

Chinese icebreaker steams for Antarctica in polar power play

November 8 2017, by Ryan Mcmorrow



Picture taken on October 30, 2014 shows a woman taking a photo with her mobile phone as Chinese research vessel and icebreaker Xuelong sets off from a port in Shanghai

The Chinese ice-breaker Xuelong steamed south from Shanghai on Wednesday bound for Antarctica, where it will establish China's newest base as Beijing strives to become a polar power.

China is a latecomer in the race for pole position but its interest in Antarctica has grown along with its economic might. The new station will be the fifth Chinese foothold on the frozen continent, more than some nations which got there earlier.

China is ploughing money into polar exploration and research as other countries like the United States pull back under funding constraints and a glut of other global priorities.

An international treaty suspends all territorial claims to Antarctica, essentially setting it aside as a scientific preserve.

That "provides a precious opportunity to quickly develop China's polar bases", Qin Weijia, director of the China Arctic and Antarctic Administration, said at an annual meeting on the poles last month.

China has rapidly built up activities on the continent, building new bases and commissioning polar-capable ships and aircraft. Officials say it intends to become a "polar power."

"The fact that China has coined this new term and has made it an important part of their foreign policy shows the level of ambition and forward thinking that China has," said Anne-Marie Brady, a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center.

Brady's research, published in her book "China as a Polar Great Power", shows that China is already the pre-eminent spender on Antarctic programmes, when its logistics, infrastructure and research funding are added together.

The multilateral Antarctic Treaty bars mineral exploitation on the continent, but that may change in 2048 when rules governing the treaty change.

Some researchers worry that resource-hungry China's interest in the South Pole is a thinly veiled cover to allow mapping of the continent in preparation for a future when mining and drilling may be allowed.

Lin Shanqing, deputy director of the State Oceanic Administration which oversees China's polar programmes, said as much last week.

China must speed up development of "polar prospecting and extraction equipment", Lin said at the administration's annual meeting.

Snow Dragon

The 334-person crew of the Xuelong, which means "Snow Dragon", will establish a temporary 206-square-meter base on rocky Inexpressible Island, a leader of the expedition told the China Daily.

This will eventually be developed into China's fifth base, with work expected to be completed around 2022.

China has a growing collection of outposts, with its largest—the Great Wall station—able to pack in 80 researchers in the summer months. The base was not built until 1985, more than 80 years after Argentina established Antarctica's first base, on Laurie Island in 1904.

"China will be one of the few countries with a considerable number of bases spread out over the region," said Marc Lanteigne, a lecturer at Massey University Albany in New Zealand.

"It demonstrates China is a major player on the continent."

The United States, in contrast, operates three permanent bases relying in part on decades-old equipment. Argentina tops the list with six permanent bases.

Equally important are the expensive ice-breakers, whose sturdy hulls are crucial for getting supplies to iced-in Antarctic outposts.

Russia has more than 40, while the US has just two, one of which is years past its prime. China has two ice-breakers including the red-hulled Xuelong and a third under construction.

For China, it is more than a strategic priority, Brady said.

The projects in Antarctica are the latest to showcase and bolster the Communist Party's case that it is leading the nation to "rejuvenation".

"It's also about stirring up patriotism and confidence, which is very important to this government," Brady said.

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