

*Polar Prospects: A Minerals Treaty for  
Antarctica*

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**POLAR PROSPECTS**

A  
Minerals  
Treaty  
for  
Antarctica



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# Foreword

Few places remain on the Earth where rules for allocating natural resources and regulating their development are not at least reasonably well established. On land and within relatively narrow strips of adjacent coastal waters, dominion over resources-and thus the power to allocate and regulate-is largely settled. Although not universally accepted, general rules have even been established to regulate any future mineral exploitation of the deep seabeds, the vast ocean areas beyond national jurisdiction. Antarctica, by virtue of extreme isolation and a unique political history, is the last major area of the world without some system of governance for mineral resource activities. Rules establishing such a system, *although not yet in force, are embodied in a new treaty, the 1988 Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities*. The treaty does not presume that minerals will ever be developed in Antarctica. Rather, it establishes a framework for considering whether activities may be allowed and for regulating any activities that are permitted.

Four committees of the Congress, the Senate Committees on Foreign Relations and on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, and the House Committees on Foreign Affairs and on Merchant Marine and Fisheries asked OTA to evaluate the implications of this new treaty for the United States. The Senate has a constitutional responsibility to give its advice and consent to ratification of the treaty. Both houses of Congress will have to pass legislation to implement the treaty should it be ratified. OTA's report on the Minerals Convention is intended to provide a timely and useful reference to the Congress as it considers these topics.

This report identifies U.S. interests in Antarctica and evaluates the Minerals Convention relative to these interests. It examines the status of knowledge about the resources of Antarctica, the potential impacts of minerals development, and the technical, economic, environmental, geological, and political constraints to development in Antarctica.

We received substantial assistance from many individuals and organizations in the course of this study. Special thanks go to OTA's Antarctica Advisory Panel; to participants in the three workshops convened during the study; to the project's contractors; and to experts in the National Science Foundation, the Department of State, the Department of the Interior, the Marine Mammal Commission, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. We also gratefully acknowledge our sister congressional agency, the Congressional Research Service, for again sharing its expertise. However, OTA remains solely responsible for the contents of this report.



JOHN H. GIBBONS  
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NOTE: OTA appreciates and is grateful for the valuable assistance and thoughtful critiques provided by the advisory panel members. The panel does not however, necessarily approve, disapprove, or endorse this report. OTA assumes full responsibility for the report and the accuracy of its contents.

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