

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
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## **Inquiry into Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) funding**

Dear Committee Members,

I refer to your inquiry into Australian Antarctic Division funding, in my capacity as a private Australian citizen and expert in polar warfare. These views are not those of the Australian Department of Defence, Royal Australian Navy, Royal Navy or the U.S Department of Defense. My submission relates to my international scholarly work on Arctic and Antarctic geopolitics, and related matters within my academic area of expertise.

This submission makes particular reference to the following terms of reference:

- (c) the ramifications for Australia’s international commitments and obligations;
- (f) the consequences of funding cuts to Australia’s Antarctic program for our country’s geopolitical and strategic international interests; and
- (h) the widespread view, including among numerous Antarctic science experts, that funding cuts of this scale and nature are catastrophic for Australia.

Australia is faced with four central challenges in Antarctica. **First**, Australia continues to overlook its southern flank. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR2023) builds upon the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (DSU2020) precedent of omitting Antarctica from threat assessments.<sup>1</sup>

Of interest is the fact that the DSU2020 illustrates on page 1, Operation Southern Discovery (Antarctica) and flags it an Australian Defence Force (ADF) “domestic operation”, yet fails to articulate anywhere else in the document the *ways, ends, and means* of delivering on our Antarctic interests.

While a theatre of domestic ADF operation in the DSU2020, Antarctica is missing from the DSR2023 – a review of our *national defence* ecosystem. The DSR2023’s passing reference to “Australia’s southern regions” aptly captures our lax attitude towards Australia’s southern flank.<sup>2</sup>

Antarctica is often missing from the covers of government publications – including our most recent Defence and Foreign Policy White Papers, and in text, it is relegated to a ‘pop-out’ table or box. This is despite our rather sizable (and the largest) territorial sovereign claim to 42 per cent of the Antarctic continent.

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<sup>1</sup> Australia. Department of Defence. (2020). 2020 Defence Strategic Update. Department of Defence. [Canberra]: Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2020-defence-strategic-update>

<sup>2</sup> Australia. Department of Defence. (2023). 2023 Defence Strategic Review. Department of Defence. [Canberra]: Australian Government. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>

It is regrettable that the AAD finds itself both seeking to deliver on national security interests and international commitments to peace and scientific endeavour whilst surviving on a relatively tight fiscal budget. This is an impossible situation compounded by a normalised national strategic complacency akin to the notion of ‘if it ain't broke, don't fix it’.

Australia by and large remains comfortable with the assumption that the extant Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) is willing and able to do all the heavy lifting. Current geopolitical events, stemming from Russia's war in Ukraine, are no doubt cause for revisiting the assumptions around ‘good order’ and blanket commitments to ‘peaceful intentions’ as per the ‘spirit’ of the Antarctic Treaty. These are no longer shared, international values.

A **second** challenge Australia faces in Antarctica is that our strategic reading of the region is at odds with our Indo-Pacific allies. We also lack a common geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific to speak to – and boundaries and definitions do matter in geopolitics. For instance, U.S INDOPACOM specifically includes Antarctica and the Southern Ocean in its Indo-Pacific vision and area of operation. The DSU2020 narrowed the Indo-Pacific framing to our north-east Asian approaches and the south-west Pacific.

**Third**, Australia has a challenge within the Antarctic expert ecosystem. Scientific researchers, legal scholars, and security studies/international relations experts are often working in silos – with limited opportunities to bridge divisions and contest assumed knowledge. This is apparent in differing assessments of the ‘health’ of the ATS – scientists engaging with their international counterparts are less inclined to notice the more coercive elements of statecraft at the policy level. Likewise, from personal experience, security scholars are dissuaded to underscore that the mere continued functioning of the ATS is not an efficient way to measure Antarctic futures – rather, we are tarred as warmongers.

Of course, this is not to argue the ATS is failing, indeed, states have an interest in upholding the system as it is. The ATS facilitates strategic competition, as it always has since its Cold War birth. Upholding the ATS continues to be in Australia's national interest: it delivers a great return on investment – debate over our massive territorial claim shelved into perpetuity.

Nevertheless, it is within the margins of an operational ATS that Australia must look. To recognise and grasp the coercive elements of Antarctic cooperation and the entrenched nature of grey-zone activities on the continent. Overall, subversion, deception and sophisticated interpretations of international legal norms in Antarctica are all hallmarks of our functional ATS.

This leads to the **fourth** area of our Antarctic challenge: finding palatable solutions for a consensus-based governance system (ATS) which we know is imperfect, under strain, and yet in our national interest to protect. Here, we can raise the stakes of system failure by looking at the areas of mutual interest in Antarctica. Climate research and science is at the heart of the solution. Antarctica is the longest running global data set we have for weather patterns – autocracies and democracies alike recognise this value. Australia must turbo charge investment and support international linkages within the *currency* of science.

Likewise, presence is influence and influence is power in the Antarctic context. Antarctic access no longer relies on a handful of Antarctic gateway states (South America, South

Africa, Australia, New Zealand) to be gatekeepers for flights and ports in and out of the continent. Times have changed: states like China have stood up sovereign naval industries and have made undeniable inroads into South American port systems.

Finally, with 70 per cent of the Earth's fresh water, hydrocarbons, and a clear shot to space on offer in Antarctica, as well as a Southern Ocean rich in vast krill and fisheries stocks, we cannot deny Antarctica is a prized bounty. Australia needs to revise our assumptions which keep us beholden to the 2016 Defence White Paper idea that 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".<sup>3</sup> Failure to do so, before the next few decades, will certainly cost us.

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<sup>3</sup> Australia. Department of Defence. (2016). 2016 Defence White Paper. Department of Defence. [Canberra]: Australian Government. <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf>