

China says no mining in its immediate plans for Antarctica (Update)

May 22 2017, by Matthew Brown



In this file photo taken Thursday, Jan. 2, 2014 and released by Xinhua News Agency, a helicopter from the Chinese National Antarctic Research Expedition or CHINARE is used to evacuate passengers, who were aboard the trapped Russian vessel MV Akademik Shokalskiy, to a safe surface off the Antarctic. Chinese officials plan to detail their ambitions in Antarctica as Beijing hosts a meeting beginning Monday, May 22, 2017 of an international group that oversees management of the polar region. (Zhang Jiansong/Xinhua via AP, File)

China plans to expand its scientific research in Antarctica in coming

years amid worries over the area's susceptibility to climate change, but has no immediate plans to mine or develop natural resources that could be exposed as the ice cap shrinks, government officials said Monday.

China's growing interest in the frozen continent is in the spotlight as it hosts a meeting of more than 40 nations that oversee management of Antarctica under a 1959 treaty.

Human activity in Antarctica is governed by agreements designating it as a natural reserve. Those protocols also prohibit military bases and the extraction of natural resources, although there has been speculation China one day could seek to tap into Antarctica's mineral reserves to support its economic expansion.

China signed the Antarctic treaty in 1983 and has since established four research stations. It plans to start construction of an airfield later this year and a fifth research station as early as 2018, and has a new icebreaker under construction to augment the Xue Long, a Ukrainian-built vessel currently used to service its Antarctic missions.

Lin Shanqing, deputy head of the State Oceanic Administration, told reporters Monday that China wants "to make our contribution to the peaceful use of the Antarctic as a responsible and big country."



In this Jan. 26, 2015 file photo, Wenjun Li, a marine chemist from China, walks along the beach in search of samples in Punta Hanna, Livingston Island, South Shetland Islands archipelago, Antarctica. Chinese officials plan to detail their ambitions in Antarctica as Beijing hosts a meeting beginning Monday, May 22, 2017 of an international group that oversees management of the polar region. (AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko, File)

"At this stage China's Antarctic expeditions and research mainly focus on boosting our understanding of the Antarctic and to better conserve the Antarctic environment," Lin said. "According to my knowledge now, China has made no plans for mining activity in Antarctica."

About 400 representatives from 42 countries and 10 international organizations are expected to attend the 40th Antarctic Treaty meeting, which goes through June 1. China's delegation is led by Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli and Yang Jiechi, a senior foreign policy adviser to Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Their attendance speaks to the importance China attaches to its rising scientific and technological prowess, which includes landing a rover on the moon in 2013, an increasingly sophisticated military and the maiden flight of the first large Chinese-made passenger jetliner earlier this month.

At the Antarctica meeting, Chinese officials hope to sign polar cooperation agreements with the United States, Russia and Germany, according to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



In this Dec. 17, 2005 file photo released by Xinhua News Agency, members of the Chinese Antarctica Research Team wait for the arrival at the continent on board of the polar expedition ship Xuelong, one day before the team on its 22nd expedition trip to the polar continent arriving the icy region nearby the Chinese Zhongshan station after one-month sailing. Chinese officials will detail their growing ambitions in Antarctica on Monday, May 22, 2017, as Beijing hosts a meeting of nations that oversee management of the polar region amid concerns over its susceptibility to climate change. Scientific research in Antarctica is

governed under a 1959 treaty that designates the ice-capped continent as a natural reserve and prohibits commercial resources extraction. (Zhang Zongtang/Xinhua News Agency via AP)

Climate change and the tourist trade also will be on the international delegates' agenda.

Last week, researchers from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom released a study describing "fundamental and widespread changes" on the Antarctic Peninsula as glaciers retreat and more areas become covered with green moss. Representatives of the treaty nations will examine how to adapt to such changes.

More than 38,000 tourists visited Antarctica and surrounding waters in the 2015-2016 season, a 29 percent increase from a decade earlier, according to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators. China accounts for a growing proportion of the visitors.

In 2014 the crew of the Xue Long rescued 52 scientists and tourists from a Russian research ship that became stuck in Antarctic ice.

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