

## Reassessing Australia-China ties in Antarctica

**Speakers:** Dr Elizabeth Buchanan, Senior Fellow, Australian Strategic Policy Institute  
Professor Tony Press, Adjunct Professor, Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies and Australian Antarctic Program Partnership, University of Tasmania  
Ms Chen Xi, Research Fellow, Australian Studies Centre, East China Normal University; UTS:ACRI Visiting Scholar

**Moderator:** Professor James Laurenceson, Director, UTS:ACRI

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### Dr Corey Lee Bell:

Good afternoon members of the audience and special guests. Before we begin the proceedings, on behalf of all those present, I would like to acknowledge that this webinar is hosted on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I would also like to pay respects to the Elders past, present, and emerging, acknowledging them as a traditional custodians of knowledge for this land. This session will now be recorded. We'll record audio, screen share, and our presenters. We will not be recording any audio or video input from the audience.

Welcome to all UTS students, staff, and all friends of ACRI and UTS. My name is Dr Corey Lee Bell and I'm a Project and Research Officer at the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney. UTS:ACRI is an independent non-partisan research institute established in 2014 by UTS. Chinese studies centres exist in other Australian universities, but UTS:ACRI is Australia's first and only research institute devoted to studying the relationship between these two countries. UTS:ACRI seeks to inform Australia's engagement with China through research, analysis and dialogue grounded in scholarly rigour. If you would like to learn more about UTS:ACRI and the Australia-China relationship, details are available on our website at [australiachinarelations.org](http://australiachinarelations.org).

Today we're happy to host this webinar, 'Reassessing Australia-China ties in Antarctica.' This webinar addresses challenges for the long-running Antarctic Treaty system, discusses how rising geopolitical tensions might impact cooperation between Australia and the People's Republic of China, and explores potential risks and flashpoints, as well as new opportunities for cooperation moving forward.

So we're pleased to welcome three eminent speakers to this event.

The first is Dr Elizabeth Buchanan, a polar geopolitics expert who serves as a Senior Fellow at the Australia Strategic Policy Institute or ASPI. Joining us also is Professor Tony Press, Adjunct Professor at the Institute from Marine and Antarctic Studies at the University of Tasmania. I'd also like to welcome Ms Chen Xi, a Research Fellow at the Australia-China Studies Centre at East China Normal University who is with us as a UTS:ACRI visiting scholar. So our event will be moderated by a person that needs no introduction, UTS:ACRI's director, Professor James Laurenceson.

So to the audience, there will be an opportunity for you to submit questions. If you'd like to do so, please use the Q&A button on the bottom bar. I'll now hand you over to Professor Laurenceson.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thank you very much, Corey. I hope I'm coming through loud and clear.

Look, I don't think anyone joining this webinar today will need convincing that the topic we're discussing today is an important one. But I couldn't help but noticing when I woke up and was having my morning coffee, if you looked at the opinion pages of *The Australian* newspaper, you will have seen an article relating to this very topic we're talking about, Australia, China, Antarctica. And this particular article was talking about how Australia should pay attention to China's Antarctic moves. And just two weeks ago as well, there was a big piece in the US Foreign Affairs magazine called *Foreign Affairs* by one of our panellists today, Dr Liz Buchanan, also talking about how great power competition is coming to Antarctica and the challenges this presents for Australia.

But look, it's not just all in the last two weeks. In preparing for this webinar, I also came across a press conference undertaken by Australia's former Prime Minister Scott Morrison in February 2022. So this was just in the lead up to the federal election, and our then prime minister was announcing a big funding package for Australia's activities in Antarctica, \$804 million. And I was struck by just how many of the questions from journalists at that press conference were focused on China.

Let me just read one to you quickly. A journalist asked Scott Morrison, 'Is the Australian government concerned about other nations, particularly China, trying to assert their dominance over the Antarctic region?' And here was our prime minister's response. He said, 'We are a treaty nation when it comes to Antarctica and we take those responsibilities incredibly seriously. Now, not everybody respects those obligations and those stewardship responsibilities.' And he went on to say that 'they [China] don't share the same objectives as Australia.'

So some stark comments there from our former prime minister, although I do have to say also with some basic factual errors. He pointed out that Australia was a member of the Antarctic Treaty. Of course that's true, but so is China. And China became a member of the Antarctic Treaty in 1983. It acceded to that treaty and it also became a consultative party in 1985.

So look, it's my pleasure to moderate this session with three people who know this topic incredibly well – I'm quite sure quite a bit better than our former prime minister. So I'm just going to launch into the discussion today. It's going to be a rich one.

Chen Xi, I might go to you first. We want to spend most of today's webinar talking about Australia, China, and Antarctica in a more contemporary setting. But I think it's very important to put that contemporary setting in context. Many of you will have heard me talk about one of my bugbears of Australia's discussion of China before is that current contemporary developments are often not put in an appropriate context. Now, I know you've been spending a lot of time looking at documents in Australia's National Archives. In fact, I don't think any scholar, whether Australian or Chinese, has probably spent more time than you digging into the origins of

Australia-China engagement in Antarctica. So can you just give our audience today a quick overview of when Australia and China started engaging in Antarctica and the factors that in your assessment drove that initial engagement?

**Ms Chen Xi:**

Yeah, okay. Thanks, James.

So China's interest in Antarctica could be traced back at least to actually 1957 when the International Geophysical Year [IGY] started at the time. But China decided to withdraw its endeavour to participate later when Taiwan was prompted by the United States to apply for the IGY membership and got admitted by the organisers in the end. So it was until late 1970s to early 1980s when China's [scientific] interest towards the Antarctic was fully unveiled. So in terms of the bilateral cooperation at that time, I think the bilateral factors primarily propelled the cooperation between these two countries. Well, the international context does matter as well.

So there are in total, I think, two factors that spurred specifically Australia-China cooperation in Antarctica at the time.

So the first one is China expressed its scientific interest and was willing to cooperate with other countries, including Australia to develop its Antarctic course. So it was in 1978 to 1979, both Chinese Academy of Sciences and National Bureau of Oceanography proposed interest to send Chinese scientists to join a foreign cruise to Antarctica. And then in April 1979, the then director of the Australian Antarctic Division proposed to invite scientists from China to join in the short-term research trip to Antarctica.

And then this official invitation letter was sent in December that year. And then we have two Chinese scientists together with the Australian-Antarctic expedition travelled all the way from Melbourne to Casey station in Macquarie Island in early 1980. So they became the first Chinese to step on the Antarctic continent. And that was the start of Australia-China Antarctic cooperation.

And also the second factor propelled this relationship at that time was a generally positive trajectory in the bilateral relationship. We know that ever since Canberra formally established its diplomatic relationship with Beijing in 1972, Australia-China relations had developed quite smoothly into the 1980s. So both sides were quite willing to expand the scope of this relationship. And in particular, China's adoption of a reform and opening up policy followed by serious modernisation programs was viewed by Canberra as an opportunity to expand the cooperation. And what we cannot forget is that the potential of a trade with China has quickly become more apparent at the time. For example, in 1980, Australia already became China's third-largest of suppliers about commodities.

But that said, that doesn't mean that Australia had no anxieties around deepening its cooperation with China at the time. Rather, engagement was deemed by Canberra at that time as the most constructive approach to manage those lingering concerns. And also Australia and China, they found a shared position on the awareness of protecting Antarctic environment and very careful study of the very delicate Antarctic ecology. And besides these bilateral factors, we should not forget the international background at that time. That was the period of time when the Antarctic Treaty system was severely criticised as an exclusive club by especially developing countries.

So among these developing countries, Malaysia took the lead and brought the question of Antarctica to the United Nations. So that was time when the conference on the Law of the Sea just finished. So one of the significance of that conference was to list the inhabited land, like the deep sea bed as the common heritage of mankind so that every country could share equal rights in protecting as well as using those uninhabited

land. So regarding Antarctica, Malaysia proposed at that time, like the claim in contrast to Antarctica, they should give up their sovereignty claims and one option could be to help the United Nations administer those lands.

So despite all those disagreements among the consultative parties within the treaty system, there's just at least one core interest that everyone shared at that time, that is maintain the unchallenged status of the Antarctic Treaty as the prime governing mechanism of the continent. So therefore, one of the initiatives adopted at the time was to widen the participation of countries in the treaty system and to deliver invitation to developing countries at the time. So these are the bilateral factors as well as the international contact, which together propelled the cooperation of the Antarctic cooperation between Australia and China at the time.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks Chen Xi. That was great.

I mean that's a two layered explanation, both bilateral factors and also putting those bilateral drivers in a broader international context. And I mean, two things stand out there immediately. So this Australia-China cooperation is not remotely new, it extends back more than 40 years. And I also noted your comments about how Canberra had some anxieties back then, but they saw engagement as the best approach to manage those challenges. And I couldn't help but reflecting that sounds very similar to Australia's foreign minister right now, Penny Wong, when she talks about managing a complicated relationship with China.

Tony, if I could go to you next. I think Chen Xi has given us a really fantastic explanation of what drove China and Australia to initially engage in the context of Antarctica. Look, you were the Director of the Australian Antarctic Division from 1998 to 2008. I wondered if you could give our audience a sense of how prominent that cooperation between Australia and China became, perhaps relative to Australia's other partners, and what were some of the major outcomes of that cooperation? And while you're at it, I mean, I'm sure not everything was rosy, so it'd also be good to hear if there were any practical challenges or disagreements between Australia and China over that period.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

Yeah, sure.

But first of all, I'd like to say, a great summary of the evolution of that engagement between China and Australia. And as a matter of fact, I got a message yesterday from a prominent Chinese colleague who has been involved with collaborations in Antarctica with Australia and other countries for very many years, from the 1980s onwards. So, those relationships are quite deep and strong among the scientists, Chinese, Australian, and other countries' scientists, that went to Antarctica back in the 1980s.

Relationship with China, when I was Director of the Antarctic Division from 1998 until end of 2008, were very business-like and very functional. Chinese academics and Chinese researchers and employees of CHINARE, the Chinese Antarctic Research Expedition, and the organisations that supported China's research efforts in Antarctica, came and stayed at the Antarctic division, for instance.

We had people working with us in our data centre, and much of the initial construction of the Chinese Antarctic data centre in Wuhan comes out of that collaboration the Australian Antarctic Division and officials from China had in working together on the practicalities of how you not only do science in Antarctica, but what you do with the data that comes with those efforts, and how you make those data available not only to your own researchers, but researchers in the rest of the world.

At a logistics level, there was collaboration and cooperation between China and Australia. Most of the logistics back then was based around shipping. Actually, China did do some work for Australia in bringing back waste material from Casey Station during that period. Australia helped China with logistic problems from time to time. There were also, during that period and afterwards, collaborations in doing field work in Antarctica, but also search and rescue, medical evacuations, those kinds of things. I would describe those kinds of interactions as scientific collaboration and business-like logistics and other collaborations in Antarctica.

At the more diplomatic and political level, at Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings, which are held annually or were held annually, we would always have an Australia-China bilateral, usually a bilateral dinner, where we talked things about collaborations and also negotiated maybe delicate issues that might've been arising inside the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting itself. They were standard, they were business-like. They were fairly open and frank discussions between Australia and China, and that was the way that relationship operated.

You did ask me whether there were any tensions. I can't remember any specific incident at all, where there were diplomatic or other intense issues between Australia and China during that period.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

That's okay. I don't want to force you to come up with disagreements. I just thought I'd ask if you had any of them.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

No, you did ask the question and it's made me ponder. I must say that anything that was remotely sensitive was usually dealt with in these bilateral discussions that would be held regularly either at or in the margins of –

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Got it.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

These official Antarctic Treaty system meetings. That extended well beyond my period in the Australian Antarctic Division.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Sure. Thanks, Tony. That's great. It's really good to have those observations at the coal-face.

One of the other things, I don't obviously have your experience at the coal-face, but before this webinar, I did look at the Web of Science database of scientific publications, and it's quite stunning in terms of the scale of Australian and Chinese research activities in Antarctica. For example, back in 1990, Australia produced 31 scientific articles where the keyword 'Antarctica' appears. China only produced three. But in 2022, Australia went from 31 to 205. Meanwhile, China went from three to 344.

Now, according to the Web of Science, researchers affiliated with a Chinese institution are now accounting for 16 percent of the global total, whereas researchers affiliated with an Australian institution are accounting for 10 percent. To be clear, also, that 10 percent of Australian scientific publications, or 16 percent of those, they actually also include a Chinese co-author. So, there's a big increase in both countries' research, particularly in China as well as bilateral collaboration at that scientific level.

All right, Liz, if I can bring you into the conversation now. Look, Chen Xi and Tony have given us a better understanding of some of the context, particularly that historical context with respect to Australia, China and Antarctica. Let's now fast-forward to a contemporary setting. Over the last five years, I think you've written more than anyone on how geopolitics is now challenging Australia's interests and the Antarctic Treaty System. Look, can we start pretty big-picture and then get more detailed? You wrote in foreign affairs very recently, just two weeks ago, about the return of great power competition to Antarctica, and in some comments you made just last week, you assessed that, 'The ATS...', sorry, 'the ATS is slowly coming apart at the seams.'

The first big picture question I wanted to ask you, Liz, is this geopolitical contestation in Antarctica – is that just part of the bigger regional and global picture of great power competition that our Defence Minister Richard Marles now routinely refers to, or is it something more unique and unusual about this particular Antarctic context? Maybe, there's greater parallels with the Arctic, and I know that's an area of your research expertise as well, rather than the Indo-Pacific as the Australian government currently defines it.

Over to you, Liz.

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

Thanks, James, for the invitation to attend this really important discussion.

I can't help myself, I already have to have a quick response to the previous two speakers. I just wanted to say that I think we place collectively far too much emphasis on goodwill and not enough on the strategic elements of competition when it comes to Antarctica. The discourse now in Beijing is about the utilisation of resources and sustainable development, and I think it's worth acknowledging that and considering the disparity in terms of funds that have been pumped into their Antarctic agenda versus Australian approaches.

But coming back to your question, I understand that these historical elements that we've just discussed with Chen Xi and with Tony Press are a really important part of understanding Antarctic security. Where have we been and how did we get here? I would say it helps us better understand the Antarctic strategy that Australia is pursuing, but we don't have one. So, I think it's better to reflect on the disconnecting practice that we've got when it comes to delivering on our interests, which is where my work sits.

In terms of the bigger picture of great power competition and how it shapes the contours of Antarctica, that's my baby. That's what I'm really interested in. I think, first of all, this great power competition affects Australia quite differently to China and that's because we not only have the Antarctic Treaty System that is being impacted, but we also have this Australian Antarctic territory, this 42 percent claim. I think it's worth pointing out that makes us a little bit different. We've got more skin in the game.

The foreign affairs essay, it sought to delve into the health of the treaty system. I believe it's troubled, consensus is near impossible, and this has been evidenced in the last handful of opportunities that we've had in the ATCM [Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting] forums. But I also am starting to wonder if we need to accept the fact that the treaty was not intended to be a solution forever to the problem of Antarctica.

It's a great way, it's been a very successful mechanism for setting aside the debate or the contest over those claims to the territory of Antarctica, but it's also worked well to facilitate great power competition. I think some states are more adept at utilising the system, working the system to make it work and facilitate great power competition in the end. But again, this is only working for some players. Others are really falling behind. So, those with the capability and the intent, which is what I see in Beijing's Antarctic posture.

Great power competition I think occurs at the seams of the treaty. I'm not saying it will implode, actually rather the opposite. I think it will continue to chug along, if not because it's of the interest of the states that are able

to work the system, that they have the freedom to do so, which is the tricky reality I think for Australia when it comes to great power competition in Antarctica that we need to not only invest in our capability, but we also need to work the system. I think absence for Australia really erodes our relevance in Antarctica.

What's unique, I think, about the Australian opportunity in great power competition on and over Antarctica is that we have this national inability to really own our Antarctic identity and our claimed sovereign territory. So, it's almost in the too hard basket that gets handed to every new government. But of interest is, currently, when you bring up Marles' comments about Antarctica, the way in which US defines Antarctica and Southern Ocean as part of its INDOPACOM Theater of Strategic Interest.

We know that we don't. You mentioned that we look more to our northeastern Asian approaches. So, by design, our government has set us up to be blind to what's going on there. I think the central overlap with what Beijing has going in terms of its Arctic strategy and its Antarctic strategy is it's really cultivated that national identity of its polar powerness and that's something that we shouldn't be missing, but we are.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks, Liz.

That was great big picture context of that geopolitical contest. It sounds from your comments that you don't think Australia is actually doing a particularly good job of playing. That's a fair comment?

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

Absolutely.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Okay. All right. Well, look, Liz, can I stick with you for a minute?

That was at the big picture, but I'd like to get more specific if I can as well, and just stay with this geopolitics. You wrote in your *Foreign Affairs* piece about China's 'destabilising activities.' Can you describe for our audience some of the specific ways in which the Antarctic treaty system is now being challenged by China, and also maybe give us a flavour for how different are these activities from those of other significant actors like Australia?

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

Yeah, really good question. But from the outset, I really wanted to emphasise that these destabilising activities are perfectly permissible in the treaty context. There's no real breach of norms, and in any case, if there was, I would question our ability to adequately enforce any of these rules or respond or shape behaviour anyway.

Example mechanisms I've often pointed to are the use of specially managed areas in Antarctica by Beijing. So, these are essentially zones that are established and they often attract code of conduct rules written by Beijing to limit international access to, through, or over specific points of Antarctica. They do tend to overlap with traditional strategic points of interest. Dome Argus is one that's used, which obviously, if it's the highest point on the East Antarctic landmass, it is therefore the closest to space. So, that's prime positioning territory and quite coveted.

Anything can easily have a military strategic application of course. This opens up the discussion to the dual-use Pandora's Box, which of course, it's a capability – anything that we say China has dual-use facilities, that

charge could be levelled at any other actor, including Australia and the US for sure. We do have that capability with our stations, but I think what sets Beijing apart as more of a strategic threat when it comes to its Antarctic posture is the fact that it has that legislative aspect of its civil military fusion laws, which necessitate Chinese military access to or use of civil research platforms and outposts.

So another example of destabilisation activities I've often discussed are sort of the use of the administration processes of the Treaty System. Most recently, this was highlighted in the new Chinese research station, fifth station coming online.

So a few years back, a US-led inspection team reported, and it's all available on the Treaty website, reported that they had seen evidence, concrete drilling and post-development, that the station was already under development, underway, getting built, under construction, despite the outcomes and evaluations of peer review feedback coming through, which is an environmental step that has to happen in, sort of, the ATS governance procedures.

So as it were, China had worked the system. It had submitted all the necessary paperwork, but at the same time, it was still progressing with the development. So I guess the question is it flags the potential and the intent to crack on unilaterally when it sees it's in its interest to do so.

So how do we respond to these activities? Because I feel like so much of the discourse in Australia is about sort of tarring – sort of these unwanted or these erosive activities that China is undertaking, but not so much about what we can do to respond.

So I think the maintenance of the treaty itself and why it will probably continue to chug along is that states have no real interest in breaking it apart. It affords so much agility that – why would you burn it down? I mean, there's so much diplomatic and political capital that Beijing can draw from it by showing it is an actor in an international sort of governance forum. And it is, I think, more of a problem when we think about any changes we want to make to the system will require consensus. And I think it's overly optimistic to think that we'd ever get to that point.

So I think what we can do is start to mirror activities. I would be looking at reinvesting in our stations, in our science program, in our prestige and really, again, cultivate a national interest, a strategic national interest in what goes on in Antarctica.

So these destabilisation activities, they're not new. I don't think they're going to break apart the system while powers find it useful to operate within that construct. So the problem is really how do Australian strategic interests coexist with this instability.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Right. Thanks, Liz. Geez, you've given us a lot to think about there.

Look, I'm going to go back to Chen Xi and Tony very soon, but can I just remind our audience, in a few minutes after I've gone to Chen Xi and Tony, I would like to bring our audience into this discussion, so please do put any questions you have. I know that on this webinar, we've got some fantastic registrants, so don't be shy. Please put your questions in the Q&A box and then I'll go to my colleague, Corey, to put a few of those audience questions to our panellists today.

Chen Xi, I'll come back to you. As a follow-up to Liz, I'm curious, in your reading of the more recent Chinese discourse around Antarctica, how prominently do you sense geopolitics features in that discussion relative



to other frames like scientific research, for example, and if you had any other response to some of the other issues Liz raised as well around China's activities. Go for it.

**Ms Chen Xi:**

Yeah. So I think the first thing we have to say is so China is a conservative party to the inducted treaty. So the country has always carried out its activities in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Treaty System. Even the station constructions, the latest on the fifth research station, which was mentioned, fully complies with international rules and procedures as well.

And also, on the other hand, like it is true. We have to admit that geopolitics has been a very keyword in Antarctic issues, ever since 1950s when the treaty was reached at the time. And it also had a very great impact to even on the formation of the – for Antarctic cooperation in the early 1980s. But it was neither China coming to the continent, nor its increasing presence in the Antarctic that brought geopolitical discussion or the great power competition to Antarctica.

So in terms of Chinese discourse, like, geopolitics has actually never been a key part of discussion in China in terms of Antarctic activities, no matter in official statement or state media, academia, scientific activities, et cetera. So researchers of social sciences, let's say, do talk about different countries' Antarctic policies, strategies, but geopolitics has never been a very prominent part.

So let's take the example, like we'll say that the latest research station. So China opened its fifth research station in this February. So what has been mainly discussed in China? So the first one, definitely, the expectations or the specialty about this new research facility. So the first one is definitely that the new research station will help to enhance the scientific understanding of Antarctica for all countries. And the second one, also the most important one that China emphasised at the very beginning in its evaluation report, that the establishment of this new research facility is to provide a platform for China to cooperate with other countries in scientific expeditions in Ross Sea area.

That doesn't mean that after the commencement of this research station, China suddenly, like, becomes to this region. Actually, together with New Zealand and also Korea and other countries, China has been conducting scientific investigations for years in this region. And also this research facilities definitely fills the gap in China's research in this region as well. And also technology has been a focus in China's discourse about the new research station as well. The new station makes very great use of the smart technology to facilitate scientific research.

And also the environmental protection is one of the very important factor when China started to design about this research facility. So take one example, like this new research, this new station, actually adopts a kind of energy management system that combines the renewable energy and also the traditional energy. So giving priority to the clean energy such as wind and solar. So actually the new energy here will account for more than 60 percent of the station's energy. So the aim of doing this is actually to make the operation more greener and also more environmentally friendly.

So as we just mentioned about the inspection, I do agree that the inspection serves very well to prove each country, each party's compliance with the treaty provisions. And actually Australia has been always kind of the first one to inspect the Chinese research facilities. So Australia has been the first one, was the first one to inspect the China's Zhongshan and Taishan stations, as well as the only one now to inspect China's special protected area in the Grove Mountains in East Antarctica. And even before China's first research station, the Qinling station officially open, actually Australia together and also with the United States, they, too, have already conducted inspections in 2020 already.

So if we are going to count a bit how many times Chinese research stations have been inspected already, ever since China established its first research station in 1984, so from 1985 until 2020, 19 inspections in total included at least one Chinese research station or special protected area. And in total 13 countries involved in these inspections towards the Chinese research facilities including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, the UK, Chile, Russia, et cetera. So I do agree that inspections provide a very significant public assurance that the continent was used for peaceful purposes only and Chinese research facilities have been inspected quite regularly.

And also the other part is according to the scientists who have participated in the international expeditions there, inspection actually given them a very good opportunity as well for these countries to exchange ideas with each other and learn from each other, which is itself a very good approach to this [inaudible] as well.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks, Chen Xi.

So, I mean, to summarise then your reading of the Chinese discourse, of course, geopolitics is there, but there's more emphasis placed on scientific research and, indeed, the operation of China's new research facilities using greener and cleaner technologies. And also the point at the end was Australia hasn't been shy about using reassurance and compliance mechanisms like inspections of Chinese stations.

Tony, can I go back to you now? In 2022, you wrote what I thought was a very, very interesting paper. The title of your paper was, quote, 'Security challenges of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean: Australia's Antarctic interests.' So bang on the topic we're talking about today.

Now one of the sentences you wrote was this, I'll quote it, you said, 'Australia's Antarctic security interests are not only centered on sovereignty and militarisation'. Now that's interesting because I think when we do think about security, militarisation and sovereignty are two sort of terms that immediately come to mind.

So tell us more about these other Australian security interests. And on those other security interests, is China a threat to those, too? Or on those other security interests, do Australia and China actually have some shared ground there?

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

Well, thank you for the question and I will answer it. But I'd also like to come back to just qualifying a couple of things that the other two participants have mentioned.

But those other national interests relate to food security, climate security, and the way climate change will inevitably affect Australia. It'll affect the productivity of our agricultural regions and it will affect the infrastructure and communities we have, particularly along the coast, but not just confined to the coast. I always say this, that even if Australia did not have a claim to 42 percent of Antarctica, Australia would still be intensely interested in Antarctica because of its role in the global climate system and because of the importance of the ecosystems and the marine resources that exist around Antarctica.

Climate change is having and will have a significant effect on those. And we, as a nation, should not only look at Antarctica in the context of its non-militarisation, our sovereign position with respect to Antarctica, but we should also look at it as Antarctica being so influential on the economic wellbeing of Australia and the impacts that that will have in the future. Does that answer your question?

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Yeah. It sure does, Tony. That's good. So for you, I mean, climate change, to be very blunt, climate change is a security interest for Australia.

And look, I can't claim to be an expert on how China views this, but I did note Chen Xi in her last comment, she also made the point that the sustainability and at least the energy sources of these new Chinese stations also placed an emphasis on green technology so that's probably of interest to Australia as well.

Corey, I might – Sorry, Tony, do you want to jump in again? Go for it.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

Would you allow me just to go back and cover a couple of things that I'd –

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Go for it, please.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

Okay. The first is, I'd just like to clarify that the ASMA, the Antarctic Specially Managed Area, for Kunlun Station, was never proclaimed for that area. So the position of the administration and access to Kunlun remains the same as it was.

On the issue of consensus, well, consensus is available for many, many issues and has been met on many, many issues in Antarctica. But it's just a few issues at the moment that are controversial and difficult to reach, particularly consensus on marine protected areas and some fisheries.

I'd also like to say that geopolitics has entered the functional relationship between China and Australia and Antarctica. The recent visit of the Xue Long to the Port of Hobart two weeks ago was the first visit by China's Antarctic research vessels since 2022, when China, all of a sudden and very unexpectedly, as they were supposed to be coming to Hobart, decided to divert and go to Christchurch instead. That was very clearly a decision that was driven by tensions that existed in the Australia-China relationship outside of Antarctica at that time. So that's all I'd like to say.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks, Tony.

Liz, back to you. I see you've got your hand up. Please jump in.

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

Yeah, I just wanted to build off a few things that have also come up with the other panellists.

When it comes to the Australian record of inspecting, free and fair inspection of stations, I think we've done a few. There could be more. I would hold fire and wait for the results of any unannounced inspections of this new facility. I would be hoping that there is pressure on China to share its data as per treaty obligations.

And just picking up on what Tony was putting down about climate security, absolutely agree that that's a key sort of driver here for international cooperation. It requires partnership with all stakeholders in Antarctica. The Australian budget issues for Antarctica are well-known. Last week, the US came out and mentioned it has its own budgetary issues for science in the future. So China clearly has the funds. So here's a real opportunity, I think, for Beijing to illustrate in practice its commitment to science and international collaboration.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks Liz. Look folks, not surprisingly, we're running out of time.

So Corey, I am going to go to you now. If you could put to our panel one or two questions from our online audience, that'd be great. Then I'll come back and finish up with one big question I want to ask each of the three panellists today.

Over to you, Corey.

**Dr Corey Lee Bell:**

Okay. So we'll start with the first one here. So this is from Giovannina Sutherland, so apologies if I've got the name wrong there. So it says, 'Thank you so much for your presentations, regards from Chile. In your opinion, what is the best source to understand China's interests in Antarctica besides its projection through the five-year plans and China's white paper on Antarctica?' A speaker isn't identified in this question, so it's open to anyone.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Chen Xi, perhaps it might be best to direct it to you.

So the question, if we were wanting to understand China's intention and strategy for dealing with Antarctica, where would we be best off to look? And Tony and Liz, I don't mean to exclude you. You jump in as well if you'd like, but Chen Xi, I might go to you first.

**Ms Chen Xi:**

Yeah, I think not only from the official statement as well as the state media, as well as the researchers, they have both produced the academic results as well as the news to describe the activities carried out in Antarctica by Chinese national expeditions there. So I think there are quite a lot of sources. So of course, the five-year plans as well as the China's white paper on Antarctica, these two help as well. But also we can focus more on the use of giving us a sense of what kind of activities China actually conducted there and also of the scholarly research achievements as well.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Great. Thanks Chen Xi.

Tony, your hand's up. Over to you, and Liz after you, Tony.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

Yeah, look, two areas. The statements made by officials from China are really important, and increasingly in those statements there are words – the context being portrayed is there needs to be a better balance between conservation and use. Sometimes that's referred in the fisheries context as a balance between

conservation and rational news. What that actually means is, quite openly, that China wants access to more marine resources in Antarctica and wants the rules that govern how those catch limits are developed to be used more in their favour. So that's one area.

The other area that I have a fair bit to do with, and that is reviewing scholarly papers, and there is a great trend at the moment coming out of various research institutions in China where the fundamental black and white laws of Antarctica are being reinterpreted in a way that I could quite – I think the best way to describe it is written in the Chinese image of what they want for the future. And this kind of academic lawfare, which sometimes arises as diplomatic lawfare, is a trend that needs to be really examined and understood and actually needs coordinated effort to respond to because those kind of actions insidiously undermine the stability of the Antarctic Treaty System and particularly undermine the modes and operations of the treaty system itself.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks Tony.

Liz, to you?

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

Yeah, so I agree. I'll keep my broader geostrategic framing, which is of interest to me, but I think Beijing is working the system and finding its limits. Tangible example, China continues to block the development of new marine protected zones and its reasoning is more science needs to be conducted. Until we know the value of what we are pitching, it needs to be protected. So, you know, invite Australia to undertake the research.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Sounds like a great suggestion to me, Liz. I'm on board. You've convinced me at least.

Corey, back to you for at least one more question from our online audience.

**Dr Corey Lee Bell:**

Okay, so this one is from Jake Van Den Broek, I hope again that I've got the name correct. 'Can Australia learned from great power competition in the Arctic, referring to Russian and US? Are there applicable lessons or are the regions too dissimilar?'

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Liz Buchanan, that's got to be for you.

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

Take a stab, but that's probably for me. Yeah, so we could do the whole contrast and comparison of the two theaters, but my main quick takeaway would be watch carefully the bilateral relationships in each theater. So China and Russia are aligning closely when it comes to the Arctic, but when it comes to the Antarctica, it is not a friendly relationship in terms of support. In fact, India and Russia are more closely aligned when it comes to logistical resupply and whatnot. So for me, that's interesting to see the divergence.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

And Liz, you've actually written an entire book on the Antarctic context, correct?

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

On the Arctic context.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

On the Arctic, sorry. The Arctic.

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

Pitch: *Red Arctic*, with the Brookings Institution Press. Thank you.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

There we go. Very happy to facilitate that pitch.

Tony, you've got your hand up.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

Yeah, I'd agree with Liz on looking at the bilateral relationships and their importance.

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

We agree.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

We agree on a lot of things, Elizabeth.

In that context, what's also important for Australia is its other bilateral and multilateral relationships, excluding China. They're really important. But the other point I wanted to make, just to underline the differences which Elizabeth didn't go into, and that is almost all of the Arctic in one way or another falls under some form of national jurisdiction. And that's not the case in the Antarctic. So the way that geopolitics and international law play out are going to be very different in those two regions of the world.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks Tony. And indeed, even I know this, not even the United States, Australia's security ally, recognises Australia's sovereignty claims in Antarctica.

Look, I'm going to have to bring it back to me now. I'm sorry for our online audience, we only got a couple questions in, but I do have a big question. Look, we've probably only got five or six minutes to get through this folks, so let's try and do it quick.

Chen Xi, can I go to you first, a forward-looking question? I want to ask: How confident are you that the Antarctic Treaty system can continue to deliver stability in Antarctica? What mechanisms are in place or could

be put in place to build mutual reassurance? What's your key advice, Chen Xi, for Canberra and Beijing? If you could keep your answer to two minutes, that would be great. I'm sorry, that is unfair.

**Ms Chen Xi:**

Sure, I'll keep it in brief.

So the first thing is it is quite understandable to Australia and other countries – they focused this kind of geopolitics and its implications, but what I want to emphasise here is we can't have an overemphasis on geopolitics in the Antarctic because it would potentially divert countries' focus on scientific investigation. And the scientific investigation will help the development of Antarctic science instead of the overemphasis of the geopolitics. The overemphasis will possibly even encourage countries to pursue the kind of grid power competition in the continent.

So as both China and Australia, these two are very active players now in the Antarctic. And there is actually no conflict between these two countries at all in terms of cooperation in Antarctica. So what both Beijing and Canberra, I would like to say is both sides should avoid to let geopolitics dominate and stifle room space for cooperation, in particular when we are going to the policymaking process.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks Chen Xi, and good job keeping to two minutes.

So let's not be naive about geopolitics, but let's not let it be the sole or the overwhelming frame through which this engagement is conducted.

Tony, can I go to you next? Again, if you could keep your response to two minutes, that'd be great. It's a massive question. I'm sorry about that.

**Professor Tony Press AO:**

No, it's a great question though.

Look, I think the first thing you need to do is to visualise what the Antarctic would be like if it did not have a uniform, coherent governing regime, which it has at the moment. It would be a very different place and it would be a region of potentially extreme instability. So I think it's in China and Australia's mutual interests to ensure that the Antarctic Treaty System is supported and maintained, and that the work of consensus in the Antarctic Treaty System is actually developed and enhanced. That's fundamentally important.

From an Australian point of view, it's very clear that we do under-invest overall. It's very clear that our focus on diplomacy in Antarctica waxes and wanes over the years. And we really need, in the medium, the short, and then in the medium and into the long term, an engagement strategy between ourselves and the whole of the Antarctic Treaty System, between ourselves and our bilateral partners, and between ourselves and our multilateral partners; we need to engage fully on Antarctic regional security and diplomacy. And lastly, we actually need to step into the future knowing that we're investing properly in Antarctic science and support for Antarctic science.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

Thanks Tony. Liz, to you. The last word, what's your top tips for Canberra-Beijing?

**Dr Elizabeth Buchanan:**

This is dangerous. So the top line is we need to get realistic. The treaty system was designed to facilitate strategic competition without squaring the issue of sovereignty, but I think the character of strategic competition today is much different than what it was in the 60s when we struck this deal. So we must also change our interpretation of the ways in which we can work the system.

International law and treaties are about interpretation. We need to get creative and Australian specific, if anyone's listening, I think we just need to really understand that it is so easy for strategic intent to change and it can happen overnight. But capability can't.

**Professor James Laurenceson:**

So Liz, a big point for you is, just as Tony said, Australia really needs to invest in that capability. That's a key plank of what our strategy going forward should be.

Okay, Corey, look, we've got two minutes, so now is the time to throw back to you to wrap things up. What a fantastic discussion. I'm sure our audience have enjoyed very much the expertise that's been on display.

Corey, back to you.

**Dr Corey Lee Bell:**

Okay, so thank you to our eminent speakers and to our moderator.

So for members of the audience, we'll be sending an email to everyone here asking for your thoughts on how this webinar went. So if you could please fill out that feedback form, we'd really appreciate it. It'll help us make future UTS:ACRI events a better experience for everyone involved. So if you would like to know more about the Australia-China relationship and about our research, more details are available on our website at [australiachinarelations.org](http://australiachinarelations.org).

So the discussion today will also be available there. Please follow us on Twitter for the latest news, or X, @acri\_uts. So thanks again to our speakers and all our attendees and we'll see you next time.