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Australian Government
Department of Defence

Department of Defence submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade *Inquiry into Australia's Future Activities and Responsibilities in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic Waters.*

Successive Australian governments have acknowledged the importance of Australia's enduring national interests in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. Defence's role in giving effect to these interests is limited in practice by constraints on military activities in Antarctica, the unique requirements of the Southern Ocean operating environment, and competing priorities for the development of Defence capabilities.

Deterring and defeating attacks against Australia is the Australian Defence Force's (ADF's) most important task, and is one of two broad tasks that the ADF is structured to carry out (the other being to support security and stability in the South Pacific and Timor-Leste). Both Defence and the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service also assign assets to the Border Protection Command (BPC), a multiagency taskforce which conducts civil maritime security operations. Australia's defence policy settings, including ADF tasks, will be reviewed as part of the development of the Government's 2015 Defence White Paper.

The ADF's primary operating environment [Figure 1] extends from the eastern Indian Ocean to the island states of Polynesia, and from the equator to the Southern Ocean. That area includes all Australian sovereign, offshore and economic territories, such as Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Christmas Island, Heard and McDonald Islands, Macquarie Island, Norfolk Island and waters adjacent to the Australian Antarctic Territory. Australia's search and rescue region is also extensive, covering ten percent of the Earth's surface [Figure 2].

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Figure 1. ADF Primary Operating Environment

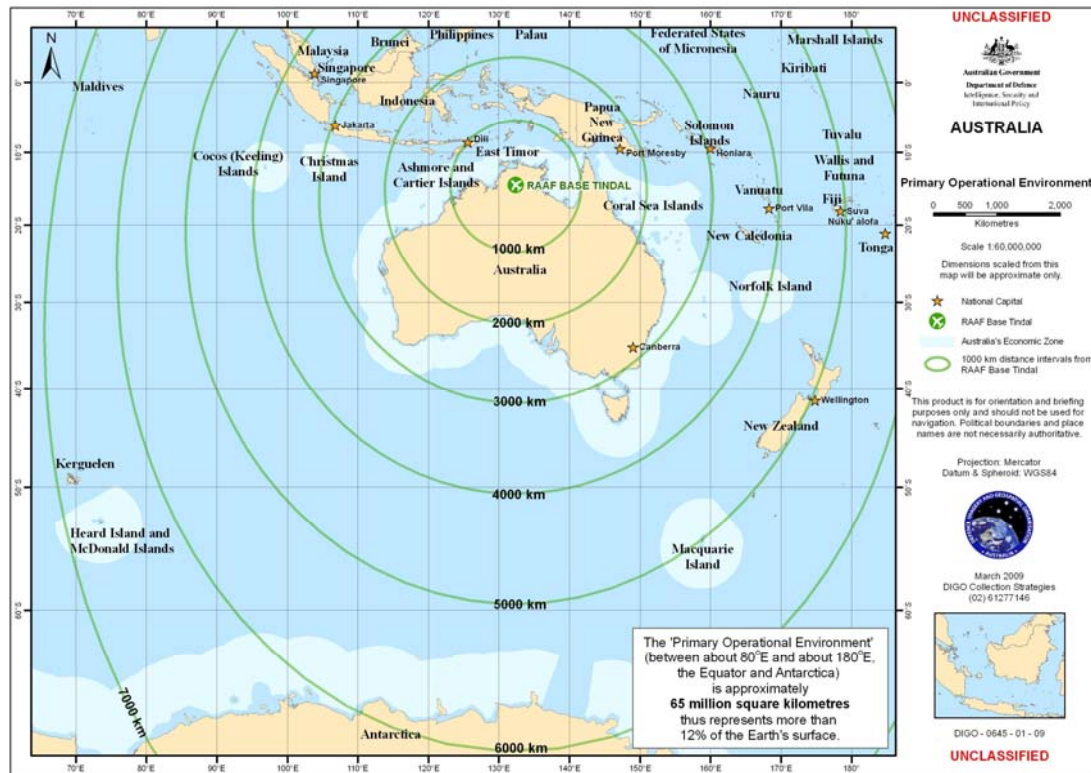
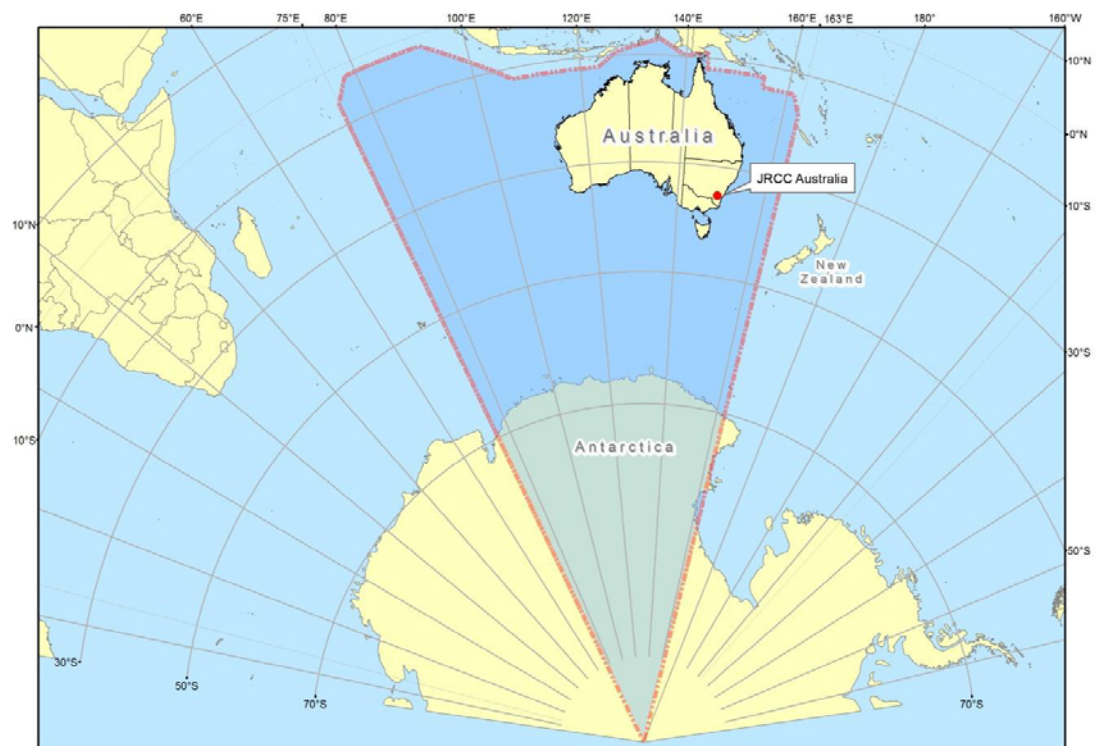


Figure 2. Australian Search and Rescue Region



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The remoteness of the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters, its harsh climate and the prohibition of militarisation of the Antarctic region under the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) have to date fostered a relatively benign environment that has not featured prominently in Defence planning. The maintenance of the ATS and supporting international agreements such as the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources are seen as the best means of protecting Australia's interests in Antarctica.

This means the ADF has maintained few capabilities suited to the unique and demanding operating environment of the Southern Ocean. The conditions are harsh and can exact a toll on assets not designed to withstand these extremes. The area is also remote, requiring ships and aircraft to be able to operate safely at extended ranges.

Potential roles for Defence in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters (if requested by Government to support civil agencies) include border protection, search and rescue; resource protection; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support; and, if required, logistical support to Australia's Antarctic Program. For example, Defence has in the past contributed to efforts to control illegal fishing in the Southern Ocean, both independently and in partnership with other national and international agencies. However, these contributions have typically employed capabilities not purpose-designed for the role, meaning that their use is constrained by environmental factors such as ice and weather.

The Royal Australian Navy operates two ice-strengthened vessels – HMAS *Choules* and ADV *Ocean Shield*. Both ships are not 'icebreakers' in the common understanding of the term, but are built to operate in areas where some light sea ice can be expected to be encountered. *Ocean Shield* will be transferred to the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (ACBPS) in July 2014. There are no plans at this stage for Defence to acquire additional vessels with ice-strengthened capabilities.

Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) aircraft able to reach the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters include the AP-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft, the C-130J Hercules, and the C-17A Globemaster aircraft. The RAAF will acquire the P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft to replace the AP-3C over the 2017-2019 timeframe,

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supplemented by Triton maritime surveillance unmanned aerial systems from 2021. These two new platforms will improve ADF capacity to maintain situational awareness of and responsiveness within Australia's maritime domain, including the Southern Indian Ocean.

While Defence regularly reviews developments in Australia's strategic environment, the assessment remains that there is no credible risk of Australia's national interests in the Southern Ocean being challenged in ways that might require a substantial military response over the next few decades. Although the ATS prohibits any resource extraction activities until at least 2048, there is increasing international activity and industrial interest in the region. This appears in part to be motivated by the resource potential in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, and this interest may increase in the future as resources elsewhere become scarcer.

Given the increasing international activity and interest in the region it is important that Defence is able to support other Government departments and agencies to ensure that Australia meets its full suite of border security and international responsibilities. At this point in time the protection of Southern Ocean resources is first and foremost the responsibility of civil agencies. Defence considers this appropriate given the current nature of threats and challenges in these areas.

Options for responding to any heightened pressure on Australian interests in the Southern Ocean could include either additional security capabilities, or agreements with international partners such as the existing agreement with France (managed in part by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection) to assist in policing the waters of Heard and McDonald Islands against illegal fishing.

The Government's 2015 Defence White Paper provides an opportunity to review Australia's defence policy settings and associated capability priorities. Should there be a Government requirement for the ADF to be able to operate routinely in the Southern Ocean, this would have accompanying resource implications to meet the unique requirements of this operating environment.

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