

Ice panda: Navigating China's hybrid Antarctic agenda



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Contents

What's the problem?	4
What's the solution?	4
Introduction	5
Antarctic geopolitics 101	5
Strategic interests in Antarctica	6
Australia	
People's Republic of China	
The Australia–PRC Antarctic relationship	10
Working the problem	12
Policy recommendations	16
Appendix: Reference to Antarctica in Australian strategic documents, 1987–2024	17
Defence white papers	
Foreign policy white papers	
Notes	19
Acronyms and abbreviations	20

What's the problem?

Antarctica is enticing. Especially for powers seeking to future-proof their resource insecurities, partake in strategic competition activities like global governance, and to enhance their currency prestige wise in the scientific realm. For the People's Republic of China (PRC), Antarctica ticks all these boxes. The Antarctic Treaty (AT) prohibits military activity and establishes Antarctica as a zone of international cooperation for scientific research. But the AT alone, without being an Australian foreign and security priority, is not holding Beijing's objectives, including those against Australia's interests, at bay.

Beijing is known for its assertive and, increasingly, aggressive, behaviour from the South China Sea to space and in cyberspace. Antarctica is too often forgotten, or not included in the strategic competition debate. It should be – to determine whether Beijing's behaviour is merely assertive or if it is crossing into aggressive as it is elsewhere. The answer, and simultaneously the problem, is that when it comes to Antarctica, Beijing is not actually breaking the agreed rules by which the continent is managed, but it is undermining them and, therefore, Australia's interests. Indeed, according to the rulebooks (the AT System) facilitating activity in Antarctica - the

PRC is not overtly in breach of AT agreements. Rather Beijing can 'work' the AT System effectively to undermine the status quo and, with it, a vital strategic interest for Australia. It is doing this in multiple ways, including through its domestic industrial policy which has fused its civil and military sectors, and which is at the very least against the spirit of the AT's prohibition of military activity, if not wholly inconsistent with it. Just because Beijing is not yet undertaking military activity on Antarctica does not mean it is not using the access it has for military purposes. Regardless of whether it is inconsistent or merely a breach of the AT system's spirit, it is no longer 'business as usual' in Antarctica and Australia cannot sit idle as the status quo is changed.

The trajectory of the PRC in Antarctica appears at odds with Australia's national interests. There is only so much Canberra can do to protect the status quo ensured by the AT System and, in doing so, stave off challenge to the Australian Antarctic Territory. Yet, Australia appears to be failing to do even the bare minimum. Canberra needs to act more seriously about investing in a diversified capability to exist (competitively) in the Antarctic strategic environment of today.

What's the solution?

Beijing can (and does) destabilise the situation on the Antarctic continent within the existing rules. Any solution must begin with an acknowledgement of that reality. A health check of the continent is required, starting with a clear-eyed assessment of contemporary PRC Antarctic strategy.

Australia, and like-minded partners, should develop a toolkit to adequately counter and mitigate the PRC's erosive efforts to rewrite Antarctica's future. Capabilities are a critical component of any toolkit, as they ensure the ability to adequately monitor Beijing's Antarctic activity. Investment in polar capabilities and the sustainment of physical presence through revitalised Antarctic research bases and a competitive scientific research agenda are priority areas of action.

Diplomacy is a vital requirement of our Antarctic toolkit. Simply put, the continuance of the *status quo* in Antarctica is a shared interest for all parties. Though without any checks and balances, Beijing will continue to use the existing rules and a lack of interest from nations like Australia to change the status quo. Australia must work to remind Beijing (both privately in detail as well as in public to ensure the Australian public are aware of the issue and priority) of the spirit and obligations of the Antarctic Treaty. We need a delicate balancing strategy that bolsters the arrangements facilitated by the treaty *and* a robust ability to 'push back' against growing Chinese power in Antarctica. While armed conflict is unlikely, make no mistake: Australia's Antarctic interests and the treaty arrangements are squarely under threat.

Introduction

Maintaining Australia's position in the Antarctic is critical, particularly at a time when international activity in the region is increasing.

— Parliamentary paper 165, *Maintaining Australia's national interests in Antarctica*, Inquiry into Australia's Antarctic Territory, 2018

Antarctica is no longer 'frozen'—literally, via climate change, and figurately, in terms of the heating up of political tension in the ATS. Indeed, strategic competition, including between the US and China but not limited to those major powers, is no longer dormant on the continent. The system put in place to stave off geopolitical contest in the context of the Cold War might still be in place, but it's under hybrid attack.

Antarctic geopolitics 101

Picture a globe turned upside down so that you're seeing Antarctica at the top of the world. The continent's immense strategic value is striking. Antarctica's geographical edge aside, global resource pressures, coupled with advances in technology, continue to promote a deep strategic interest in Antarctica. That interest will continue to escalate.

Enduring international media interest in brewing conflict and geopolitical disputes over territorial claims, competing interests and access to resources makes Antarctica forever relevant in our national-security discourse. Yet, there is a limited public discussion and an even more limited understanding of the unique nature of Antarctic geopolitics—from the details of the continent's governance system to the polar capabilities of government stakeholders. While there's currently no immediate risk of war on (or for) Antarctica, contemporary geopolitics—and the prospect of future tensions—make it crucial to understand threats posed to the *status quo*.

The Antarctic Treaty places existing territorial claims to Antarctica in a 'holding pattern', essentially setting aside the debate as to their *legitimacy*. As illustrated at Figure 1, the states with current claims to Antarctica are Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway and the UK. The treaty further protects the US's and Russia's

This report examines the implications of PRC hybrid activity in Antarctica. It begins with an assessment of contemporary Antarctic geopolitics. Next, the report provides an in-depth look at the strategic Antarctic interests of Australia and the PRC. Building upon that, it delves into Australia–PRC Antarctic engagement since the 1980s. The report's discussion section works through the problem posed by Beijing's erosive Antarctic activity, which is occurring beneath the threshold of outright rule breaking. Finally, this report offers policy recommendations for Australia, and like-minded partners, to navigate the sharpening challenge of the PRC's Antarctic activity.

assertions of rights to maintain a 'basis of claim' to any or all of Antarctica (essentially, neither has missed the boat to stake a territorial claim). Of course, such assertions can't be made *while* the treaty is in force. This is a holding-pattern agreement.

Figure 1: Territorial claims to Antarctica



Source: ASPI. Based on Australian Antarctic Program, 'Antarctic territorial claims', Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, Australian Government, [online](#).

The Antarctic Treaty protects territorial positions in perpetuity (at least while the treaty is in force), crafting an Antarctic *status quo* (Table 1 summarises the treaty’s articles). Having come into effect in 1961, the treaty now consists of 57 parties (states). Of those 57 contracting

parties, 29 are ‘consultative parties’, which means they have voting rights at Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings. Both Australia and the PRC are consultative parties. They’re equal.

Table 1: Summary of Antarctic Treaty articles

Antarctic Treaty	
I.	Antarctica is to be used for peaceful purposes only. Military activities (base establishment, manoeuvres, testing of weapons) are banned. Military personnel and equipment in support of scientific research are permitted.
II.	Freedom of scientific investigation and cooperation in Antarctica is to continue (subject to the provisions of this treaty).
III.	To the ‘greatest extent practicable’, signatories are to share information related to scientific plans, exchange scientific personnel, and share observations or results.
IV.	The treaty cannot be interpreted as the renunciation of rights or claims to territorial sovereignty, or the diminution of claims, and does not prejudice any party regardless of its recognition or non-recognition position. No actions taken while the treaty is in force constitute a basis for asserting, enlarging, supporting or denying a claim to territorial sovereignty.
V.	Nuclear explosions and the disposal of nuclear waste are prohibited.
VI.	The area of application is south of 60 degrees latitude, inclusive of the continent and ice shelves.
VII.	All facilities in all areas of Antarctica are always open to inspection.
VIII.	All persons in Antarctica are subject to the jurisdiction of the party of which they are nationals.
IX.	Parties agree to meet regularly to consult on Antarctic matters.
X.	Parties commit to engage in the Antarctic spirit—and not contrary to the principles and purposes of the treaty.
XI.	Disputes are to be managed between parties and resolved through peaceful means.
XII.	The treaty can be modified or amended at any time by the unanimous agreement of contracting parties. After 30 years (from 1991), any of the contracting parties can call for a conference to review the operation of the treaty, but any changes to the treaty require majority agreement.
XIII.	The treaty is subject to ratification by signatory states.
XIV.	The treaty is deposited in the archives of the US Government.
Source: The full text of the Antarctic Treaty is available, online .	

Strategic interests in Antarctica

Australia

Australia’s historical connection with Antarctica dates to the early 20th century when Australian explorers, including Sir Douglas Mawson, played pivotal roles in expeditions to the continent. Mawson’s exploration and scientific work laid the foundation for Australia’s enduring interest in Antarctica.

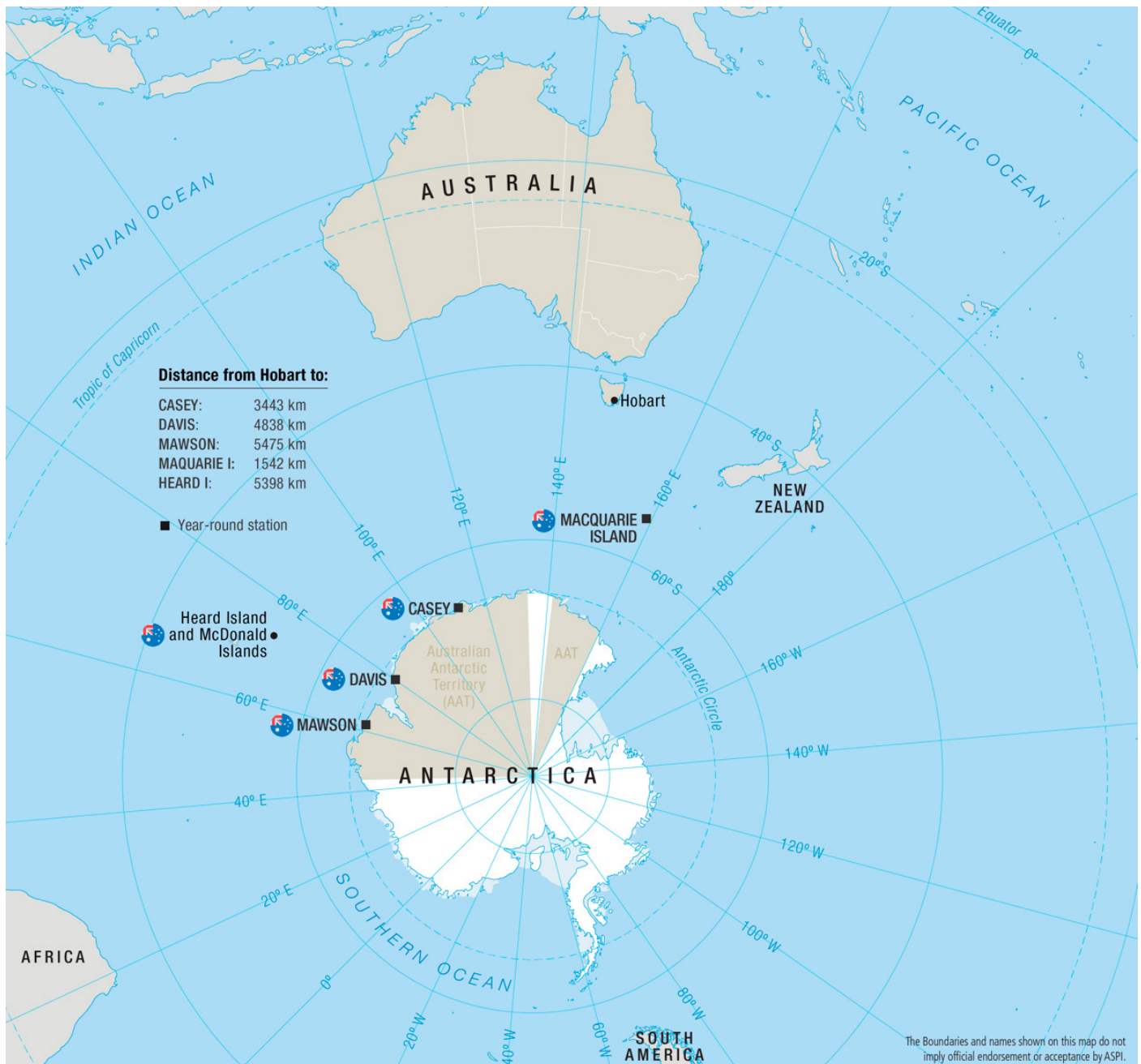
Australia maintains a sovereign territorial claim to some 42% of the Antarctic continent, known as the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT). This sizable claim is based on the 1840s territorial claim of the British, which was transferred to Australia by the *Australian Antarctic Territory Acceptance*

Act 1933. Further exploration and occupation of Antarctica by Australia up until the Antarctic Treaty came into force (1961) further substantiates Canberra’s claim.¹

Territorial claims aside, Antarctica is a strategic buffer—it’s our southern doorstep. The stability and cooperation established under the treaty contribute to our southern regional security by preventing militarisation and conflicts at the South Pole, benefiting our broader security interests.

Australia operates four year-round permanent stations in the region: Macquarie Station (on sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island); Mawson Station (in the AAT); Davis Station (in the AAT); and Casey Station (in the AAT). Those stations and the AAT claim are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The Australian Antarctic Territory



Source: ASPI

A whole-of-government strategy is articulated by the *Australian Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan*.² First published in 2016, then updated in 2022, the strategy articulates Australia's national interests in Antarctica as follows:

- Maintain Antarctica's freedom from strategic and/or political confrontation
- Preserve our sovereignty over the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT), including our sovereign rights over adjacent offshore areas
- Support a strong and effective Antarctic Treaty system (ATS)
- Conduct world-class scientific research consistent with national priorities
- Protect the Antarctic environment, having regard to its special qualities and effects on our region
- Be informed about and able to influence developments in a region geographically proximate to Australia
- Foster economic opportunities arising from Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, consistent with our ATS obligations including the ban on mining and oil drilling.

The strategy looks ahead to securing Australian national interests out to 2036. Priorities include:

- ‘enhancing Australia’s Antarctic leadership’ through the ATS
- implementation of an ‘enhanced program of mapping and charting of areas of East Antarctica’
- the lease of a second ice-strengthened vessel to ‘release the RSV *Nuyina* to focus on important science programs’
- investigation of avenues for Australia’s ‘expanded presence in Antarctica’
- increased inspections
- enhanced air-lift capabilities
- the development of ‘a leading edge maritime capability’ in the Southern Ocean.³

When it comes to Australian defence strategy, Antarctica is often overlooked. Indeed, not since the 1980s has the federal government really acknowledged the strategic challenge of Antarctica. The 1987 Defence White Paper (DWP) specifically listed Antarctica as a component of the Australian strategic environment, naming it as a national-security and defence interest. The 1994 and 2000 iterations of the DWP made zero reference to Antarctica. It all but disappeared. Antarctica was briefly mentioned in terms of Australian interests being ‘at no credible risk’ in the 2009, 2013 and 2016 DWP. However, by the time of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, Antarctica was missing again. The 2024 National Defence Strategy also overlooked Antarctica entirely.⁴

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has also haphazardly included Antarctica in strategic considerations since the 1980s. The first Australian Foreign Policy White Paper (FPWP) was 1997’s *In the national interest*. Listed under strategic interests, Antarctica was framed as an extensive area where ‘Australia’s security interests are engaged’. The next iteration of the FPWP came in 2017, complete with a large ‘pop-out’ box articulating our Antarctic interests. Somewhat idealistically, it stated that the Antarctic Treaty ‘reduce[s] the potential for strategic competition to Australia’s south’.

Essentially, Canberra continues to put off the strategic challenge of Antarctica. It’s apparently been put in the ‘too hard’ basket. However, defaulting to a policy setting of ‘nothing to see here’ when it comes to Antarctica is perplexing, given the sovereign territorial interests embodied by the AAT. The ADF’s mission is specifically to

defend Australia and its national interests to advance our security and prosperity. The AAT no doubt falls within that mission scope.

Consideration of Australia’s Antarctic interests and geostrategic developments via strategy documents wouldn’t be in breach of the Antarctic Treaty. The treaty bans military activity on Antarctica. Although many other treaty parties include Antarctic assessments in their public security assessments, ‘militarisation’, in the Antarctic context, is a very difficult term to define. For instance, a state may perceive ‘militarisation’ to cover activities that involve strategic force planning for defending against threats to a claim or to the adequate operation of the treaty. However, another state may perceive such activities as not being militarisation because they do not cross the threshold of force deployment into the Antarctic Treaty zone.

People’s Republic of China

The 1980s was a critical time for fashion, and for Antarctic geopolitics. In 1980, the Australian Antarctic Division arranged for Chinese researchers to join its members in Antarctica to see how things were done. In 1983, the PRC had acceded to the Antarctic Treaty. Just a year later, in 1984, Beijing undertook its first Antarctic expedition. Importantly, China has no claim to Antarctica.

As per the Antarctic Treaty, the PRC’s official position on Antarctic sovereignty—that it’s a continent belonging to no one—is legitimate and not dissimilar from the position of (many) others. Canberra’s response to such discourse is to comfort itself in the notion that, so long as the treaty is in force, the status of Australia’s territorial claim isn’t in dispute. In 2017, Beijing hosted its first Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM). It was a significant ATCM because it was the first (and, so far, the only) public articulation of the PRC’s Antarctic *strategy*. Although conceptualised in popular terms as ‘China’s Antarctic White Paper’, the 36-page document shared at the 2017 ATCM was more of a discussion paper regarding the PRC’s Antarctic achievements.⁵

The White Paper referenced ‘sustainable development’ some 27 times. Beyond Antarctic resource development interests, Beijing noted its commitment to enhancing and leading governance efforts within the ATS.⁶ The paper opened with a broad-stroke discussion of Beijing’s

Antarctic ‘philosophy’. Noting that Antarctica is of ‘great significance’ to human development, the PRC offered its leadership credentials to assist in moving the ‘international governance of Antarctica ... towards a more equitable and reasonable orientation’.

The White Paper canvassed two key phases of Antarctic activities. In the ‘warming up’ phase, from 1980 to 2000, Beijing collaborated with Antarctic partners to learn the ropes. 2001–2015 was dubbed the ‘booming’ phase, in which rapid investment and growing capabilities enabled the PRC to emerge as an independent Antarctic stakeholder. For Beijing, its Antarctic expeditions had ‘played a significant role in China’s ... deep space exploration of the Moon and Mars’. The paper noted that the Chinese Beidou satellite network, which was supported by Antarctic ground stations, had provided a ‘solid foundation ... for China to expand its outer space observation’. In effect, Antarctica has been a key to Beijing’s development of a space research edge.⁷ Of course, many states use Antarctica as a testing ground for Mars exploration and space travel.⁸

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the PRC’s Antarctic White Paper is the ‘rational use’ of Antarctic resources. The paper noted Beijing’s strategic interest in activities targeting marine biological resources in Antarctica and its continued effort to participate in ‘scientific studies and assessment of krill resource and ecosystems, [with a view to] exploring and utilising such resources on a sustainable basis’.

The 2017 ATCM hosted by Beijing set out to signal its long-term Antarctic ambitions. In an opening address, then Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli implored delegates to reflect on five key notions:

1. Peace and stability requires enhanced ‘mutual trust’.
2. Consensus in Antarctic governance affairs should be maintained.
3. ‘Equal footing consultation and mutual cooperation’ should be enhanced among parties.
4. Freedom of scientific investigation in Antarctica should remain a priority.
5. Consideration must be given to ‘ecological balance and sustainable development’ in Antarctica.⁹

‘How’ the PRC executes its Antarctic strategy at home is vital to grasp. Global leadership in Antarctic research and scientific prestige is a driving force. In all, the PRC’s Ministry of Education has designated 17 national institutions as maritime research hubs. Each has well-established marine science or technology centres, out of which Antarctic or polar research is conducted.¹⁰ Of interest is the overlaid security risk based on the findings of the ASPI *China Defence Universities Tracker* tool.¹¹ The tracker illustrates the methods used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to bolster research links between universities and its military/security agencies.

Beijing’s ‘civil–military’ fusion laws essentially deem any academic/scientific research undertaken to require a ‘back-door’ or shared utility for CCP security and defence ends.¹² Table 2 illustrates the intertwining of China’s 17 assigned Antarctic research institutions with broader CCP security, intelligence or defence capabilities. The 17 institutions have links to the PRC’s State Oceanic Administration and are codified by a joint agreement.¹³

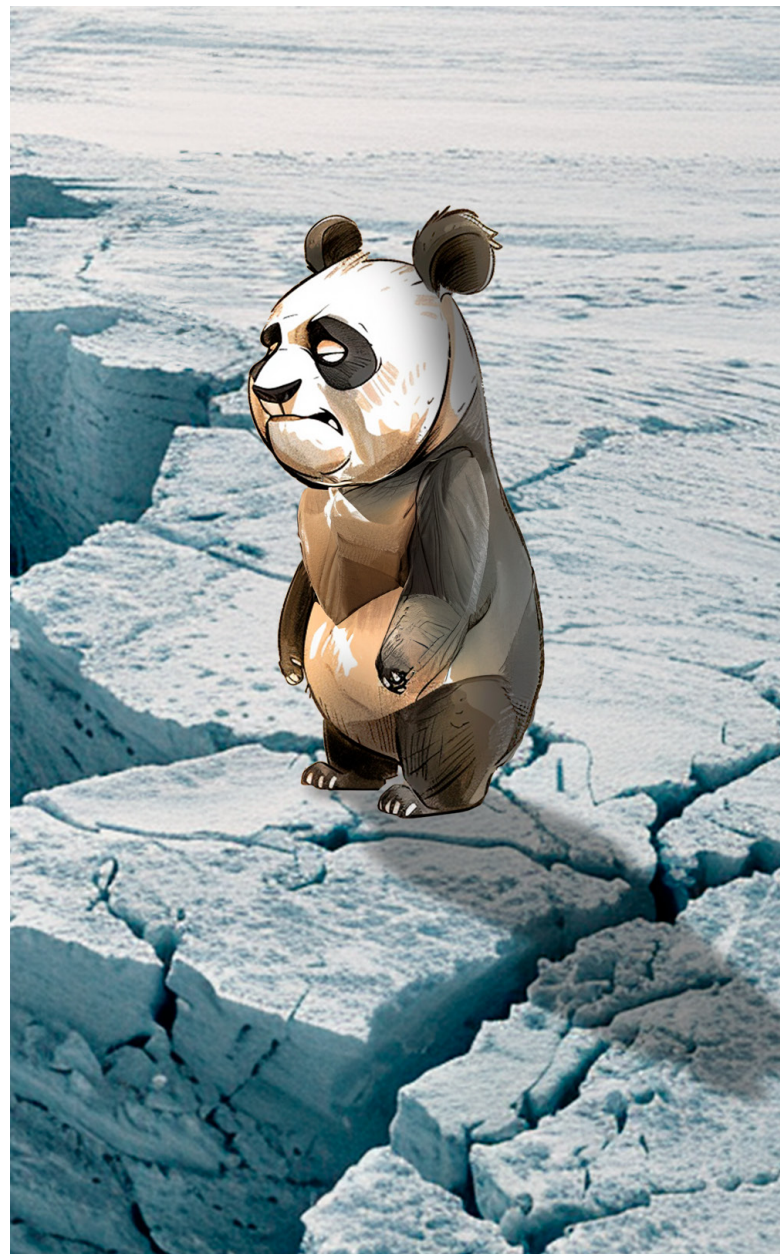


Table 2: China's 17 universities directly tasked with Antarctic research and their associated ASPI *China Defence Universities Tracker* risk

Wuhan University	VERY HIGH RISK CATEGORY	China University of Geosciences	MEDIUM RISK CATEGORY
Tsinghua University	VERY HIGH RISK CATEGORY	Dalian University of Technology	MEDIUM RISK CATEGORY
Peking University	HIGH RISK CATEGORY	Tongji University	MEDIUM RISK CATEGORY
Tianjin University	HIGH RISK CATEGORY	Nanjing University	MEDIUM RISK CATEGORY
Wuhan University of Technology	HIGH RISK CATEGORY	Xiamen University	MEDIUM RISK CATEGORY
Sun Yat-sen University	HIGH RISK CATEGORY	Ocean University of China	MEDIUM RISK CATEGORY
Shanghai Jiao Tong University	HIGH RISK CATEGORY	China University of Geosciences (Wuhan)	MEDIUM RISK CATEGORY
Zhejiang University	HIGH RISK CATEGORY	Beijing Normal University	LOW RISK CATEGORY
		Hohai University	Unknown

Note: This data was most recently updated in 2021.

Source: *China Defence Universities Tracker*, ASPI, Canberra, online.

The Australia–PRC Antarctic relationship

While the Australia–PRC Antarctic relationship has its roots back in the 1980s, various collaborative activities in Antarctica have occurred over the past 40 years. One instance is the collaborative effort in 2004 at an ice-dome known as Dome Argus (the highest point on the East Antarctic ice shelf, rising 4,000 metres above sea level and within the AAT) to install automated data-collection systems.¹⁴ At the time, Dome Argus was considered by Australian scientists to be ‘a blank spot in our data’: Australia lacked the deployed capability to monitor the Earth’s atmosphere from this point. The 2004 collaborative effort saw PRC expeditioners undergo training in Fremantle, Western Australia, before the PRC’s vessel, *Xue Long*, departed for Antarctica.

The Australia–PRC Antarctic relationship was formalised by three memorandums of understanding (MoUs) between Canberra and Beijing.¹⁵ According to Chinese sources,

the MoUs reflect bilateral intent to deliver ‘concrete and tangible cooperation on Antarctica and [the] Southern Ocean’.¹⁶

Key elements of the most recent and now expired (2014) Australia–PRC Antarctic MoU include:¹⁷

- a continued commitment to the Antarctic Treaty system, which enables the designation of Antarctica as a natural reserve, devoted to peace and science
- establishment of a joint committee that will meet every two years, to oversee our cooperation
- establishment of a mechanism for environmental, policy, scientific and operational collaboration, including collaborative Australia–PRC Antarctic science projects
- establishment of a platform for Antarctic official and academic exchanges

- commitment to utilise Australia, including Tasmania, as an Antarctic ‘gateway’.

The first (and only) Committee on Antarctic and Southern Ocean Collaboration meeting between Australia and the PRC was held in 2016. At the time, the meeting was touted to signal Canberra’s and Beijing’s ‘desire to strengthen cooperation on Antarctic science, operations and enhanced environmental protection.’ A litany of agreed priorities related to future work plans also resulted, as did a commitment to meet every two years. Priorities included the following:

- the joint committee would serve as an effective overarching framework for PRC–Australia Antarctic cooperation
- agreement to hold a joint East Antarctic / Ross Sea Workshop on Collaborative Science in 2017
- increasing the use of Hobart as an Antarctic gateway
- advancing policy discussions on enhanced environmental protection and ‘other key areas’
- committing to support each other’s national Antarctic programs through annual logistics support
- establishing professional exchanges of scientists, officials and scholars on policy, science and operations.¹⁸

Evidently, follow-up meetings of the committee have failed to occur, as has the future work plan for shared Antarctic activities. All three Antarctic-themed MoUs between Australia and the PRC appear to have largely disappeared since 2016. There’s limited, if any, activity directly associated with them. Political ties between Canberra and Beijing underwent immense strain during this period, and the bilateral relationship began to ‘stabilise’ only in 2024.

Within only a few years since President Xi’s visit to Australia in 2014, and the signing of a significant numbers of agreements, they either weren’t used or expired. Not renewing is a good first step, but alone this will not stop Beijing from pursuing its strategic objectives in Antarctica.

However, Australia–PRC Antarctic engagement in academia continues. A flurry of activity relates to the Ocean University of China (OUC), which is designated by ASPI’s *China Defence Universities Tracker* as ‘medium risk’ for its involvement in military-applicable research and links to CCP defence and security services. A joint degree was stood up by OUC in partnership with the University

of Tasmania. In 2015, 48 Chinese students enrolled in the degree—a Bachelor of Marine and Antarctic Science with Honours (Physical Oceanography)—completed the four-year course in Tasmania.¹⁹

OUC also inked cooperation agreements with the University of New South Wales (UNSW). It partnered to establish the Sino-Australia Research Centre for Coastal Management at UNSW’s Canberra campus (the Australian Defence Force Academy; ADFA). The research centre is led by a graduate of OUC: a professor who is also the coordinator for the China Scholarship Council program at UNSW.²⁰ Financial records of the Australian Government-funded Antarctic Climate and Ecosystems Cooperative Research Centre indicate that OUC provided financial injections to the centre.²¹

Australia’s research ecosystem lacks adequate policies to ensure that strategic Antarctic research is protected. Just look to the Centre for Southern Hemisphere Oceans Research (CSHOR), launched in 2017. CSHOR was a collaboration between Australia’s CSIRO and the PRC’s Qingdao National Laboratory for Marine Science and Technology (QNLN).²² The collaboration would see QNLN researchers based in Hobart using CSIRO satellites to conduct climate-related studies. The security and espionage risks of the program soon became obvious. Responding via *The Australian*, CSIRO’s Chief Executive underscored the decades of positive research collaboration between Beijing and Canberra.²³ Many of the Chinese Academy of Sciences institutes that Australia has had a history of partnering with in Antarctic research are on the US ‘sanctioned entity’ list—a list of entities that are believed to work contrary to the national-security interests of Washington.²⁴

In fact, CSHOR had facilitated agreements with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and CSIRO engineers assisted in building, for Beijing, the world’s largest radio-telescope dish.²⁵ While the partnership wasn’t continued when the CSHOR came up for renewal in 2022, the PRC has maintained its Antarctic research agenda; in particular, at Dome A. It’s regarded as the best observing site on Earth’s surface.²⁶

Working the problem

Both Australia and the PRC have vested, legitimate, national interests in Antarctica. While Canberra has a sovereign territorial claim to protect, and a close geostrategic flank to manage, when it comes to Antarctica, Beijing's designs aren't difficult to grasp. Besides what the PRC tells us it seeks to do with Antarctica, it's evident that Beijing's long-term ambitions relate to the future development of Antarctic resources (living and non-living). Of course, our interests overlap to a point—primarily our mutual interest in leading or engaging in governance within the ATS. Our interests also converge in seeking to uphold the *status quo* facilitated by the Antarctic Treaty. Both states are also interested in scientific leadership and capitalising on science as a 'currency' of prestige in the Antarctic context.

The first challenge is Australia's absence of a 'safety net' or 'Plan B' for shoring up national Antarctic interests. This would be pertinent, considering Beijing's patterns of behaviour in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Evident behaviour signals the PRC's ability to continually erode existing systems of governance, and its interest in doing so, by artfully interpreting its commitments. Creating an atmosphere of 'facts on the ground' in the South China Sea is one striking example. Already, the PRC is seeking to craft 'facts' in the Antarctic context. Consistently, Beijing votes against efforts to establish new environmental protection zones in the Southern Ocean.²⁷ It argues that 'more science' is needed to understand the value of or requirement for new protected areas. 'Kicking the can down the road' is one reading of that approach, allowing the PRC to conduct further mapping and research into the resources (living and non-living) of Antarctica.²⁸

A second problem emerges in Antarctica when considering the PRC's patterns of behaviour, stated Antarctic objectives and incremental steps away from the original 'spirit' of the Australia–PRC relationship in Antarctica. Today, Beijing can operate in Antarctica without relying on Australia as it once did. The balance of power related to Antarctic capabilities and fiscal investment is beginning to tip in Beijing's favour. This has emboldened the PRC to overtly support the *status quo* delivered by the ATS, and, at the

same time, work to incrementally test the ATS's weak spots and stifle consensus.

MoUs between Australia and the PRC have all but fallen to history, and opportunities to deepen collaborative research ventures haven't come to fruition. Research agendas appear to have been furthered by Beijing within Australia's Antarctic research community in a pervasive manner. Since the 1980s era of Australia–PRC collaboration, Beijing has also successfully reached into Latin America (which is home to two of the five 'Antarctic gateway' cities). The notion of Hobart holding unparalleled strategic value for PRC Antarctic activities is no longer tenable. If any reservations remained as to Beijing's assessment of the port of Hobart (or the port of Fremantle) as holding significance, surely its (unannounced ahead of time) use of Christchurch, New Zealand, to support its 2023–2024 Antarctic season activities is evidence of Australia's waning gateway value.²⁹

Of course, given that the PRC is expected to unveil its first nuclear-powered icebreaker in 2024, and noting New Zealand's ban on nuclear vessels, Christchurch might no longer be Beijing's priority Antarctic gateway. However, the PRC has worked to bolster ties with Chile, resulting in bilateral plans for the mega-development of the port city, Punta Arenas. That development is set to secure Beijing's transport, supply and support needs for Antarctica.³⁰

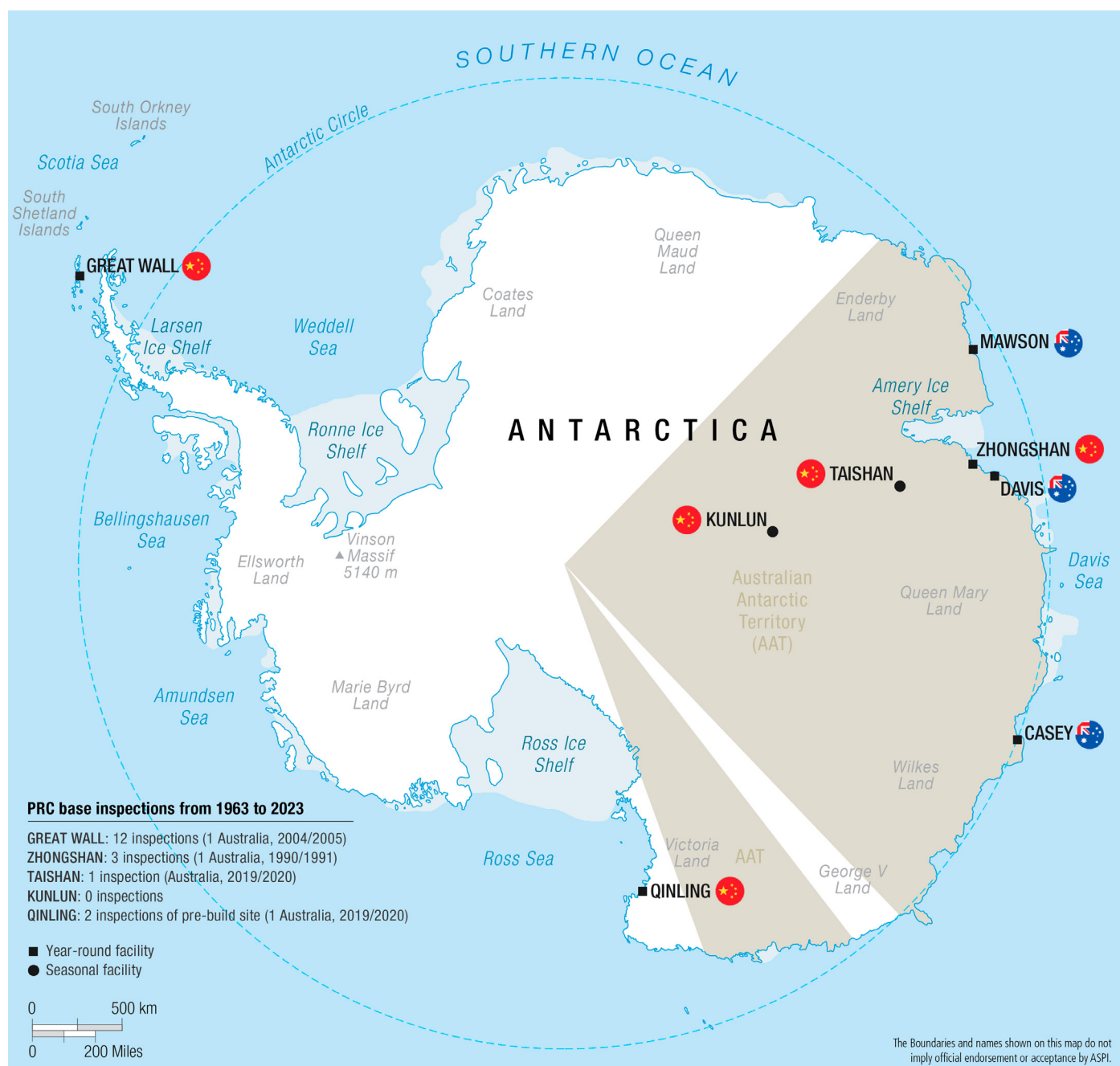
Contemporary Australian Antarctic policy and activities exist to support the ATS itself as a mechanism to protect our enduring claim to the AAT, whereas the PRC appears to work the ATS to shore up decadal strategic ambitions conducive to Beijing's long-term interests and is actively building a capability suite to support them.

It's simplistic to argue that the continuance of the ATS is evidence of its 'success'. Under the hood, things are quite dire. Just look to one of the ATS mechanisms used to keep pervasive activity in check: inspections. The use of inspections to 'service' the treaty and reveal nefarious activities or outright treaty breaches is lacklustre, at best. Since 1963, Australia has undertaken 10 inspections of facilities in Antarctica—a mere three of which were inspections of PRC Antarctic stations (Zhongshan in

1990–1991, Great Wall in 2004–2005 and both Taishan and Qinling in 2019–2020). Of course, the Qinling inspection was only of the levelled ground site prior to Beijing’s completion of the building of the station.³¹

Other inspections of PRC Antarctic stations have been undertaken by treaty parties; however, no party has ever inspected Kunlun station (Beijing’s inland station in the AAT; Figure 3).

Figure 3: Inspections of PRC Antarctic stations from 1963 to 2023

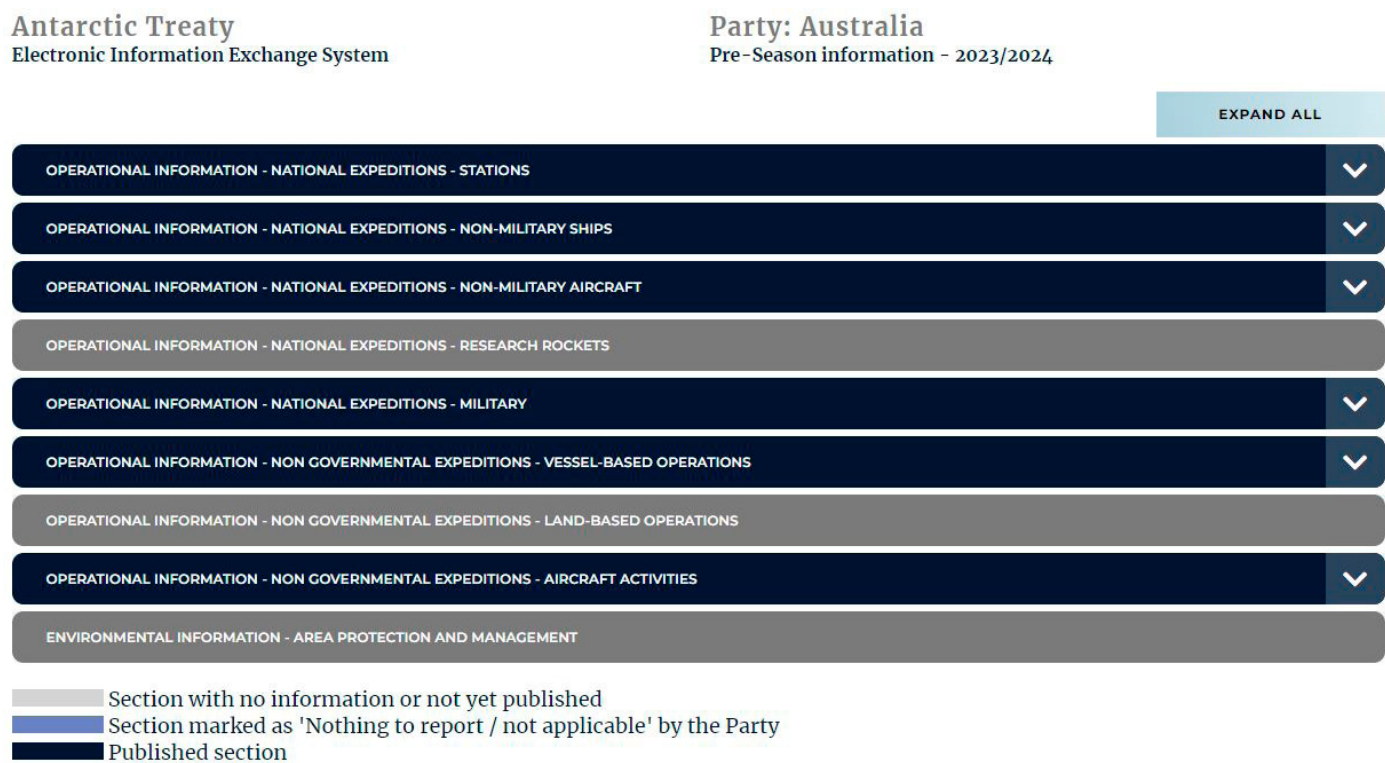


Source: ASPI

PRC ‘engagement’ with the ATS as evidenced by its commitment to sharing scientific data and seasonal plans with treaty partners is lacklustre. Indeed, the submission of PRC working papers to ATCMs when compared to Australia’s submissions is further evidence of failure to adhere to Antarctic obligations and norms. Despite obligations stated in the Antarctic Treaty, Beijing is

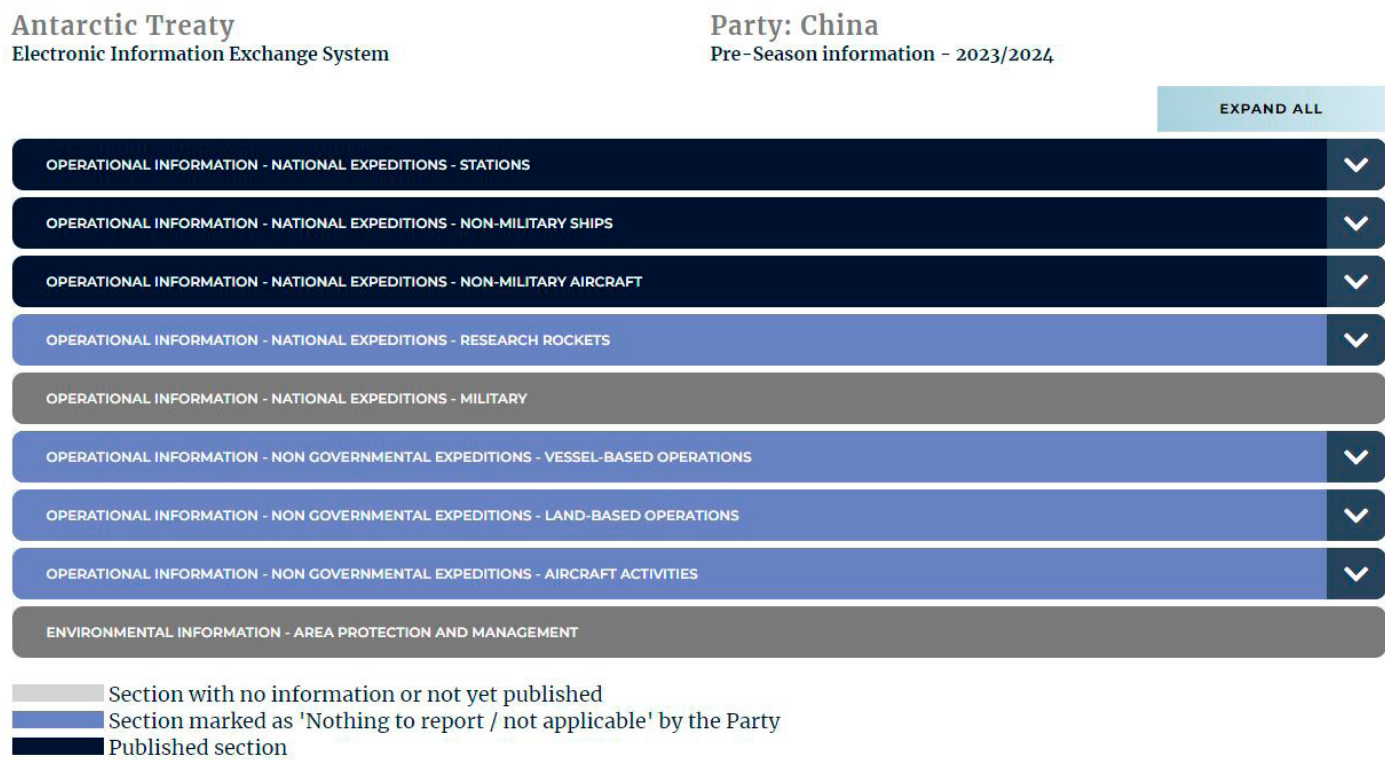
notoriously difficult when it comes to accessing and sharing research data from Antarctic expeditions. Pre-season planning information is also purposefully frustrated: less than 50% of operational information is shared online, and Beijing opts to mark components of the exchange system as ‘nothing to report’ or ‘not applicable’ (Figure 4 and Figure 5).³²

Figure 4: Pre-season information shared by Australia (2023/2024)



Source: Antarctic Treaty Electronic Information Exchange System, Australia, online.

Figure 5: Pre-season information shared by the PRC (2023/2024)

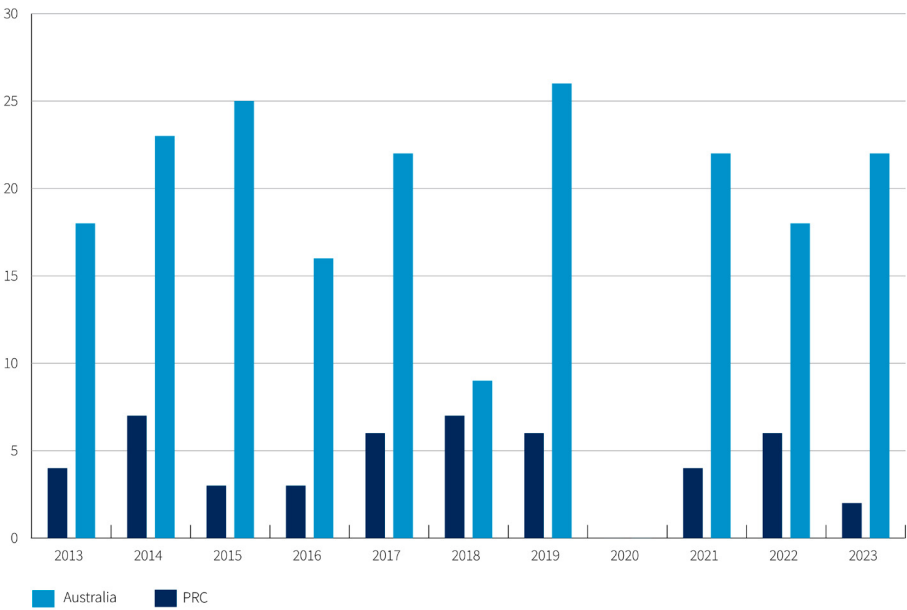


Source: Antarctic Treaty Electronic Information Exchange System, China, online.

Despite Beijing’s commitment to and investment in Antarctic research, the disparity between Australia and the PRC when it comes to working papers submitted to ATCMs is striking. For all of Beijing’s talk of its intent to bolster its leadership position in shaping the ATCM agendas, opportunities to do so legitimately via discussion papers or policy papers are not seized. As Figure 6 illustrates, the past decade of submissions to ATCM discourse and activities indicates that the PRC is very much missing in action.

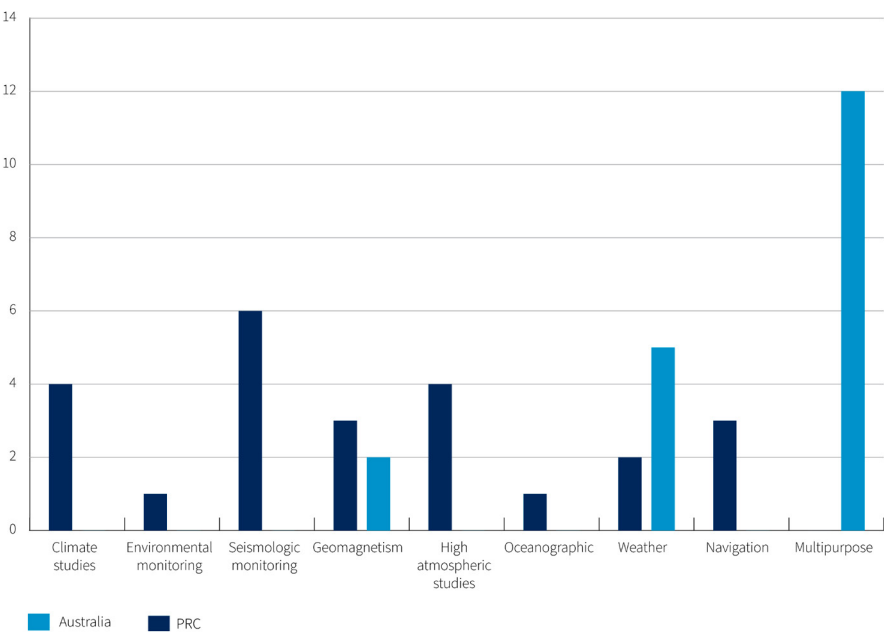
Of course, this isn’t a simple case of the PRC not having any research results to share. Just look to the vast number of (disclosed) automated recording and observation capabilities possessed by Beijing in Antarctica. Figure 7 illustrates the array of research devices deployed there (by both the PRC and Australia). Installations by national Antarctic programs are reported through the Electronic Information Exchange System of the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat, as per the exchange requirements of the treaty.

Figure 6: Authorship (sole/co) of ATCM working papers, 2013 to 2023



Note: ATCM 2020 was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
Source: ‘Meeting documents archive’, Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty, [online](#).

Figure 7: Automatic recording and observation devices in Antarctica and stated purposes



Data source: ‘Gallery’, Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty, [online](#).

Policy recommendations

1. By 2025, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet should undertake a net-assessment stocktake of the existing Australia–PRC Antarctic funding and research nexus. The stocktake should cover the number of Antarctic and Southern Ocean postgraduate scholarships or PhD research projects over the past decade that Australian taxpayers have funded; whether the intellectual property and expertise remained in Australia; and the long-term implications of research partnerships (by cross-referencing PRC partners with the US ‘sanctioned entities’ list).
2. The government must fund Australian Antarctic capacity to conduct annual inspections of all international facilities (coastal and inland) in the AAT. This would require funding increases (in the tens of millions of dollars) and additional logistic capability support.
3. Signal the national strategic relevance of Antarctica (and primarily the AAT) by crafting a specific Antarctic Group in the Department of Defence. Notwithstanding the AT’s prohibition on militarization, we must recognise there are indeed security and defence interests relating to Antarctica. This is a rather different policy-position to Beijing’s civil-military strategy - which is incorrectly observed to be merely a ‘different political system’. The group would work with partners across government, including the Australian Antarctic Division within the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.
4. Antarctica should be a higher priority in Australia’s strategic conception and papers, including across foreign, security and defence outputs.
5. Investigate the value proposition of the port of Albany, the port of Fremantle, or both, becoming additional ‘Antarctic gateway’ cities. The enduring port of Hobart redevelopment delays and issues with refuelling signal a requirement to diversify our Antarctic gateway city offering.
6. Buy back the *Aurora Australis* from P&O (reportedly, the ship is in Dubai) and use it as a secondary vessel to support Antarctic missions. This would free up *Nuyina* from cargo-resupply missions to conduct more of its principal duties, including Antarctic research.
7. Push the US Coast Guard on its (Trump administration) commitment to base an ice-hardened vessel in the Southern Ocean—with a view to securing an Australian homeport for the US Coast Guard. This would bolster Australian capability to monitor and respond to enhanced PRC Antarctic and Southern Ocean activities.
8. Learn from the PRC program of ‘Antarctic Cultural Publicity and Public Education’ in the Australian national setting to cultivate national interest in Antarctica and the AAT. Beijing incorporates, for secondary and primary schools, Antarctic knowledge and agency. The Australian Government should learn lessons and seek to replicate some of the PRC’s successes.
9. The government should establish a ministry-level position—a Special Envoy or Ambassador for Antarctica in the Prime Minister’s portfolio. The purpose would be to promote Australia’s Antarctic identity and interests both within the nation and internationally. The UK and the EU have such positions, and they’re crucial components of a broader effort to raise awareness and maintain Antarctic literacy in security affairs.



Appendix: Reference to Antarctica in Australian strategic documents, 1987–2024

Defence white papers

1987

‘The Government strongly supports the provisions of the Antarctic Treaty, which prohibit military use of the territory. The national interest of Australia lies in ensuring that Antarctica remains demilitarised and free from political and strategic competition. So long as Antarctica remains demilitarised, no threat to the security of Australia itself is in prospect from or through that region. There is no requirement for defence activities to support our territorial or economic interests in Antarctica or for defence involvement beyond the present limited logistic support for Australia’s national effort there.’

‘The Government’s policy is to pursue political, as distinct from military, solutions to any disputes. Growing international interest in the exploitation of continental and off-shore resources in Antarctica is stimulating pressures for challenges to the Treaty. With the other Treaty consultative parties, we are working on means to preserve the Treaty.’

1994

Nil reference.

2000

Nil reference.

2009

‘Our strategic interests and defence posture suggest a primary focus for the ADF on tasks in our geographical vicinity. To guide defence planning, the Government has decided that the ADF’s primary operational environment extends from the eastern Indian Ocean to the island states of Polynesia, and from the equator to the Southern Ocean. That area contains all Australian sovereign, offshore and economic territories, such as Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Christmas Island, Heard and McDonald Islands, Macquarie Island, Norfolk Island and also waters adjacent to the Australian Antarctic Territory.’

‘While we do not judge that there is a credible risk of our national interests in the Southern Ocean and the

Australian Antarctic Territory being challenged such that substantial military responses might have to be contemplated over the period of this White Paper, the Government will continue to monitor the strategic implications of international developments in the Antarctic region.’

2013

‘There is no credible risk of Australia’s national interests in the Southern Ocean and the Australian Antarctic Territory being challenged in ways that might require substantial military responses over the next few decades. The Antarctic Treaty System provides for the international governance and management of Antarctica and sets aside use of Antarctica for peaceful purposes, with a particular emphasis on scientific research and environmental protection. The Antarctic Treaty’s ‘Madrid Protocol’ prohibits any activity relating to mineral resource exploitation other than scientific research, and until 2048 can only be amended by unanimous consent. Australia is a strong advocate of the Antarctic Treaty System and its goals.’

‘There is, however, increasing international interest in Antarctica, including in Australia’s Antarctic Territory. Australia has forged operational and scientific cooperation relationships with several nations and will continue to monitor the strategic implications of international developments in the Antarctic region. To date, the Antarctic Treaty System has been well respected, but in coming decades it may come under pressure as resources become more scarce elsewhere.’

2016

‘The Australian Antarctic Territory faces no credible risk of being challenged in such a way that requires a substantial military response for at least the next few decades. It is in our interest to work with like-minded countries to prevent any militarisation of Antarctica which could threaten Australia’s sovereignty over the Australian Antarctic Territory and its sovereign rights over its offshore waters. Australia is a strong supporter of the Antarctic Treaty System, which expressly prohibits any mining in Antarctica.

Australia also strongly supports the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, which regulates fishing activity in Antarctic waters.’

‘Defence will continue to support maritime resource protection operations, particularly in the fisheries of our Heard and McDonald Islands Exclusive Economic Zone, and will provide niche support to the Australian Antarctic Division’s operations, including Royal Australian Air Force heavy air lift missions in support of Australia’s stations in Antarctica.’

2020 Defence Strategic Update

Nil reference.

2024 National Defence Strategy

Nil reference.

Foreign policy white papers

1997

‘Australia is a continent facing three oceans, and the area where Australia’s security interests are engaged is extensive. It embraces South East Asia, the South West Pacific, Antarctica, and the eastern Indian Ocean.’

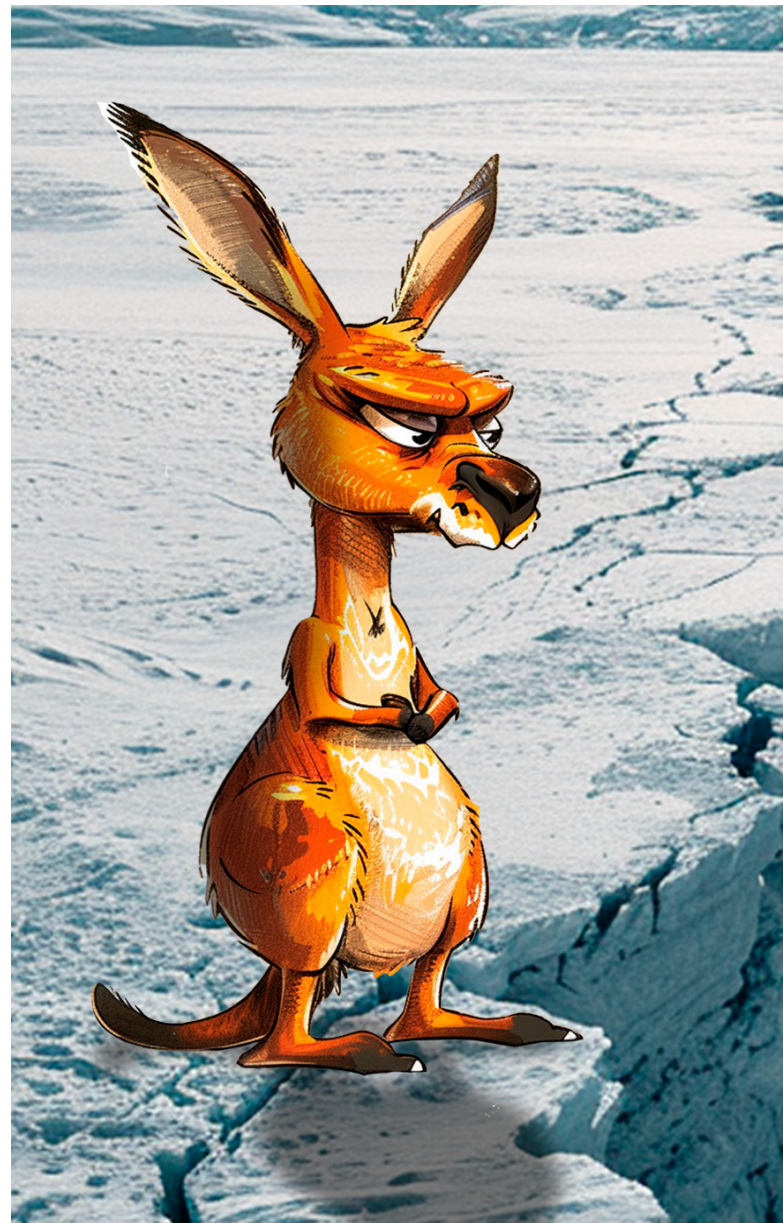
2017

‘Antarctica is important to Australia. We have sovereignty over 42 per cent of the continent, including sovereign rights over adjacent offshore areas. The Government is spending an additional \$2.2 billion to protect Australia’s significant Antarctic interests.’

‘Australia is among the most influential parties to the Antarctic Treaty and is staunchly committed to the Treaty’s strength and effectiveness, and its principles of environmental protection and non-militarisation. This will preserve Antarctica as a region devoted to peace and science and reduce the potential for strategic competition to Australia’s south.’

‘Australia has an ambitious agenda for its future in Antarctica, set out in the Australian Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan. We are building a new world-class research and resupply icebreaker vessel and new overland transport capabilities. We are improving our aviation access to the continent. We will protect the Antarctic environment, with an emphasis on maintaining the indefinite ban on mining and oil drilling, and on conserving marine resources. We will continue to deliver a world-class science program.’

‘The Government will also fund new capabilities and infrastructure to support Tasmania’s status as the premier gateway for science and operations in East Antarctica.’



Notes

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- 15 The first, signed in 2012, was an MoU on Antarctic cooperation between the Australian Antarctic Division and the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration. The second, signed in 2013, was an MoU on Antarctic Gateway cooperation between the Government of Tasmania and the State Oceanic Administration of China. A third MoU, signed in 2014, represented the broader strategic bilateral relationship in Antarctica. This MoU, on 'cooperation in the field of Antarctic and Southern Ocean affairs', was signed by Prime Minister Tony Abbott and President Xi Jinping.
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Acronyms and abbreviations

AAT	Australian Antarctic Territory
ADF	Australian Defence Force
ADFA	Australian Defence Force Academy
ATCM	Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting
ATS	Antarctic Treaty System
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSHOR	Centre for Southern Hemisphere Oceans Research
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DWP	Defence White Paper
EU	European Union
FPWP	Foreign Policy White Paper
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
OUC	Ocean University of China
PRC	People's Republic of China
QNLN	Qingdao National Laboratory for Marine Science and Technology
UNSW	University of New South Wales
US	United States

WHAT'S YOUR STRATEGY?

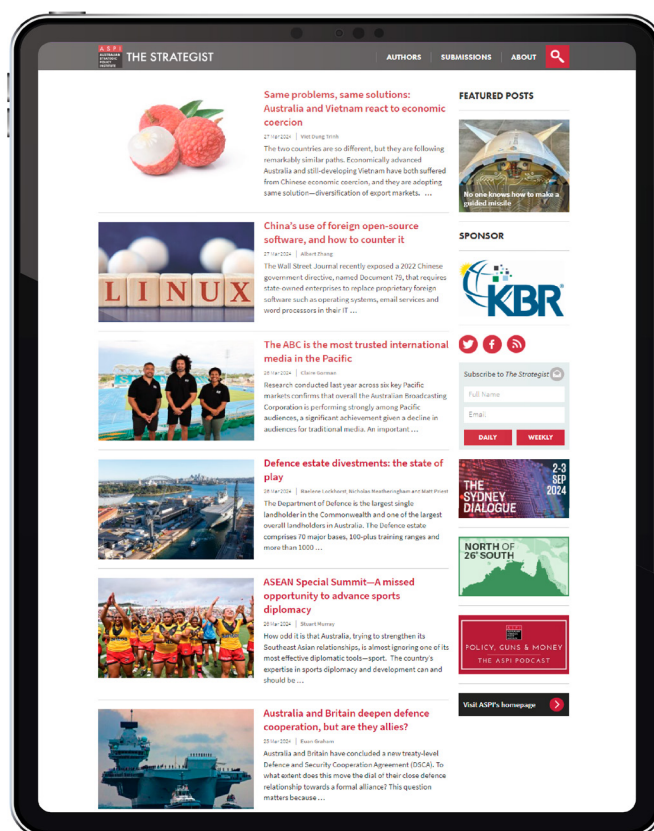


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