

Australia's Antarctic claim 'at risk'

August 8 2011



This undated handout photo released in 2010 by the Mawsons' Huts Foundation shows Commonwealth Bay, in the Australian Antarctic Territory. Australia holds the largest claim to Antarctica but risks losing it in any race to unlock the frozen continent's potentially vast mineral and energy resources, an influential thinktank has said.

Australia holds the largest claim to Antarctica but risks losing it in any race to unlock the frozen continent's potentially vast mineral and energy resources, an influential thinktank said Monday.

With global interest in the icy southern region growing, the Lowy Institute has warned Canberra against complacency when it comes to its claim, which covers 42 percent of Antarctica, an area roughly three-quarters the size of Australia.

"Australia has limited [Antarctic](#) presence and capability, and positions its policy in terms of science and environmental management rather than national security," Lowy's national security fellow Ellie Fogarty said in a paper.

"This raises questions about its ability to preserve its sovereignty claim."

A [global treaty](#) bans resource exploitation in Antarctica but the prohibition becomes reviewable in 2048, and some states may then decide to withdraw from it given the continent's [mineral deposits](#).

These include coal seams, manganese, iron and uranium, while Antarctica's forecast oil reserves are estimated as among the largest in the world after Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.

Fogarty argues that Australia cannot adequately patrol its claim, lacking the kind of ski-planes it needs to reach some areas and without an ice-breaking ship in the region.

In addition, a recently opened airbase near Australia's Casey Station and the leasing of a wheeled Airbus 319 for intercontinental flights has not been as successful as hoped, because the plane is unable to bring in heavy equipment and is often diverted to land at the American McMurdo base in New Zealand-claimed territory.

At the same time, other nations such as Russia and China are unapologetically increasing their efforts in Antarctica, including in the 5,800,000 square kilometre Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT).

"There are even reports that Kunlun Station, established on the AAT's Dome Argus, features a sign stating 'Welcome to China,' implying Chinese territoriality and denial of Australia's claim," the Lowy paper said.

"Antarctica: Assessing and Protecting Australia's National Interests" urges Canberra to push for international inspections of all other nations' stations and the modernisation of Canberra's three outposts.

Australia is one of seven nations that have claimed territory in Antarctica. It established the first permanent base on the continent at Mawson in 1954.

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Citation: Australia's Antarctic claim 'at risk' (2011, August 8) retrieved 11 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-australia-antarctic.html>

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