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Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE
NATIONAL CAPITAL AND EXTERNAL
TERRITORIES - INQUIRY INTO THE
IMPORTANCE OF ANTARCTICA TO
AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL INTEREST**

**DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE SUBMISSION
12 APRIL 2024**

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The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories as part of the Committee's *Inquiry into the importance of Antarctica to Australia's national interests*. This submission provides information on DFAT's longstanding work in support of the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) and outlines Australia's national interests.

Australia's enduring national interests in the Antarctic

Australia has strong national interests in Antarctica given its proximity in our region. These interests include: to maintain Antarctica's freedom from militarisation; to protect the unique Antarctic environment; to conduct world class scientific research; to promote economic benefits for Hobart as an Antarctic gateway; and to preserve our sovereignty over the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT), including rights and jurisdiction over its waters consistent with international law. Our national interests are supported by the strong and effective operation of the ATS, comprising the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, the 1991 Protocol on Environmental Protection, the 1980 Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, and the 1972 Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Seals.

Australia is regarded as a leader in the Antarctic and is influential in the ATS. Our reputation is built on decades of excellence in Antarctic science and operations, our bilateral collaboration, and our active engagement in the ATS. Australia asserts sovereignty over 42 per cent of the Antarctic continent. Australia is also the depositary state for the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) and hosts the Commission, Secretariat and annual meetings in Hobart.

Australia and the ATS

Australia faces the most challenging strategic circumstances in the post-World War II period. Conflict, climate change, global economic uncertainty, the demand for resources, demographic and technological shifts are testing all States. The Antarctic and the ATS are not immune from the impact of these global challenges.

Australia maintains a position of leadership and influence in the ATS and is committed to ensuring its ongoing strength and effectiveness, to preserve Antarctica as a region devoted to peace and science. The ATS continues to serve Australia's national interests at a time when interest and activities in the Antarctic region are increasing. The ATS provides a critical forum to discuss, manage and respond to challenges and complex issues. It enables international cooperation on issues of significant importance and ensures States can express and manage differences through established norms and rules.

The ATS has at its core the principles of non-militarisation, environmental protection, international cooperation, and freedom of scientific investigation. Article IV of the Treaty provides that:

“No acts or activities taking place while the present Treaty is in force shall constitute a basis for asserting, supporting or denying a claim to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica or create any rights of sovereignty in Antarctica.”

The Treaty accommodates the positions of all claimant States on Antarctic sovereignty and provides that States' behaviour during the operation of the Treaty does not strengthen nor weaken claims.

Inspections provided for by the Antarctic Treaty and its 1991 Environmental Protocol are a key transparency mechanism to monitor compliance. Australia, led by DCCEEW with DFAT participation, continues to be one of the most active nations in carrying out inspections of other countries' Antarctic stations. Our inspections, with a particular focus on the East Antarctic region, have found a high level of compliance by other States with ATS obligations. We remain committed to ongoing regular inspections.

Conserving and protecting Antarctica's unique biodiversity and environment and enhancing our understanding of the environment and climate through science is vital. We know climate change is impacting Antarctica. These impacts include melting glaciers and the loss of sea ice. This has significant implications for Australia, our region and globally, such as through the contribution to sea level rise, changes to global ocean currents, and effects on biodiversity, including changes to fisheries.

Recent *International Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) reports and the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) *Antarctic Climate Change and the Environment Report* – provides clear evidence of the impact climate change is having on Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. This is why, at the 2023 Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM), Australia underscored the enduring importance of the best available science to Antarctic governance. Australia also co-sponsored the *Helsinki Declaration on Climate Change and Antarctica* at the 2023 ATCM.

Australia is globally renowned for this research, including understanding the global implications of changes in the Antarctic region. Accordingly, Australia has advocated in the ATCM and CCAMLR for Antarctic Treaty Parties to seek to ensure international discussions about climate change mitigation and adaptation are informed by Antarctic climate change research.

In November 2023, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs, The Hon Tim Watts MP, attended the One Planet – Polar Summit, hosted by President Macron in Paris. Assistant Minister Watts' participation in the Summit was a strong demonstration of Australia's longstanding commitment to the Antarctic. He reaffirmed the value of the ATS and Australia's commitment to its enduring success through upholding the principles of peaceful use, scientific cooperation, and environmental protection.

Hobart is one of the five gateways to the Antarctic. Tasmania and Australia's academic and research community benefit from science and operations in the Antarctic. Hobart, the headquarters and port for Australia's Antarctic Program since 1981, has been visited by polar and research vessels from France, China, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and the United States. The Antarctic and Southern Ocean sector was estimated¹ to contribute more than \$183 million each year to the Tasmanian economy. More broadly, Australia's economy and trade links are enhanced through responsible and sustainable fishing in Antarctic waters, which includes one of the most valuable Commonwealth-managed fisheries in Australia.

¹https://www.antarctic.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/487308/Summary_report_into_the_contribution_of_the_Antarctic_and_Southern_Ocean_sector_to_the_Tasmanian_economy_2021-22.pdf

Australia's Antarctic Diplomacy

Australia has a proud history in Antarctica, and we have long been one of the world's leading Antarctic nations, including our scientific research and engagement in the ATS. For over a century, since the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (1912-14) led by Sir Douglas Mawson, Antarctica has occupied a unique place in Australia's national identity.

On 22 February 2022, the then Government announced an investment of \$804.4 million over ten years to support Australia's Antarctic engagement and our ongoing commitment to a strong and effective ATS. This funding was retained as part of the October 2022 Budget Measures review. DFAT was directed to find \$3.4 million over five years from internal resources to enhance Australia's international engagement to support the rules and norms of the ATS and promote Australia's leadership in Antarctic affairs.

DFAT's role in relation to the Antarctic includes promoting the global rules-based order through our leadership of Australia's engagement in the annual ATCM and support to CCAMLR; whole-of-government coordination including co-chairing a cross-agency Senior Executive Panel on Antarctic Affairs; providing advice on foreign policy and legal policy; and diplomatic engagement. For example, in April 2024 DFAT hosted a pre-ATCM Antarctic event for the Diplomatic Corps at the Australian National Museum. The event served to demonstrate Australia's commitment to the ATS by engaging with key stakeholders – including parties to the Antarctic Treaty, and special guest HE Mr Gopal Baglay, India's High Commissioner to Australia (India is the host of the ATCM 46 in May 2024).

DFAT works closely with the Australian Antarctic Division (DCCEEW), the Attorney General's Department, Defence, and other agencies. We analyse geostrategic forces with reference to national security information and analysis. DFAT's Chief Counsel and First Assistant Secretary, Legal Division, is Australia's senior official on international Antarctic issues and serves as the head of Australia's ATCM delegation.

Australia has a positive story to tell about our role in the Antarctic and DFAT works hard to promote this to international audiences. DFAT's Antarctic diplomacy is crucial to strengthening and protecting the ATS and creates opportunities for advancing Australia's national interests, in the Antarctic and beyond. Through shared Antarctic interests Australia can strengthen and develop existing bilateral relationships on and off the ice, including relationships with our likeminded partners and other Antarctic gateway states. DFAT also actively seeks opportunities for engagement with academia, civil society, and the private sector.