

# Australia's concerns about China's Antarctic activities are overblown

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*As tensions rise over Taiwan, Antarctica could provide opportunities for co-operation and a way for Canberra to stabilise the relationship.*

The governments of Australia and China took their first steps towards stabilising the relationship last month. But words and rhetoric will only go so far. How can the two countries gradually build more trust in the face of [ongoing geopolitical tensions](#)?

Australia and China this year will mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties, which is the perfect opportunity for improving the relationship. Antarctica presents a low-risk option that is often overlooked. Despite differences in approach, there is huge scope for more co-operation.

Australia is influential in Antarctic affairs, having a long-standing connection to the frozen continent as one of the 12 original signatories of the Antarctic Treaty in 1959. Canberra's investment in Antarctic capabilities and science ensures its influence and leadership on governance.

China, in contrast, is a relative latecomer, having only earned a seat at the Antarctic governance table in 1985. Beijing has made significant progress in infrastructure and logistics since that time. Yet, its influence in Antarctica remains limited, especially when compared to its considerable heft in other global governance issues. And its achievements in Antarctic science are not yet on par with countries such as Australia.

In my new report [China's ambitions in Antarctica and their implications for Australia](#), I argue that Australian concerns about China's Antarctic activities are overblown. These include the potential for territorial claims, militarisation and mining. We must not assume that China applies the same template to different

geopolitical issues – that Antarctica will be another South Pacific or South China Sea.

In my view, China is unlikely to use military force and other forms of coercion to pursue its Antarctic interests. Compared to the South China Sea [or Taiwan](#), Antarctica is a peripheral issue for China.

Beijing has ambitions to be a great polar power. However, it is not there yet, and it prefers advancing its interests through international forums rather than risk being sidelined by others.

### **Differences in approach**

China doesn't need to make territorial claims to advance its interests – under the Antarctic Treaty, claimant and non-claimant countries enjoy similar rights and privileges in accessing and using Antarctica.

(Chile, Argentina, the United Kingdom, France, Norway, Australia and New Zealand all claim territory in Antarctica, while the United States and Russia reserve the right to claim the whole of the Antarctic continent. Countries without claims have built infrastructure on the continent.)

There are major differences in how Australia and China approach Antarctica – the main one being China's opposition to the establishment of marine protected areas – but there is also common ground.

Both countries want to ensure the longevity of the Antarctic Treaty. And despite deteriorating ties and political distrust over the past few years, logistics-sharing arrangements have continued in Antarctica.

However, recent heightened tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic have been obstacles to port visits.

In 2014, during President Xi Jinping's visit to Tasmania, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding that included a commitment to use Tasmania as a gateway to Antarctica. Yet in 2020, the Chinese icebreaker Xuelong 2 made a port call in Christchurch, New Zealand, rather than Hobart.

### **Climate science benefits**

Tasmania aspires to become the world's leading Antarctic gateway and the state government has just announced a new strategy to make that happen. Port visits by Chinese ships to Hobart provide not only an opportunity to show goodwill between the two countries but also boost Tasmania's image and credentials as an Antarctic gateway. A port visit could be one way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties.

There could also be more scientific collaboration. For national security reasons, certain areas of co-operation must remain off-limits, especially when it comes to proprietary technology that can aid China's weapons development. However, the scope for co-operation remains vast, including research into the effects of climate change.

Climate science has also been touted as a key area of co-operation between China and the United States. And indeed, it is essential to address this existential threat.

Australia should support joint projects between the CSIRO and its Chinese counterparts that focus on understanding the role of Antarctica and the southern oceans in climate change.

In recent years, the number of research grants with Chinese collaborators has declined sharply, and Australian researchers often avoid collaboration with Chinese partners.

This needs to change. National security officials should work with Australian researchers much earlier on, finding ways to mitigate security risks rather than vetoing projects at the last minute. The benefits of research must also be weighed against the risks.

China's emphasis on the resources of Antarctica over environmental protection has become a source of tension with Australia. But such differences can be managed with diplomacy in the Antarctic Treaty System. After all, China – like Australia – wants the system to continue.

We can and should co-operate where common interest exists, despite our differences.

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