



China's Environmental Threat to Antarctica

December 1, 2021 **Alexander B. Gray** *The Wall Street Journal*

Related Categories: International Economics and Trade; Science and Technology; Antarctic

While much of the world was focused on the recent climate summit in Scotland, China had its eye on a very different environmental issue. For the fifth year in a row, China, with Russian assistance, used an international forum to prevent the establishment of new marine protected areas along the coast of Antarctica. Beijing is increasingly interested in the southern continent, and for all the wrong reasons.

Since 1961, Antarctica has been governed by the Antarctic Treaty, to which more than 50 countries are now party, including China. The treaty preserves Antarctica for scientific pursuits and prohibits all military activity on the continent. The 1991 Madrid Protocol banned extractive mining and seeks to preserve the unique ecosystem of the world's last true wilderness.

China has expanded its presence in Antarctica significantly over the past decade and now operates five research stations on the continent. Beijing has stated its intent to build a permanent airfield at the South Pole and maintains a station, Kunlun, on Antarctica's highest ice feature, demonstrating China's interest in expanding its permanent presence to even the remotest parts of the continent. China's development of nuclear-powered icebreakers promises to ensure Beijing ready access to those facilities.

Yet the Chinese government's activities in the Antarctic appear to go beyond building scientific bases and airfields. New Zealand political scientist Anne-Marie Brady has documented Beijing's use of its bases for satellite receiving stations and high-powered telescopes, both of which can be used for military purposes. More troubling, according to press reports and scholars such as Ms. Brady, People's Liberation Army officers are beginning to serve at China's research stations in greater numbers, including to install a radar site that could, potentially, interfere with U.S. polar satellites. In violation of the treaty, Beijing failed to report the military personnel to its fellow signatories.

But China's principal objective on the southern continent appears to be economic, which brings us back to the marine life protections at issue at the annual meeting of the Commission for Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources. Chinese analysts often speculate about the potential scale of mineral and energy resources in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. The Madrid Protocol bans any such exploration.

Hence the emergence of a bizarre campaign in Chinese academic circles to promulgate a theory endorsed by no legitimate legal scholar: that in 2048 the protocol's mining ban expires and exploitation of the continent's mineral resources can commence. At that time the protocol comes up for review, but it is unlikely the prohibition against mining will be taken out.

President Xi Jinping has long publicly demonstrated an interest in polar matters, vowing in a 2014 speech that China would work to "understand, protect, and exploit" Antarctica.

Yet there is much Washington and its allies don't fully grasp about Beijing's ambitions on the southern continent, having failed to conduct a treaty-mandated inspection of any operational Chinese research station since 2015. America's traditional partners in Antarctica—Australia and New Zealand—have been similarly derelict. Washington's struggle to maintain a working icebreaker fleet and polar-equipped C-130 transport aircraft has hobbled efforts to enforce the status quo on the continent.

The Biden administration has a unique opportunity to pre-empt Chinese mischief and shore up the international system in Antarctica. First, the administration should declare unequivocally that the Madrid Protocol's mining ban will remain in effect after 2048 and encourage other countries to make similar statements.

Second, in conjunction with New Zealand and Australia, the U.S. should inspect multiple research stations in the coming Antarctic summer. American bases should welcome similar inspections by other countries. If Beijing has nothing to hide, it will do the same.

Finally, the U.S. must update its polar capabilities for great-power competition in the Antarctic. America must have icebreakers and aircraft capable of resupplying its bases in all weather conditions and conducting regular inspections. Antarctica's peace and tranquility was one of the 20th century's great diplomatic triumphs. Washington has an obligation to ensure that this remains true in the 21st.