahluwalia, K. (1960) "The Antarctic Treaty: should India become a Party to It?", *Indian Journal of International Law*, 1960-61, pp. 473-483.

Barros Van Buren, Mario (1990) *Historia Diplomática de Chile 1541-1938*. Second edition (updated to 1958), Editorial Andrés Bello.

Bowie, Robert (1974) *Suez 1956*. Oxford University Press.

D'Arcy, Manuela. (1991) *L' O.N.U. a Nu*. Paris, V&O Editions. 157 pp.

Fiske, Victor (1994) "The road to Suez: the British Foreign Office and the Quai d'Órsay". In *The Diplomats, 1939-1979*. Edited by Gordon A. Craig and Francis L. Loewenstein. Princeton University Press, pp. 167-200.

Finger, Seymour Maxwell. *American Ambassadors at the UN. People, Politics and Bureaucracy in making Foreign Policy*. New York, UNITAR, RR 36. 363 pp.

Fonseca, Rena (1994) "Nehru and the Diplomacy of Non-Alignment", Chapter 13. In *The Diplomats, 1939-1979*, pp. 371-397.

Headland, Robert K (1989) *Chronological List of Antarctic Expeditions and Related Historical Events*. Studies in Polar Research. Cambridge University Press. 730 pp.

Howkins, Adrian (2008) "Defending polar empire opposition to India's proposal to raise the 'Antarctic Question' at the United Nations in 1956". *Polar Record*, vol. 44 N°228, pp. 35-44.

Lauren, Paul Gordon (1994) "The Diplomats and Diplomacy of the United Nations". In *The Diplomats, 1939-1979*, pp. 459-495.

Lebedev, V. *La Antártida* (1965). Buenos Aires, Editorial Cartago, 255 pp.

León W., M. Consuelo & Jara F., Mauricio. (2003) *ANTARTICA. Testimonios Periodísticos, 1947-1957*. Editorial Puntángenes, Valparaíso, 345 pp.

León W., M. Consuelo & Jara F., Mauricio (2006) *La Antártica y el Año Geofísico Internacional. Percepciones desde Fuentes chilenas, 1954-1958*. Valparaíso, Libra, pp.219.

Memoria del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores correspondiente al año 1956. Imprenta de Chile, Santiago, 11 IX 1959.

Mikes, George (1957) *The Hungarian Revolution*. André Deutsch Limited. Tonbridge, Kent. 192 pp.

Pinochet de la Barra, Óscar (1994) *Medio Siglo de Recuerdos Antárticos. memorias*. Santiago, Editorial Universitaria, 156 pp.

Quigg, Philip W. (1983) *A Pole Apart: The Emerging Issue of Antarctica*. London, McGraw Hill, 299 pp.

Templeton, Malcolm (2000) *A Wise Adventure. New Zealand in Antarctica, 1920-60*. Victoria University Press, Auckland, 328 pp.

Whiteman, M.M. *Digest of International Law*, Vol. 2 Washington D.C. 1963.

## UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL

- Domeyko (Chargé d’Affaires in Australia) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Report n° 46-22 of 25 February 1956. Archivo Histórico. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.
- Domeyko (Chargé d’Affaires to Australia) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Report n° 51/24 of 29 February 1956. Archivo Histórico. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.
- Domeyko (Chargé d’Affaires in Australia) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Report n° 62-30 of 12 March 1956. Archivo Histórico. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.
- Domeyko (Chargé d’Affaires in Australia) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Report n° 76/34 of 16 March 1956. Archivo Histórico. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.
- Ortega (Ambassador to the United Nations) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Report n° 449/9 of 17 August 1956 (“Utilización Pacífica de la Antártida”). Archivo Histórico. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.
- Serrano (Ambassador to India) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Confidential report n° 4, 5 March 1956.
- Serrano (Ambassador to India) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Confidential report n° 8, 25 March 1956.
- Miguel Serrano (Ambassador to India) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Confidential report n° 9, 27 March, 1956.
- Serrano (Ambassador to India) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Confidential report n° 18. 22 August 1956.
- Serrano (Ambassador to India) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Confidential report n° 19, 20 September 1956.
- Serrano (Ambassador to India) to Barbosa (Foreign Minister). Confidential report n° 21. 26 October 1956.

## CHILEAN PRESS

- La Unión, Valparaíso  
La Estrella, Valparaíso  
El Diario Ilustrado, Santiago  
El Mercurio, Santiago

## FOREIGN PRESS

- The Hindustan Standard  
The Times of India  
The Times of London  
The Mirror of Australia  
The Sydney Herald

## OTHER DOCUMENTS

- United Nations Official Documents, Eleventh Session Period, Annex p. 1.  
Doc. A/3118, 17 February 1956.  
Doc. A/3118/add. 1 (Change of name) 12 September 1956.  
Doc. A/3118/add. 2 (Explanatory Memoranda).  
Official Doc. Annex p. 1 (inclusion as n° 8 Provisional Agenda).  
Doc. A/3191, (transfer to n° 59 Provisional Agenda).  
Doc. A/3350; Withdrawal of the item) 14 November 1956.  
United Nations Official Documents, Thirteenth Session Period  
Doc. A/3846, 18 July 1958 (Includes item n° 64 in the Provisional Agenda).  
Withdrawal before definitive Agenda is agreed.

## MAURICIO JARA

University of Playa Ancha, Chile  
Email: mjara@upa.cl