

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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August 26, 2025

Mr. John E. Thompson
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Bureau of Oceans and International
Environmental and Scientific Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable John Noh
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for
East Asia
U.S. Department of Defense
2000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Deputy Assistant Secretary Noh and Mr. Thompson:

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is conducting oversight of the coordination of federal agencies in advancing national research and other priorities in Antarctica, including the U.S. Department of State’s (State Department) and the U.S. Department of Defense’s (DoD) respective approaches. The State Department’s Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs (OPA) is the leading stakeholder for the United States with respect to the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS)¹, which operates as the sole international pact to safeguard and preserve Antarctica from political theatre. The DoD supports the U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP) by helping deliver critical supplies year-round as well as operating polar ice cutters for transportation through DoD’s annual Operation Deep Freeze.² Both agencies are integral to the longevity of a U.S. presence in Antarctica. However, with a recent increase in activity from both Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the region, the challenge of protecting America’s presence in the ATS and Antarctica grows more complex. The Committee requests a briefing regarding the State Department’s plans for the ATS and how the State Department and DoD assess the growing presence of foreign adversaries in the region—specifically the PRC and Russia.

The PRC is quickly increasing its presence in Antarctica.³ China currently operates five stations on the continent, while constructing a sixth station that is set to begin operating this year.⁴ Meanwhile, USAP consists of only three year-round research facilities, with around 3,500 Americans participating in research on the continent annually.⁵ Last year, the Committee’s

¹ *About Us*, U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, OFF. OF OCEAN & POLAR AFFAIRS (last visited June 10, 2025), available at <https://www.state.gov/about-us-office-of-ocean-and-polar-affairs>.

² *Coast Guard Crew Takes on Deep Freeze*, U.S. DEP’T OF DEFENSE (last visited August 06, 2025), available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/3637624/coast-guard-crew-takes-on-deep-freeze/>.

³ Jasmine Laws, *China Opens New Antarctic Station, Targeting ‘Polar Great Power’ Status*, NEWSWEEK (Dec. 6, 2024).

⁴ *The Impact of China’s Expansion into the Arctic and Antarctic*, RISK MITIGATING CONSULTING (Mar. 3, 2025).

⁵ *See U.S. Antarctic Program*, U.S. NAT’L SCI. FOUND. (last visited June 10, 2025).

investigation revealed the PRC is responsible for 90 percent of research security issues for *all* federally funded research.⁶ Since 2011, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has targeted Antarctica as a “new strategic frontier.”⁷ In 2014, President Xi Jinping even stated that China seeks to become a “polar great power.”⁸ The DoD recognized the PRC as the U.S.’s only competitor “with the intent and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order.”⁹ In 2023, DoD recognized that “China is quickly building a formidable presence in Antarctica that *almost certainly has a nexus with its civilian space program and future [People’s Liberation Army (PLA)] missions.*”¹⁰ Further, the DoD asserted that the PRC “endeavors to work more closely with Russia and possibly seeks to revise the Antarctic Treaty in 2048 to afford it greater access to natural resources and support military operations there.”¹¹ The CCP admitted militaristic intentions in the polar region in a 2020 Science of Military Strategy textbook, which stated that “[m]ilitary-civilian mixing is the main way for great powers to achieve a polar military presence.”¹² Antarctica’s resources could also be exploited, as the continent is estimated to house around 500 billion tons of oil, 300 to 500 billion tons of natural gas, as well as a potential 135 billion tons of oil in the surrounding Southern Ocean.¹³

The Committee seeks more information to assess U.S. strategy in Antarctica and ensure that American interests remain safe and secure. The Committee therefore requests a staff-level, inter-agency briefing on this matter as soon as possible, but no later than September 2, 2025. The State Department and DoD should be prepared to address the following topics: (1) how the U.S. plans to address an increasing presence of dual-use Chinese research stations in Antarctica, (2) what the State Department’s short-term and long-term priorities are for U.S. involvement in the ATS, (3) how the U.S., and the other member countries of the ATS, can ensure long-term geopolitical neutrality in the region, (4) what the DoD risk assessment is of the growing presence of China and Russia in the region, (5) and how both agencies intend to maintain a strategic presence while preserving Antarctica as a peaceful region free of military buildup.

To schedule the briefing, please contact the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Majority staff at (202) 225-5074. The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

⁶ Briefing from NSF Officials to Majority Staff, H. Comm. on Oversight & Accountability (Mar. 21, 2024).

⁷ John Garrick, *China’s “Maritime Powerhouse” Goals Include Expansion in Antarctica*, THE MAR. EXEC. (Nov. 14, 2021).

⁸ John Garrick, *The Antarctic Treaty System is on thin ice—and it’s not all about climate change*, THE STRATEGIST - AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INST. (Nov. 12, 2021).

⁹ U.S. DEP’T OF DEFENSE, REPORT ON MILITARY AND SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS INVOLVING THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (Oct. 19, 2023), at 1.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 162 (emphasis added).

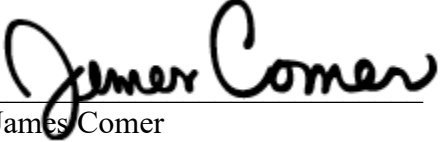
¹¹ *Id.* at 162-63.

¹² Heather Mongilio, *Russian, Chinese Cooperation in Arctic A Growing Concern, Says CJCS Brown*, U.S. NAVAL INST. (Oct. 9, 2024).

¹³ Jenna Higgins, *Ice Dragon: China’s Antarctic Strategy*, THE MODERN WAR INST. AT WEST POINT (May 31, 2024).

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Sincerely,



James Comer
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Robert Garcia, Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform