



# THE KANGAROO AND ITS PENGUIN: MAINTAINING AUSTRALIAN ANTARCTIC SECURITY

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## SYNOPSIS

**The maintenance of Australian territorial security in Antarctica is a delicate balancing act. From a strategic perspective, our relative power in the region cannot be easily defined by our military capacity. Rather, the ability of Australia to defend and preserve its sovereignty over the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT) rests upon the complicated and increasingly fragile international consensus of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty.**

For decades, the 1959 Antarctic Treaty has protected the militarisation of the Antarctic continent. But as commercial, scientific, and technological capabilities combine and increase, Australia is discovering that its role as a leader in the region can no longer be assumed. The increased interest in the region by powers such as China and Russia has far reaching implications on Australia's sovereignty over its Antarctic regions.

The recent announcement of the [Australian Antarctic Strategy](#) by the Turnbull Government, to boost funding to the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) following years of neglect, has been welcomed strongly by scientists and foreign policy experts as a step in the right direction. But considering the growing strategic importance of the region, it doesn't do enough to assuage fears that Australian influence, sadly, is crumbling.

## ANTARTICA

Antarctica is of immense strategic importance to Australia. We are one of just seven nations (including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, France, Norway, Chile and Argentina) that claim territory in the Antarctic. Australia's claim is also the largest, totalling 5.9 million square kilometres. This is around 42% of the Antarctic continent.

The [1959 Antarctic Treaty](#), of which Australia was an original signatory, establishes the entirety of Antarctica as a scientific preserve, banning all military activity. The Treaty also sets aside all territorial sovereignty claims in the area and outlines that no new claims shall be asserted whilst the treaty is in force. Basically, Australian claims to the region are suspended but not defeated. The subsequent Madrid Protocol which came into force in 1998 prohibits all activities related to mineral resources other than scientific research. Importantly, this aspect of the treaty will be open for review in 2048.

## SOVEREIGNTY

This suspension of sovereignty guaranteed by the Antarctic Treaty places Antarctica in a state of continued [political flux](#). The closest comparable legal decision is that made by the Permanent Court of International Justice in 1933 on East Greenland. [It decided](#) that remote unpopulated territory is subject to the effective occupation of that territory by the country that claims it. In the case of Antarctica, scientific activity is occupation. Countries have therefore used scientific activity as a ['quasi-legal and political tool'](#) to justify their occupation of the continent.

Countries have also sought to convey sovereignty in more traditional ways as well. Anne Marie Brady, an expert on Antarctic affairs, suggests that the 2015 conquering of Dome Argus by the Chinese marked a significant transformation in Chinese self-conception. Their triumph in 'the last geologically significant unexplored territory of Antarctica', signaled a transition from mere scientists to [polar explorers](#). This, and their naming of a number of areas of geographical and geological significance were believed to convey a sense of legitimacy to the Chinese presence in Antarctica that paralleled the early Western exploration of the continent.

Similarly, New Zealand emphasises its proximity to Antarctica to realise its own sovereignty claims. New Zealand's emphasis on the historic use of its ports by early explorers as the ['gateway' to Antarctica](#), as well as the effect of Antarctic weather systems on its own weather, all aim to produce a continuing and inalienable connection between the island nation and its important continental neighbor. Not to be confused with Australia, of course.

More overtly, in the 1970s Argentina dispatched a pregnant woman to the Argentinian bases in Antarctica in what has been described as ‘a blatant attempt to establish a [genealogical record](#)’.

These examples all illustrate the extent to which traditional conceptions of sovereignty and strategic thinking are still present in Antarctic geopolitics, despite the Antarctic Treaty of 1959.

## INCREASED ATTENTION

The Australian Antarctic Strategy comes as a response to the [2014 Press Report](#) that issued 35 recommendations to improve our standing in Antarctica. Along with identifying dangerous levels of under-investment, it recognised the emergence of new players, slowly growing their Antarctic scientific presence.

China is one example. In May 2015, Xi Jinping was in Hobart, heralding the construction of a [new research station in Antarctica](#). This would bring China’s total research stations to five (Australia has just three). Jinping also signed a five-year accord with the Australian government allowing Chinese vessels to resupply in Tasmania on their way to Antarctica. China has also announced it is preparing to set up its first air squadron in Antarctica, [following earlier announcements](#) it was preparing to build a second icebreaker.

Russia is also making headlines for its Antarctic movements. In October 2015, Russia blocked a proposal to protect the Ross Sea, an important commercial fish ground, for the fifth time. The Director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition believes [geopolitics are to blame](#) for Russia’s decision. In a similar vein, Russia has been accused of using its Antarctic presence to [develop its GLONASS](#) global positioning system, a rival to the American GPS.

## NEXT STEPS

The implications of these actions are magnified when you consider how little of a scientific footprint Australia has over its own claimed region. Australia does not even have an inland station because it is unable to provide secure access to it. But China, France, Italy, Russia, and the United States all do. This provides them naming rights to places Australians cannot access, cultivating a cultural connection to a specific area. The largest station in the Australia Antarctic Territory isn’t even our own. It is Russia’s inland [Vostok station](#).

But it does appear that the Government is recognising that if we want to ensure the Antarctic region remains stable and secure, we have to rectify these problems and increase our scientific presence.

The AAD and the Royal Australian Air Force have recently completed their first [joint flying mission](#). Australia has also signed a contract for a [new icebreaker](#) due in mid-2020, opening up access to our remote research stations for a longer period of time.

As demand for the potentially oil rich Antarctic shelf and [other potential minerals grows](#), maintaining the current governance status quo in Antarctica is critical to securing our southern borders. But this is not a reality that can simply be assumed. Australia must work harder to ensure that we remain at the forefront of Antarctic research and leadership. Turnbull's announcement is just the start.