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Australia's Strategic Interests in the Antarctic: New Challenges, New Strategies

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Cover image

Able Seaman P.N Guin (Pepper the Penguin), onboard the RSV Aurora Australis, with his home port of Macquarie Island in the background.

Australia's Strategic Interests in the Antarctic:

New Challenges, New Strategies

Executive Summary

Since 1961, Antarctica has been governed by the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), which has prohibited resource extraction and militarisation – effectively setting the continent aside for peace, science, and international collaboration. In recent decades, however, the longstanding Antarctic status quo is beginning to show signs of increased strain in an era of renewed geopolitical competition, exacerbated by resource insecurity and climate change. Subsequently, Australia's sovereignty claims to the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT) and its strategic interests in Antarctica, both of which are intrinsically tied to the status quo, can no longer be taken for granted. In light of this, a re-evaluation of Australia's strategic thinking towards Antarctica is critical.

This report aims to:

1. Explore the progression of Australia's Antarctic strategic interests since the establishment of the ATS in 1961;
2. Examine how major Antarctic powers like Russia have increased their engagement in Antarctica over the past decade and the implications for Australia;

3. Critically assess Australia's current geostrategic position in Antarctica and provide recommendations on how to address key challenges.

The report analyses Australia's strategic thinking towards Antarctica through a qualitative document analysis of national security policy documents since the ATS' establishment in 1961. It also uses a range of sources from academic journals and publications as well as think-tanks to examine Antarctica's role in the international system, Russia's escalating Antarctic engagement over the past decade, and in critically assessing Australia's geostrategic position.

The findings suggest that Antarctica has and continues to hold a low-profile in Australia's strategic thinking due to the minimal attention the continent has received in national security documents. Australia's three main Antarctic strategic interests have centred around keeping Antarctica demilitarised and peaceful, supporting the ATS regime, and preserving its AAT claim, both during and beyond the life of the ATS. Meanwhile, Russia's more assertive Antarctic posture over the last decade – namely its 'dual-purpose' activities and contingency planning, directly threatens Australia's strategic interests. Australia's enduring geostrategic position as an Antarctic leader is coming under threat owing to a lack of material and operational capabilities on the continent. Simultaneously however, Antarctica presents unique diplomatic opportunities for Australia to productively engage with potential adversaries like Russia along with other Antarctic powers.

The report's policy recommendations aim to provide viable ways for Australia to best equip itself to maintain its main Antarctic strategic interests moving forward.

Recommendations are divided into three broad categories: increasing Australia's engagement with the ATS; reinforcing Australia's Antarctic presence and activity within the AAT; and reconceptualising Antarctic policy in national security terms.

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Introduction

Australia has held a leading role in Antarctic affairs for over a century as a claimant of territory, a leading player in Antarctic sciences, and as an original signatory member of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty. But due to historical under-investment and an increase in emerging Antarctic players, this leadership status is coming under question. The Antarctic region is becoming increasingly contested between both established Antarctic powers and those newly emerging such as China, India, and South Korea. Consequently, the balance of influence that has long existed in the region is experiencing significant change and is undermining the status quo that has benefited Australia's strategic interests considerably.

This report analyses Australia's strategic interests in Antarctica and how an emerging geopolitical competition over the continent is threatening them, as well as providing policy recommendations on how to address these challenges. The first section explains what place Antarctica occupies in the international system. The next section outlines how Antarctica has featured in Australia's strategic thinking by outlining its presence in national security policy documents since the establishment into force of the Antarctic Treaty in 1961. The third section focuses upon how growing Russian presence and activities in Antarctica over the last decade are posing a threat to Australia's strategic interests. The fourth section critically analyses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to Australia's geostrategic position in Antarctica. The final section concludes with policy recommendations for Australia to best equip itself to maintain its Antarctic strategic interests moving forward.

Antarctica's place in the international system

Antarctica occupies a unique place in the international system. It has often been termed as a 'global commons area', which are typically global resource domains in which common-pool resources are found such as the deep oceans, the atmosphere and outer space.

These areas legally belong either to no-one or to everyone. What is special about the case of Antarctica is the continent's unresolved status of sovereignty – with no country having full international recognition of ownership over Antarctica. As argued by Joyner, this means that the continent lacks any form of effective administrative control by individual states. Thus, Antarctica can be argued to be indivisible under international law and universal access implied.¹ In turn, this has resulted in the region becoming more suitably governed by a multilateral global commons regime as opposed to a single state.

The Antarctic Treaty System

The principal international legal institution that has governed state activities in Antarctica since 1961 is the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) – made up of the original 1959 Antarctic Treaty (entered into force in 1961) and its associated agreements. Prior to the ATS' establishment, seven countries had issued formal declarations of sovereignty over different parts of Antarctica, three of which were overlapping (See Figure 1).² Australia's claim, the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT), remains the largest claim that encompasses 42 percent of the continent. Growing tensions between claimant states exacerbated by the Cold War political climate led to an unstable and uncertain status quo in the region. To quell the prospect of conflict, 12 signatory states led by the United States (US) and the

¹ Christopher C. Joyner, *Governing the frozen commons: the Antarctic regime and environmental protection*. (Columbia, S.C.; [Great Britain]: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 44-45.

² Alongside Australia, other claimant states include Argentina, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom.

Soviet Union (USSR) negotiated the Antarctic Treaty (referred to as 'the Treaty') in 1959, which transformed the legal, political, and scientific status of the continent and surrounding Southern Ocean. At a time of great ideological competition, the Treaty marked a rare moment of Cold War-era cooperation. The treaty performs a range of functions including:

- *Accommodation of competing territorial claims:* The Treaty effectively put the question of sovereignty over the continent on hold by: suspending all existing territorial claims by claimant states, prohibiting any new claims, and banning any state activity that could be interpreted as asserting, supporting, or denying a claim for the duration of the Treaty's existence.³ It also protected both the US and the USSR's (now Russia) right to lay claim to any or all of Antarctica in the future, particularly in the event that the legal status quo associated with the ATS collapsed.⁴
- *An arms control measure:* Article I of the Treaty states that, 'Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only', thereby prohibiting 'any measures of a military nature', including military bases, fortifications, manoeuvres, and weapons testing.⁵ Meanwhile, Article V bans any nuclear weapons testing in Antarctica in addition to the disposal of any radioactive waste in the region.⁶ In effect, the Treaty has arguably 'demilitarised' the region.

³ Ellie Fogarty, 'Antarctica: Assessing and Protecting Australia's National Interests.' *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, August 2011,

https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/pubfiles/Fogarty%2C_Antarctica_web_1.pdf, 3.

⁴ Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty, 'The Antarctic Treaty.' Accessed September 10, 2022.

<https://www.ats.aq/e/antarctic treaty.html>.

⁵ Secretariat, 'The Antarctic Treaty.'; Frank Klotz, *America on the ice: Antarctic policy issues*. (Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1990), 44.

⁶ Secretariat, 'The Antarctic Treaty.'

- *A science compact*: A central objective of the treaty as set out by Article II was to ensure the freedom of scientific exploration and information on the continent.⁷
- *Participation in Antarctic Governance*: Since 1959, the number of parties signed to the treaty has expanded from the original 12 to 54 – including 29 parties with consultative status that allows them to participate in Antarctic decision-making processes during Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCMs) that can bind all parties.

Meanwhile, later ATS agreements such as the 1991 Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (known as the 'Madrid Protocol') focus on Antarctic environmental conservation. The Madrid Protocol explicitly prohibits the exploitation of mineral resources except for scientific research purposes – reinforcing the continent's status as a 'natural reserve devoted to peace and science'.⁸ However, it is noteworthy to mention that this agreement can be opened for review from 2048. Left unregulated, global commons areas are often prone to overexploitation leading to serious environmental degradation. Management of the region through international legal institutions thus becomes critical in ensuring ecological protection and resource conservation.⁹ In short, Antarctica's place in the international system since 1961 has been as a global common area, set aside for strictly 'peaceful purposes' and removed from geopolitical competition.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Australian Antarctic Program. *Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty*. Accessed September 9, 2022. <https://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-antarctica/law-and-treaty/the-madrid-protocol/>.

⁹ Joyner, *Governing the frozen commons*, 45.

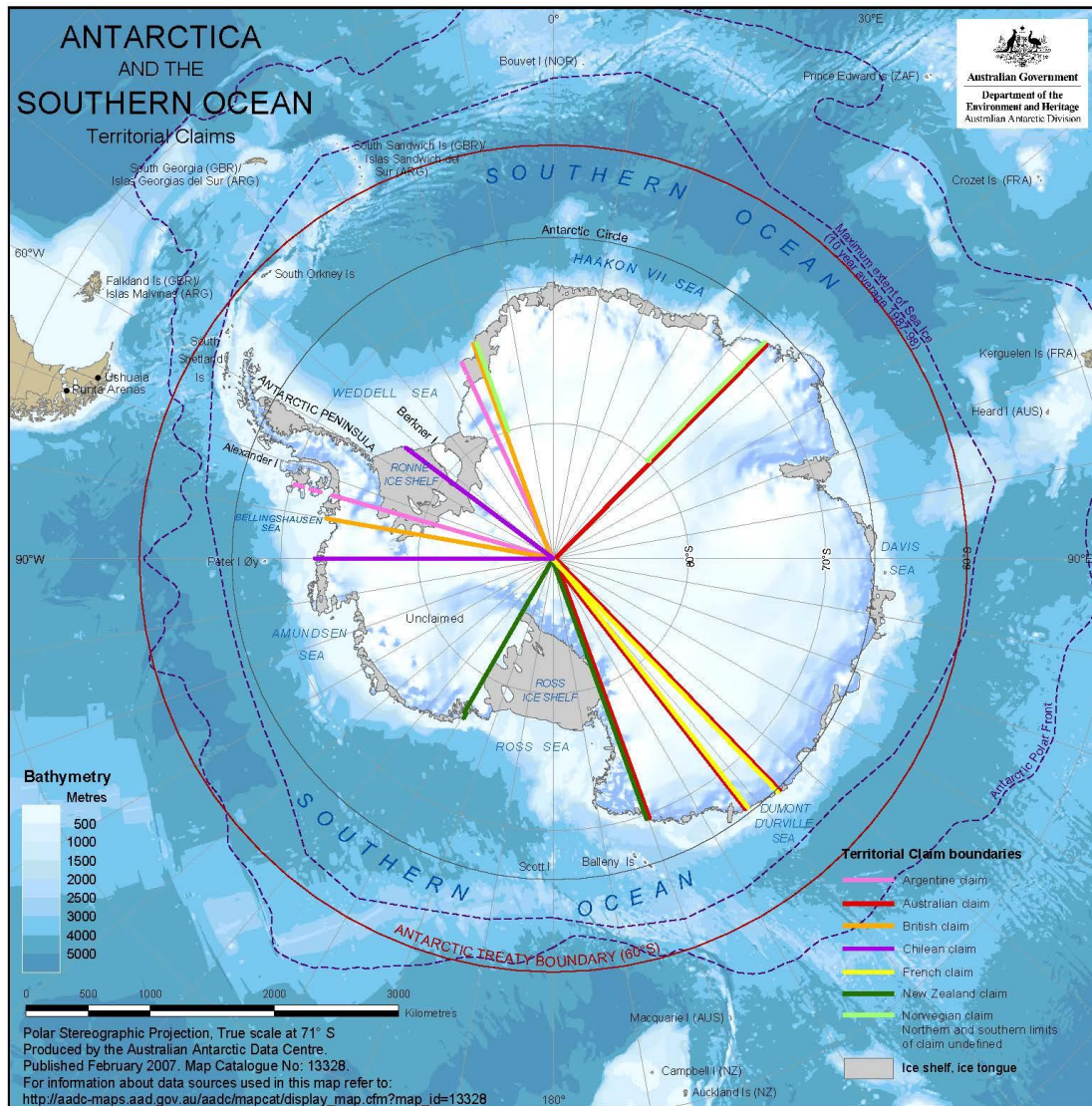


Figure 1: Map of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean Territorial Claims (Source: Military History & Heritage Victoria)

Antarctica in Australia's strategic thinking since the establishment of the ATS (1961)

Antarctica in Australia's national security documents since 1961

Antarctica has historically held a low-profile in Australia's strategic thinking as shown by the minimal attention it has received in principal national security documents. It was only from the 1950s that Antarctica became regarded as an area of geostrategic significance to Australia. At this time, the most pressing threat from Antarctica was the prospect of a hostile power establishing a military foothold in the region from which power projection

capabilities could be directed against the mainland.¹⁰ However, with the stabilisation of territorial disputes and Antarctica's demilitarisation through the Treaty, threat perceptions in Canberra diminished and the continent would feature in little depth throughout the 1960s. The possibility of a threat emerging from Antarctica was deemed unlikely due to the inhospitable nature of the continent complicating the establishment of any military bases or missile sites.¹¹ Likewise, the continent's climate hindered the ability of states to effectively extract mineral resources. Thus, the general Cold War situation surrounding Antarctica was judged to largely reinforce Australia's security to its South.

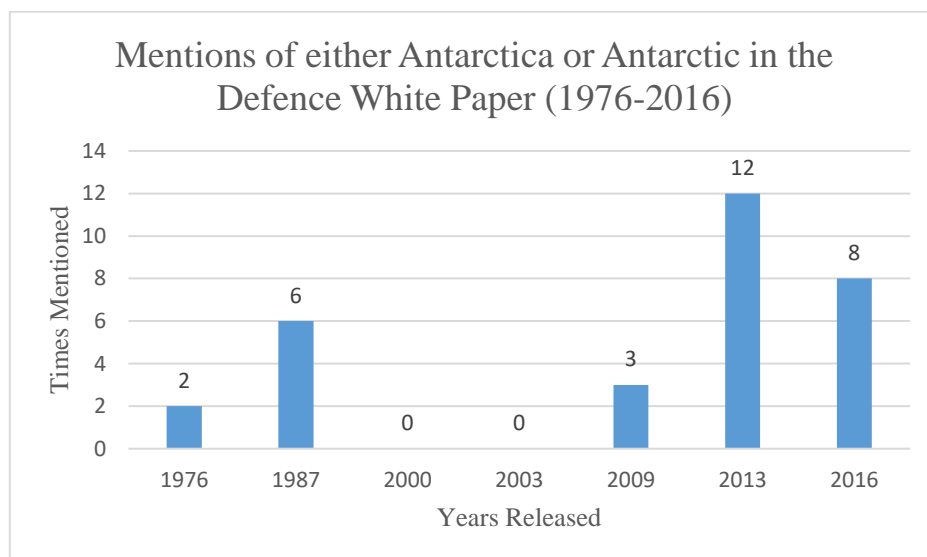


Figure 2: Mentions of either Antarctica or Antarctic in the Defence White Paper (1976-2016)

From 1976 onwards, the Defence White Paper became Australia's primary national security document. Thus far, Antarctica has only featured in five out of the seven releases (See Figure 2). In the 1976 release, Antarctica's demilitarisation through the ATS meant that it posed little threat to Australia, especially as both the US and USSR also seemed

¹⁰ Frühling, Stephan, *A history of Australian strategic policy since 1945*. (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009), 118.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

content with these provisions.¹² In 1987, Australia's support for the provisions of the Treaty to keep the region peaceful, demilitarised, and set aside from geopolitical competition lay at the heart of its strategic assessment. So long as the Treaty remained, there was no immediate threat to Australia's security from or through the region, thereby reducing the need for any defence activities to support Australia's AAT claim.¹³ There was, however, a brief mention of growing international interest in the exploration of continental and offshore resources in Antarctica and the pressures it posed to the preservation of the Treaty.¹⁴ Yet, the later negotiation of the 1991 Madrid Protocol prohibiting mineral resource extraction decreased the likelihood of this prospect, leading to Antarctica's absence in either the 1994 or 2000 releases.

In contrast, the next White Paper released in 2009 showed a starkly different tone and focus. While the 1987 document focused upon Australia's engagement with the ATS, the 2009 document completely omits any mention of the Treaty and instead focuses on the AAT and its adjacent waters as the Australian Defence Force (ADF)'s 'primary operational environment'—symbolising a shift in its priority-setting'.¹⁵ Compared to the previous emphasis on demilitarisation in 1987, the 2009 paper would only deem the need for 'substantial military responses' to strategic developments that threatened Australian interests in Antarctica as unlikely until 2030.¹⁶ This would mark a significant inflection point from a previously benign strategic assessment of the region.

¹² Australian Government, *Australian Defence (1976 Defence White Paper)*. (Canberra: Department of Defence, 1976), 9.

¹³ Australian Government. *The Defence of Australia (1987 Defence White Paper)*. (Canberra: Department of Defence, 1987),

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Australian Government, *2009 Defence White Paper*. (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009), 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

By the 2013 release, Antarctica would for the first time have its own dedicated sub-section in the White Paper. However, the tone of this paper would revert back to that of 1987 release. The possibility of a threat to Australia's national interests in the AAT and Southern Ocean that would require a substantial military response was deemed unlikely over the next few decades.¹⁷ Once again, Australia's strong advocacy of the ATS to serve its national interests would return to the forefront of its strategic assessment of Antarctica. But the prospect of the Madrid Protocol coming under pressure in the coming decades as global resources became scarcer elsewhere remained a concern.¹⁸ Amid a more crowded and competitive Antarctic region, the 2013 paper reiterated Australia's commitment to eschew the deployment of military assets to keep Antarctica demilitarised.¹⁹

The latest 2016 release largely remained in line with that of its predecessor. Similarly, the likelihood of Australia's claim to the AAT coming under a threat that would require a significant military response is considered unlikely for 'at least the next few decades'.²⁰ Australia's stake in maintaining the demilitarisation of Antarctica and its offshore waters is again explicitly outlined. And notably, the paper reiterates Australia's support for the ATS regime in relation to the prohibition of any mining activities in Antarctica and the regulation of fishing activities in the Southern Ocean. The framing of the ATS in this manner is a pointed reminder to other states of Australia's commitment to the provisions of the ATS.²¹ In addition, it is noteworthy to mention that the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper also featured its own Antarctica sub-section for the first time that reinforced

¹⁷ Australian Government, *2013 Defence White Paper*. (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2013), 19.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Australian Government, *2016 Defence White Paper*. (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2016), 54.

²¹ Ibid.; The agreements in question being the Madrid Protocol and the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources.

Australia's commitment to its AAT claim and its associated rights to adjacent offshore areas.²² In sum, the Antarctic region has largely remained a neglected area in Australia's national security focus due to the perceived lack of any imminent threats to its position in the region. In recent years, however, the growing number of Antarctic players and interest in natural resources has caused a slight rise in attention.

Australia's main strategic interests in Antarctica since 1961

For the duration of the Treaty's existence, Australia's Antarctic policy has revolved around three enduring strategic interests:

- Keeping the Antarctic peaceful and free of conflict.
- Remaining active within and maintaining the ATS regime.
- Preserving Australia's dormant territorial claim to the AAT for the duration of and beyond the existence of the Treaty.

A constant theme that runs within national security documents, besides a lack of in-depth attention, is a strong commitment to upholding the status quo centered on the ATS regime. Since Australia's dormant AAT claim to Antarctica is effectively preserved by the Treaty, it is considered crucial that Australia do everything it can to ensure that a rules-based order persists and that all state activities comply with the ATS. However, this same status quo has come under pressure in recent decades because of an increasingly crowded and competitive Antarctic region.

²² Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*. (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017), 85.

Russia's growing presence in Antarctica over the past decade

Among the states increasing their activities in Antarctica, Russia is an especially alarming case for Australia's strategic interests. Over the past decade, Russia's engagement with Antarctica has undergone a noticeable shift as reflected by official statements, policy documents, and its growing presence on the continent. Russia is increasingly perceiving the Antarctic as a space for geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geoscientific competition where its interests need to be protected, including through military means. The growing number of claimant and non-claimant states vying for influence within the ATS has thus created impetus to reinforce its position in the regime. The result has been a strengthening of Russia's maritime presence and posture in Antarctica, often with suspected military and intelligence purposes that are at direct odds with Australia's strategic interests.

With the banning of any sovereignty-asserting actions by the Treaty, scientific activity is often used as a 'quasi-legal' and political tool for states to demonstrate Antarctic 'presence'.²³ More importantly, leading states in the Antarctic sciences also tend to possess the largest influence in international discussions regarding Antarctic affairs.²⁴ In Russia's case, the Russian Antarctic Expedition (RAE) has been severely underfunded for decades, weakening its previous leadership status in Antarctic research and exploration.²⁵ The technological sophistication and upkeep of Russian polar research facilities has also fallen behind compared to other leading Antarctic powers. Accordingly, Russia released a ten-year Antarctic strategy in 2010 aimed at restoring its status as a leading state in

²³ Fogarty, 'Antarctica: Assessing and Protecting Australia's National Interests.', 8.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Sergey Sukhankin, 'Is Russia Preparing to Challenge the Status Quo in Antarctica? (Part One)' *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 9, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/is-russia-preparing-to-challenge-the-status-quo-in-antarctica-part-one>.

Antarctic research titled, '*On Strategy for the Development of the Russian Federation's Activities in the Antarctic for the Period until 2020 and the Longer-term Perspective*'.²⁶ The document concluded that Russia's Antarctic activities suffered from 'a backwardness in all scientific fields, obsolete infrastructure, and poor quality education and training for personnel'.²⁷ In turn, the primary goals of Russia's regional policy as laid out by the Strategy were²⁸:

- Maintaining Antarctica as a zone of peace, stability and cooperation, and preventing possible sources of international tension or global climatic threats from arising.
- Strengthening Russia's economic potential through the use of existing biological resources in the Southern Ocean, as well as extensive study of Antarctic mineral resources.
- Raising Russia's natural prestige, to be facilitated by conducting large scale social, scientific and environmental events connected with Russia's Antarctic activities.

'Dual Purpose' Activities

Subsequently, Russian scientific activity in ground-based space research and geological exploration have intensified since 2017. However, this has also raised concerns of potential 'dual-purpose activities' that undermine the provisions of the ATS. While the Treaty has effectively demilitarised Antarctica and regulated all military activity to strictly 'peaceful purposes', this term leaves open room for interpretation. The use of ground-

²⁶ Russia tabled its latest Antarctic strategy in 2020 but has, so far, only made the executive overview section public.

²⁷ Perry Carter et al., 'Russia's 'Smart Power' Foreign Policy and Antarctica.' *Polar Journal* 6, no. 2 (2016): 265.

²⁸ Roshydromet, et al. - *Strategy for the Development of the Russian Federation's Activities in the Antarctic for the Period until 2020 and the Longer-term Perspective*. (Moscow: Roshydromet, 2011), 3.

based space research and satellite technology assets are often considered as a form of covert military activity, notably for intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISR) purposes and communications.²⁹ Through the state-run corporation, Roscosmos, Russia has increased its deployment of remote-sensing and ground-based Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) installations in Antarctica. As a dual-use system, GLONASS has been suspected of being used for military and intelligence purposes in the region, namely for missile tracking and to increase command and control (C2) capabilities.³⁰ At its extreme, these could be used for the clandestine deployment of electronic warfare or anti-satellite capabilities, both of which would be clear violations of the ATS.³¹

Another area of potential concern are Russian Navy-led oceanographic expeditions. Although the stated intentions of these operations are for hydrographic surveys in the Southern Ocean, they could just as easily be used for naval intelligence and surveillance purposes – such as to track submarine activity outside the perimeters of the ATS.³² In Russia's view, its current posture and use of dual-purpose activities under the guise of scientific activity are to ensure its interests within the ATS and help monitor the maritime and naval activities of foreign actors in the Southern Ocean. But for Australia, they present a challenge to its strategic interest in keeping the Antarctic demilitarised and peaceful,

²⁹ Mathieu Boulègue, 'The militarization of Russian polar politics.' *Chatham House*. Accessed September 8, 2022. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/2022-06-06-militarization-russian-polar-politics-boulegue_0.pdf.

³⁰ Boulègue, 'The militarization of Russian polar politics.'

³¹ Sergey Sukhankin, 'Is Russia Preparing to Challenge the Status Quo in Antarctica? (Part Two)' *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 24, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/is-russia-preparing-to-challenge-the-status-quo-in-antarctica-part-two/>.

³² The Maritime Executive, 'Russian Navy Research Ship Heads to Antarctica.' November 6, 2015. <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/russian-navy-research-ship-heads-to-antarctica>.

while also setting a dangerous precedent for other Antarctic powers that undermines the ATS.

Russia's 'Contingency Planning'

The potential review of the Madrid Protocol in 2048 is also contributing to a step-change in Russia's Antarctic policies. Like Australia, Russia fears the potential collapse of the agreement as countries battle over resource exploitation rights. Moscow has shown little interest in re-negotiating the Protocol, but it is preparing itself in the event of its collapse to fully benefit from the extraction of Antarctic natural resources. A clear example of this contingency planning behaviour during recent years are the growing number of geological and seismological surveys conducted by state-holding company, *Rosgeologia*, in various parts of the Southern Ocean.³³ The aim of these expeditions is to explore the offshore hydrocarbon potential of these areas and the possibility of future extraction, as well as hydrographic surveys for rare earth metals and uranium.³⁴ Together, these activities show that while Moscow is positioning itself to claim territory and exploitation rights should the ATS show signs of collapse.

The current head of the RAE, Valery Lukin, has previously argued that if the protocol came up for review in 2048, Russia's current Antarctic stations could act as a form of 'effective occupation' of the surrounding territory and strengthen its argument for exclusive resource extraction rights.³⁵ Russia currently has five year-round bases in Antarctica – the majority of which are currently located in Australia's AAT (See Figure 3). Such statements

³³ Tiara Walters, 'Using Cape Town as a launch pad, Russia boasts of supergiant oil fields in Antarctic wilderness.' *Daily Maverick*, October 25, 2021. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-10-25-using-cape-town-as-a-launchpad-russia-boasts-of-supergiant-oil-fields-in-antarctic-wilderness/>.

³⁴ Boulegue, 'The Militarization of Russian Polar Politics.'

³⁵ Valery Lukin, 'Poisk nevedomogo kontinenta. K 185-letiyu podviga russkih moryakov' ['Quest for the unknown continent. 185th anniversary of the exploits of Russian sailors'], *Vlast*, October 2005, 80–1.

therefore pose a major source of concern for Australia's sovereignty and associated rights in its EEZ regarding future resource extraction.

Russia's increasingly assertive posture also creates greater risk of potential accidents that could lead to miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. Russia is not unfamiliar with such accidents in the past such as the 'Novo incident'. In 2018, Norwegian inspectors were unlawfully denied access to the Perseus runway at the Russian Novolazarevskaya air base, raising suspicions over the nature of Russian activities at the base.³⁶ Recently, the Kremlin approved a new Antarctic action plan for 2030 which continues to show ambitions of entrenching its position within the ATS and Southern Ocean.³⁷ Despite the lack of credible threats identified to Australia's strategic interests by the recent White Paper, it is clear that Moscow is preparing itself for an uncertain future in Antarctica and its policies can be interpreted as contingency planning.

³⁶ Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty, *Report of the Norwegian Antarctic Inspection under Article VIII of the Antarctic Treaty and Article 14 of the Environmental Protocol, February 2018*. Accessed October 23, 2022. https://documents.ats.aq/ATCM41/att/ATCM41_att023_e.pdf.

³⁷ TASS, 'Russian Ministry of Environment develops Strategy for Antarctic until 2030.' July 16, 2020. <https://tass.com/economy/1178933>.

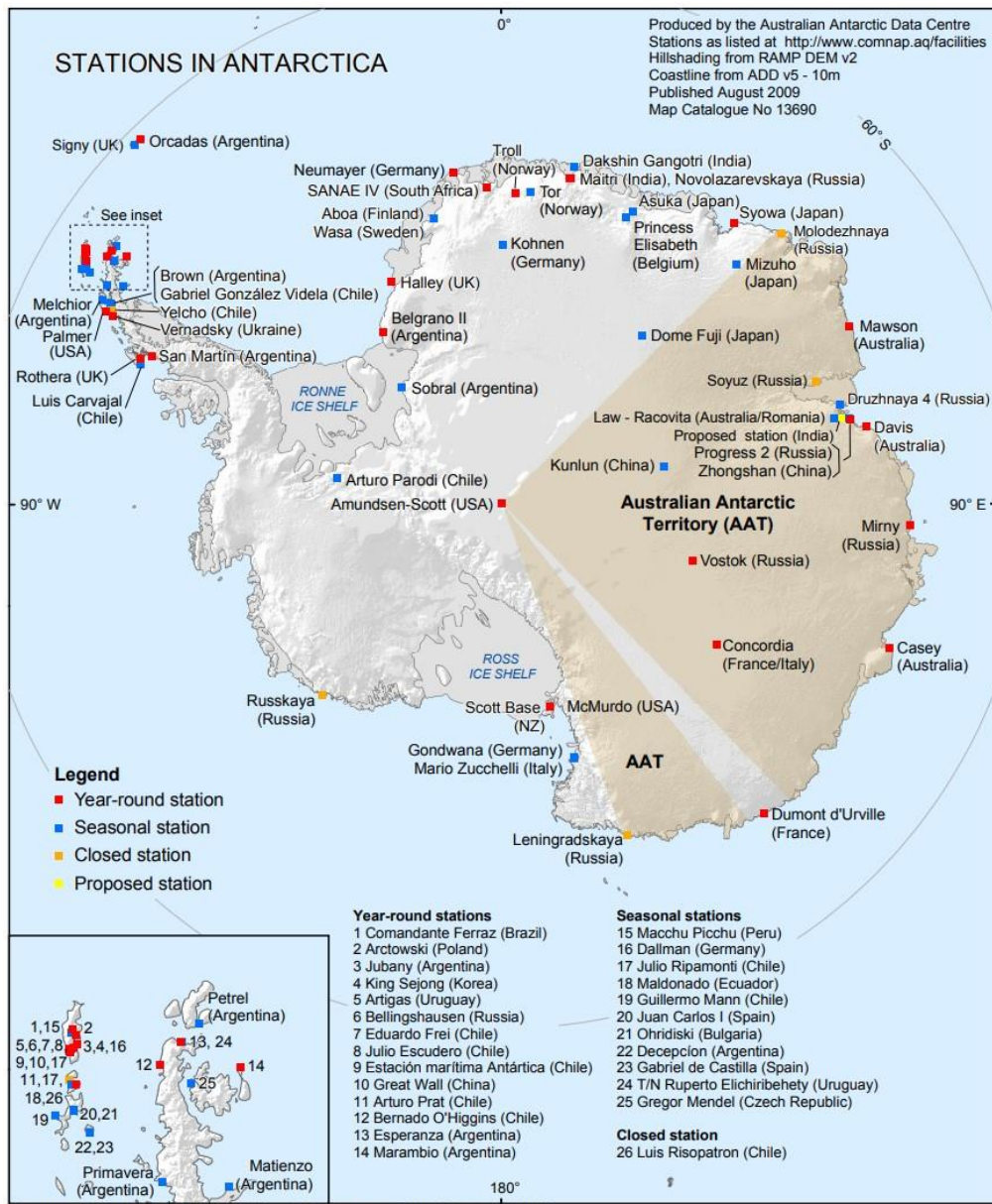


Figure 3: Current Antarctic Stations Situated in the AAT (Source: Australian Antarctic Data Centre)

Critically assessing Australia's geostrategic position in the Antarctic

Australia's longstanding position as an Antarctic leader is coming under increasing threat amid a more contested region owing to a lack of material and operational capabilities. At the same time however, Antarctica presents diplomatic opportunities for Australia in

productively engaging with adversaries like Russia along with other Indo-Pacific Antarctic powers (See Appendix A).

Strengths

Australia's key internal strength in Antarctica lies in its reputation as a world leader in the Antarctic sciences. By virtue of this, Australia is endowed with considerable influence in global discussions surrounding the continent such as the ATCM, of which it is a consultative member. The Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) also has an extensive history of Antarctic research facilities on the continent, providing a strong foundation for both presence and occupation in support of Australia's AAT claim.

Weaknesses

As a result of prolonged under-funding, Australia suffers from a range of material and operational weaknesses in Antarctica. As all three of Australia's continental stations are confined to the coastline, much of the AAT's inland territory remains unoccupied by Australia and contested by the stations of seven (soon to be nine) foreign powers (See Figure 3).³⁸ Adding to that, Australia's limited Antarctic transport capabilities further puts the country's ability to claim independent authority and use of the AAT into question. Currently, Australia only possesses one ice-breaker vessel which is critical in transporting cargo and expeditioners to and from the continent along with having no long-range ground and air traverse capabilities.³⁹ There is also no official Antarctic Department responsible for overseeing Antarctic policy and affairs from a national security standpoint. The current AAD is situated in the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water,

³⁸ Fogarty, 'Antarctica: Assessing and Protecting Australia's National Interests.', 9; Sean Parnell, PM told to defend Antarctic territory, *The Australian*, 21 December 2010: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/nationalaffairs/pm-told-to-defend-antarctic-territory/storyfn59niix-1225974139407>.

³⁹ Fogarty, 'Antarctica: Assessing and Protecting Australia's National Interests.' 9.

Population, and Communities, while Australia's ATCM activities are managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Opportunities

Antarctica presents unique diplomatic opportunities for Australia. Most importantly, with the collapse of other arms control treaties and a general breakdown of relations between Moscow and Washington, cooperation on Antarctic affairs could be a new avenue for dialogue with Russia. In contrast to other current geopolitical points of tension such as Ukraine, Antarctica by contrast is a less controversial issue that has greater room for collaboration and compromise. Greater bilateral or 'minilateral' engagement with Russia could foster greater trust and regulate its increasingly assertive posture in the Antarctic. Antarctic cooperation also offers opportunities for deeper international engagement with other ATS powers on global climate change action. Working against a common existential threat of climate change could be significant point of cooperation in repairing Australia's relations with China, while also providing further ballast to our relations with allies such as the US, South Korea, India and France.

Threats

Australia faces both traditional and non-traditional threats to its position in the Antarctic. First and foremost, the potential collapse of the ATS is becoming an increasing possibility as interest grows in natural resource exploitation. This would have catastrophic implications for Australia's dormant claim to the AAT as it would remove the preservation mechanism of the original Treaty as well as for demilitarisation and natural resource exploitation. Alternatively, the rise of a more assertive Russian presence in Antarctica threatens Australia's sovereignty and the existence of a rules-based order in the region. Russia's increased presence also increases the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent

escalation to armed conflict which could threaten Antarctica as a strategic zone of peace to Australia's southern borders.

The impacts of climate change as relating to Antarctica is a problem area for Australia's long-term security. Antarctica is a major global heat and carbon sink that ostensibly acts as the engine room of the global climate system.⁴⁰ Disruptive climate events in Antarctica will have inevitable knock-on effects on Australia's climate that can lead to rising sea levels and more frequent natural disasters.⁴¹ Energy-wise, Antarctica is projected to have immense mineral resource potential, particularly in oil and other rare earth metals. As resources grow increasingly finite in the future, it will be of utmost importance that Australia retain its sovereignty over extraction rights to maintain its economic prosperity. Antarctica also has bountiful marine resources and bioprospecting potential that can further reinforce Australia's food security.

Recommendations: How to reinforce Australia's geostrategic position

To ensure that Australia remains influential in international discussions in Antarctic affairs and reinforce its AAT claim, both during and beyond the life of the ATS, a range of policy changes and new areas of investment must be made:

Increasing Australia's engagement with the ATS

1. Australia should encourage the use of ATS oversight mechanisms such as inspections of Antarctic facilities of other states. It should exercise its right to

⁴⁰ Tony Press, 'Robert Menzies, Australia and the Antarctic Treaty.' *The Strategist*, July 9, 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/robert-menzies-australia-and-the-antarctic-treaty/>.

⁴¹ John Church, 'The world may lose half its sandy beaches by 2100. It's not too late to save them.' *UNSW Sydney Newsroom*, March 3, 2020. <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/science-tech/world-may-lose-half-its-sandy-beaches-2100-it%E2%80%99s-not-too-late-save-them>; NASA. 'Vital Signs: Ice Sheets.' Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/ice-sheets/#:~:text=Antarctica%20is%20losing%20ice%20mass,adding%20to%20sea%20level%20rise>.

conduct inspections more regularly and encourage reciprocal inspections of its own facilities. This would help promote transparency and ensure that Antarctic activities are conducted lawfully.

2. If the mineral resource question is revisited from 2048, Australia should initiate diplomatic discussions with other willing claimant states to formulate a unified position to future pressure to relinquish claims.
3. Australia should deepen its diplomatic cooperation with other ATS powers in working against common existential threats such as climate change to foster greater regional trust and transparency.

Reinforcing Australia's Antarctic presence and activity within the AAT

1. Australia should invest in ski-equipped planes to improve its access to all corners of the AAT. This capability would also assist Australia's ability to independently fulfil its inland AAT search-and-rescue obligations expected of a sovereignty-claiming state.
2. Australia should acquire a second icebreaker vessel to be used by both the AAD and Australian Border Force (ABF) for increased patrol activities against illegal fishing in AAT adjacent waters. It should also look to increase joint fisheries patrols with New Zealand within the Southern Ocean. This would communicate to other Antarctic states that Australia takes its AAT claim seriously and its willingness to police it.
3. Australia should establish a new inland research station for Antarctic astronomy on the Antarctic Plateau. By increasing the use and occupation of the AAT, this would both bolster Australia's assertion of sovereignty and its leadership in the Antarctic sciences.

Reconceptualising Antarctic policy in national security terms

1. Antarctic policy should be reconceptualised as a matter of utmost importance to national security that falls under whole-of-government policy ownership. To do so, the AAD's policy function should be moved to Canberra to enhance integration and collaboration with other relevant policy agencies.
2. The AAD should be relocated within the Attorney-General's portfolio to better represent the national security dimensions of Antarctic policy and convey Canberra's view of the AAT as one of Australia's external territories.
3. The next White Paper should increase its focus on Antarctica to signify its importance to national security. It should explicitly outline the conditions in which the AAT would become part of the ADF's primary operational environment. If not, the document should at least highlight that Antarctica's exclusion is as a result of the continent's current demilitarised status under the ATS, rather than it not being considered as sovereign territory.

Conclusion

Antarctica is intrinsically tied to Australia's longer-term national security and policymakers in Canberra need to start treating the region as such. Australia can no longer passively rely upon a status quo experiencing ever-increasing strain in an era of renewed geopolitical competition in the region. For Australia to remain best positioned to ensure its dormant AAT claim, both during and beyond the life of the ATS, it needs to start being proactive in reinforcing its geostrategic position in the region and exercise more independence in defending its strategic interests. It must seek to do so before the relatively benign security environment it has long enjoyed turns volatile. In particular, the growing threat posed by Russia over the past decade, despite being ignored by Australia's national security

documents, presents a credible threat to its Antarctic strategic interests, and requires significant attention.

Appendix A

SWOT

Australia's Geostrategic Position in Antarctica

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Internal View</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive history of Australian research facilities on the continent, providing both presence and occupation that support its AAT claim. • A reputation as a world leader in Antarctic sciences which, by virtue, lends Australia considerable influence in international discussions surrounding the continent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australia's occupation of the AAT is contested by the stations of seven (soon to be nine) foreign powers. • The areas of science which Australia has chosen to prioritise in the coming decade has largely confined Australia's activities to the coastline and leaving much of the AAT unoccupied by Australia and instead by other foreign powers. • Limited transport capabilities around the continent and in the Southern Ocean undermines Australia's ability to claim its independent authority and use of the AAT. • No official Antarctic department as part of the national security community; currently only part of Environment department.
Opportunities	Threats
<p>External View</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New avenue for dialogue with Russia on converging national interests after collapse of other arms control treaties. • Opportunities for deeper international engagement with other Indo-Pacific Antarctic powers on global climate change action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The potential collapse of the ATS through the potential review of the Madrid Protocol 2048 as regional interest grows in natural resource exploitation. • The rise of a more assertive Russian presence and posture in the region (i.e., 'dual purpose activities, contingency planning). • The impacts of climate change (e.g., rising sea levels directly affecting national and human security). • Antarctica is tied to Australia's longer-term food and energy security and losing access to the AAT would pose dire implications.