

# AUSTRALIA AND THE UNITED STATES IN ANTARCTICA: WARM PARTNERS ON THE COLDEST CONTINENT

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December 2016

## POLICY BRIEF

### Introduction

In October, 25 governments, including Australia and the United States, established the world's largest Marine Protected Area (MPA) in the Ross Sea in Antarctica. The US Secretary of State John Kerry, who played a pivotal role, heralded the agreement as the outcome of 'intense negotiations, and principled diplomacy'.<sup>1</sup> In November, Secretary Kerry visited the Ross Sea, becoming the first Secretary of State and most senior US government official to set foot in Antarctica.<sup>2</sup> Senator Kerry's Antarctic visit capped off an intense focus of American diplomacy on climate change during his term.

These historic moments in Antarctic diplomacy reinforce the geostrategic importance of the coldest continent and the intersection of key Australian and United States interests. Yet surprisingly the United States has attracted limited if any discussion in Australia's Antarctic strategic reviews and planning documents. Against this background, this report critically appraises the current state of US and Australian Antarctic policy, identifying areas of close cooperation and potential tension in the management of southern polar diplomacy.

### US Antarctic policy

The US Antarctic Program (USAP) issues a *Participant Guide*<sup>3</sup> to its personnel dealing not only with prosaic matters but also the profound question of US strategic interests in Antarctica. The guide recites the four pillars of US Antarctic policy that have been in place for over 50 years:

- Non-recognition of territorial claims.
- Retention of the right to participate in any future uses of the region.
- Use of Antarctica for peaceful purposes only.
- Free access for scientific investigation and other peaceful purposes.

The Antarctic Treaty is regarded by the United States as the 'keystone of US Antarctic policy'. The treaty was concluded in Washington in 1959 and has deftly managed the competing interests of claimants and non-claimants by placing sovereign assertions in abeyance.<sup>4</sup> The Antarctic governance framework has subsequently been expanded by additional treaties collectively known as the 'Antarctic Treaty System' (ATS).<sup>5</sup> These include the 1980 Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), which provides for the sustainable management of krill and other Antarctic marine living resources, and the 1991 Protocol on Environmental Protection, which designates Antarctica as a natural

reserve, devoted to peace and science and bans mining on the continent.

For the United States, the ATS serves its national interests by placing territorial claims on hold (while not foreclosing a potential US claim in the future), reserving Antarctica for peace and science, establishing a regional management organisation for Antarctic fisheries, and creating a sophisticated system for Antarctic environmental protection. The United States is an active participant in ATS fora and advances US Antarctic policy primarily through this multilateral regime. The USAP, administered by the US National Science Foundation, manages US scientific research in Antarctica and operates the three permanent US scientific stations: McMurdo (in the Ross Sea), Amundsen-Scott (at the geographic South Pole) and Palmer (on the Antarctic Peninsula). The Amundsen-Scott station is at a 'symbolically critical location where all the claims (save for Norway's) converge'.<sup>6</sup> This serves to signify clearly the United States reservation of its territorial position.

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## **Australian Antarctic policy**

Australia's Antarctic policy has also been characterised by stability since the 1950s. Following a detailed inquiry by Dr Tony Press (the '*Press Report*'),<sup>8</sup> in 2016 the Australian Government released the *Australian Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan*<sup>9</sup> which reaffirmed and clarified Australia's national Antarctic interests:

- Maintaining Antarctica's freedom from strategic and/or political confrontation;

- Preserving Australia's sovereignty over the Australian Antarctic Territory, including sovereign rights over adjacent offshore areas;
- Supporting a strong and effective Antarctic Treaty System;
- Conducting world-class scientific research;
- Protecting the Antarctic environment;
- Enabling Australia's influence on developments in Antarctica; and
- Fostering economic opportunities, consistent with the ban on mining and oil drilling.

The core difference in Australian and US Antarctic policy concerns sovereignty. Australia is one of the seven claimants to territory in Antarctica, and claims title to the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT) which covers 42 per cent of Antarctica.<sup>10</sup> As Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull noted in the foreword to the *Australian Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan*, "the Australian Antarctic Territory occupies a unique place in our national identity".

Australia is nonetheless as strongly supportive of the Antarctic Treaty as the United States and a highly active participant within multilateral Antarctic fora. For Australia the ATS serves its national interests by preserving the status quo (and relieving it of the need to reinforce its territorial claim), maintaining the continent free from militarisation and confrontation, promoting scientific research, protecting the environment, and enabling the sustainable management of Antarctic fisheries. The Australian Antarctic Division (AAD), a division of the Environment and Energy Department based in Hobart, advances Australia's strategic, scientific environmental and economic interests in Antarctica.

The *Australian Antarctic Science Strategic Plan 2011-12 to 2020-21* explains that 'what happens to the frozen continent and the Southern Ocean will have profound impacts on Australia', including Australia's climate and sea levels along the Australian coast.<sup>11</sup> The plan calls for scientific focus within four thematic areas: climate processes and change, terrestrial and nearshore ecosystems, southern ocean ecosystems and frontier science.

The *Australian Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan* marks a significant new investment in Antarctic science. The key components include \$1.9bn for a new research vessel to replace the ageing *Aurora Australis*, new operational funding, deep-field Antarctic science

traverse capability, exploration of year-round aviation access options, renewed diplomatic capability within the ATS, and investments in Hobart as an Antarctic research hub and premier gateway to East Antarctica. The new icebreaker will be the largest single investment in the history of Australia's Antarctic program and will significantly enhance Australia's Antarctic capabilities.<sup>12</sup>

## Domains of cooperation and consensus

Australia and the United States have cooperated to varying extents across multiple Antarctic policy domains, particularly in relation to Antarctic science and environmental protection. There has been some operational coordination, including the inheritance of Wilkes Station.

The United States and Australia have strong historic connections in Antarctica<sup>13</sup> which can be traced to the negotiation of the Antarctic Treaty in which both governments played a decisive role.<sup>14</sup> The United States was the 'principal architect' of the Antarctic Treaty, leading the negotiations and conclusion of the treaty in Washington.<sup>15</sup> If the United States was the lead treaty designer, Australia can be described as one of the most important 'renovators' of the ATS, given its leadership in CCAMLR (for which Australia is the depository) and the ban on Antarctica mining under the Environmental Protocol which was achieved primarily as a result of Australian and French diplomacy.<sup>16</sup>

While taking divergent views on sovereignty in Antarctica, Australia and the United States have cooperated closely in southern polar affairs since the 1950s. This cooperation has been both bilateral and multilateral. Multilateral cooperation is enabled by the ATS which creates fundamental principles of cooperative Antarctic management and a diplomatic framework for achieving this (through regular ATCMs and the work within other elements of the ATS, including the Environmental Protocol and CCAMLR).

Historically there has been some cooperation between Australia and the United States on basing in Antarctica. The United States constructed Wilkes Station within the AAT in 1957 during the International Geophysical Year and the station was transferred to Australian control in 1959. However, United States personnel at Wilkes were not happy with this arrangement, and as

a result the station came under exclusive Australian jurisdiction in 1961. The station was only ever intended to be temporary, and was eventually abandoned in 1969 when Australia's nearby Casey Station was established.<sup>17</sup>

Operationally, the United States now has a closer relationship with New Zealand than Australia. This is primarily for the practical reason that the US McMurdo Station is located at the southern tip of Ross Island, within New Zealand's Ross Dependency. New Zealand is USAP's primary Antarctic logistics partner, and USAP maintains a base at Christchurch International Airport for this purpose.

The Australian Government has promoted Hobart as an alternative gateway for United States access to Antarctica. In 2015 USAP participated in an AAD A319 trial flight transporting US expeditioners between Hobart and McMurdo Base in Antarctica, however this has not been followed by regular flights.<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that none of the three US stations in Antarctica are within the AAT, although the Amundsen-Scott South Pole station does straddle the sectoral claims by Australia and five other claimants.

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Australia and the United States cooperate closely in undertaking world-leading Antarctic science. Science is the primary currency of influence in Antarctica and the Antarctic Treaty makes substantial scientific research activity a condition of full membership for new parties.<sup>19</sup> One example, among many, is the joint US and Australian venture to construct and deploy an automated astronomical observatory in Ridge A, the highest elevation on the Antarctic Plateau.

Australia and the United States also cooperate closely on issues of Antarctic environmental protection and Antarctica is specifically mentioned in the 2004 United States-Australia Joint Statement on Environmental Cooperation.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Australia and the United States have been strong supporters of MPAs in

Antarctica. They were signatories of a joint 2013 statement in support of MPAs in the Southern Ocean in the Ross Sea region and in East Antarctica.<sup>21</sup>

The United States and Australia have championed separate but complementary Antarctic MPA proposals. The United States and New Zealand advocated for an MPA in the Ross Sea region, and this proposal was adopted by CCAMLR in October 2016. This is a highly significant development in the ATS and marks a thawing attitude towards Antarctica by Russia, which has previously played the role of spoiler in MPA negotiations. Secretary Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held numerous discussions on the issue, and the change of heart also aligned with President Vladimir Putin's declaration of 2017 as the 'Russian Year of Ecology'. From an environmental perspective the Ross Sea MPA is not perfect (its expiry date of 35 years is of concern as protected areas should in principle be permanent) however politically the agreement on the MPA has provided welcome reassurance of the robustness of the ATS and the willingness of Russia to be a constructive participant.

Australia, France and the European Union have proposed an MPA in East Antarctica.<sup>22</sup> That proposal had also been blocked by Russia and other states in CCAMLR. Because of the focus on the Ross Sea MPA at the most recent CCAMLR meeting, the East Antarctica MPA was not considered and approved. However it now seems likely that it will be agreed to in 2017. The proposed East Antarctica MPA would protect representative areas of biodiversity in the Indian Ocean sector of the Southern Ocean which contains distinctive deep water flora and fauna and supports key ecosystem roles, including as feeding grounds for whales.<sup>23</sup>

## Domains of disagreement and tension

### Sovereignty

Australia has probed a number of sovereignty issues to which the United States has objected. Sovereignty remains an issue on which Australia and the United States differ, and is therefore a potential irritant in the US-Australian relationship. Illustrating this, in 1955 the United States formally objected to Australia's extension of the Convention of the World Meteorological

Organization to the AAT as contrary to the US policy of non-recognition.

The Antarctic Treaty, which puts sovereignty questions on hold, has defused most tensions over sovereignty and removed the legal need for diplomatic objections to the activities of other states in Antarctica. Nonetheless, the sovereignty question arises from time to time and requires careful management to avoid escalation. The most recent example is in relation to continental shelf areas around Antarctica.

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Under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), states may be entitled to an extended continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles.<sup>24</sup> UNCLOS requires states wishing to establish such outer continental shelf areas to provide data to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), a technical body created by UNCLOS. In relation to Antarctica, the United States and other non-claimants have taken the position that maritime claims in Antarctica should be treated the same way as the terrestrial claims from which they are projected, and not be recognised. Australia and other claimants contend that the entitlement to a continental shelf under the law of the sea predates the Antarctic Treaty and therefore its recognition does not amount to a new claim, or the enlargement of an existing claim contrary to Article IV of the treaty.

Australia was the first Antarctica claimant to make a submission to the CLCS, and included data not only for the Australian mainland and offshore territories but also, controversially, the AAT.<sup>25</sup> However, conscious that few states recognise its Antarctic claim, Australia requested the CLCS not to consider this component of its submission for the time being. The CLCS duly avoided addressing this Antarctic data in its recommendations (which otherwise accepted most of Australia's outer continental shelf).<sup>26</sup>

The United States was one of six Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties to lodge a formal objection with the CLCS to Australia's submission of Antarctic data.<sup>27</sup> The US note clearly reflects the diplomatic groundwork laid by Australia and the United States to diffuse tensions over sovereignty. The United States stated that while it did not recognise any claim to Antarctic or its continental shelf, it did acknowledge 'with appreciation Australia's request to the Commission that it not take any action on that portion of its submission relating to areas of the seabed and subsoil adjacent to Antarctica'.<sup>28</sup>

### Sino-Australian ties in Antarctica

In recent years Australia and China have established increasingly close ties in Antarctica. In March 2016, Australian and Chinese officials met in Hobart at the first meeting of the Joint Committee on Antarctic and Southern Ocean Collaboration,<sup>29</sup> a body established under the China-Australia Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Antarctic and Southern Ocean Affairs, signed during President Xi's visit to Hobart in 2014 ('China-Australia Antarctic MoU'). The China-Australia Antarctic MoU affirms the two states' commitment to the ATS, establishes the joint committee, creates a mechanism for environmental, policy, scientific and operational collaboration, and establishes a platform for Antarctic official and academic fellowships.<sup>30</sup> In addition, a memorandum of understanding between Tasmania and the State Oceanic Administration of China was signed in September 2013, with access to Hobart and support for China's vessels a central feature of the arrangement.<sup>31</sup>

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China is rapidly formalising Antarctic relations with Australia, whilst the US-Australia Antarctic relationship remains far more informal. This is in large part a reflection of the intensification of Chinese activity in Eastern Antarctica, including in the AAT. China has

expanded Zhongshan Station (near Australia's Davis Station), constructed the all-year Dome A Station on the highest point in the AAT, established a new summer station, and deployed a new icebreaker.

Closer Sino-Australian engagement is a natural response to the growing influence of China as an Antarctic player, allowing Australia to work cooperatively with this relatively new Antarctic power (China only joined the Antarctic Treaty in 1983) and thereby diffuse potential anxieties over China's interests in the region.<sup>32</sup> Rather than viewing the interests of new states in Antarctica as a threat, the Australian Government's public position is that it welcomes these new activities and that it works within the ATS to have a positive influence on this engagement.<sup>33</sup> As explained in the 2012 White Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century*:

Continued cooperation with our partners in Asia in the maintenance and protection of international agreements, such as the Antarctic Treaty, will also be an asset. The development of the close relations we have with our Asian regional partners involved in Antarctica will be increasingly important in protecting the Antarctic region as well as in frontier marine, biological and climate research in the Asian century. Australia's scientific research and basing capacities in Hobart and in Antarctica have fostered closer cooperation with China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia and other partners on Antarctic research and logistics. This cooperation can be elevated through Australia's Antarctic science strategic plan, working within the Antarctic Treaty system.<sup>34</sup>

Echoing this posture, in a paper published by the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies earlier this year, Air Commodore Margot Foster recommended that:

Australia should expand its collaboration with China in the Antarctic. Building on the recently signed Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries, Australia should promote even deeper cooperation on Antarctic policy issues and scientific research, and support to operational activities through the joint movement of personnel and sharing of resources in the region.

Such increased collaboration will provide Australia with greater situational awareness of China's

activities in Eastern Antarctica. This would be a natural extension of the already-established relationship, and afford potential future opportunities such as a joint venture to build an airfield in the interior of Eastern Antarctica, which would benefit the activities of both nations. Australia should actively encourage the expansion of the Australia-China Antarctic Memorandum of Understanding to strengthen its credentials as an active and credible collaborator.<sup>35</sup>

As yet we do not know how this overt positioning by Australia is viewed by the United States, and whether it would create issues for the Australian-US relationship. It need not raise concerns for the United States. To the contrary, increased collaboration by Australia with China in Antarctica provides opportunities for the United States to leverage the insights and awareness gained by one of its closest allies on China's attitude to, and activities, in Antarctica.

## Conclusion

As in other areas of Australia's foreign policy, China has been an increasingly important focus for Australia's Antarctic diplomacy. In sharp contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to the US and Australian partnership in Antarctica. The United States has garnered limited if any discussion in Australia's recent Antarctic strategic reviews and planning documents. Indeed the *Press Report* singled out China, Russia, France and New Zealand ahead of the United States in the list of governments with which Australia should reaffirm and strengthen bilateral Antarctic ties.<sup>36</sup>

It is not the case that Australia must adopt an 'either/or' attitude towards China and the United States in Antarctica. By neutralising the sovereignty question and creating a multilateral framework for cooperation in Antarctica, the Antarctic Treaty means that Australia does not have to play favourites in its Antarctic diplomacy in order to advance its national interests. Nonetheless, neither Australia nor the United States should take its partnership in Antarctica for granted, and should consider a formal demonstration of its shared commitment to the objectives of the Antarctic Treaty.

There are multiple points of common interest in the extreme south upon which a formal declaration could pivot, from new logistical arrangements for heavy airlift capacity through to vital matters of substantive policy, including climate change. It remains to be seen whether under the incoming administration of Donald Trump that Antarctic issues will continue to be a focus for the United States. Although the President-elect's antipathy to climate science is well known, to weaken US research, much of which is necessarily focused on climate issues, would carry major diplomatic costs given the importance of scientific effort for projecting influence on the continent.

The reality is that the Antarctic is rapidly changing as a result of climate change, and understanding this process and its implications for Australia, the United States and the world is vital. As a significant Antarctic state, Australia has the opportunity to play a constructive role in pressing the United States to stay the course in the public good science it undertakes in Antarctica and to continue efforts to safeguard the unique Antarctic environment.

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Cover photo: A US research station in Antarctica, November 2016 (State Department)

**This report may be cited as:**

Tim Stephens, "Australia and the United States in Antarctica: Warm partners on the coldest continent," United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, December 2016.

## Endnotes

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*The Alliance 21 Program receives funding support from the following partners. Research conclusions are derived independently and authors represent their own view not those of the United States Studies Centre.*



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