



**Australian Government**

**Department of Defence**

**Department of Defence submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories *Inquiry into the adequacy of Australia's infrastructure assets and capability in Antarctica.***

The Department of Defence welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories' inquiry into the adequacy of Australia's infrastructure assets and capability in Antarctica.

Defence contributes to the Australian Antarctic Program by providing niche support to whole-of-government (WoG) efforts in Antarctica. Defence's role in assisting WoG operations in Antarctica is limited in practice by Antarctic Treaty System constraints on military activities in Antarctica, the unique requirements of the Southern Ocean operating environment, and competing priorities for the development of Defence capabilities.

Because of this limited scope of responsibility, this submission will address the following Terms of Reference that are most relevant to Defence's role in Antarctica, including: maintaining national interests; serving the scientific program into the future; international engagement, including collaboration and resource sharing with other countries; and environmental considerations.

*Maintaining national interests*

Successive Australian governments have acknowledged the importance of Australia's enduring national interests in Antarctica. A permanent and broadly based presence in Antarctica is the best means of protecting Australia's interests in the region. Reliable and effective infrastructure and logistics capabilities support Australia's sovereignty by facilitating access to the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT) and allow Australia to maintain a permanent presence there. Defence plays a supporting role in giving effect to these interests.

As outlined in the 2016 Defence White Paper, the AAT faces no credible risk of being challenged in such a way that requires a substantial military response for at least the next few decades. Australia is committed to working with other Antarctic nations to prevent any future strategic competition, including militarisation of Antarctica, which could threaten Australia's sovereignty over the AAT and our sovereign rights over its offshore waters.

Australia is a strong supporter of the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), which expressly prohibits any mining in Antarctica and keeps the region free from military build-up and

manoeuvre through the prohibition of militarisation and the obligation on Treaty parties to use Antarctica for peaceful purposes only, including for science.

As set out in the 2016 Defence White Paper, Defence will primarily work to maintain Australia's interests in Antarctica by providing niche support to the Department of the Environment and Energy's (Environment) Australian Antarctic Division's (AAD) operations. This cooperation is recognised in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Defence and Environment in support of the Australian Antarctic Program (AAP), finalised in June 2017.

The support provided by Defence personnel, assets, vessels and aircraft to the AAP is intended to enable scientific research and policy development to advance Australia's interests in line with the Australian Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan launched by the Government in April 2016. Defence support to the AAP includes:

- . Logistics support functions;
  - Defence facilitates more efficient air cargo transfers between Australia and the AAT. This means more important equipment can be made more readily available through offsetting the dependence on transport by sea.
- . Scientific support (geospatial, hydrographical and meteorological);
- . Sharing expertise in extreme climate, remote, maritime and airborne medicine;
- . Sharing expertise in extreme climate operations;
- . Search and rescue support, and aeromedical evacuation; and
- . Contributing to Australia's national responsibilities in the region, notably, support to maritime resource protection tasks.

#### *Serving the scientific program into the future*

Australian Defence Force (ADF) support to the AAP is primarily provided under Operation SOUTHERN DISCOVERY, which came into effect on 1 July 2016. In the 2016/2017 Antarctic Austral summer period (November 2016 to March 2017) ADF support included:

- . Geospatial and engineering support;
  - The deployment of two Army ground surveyors.
- . Antarctic charting;
  - Provision of the Antarctic Survey vessel *Wyatt Earp* and four Royal Australian Navy (RAN) hydrographic survey personnel, operating under the 2015-18 Hydroscheme (Defence's three-year rolling programme setting out national priority areas for hydrographic surveys and charting).
- . Heavy air-lift capability;
  - Six C-17A logistics support flights.
- . Aeromedical evacuation;

- One aeromedical evacuation flight to extract one of the RAN hydrographic personnel.

#### *Aviation support*

Following successful trialling in 2015-16, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) operates a C-17A Globemaster on a regular basis for flights between Hobart and Wilkins Aerodrome in the AAT. These flights allow the delivery of cargo and equipment and can potentially contribute to emergency responses in the region such as search and rescue and aeromedical evacuation incidents.

By the fifth year of Australia's Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan, the Government will have developed aviation operations to make best use of the upgraded Hobart International Airport, the major hub for air access to the region. This will include RAAF C-17A support.

Wilkins Aerodrome is the only air link between Australia and Antarctica and, while the facilities at Wilkins are adequate for current operations, greater mission capability and mission assuredness could be achieved by implementing the following additions and improvements (noting that any of these improvements would be subject to environmental, feasibility and cost/benefit analysis by AAD):

- . Aviation turbine fuel available for upload (increases payload to/from Antarctica);
- . Provision of suitable ground support equipment including power carts, air carts and aircraft towing (negates the need to use aircraft payload to carry Defence ground support equipment to and from Wilkins);
- . An aircraft de-ice capability;
- . Additional accommodation/passenger handling facilities (enables greater passenger loads);
- . Airfield lighting;
- . Airfield instrument approach;
- . Hanger or storage facility to hold Air Drop Equipment.

The Wilkins ice runway is subject to a number of restrictions which only allow aviation access during the summer period. The short aviation access window to Antarctica limits Defence support to the AAP. Defence supports the exploration of options for year-round intercontinental aviation access to Antarctica, as proposed in the 2016 Action Plan.

The Action Plan allocates \$10 million to explore options and develop a business case for year-round aviation access between Hobart and Antarctica. Defence will work with AAD to include consideration of relevant RAAF requirements. This would enable potential Defence support to this year-round aviation initiative. Further, in the event that there are plans for the construction of a new year-round airfield, it would benefit from similar facilities mentioned above.

### *Hydrographic support*

The Australian Hydrographic Office (AHO), operated by Defence, has responsibility for Antarctic and Southern Ocean charting as part of Operation SOUTHERN DISCOVERY. Defence is upgrading AHO systems and facilities and is strengthening its workforce to provide greater support across the full range of hydrographic services. This may include greater capacity to undertake hydrographic survey operations in Antarctic waters and the Southern Ocean.

Defence supports the acquisition of a new icebreaker as part of the 20 Year Action Plan in part for its capacity to conduct hydrographic surveys and charting.

### *International engagement, including collaboration and resource sharing with other countries*

The foundation of Antarctic cooperation lies in the ATS. Defence is open to, and may look to expand, international engagement with other Antarctic nations in a manner consistent with our obligations under the ATS.

Australia and New Zealand are exploring defence-related cooperation arrangements for the joint sustainment of our respective programmes in Antarctica, as well as possible combined responses for marine conservation under the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). Australia and New Zealand are also exploring opportunities for trilateral cooperation with the United States. The RAAF engages with New Zealand on an opportunity basis to share information on Antarctic operations.

Defence is prepared to support whole-of-government efforts to engage closely with Antarctic nations to strengthen ATS norms, to conduct coordinated activities in the region and, as set out in the 2016 Defence White Paper, to work with like-minded countries to prevent any militarisation of the Antarctic.

### *Environmental considerations*

Australia strongly supports CCAMLR's regulation of fishing activity in Antarctic waters. Defence will continue to support maritime resource protection operations, particularly in the fisheries of Australia's Heard and McDonald Islands Exclusive Economic Zone.

Under Operation RESOLUTE, RAAF and RAN assets are provided to the Australian Border Force-led Maritime Border Command which is responsible for countering illegal exploitation of natural resources.

### **Conclusion**

Defence recognises the importance of Australia's significant national interests in Antarctica including our sovereign, scientific, environmental and economic interests. Defence is committed to performing a supporting function to secure Australia's interests in the AAT. This involves providing, operating and upgrading Australia's infrastructure assets and capability in Antarctica.