The Antarctic Treaty and the interconnected instruments, institutions, and decision-making forums and processes comprising the Antarctic Treaty System, has provided a framework for governance of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean for over sixty years. As is well known The Antarctic Treaty was negotiated during a period of heightened cold war geopolitical tension and heightened national interests in the region. These tensions were managed through the Antarctic Treaty’s commitment to peaceful use (non-militarisation), science and international cooperation. These principles together with a commitment consensus decision-making have been encapsulated in the Madrid Protocol of Antarctica as “a natural reserve devoted to peace and science”. At times during the past seven decades Antarctic Treaty and treaty system have faced internal and external challenges. Resilience and adaptability have been undervalued in contemporary framings of Antarctic geopolitics that have in recent years tended to highlight emergent tensions or a lack of responsiveness of the system to emergent issues.

Australia has played a key role in critical moments and helped sustain and revitalise the system. In balancing the maintenance of national interests and cooperation between Antarctic states, Australia has maintained an enduring commitment to sustaining the Treaty’s principles. This presentation explores Australia’s engagement within the Antarctic Treaty System during a new period of geopolitical tension and heightened national interests, where Antarctica and the Southern Ocean still remains “of close and immediate concern”.