The ice-covered continent, Antarctica, spanning the Earth’s South Pole is rarely covered in news reports. For now, policies of the world’s leading nations do not really concern the Antarctic. There are no mining or extraction facilities, manufacturing plants or military bases on the continent. Inhabitants of Antarctica comprise several hundred researchers from different countries, who reside in South Pole stations and completely depend on supplies from the outside for survival.

The southernmost continent does not belong to any one country or even to a group of nations. The 1959 Antarctic Treaty “sets aside Antarctica as a scientific preserve”. However it expires in 2048, which is why some nations, such as the United States, Great Britain, New Zealand, Chile and even China, have already begun talking about their rights to stake claims on various parts of the Antarctic. Hence, it seems apt to revisit the history of the seventh continent and its discovery and discuss Russia’s interests in relation to this landmass.

Western theories about “a vast continent, known as Terra Australis, believed to exist in the far south of the globe” emerged a long time ago. The great British explorer and navigator, James Cook, and his crew embarked on a journey to determine whether Terra Australis Incognita (“Unknown Southern Land”) indeed existed at the end of 18th century. In 1773, their ship Resolution was the first to have crossed the Antarctic Circle. And “although they discovered nearby islands, they did not catch sight of Antarctica itself”. Expeditions to the southernmost continent then stopped for a number of years. There was renewed interest in exploring the South Pole after English captain William Smith and his crew, in an attempt to avoid contrary wind in the Drake Passage, changed course and became the first men to discover what are now the South Shetland Islands in February 1819. When the news reached Britain, the Royal Navy sent another expedition, headed by experienced mariner and officer in the British Royal Navy Edward Bransfield, “to survey the newly discovered islands”.

In the meantime, the Russian Empire also had plans to explore what is now known as the Southern Ocean. At the
time, the Russian and British Empires, which had recently defeated Napoleon and his forces, were the leading world powers. Hence, discovering a new continent could ensure the nation responsible would win the battle for international prestige. Perhaps, this is why the focus of the Russian expedition changed at the beginning of 1819. Its main aim became proving or disproving “the existence of a suspected” continent. Captain Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen was put in charge of the mission.

The first Russian Antarctic expedition began in July 1819. Two ships - Vostok, under the command of Fabian Bellingshausen, and Mirny, under the command of Mikhail Lazarev, set sail from Kronstadt (a Russian port city) and headed for the Southern Ocean. Having first stopped in Rio de Janeiro, the expedition then reached the sub-antarctic region, where they discovered several islands, which are now part of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (a British Overseas Territory). Soon afterwards, Vostok and Mirny reached impenetrable ice that surrounded the southernmost continent. In search of a passage, the captains went around the landmass in cold and dangerous seas. Although the ships were covered in snow and sailors suffered from exposure to cold weather, the crews continued with their mission until, on January 27, 1820, they spotted an ice shelf at Princess Martha Coast (the first portion of Antarctic mainland discovered by a human). This is when the seventh continent was sighted for the first time. A few days later, on January 30, 1820, the British expedition, captained by Edward Bransfield, reached Antarctica. They approached the landmass at Trinity Peninsula but none of them knew about the accomplishments of the Russian expedition. Edward Bransfield and his crew believed they were the first men to sight the new continent.

The Russian Empire did not see much value in exploring the landmass further and chose not to continue with its studies of it. Up until the end of 19th century, the British showed the most interest in Antarctica, which strengthened their territorial claims in the region. At the beginning of 20th century, the British government declared sovereignty over a number of islands in the sub-antarctic region and over a substantial portion of Antarctica. In addition, the British Empire put Australia and New Zealand, its dominions, in charge of large parts of the Antarctic.

In the first half of 20th century, the United States, France, Norway, Argentina, Chile, Germany and Japan made territorial claims in Antarctica. The answer to “Who discovered Antarctica?” depends on who you ask. Although Fabian Bellingshausen’s expedition “was technically the first to see the unknown continent”, his accomplishment was hidden for decades by an incorrect translation of his journal. The successor of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, was in no hurry to make territorial claims in the Antarctic, and instead focused on its affairs in Europe and the exploration of the Arctic.

In any case, these disputes remain unresolved. Only South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands in the sub-antarctic region became British Overseas Territory. At the time, none of the nations were keen on fully exploring Antarctica because it was expensive and difficult. Plus, most of the aforementioned nations had very serious problems back then, i.e. the First and Second World Wars.

After World War II, the Antarctic-related issues became a priority once again. Germany and Japan lost in the conflict, hence it was up to the winners to divide the world, including Antarctica, into spheres of influence. There are known reserves of natural resources in the Antarctic, which increases interest in the region in our modern industrialized world. Negotiations, which did not include the Soviet Union, on establishing “an international condominium over the continent first began in 1948”. However, the attempt “rapidly fell apart when the USSR declared an interest in the region”.

There were also more pressing issues for the world’s leading nations to worry about. The Cold War began, and the two super powers, the USA and USSR, focused on the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe and other places. They chose not to concern themselves with other problems. The Antarctic-related issues were essentially put on the back burner. And in 1959, the aforementioned Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) was established. ATS regulates “international relations with respect to Antarctica” and “bans military activity on the continent”. The original signatories of the treaty included countries with territorial claims in Antarctica at the time, i.e. Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France, Norway, Argentina and Chile, as well as the United States, Russia, South Africa, Japan and Belgium, which reserved the right to make claims. Other countries (altogether 48 nations) have since signed the ATS, and Ecuador and Peru have also made territorial claims in the Antarctic.

The treaty expires in 2048, as mentioned earlier. It is possible that it will be extended without any additional changes. Still, it is important to take into account the fact that, in recent decades, there have been more and more discussions about the depletion of fossil fuels and about the world running out of proven reserves of oil and gas in around 50 to 100 years. It is possible that by 2048, the world’s population may need to begin exploiting Antarctic resources and the southernmost continent will then have to be divided. In such a scenario, Russia can claim part of
the territory because the expedition sent by the Russian Empire was the first to sight the continent.

There could be debates about who discovered Antarctica first, however. Since the Russian explorers saw the ice shelf at Princess Martha Coast and a mount, which was subsequently named after Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen, the British expedition could be considered to be the first crew to sight the continent itself. In fact, Fabian Bellingshausen did not view himself as the first man to see Antarctica.

At any rate, there is no doubt that Russian explorers reached the seventh continent first. And participants of high-level meetings involving scientists and politicians ought to remember this accomplishment and so should the Russian and global populace. After all, public opinion, influenced by media outlets, may have an impact on international policies.

It is especially important to remember such historical moments in 2020, the 200-anniversary of the sighting of Antarctica by Russians. One notable event to commemorate Fabian Bellingshausen’s and Mikhail Lazarev’s expedition on behalf of the entire international community was a circumnavigation of the world by the training fleet of Rosrybolovstvo sailing under the flag of Russia and white sail of Peace. The Sedov barque, the Kruzenshtern of the Baltic Fishing Fleet State Academy and the Pallada of Vladivostok-based FESTFU (the Far Eastern State Technical Fisheries University) were part of the expedition. The crews included cadets from Russian navy academies. The vessels traversed the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, visited French Polynesia, Chile, South Africa and Singapore. They organized a regatta in the sub-antarctic region and covered altogether more than 100,000 nautical miles.

Thanks to these ships sailing under the white sail of peace, many people around the world learned more about the 1819-1821 expedition. This particular event and others of similar nature will help convince the international community of the fact that Russia has every right to make a claim in Antarctica if nations have to divide the continent in the future.

Sofia Pale, PhD in History, Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.