

Polar Coda

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The chapters in this volume conceptualize the relationship between the polar regions and the challenges for their governance through several environmental, political, economic, historical, and geopolitical lenses. They propose we think of the Arctic and the Antarctic through comparable security frameworks that examine the nature of environment, human resilience, and defence-sovereignty in both contemporary and historical contexts. In some cases, the notion of comity among nations serves as a model for differential analysis. Kelman’s analysis of disaster risk response, prevention, and enabling recovery, for example, shows that these are direct consequences of the mutual association among Arctic states and can possibly serve as a model to emulate for the southern polar region. The idea that governance of one region should be a “model” for the other has emerged in the twenty-first century as speculation differs about the consequences of climate change for the Arctic Ocean. Several of the authors in this volume observe that while the historical experience of Arctic and Antarctic polar regions has been shaped by similar geopolitical processes, the actions of the international community in the Arctic are predicated on a very different model of governance (i.e., co-operative post-Cold War processes) than for the Antarctic. Recent events involving the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 may influence the extent of this co-operation going forward, but these have not negated the very real desire among Arctic nations for continuing circumpolar engagement. There are several

Arctic and international treaties that continue to hold the course toward international co-operation.

While the historical geopolitics of the polar regions reflect convergence in some areas—such as mapping and exploration, environmental destabilization, rapid climate change, and the rising importance of scientific polar research as a strategic interest—the differences are profound. Warner’s analysis of key principles in global environmental law and their application to the southern polar region highlights the regional application of international law. Even laudatory factors used commonly in the Arctic, such as sustainable development, ecosystem-based management, the precautionary principle, and scientific environmental assessment may pose unique challenges when applied within the Antarctic. This conflict is echoed by Press, who reminds us that despite some obvious equivalencies, there are also considerable differences between the polar regions—not only in terms of their geography and history, but also because of the consequences of different governance structures. A system of layered governance prevails in the Antarctic whereby the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) provides the common mechanism for national interests and aspirations through consensus.

Nonetheless, the ATS does not prevent geopolitical tensions and national interests from arising. Indeed, Vince explores some of the governance and sovereignty issues experienced by Australia regarding its Antarctic Territory and its adjacent exclusive economic zone. These have either directly or indirectly led to political tensions over maritime boundaries, the use of marine resources, and environmental protection. Similarly, Burton finds the current direction of New Zealand’s Antarctic policy is fraught with risk and contention. Layton’s analysis of geopolitical and environmental security in Australia’s Antarctic underscores the uncertain consequences and realities based on today’s observations.

Slightly more problematic in this framing of Arctic versus Antarctic regional governance is the positioning of Greenland. In exercising its powers, it remains a dependency of Denmark. Greenland’s status is not so unusual in the context of the myriad Indigenous governance actors emerging within the northern polar region, yet it is not comparable to the types of territorial status ascribed to governments within the ATS. As Menezes notes, Greenland is growing in presence and importance in unprecedented

ways, as evidenced by the significance of colonial geopolitics and international relations within the region.

Commonality and difference, comity, and treaty status are among the themes explored in this volume. In fact, there are three clear and definable cross-cutting themes that could stimulate further comparative work in the future. Common threads of analysis are nowhere better defined than in the chapter in which Causey, Kee, and Dunkle observe that the challenges, threats, and realities in the polar regions are best understood through multi-causal analysis that connects the complexity of environmental, human, and defence security. They capture the importance of understanding the interconnectivity inherent in a complex, multi-factorial framework. Driving this complexity is change at the macro and micro levels—from the ecology of the ice edge to the larger-scale transformation of polar ecosystems.

But the authors of this book also recognize a second cross-cutting theme: transformation has ecological spillover consequences, and these changes involve important multidirectional connections between human security and defence responses that require multi-track forms of diplomacy. For example, international agreements that provide the framework for governance through the ATS regulate activities for both the Antarctic continent and the surrounding seas. The division between environment, human security, and defence activity is increasingly nebulous as each of these factors are implicated in a relationship of mutual impact and response.

This notion of complexity resulting from the clear relationship between frameworks of changing regional environments, their governance, and emerging trends in diplomacy, is traced throughout the volume, and indeed leads to a third cross-cutting theme. As all contributors observe, the management of key issues emerging from transformative environmental features contribute to both the transient and complex nature of diplomacy and its successes. Small states may find themselves working toward larger co-operative arrangements, while large states find themselves engaged in more complex and potentially disruptive unilateral relationships triggered by conflicts arising from changing environments. As Kelman suggests, even in the polar regions, disaster diplomacy may be a fraught and unsuccessful strategy for furthering international co-operation. If environmental transformations prompt new understandings of human security

and defence imperatives, there is no guarantee or empirical evidence that they will be either peaceful or co-operative, despite the “exceptionalism” narrative that has emerged around features of governance in the Arctic and Antarctic regions.

Is this truly the case? Is each region unique? Much as the Arctic Council has become a forum for promoting international stability through environmental co-operation in the northern polar region, this is also the case in the Antarctic region. As Vince observes, the ATS evolved from a response to potential conflict over territorial claims and superpower competition to a comprehensive regional governance regime. Many of the contributors to this volume thus reference the ATS and its importance in the stable environmental and geopolitical governance of the region, precisely because it includes agreements pertinent to oceans governance and the management of marine resources in the Southern Ocean. Similarly, the nature of intergovernmental co-operation for the circumpolar North has been forged by the Arctic Council.

The exceptional context of polar relations thus underpins the contributions in this volume, although not all contributors would agree on the nature of that exceptionalism. Geostrategic futures may not reflect the stable geopolitical past in either region. Although the Arctic and Antarctic have evolved as regions with relatively stable governance, managed through the Arctic Council or the Antarctic Treaty, the evidence discussed in this volume suggests that the road ahead is bumpy. There are choices fraught with security interests for near-Antarctic states, and choices regarding political alliance for ensuring strategic resources in the Arctic region. The collaborative resolution of intertwined economic and strategic interests among the Five Eyes countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) might establish precedents for the circumpolar North, but it leaves open the question of the changing international relationship in the South. No choices about governance and policy can ignore environmental transformations, particularly because of their geostrategic implications. Layton suggests that there are various scenarios relating to environmental change and its consequences for governance within the Antarctic. Those range from states that wish to keep Antarctica a pristine wilderness for scientific research to those that wish to exploit its marine, genetic, and mineral resources. Warner reminds us

that the threats posed by climate change, the associated impacts of ocean acidification, and increased human activities in Antarctica are daunting, given that ongoing implementation of international environmental law principles and approaches continue to present a challenge for the region. The management of the future within this region depends heavily on diplomatic and governance responses and the direction of international law in the future. The chapters in this volume suggest that much of the future depends on the management of geopolitical and geo-economic interests.

Nicol and Heininen argue that there has always been a global element to polar geopolitics and international relations. While rapid climate change and melting ice is opening the Arctic region to new environmental, geographical, and geopolitical realities, it would be wrong to think that both polar regions have not experienced transformative change in the past—or that previous transformations have followed directly comparable paths. Polar geopolitical processes are, and have always been, intimately tied to broader processes of international relations, global development, and geographical change. To this we can now add the global influence of climate change. The lesson here is that we should expect geopolitics to not merely drive regional security paradigms, but also to respond to them in ways that reflect broader international interests in different ways, given that national and regional/global circumstances intersect at different scales. Greenland is indeed an example of one response, as Menezes contends, while the responses of New Zealand and Australia to similar challenges reflect different regional conditions. Most of the chapters in this volume suggest that national contexts do matter, and they offer ways to understand and manage the political ramifications of complex environmental change through diplomacy, innovation in governance, and co-operation. At the same time, they must respond to new international trends, the most significant of which, for security purposes, is not climate change.

The question we are left with is whether there are lessons to be learned from understanding the polar regions in a comparative context. To some extent, the answer could go either way. Certainly, political co-operation as a strategy remains key in both regions. In the northern polar region, the Arctic Council has grown in importance with environmental change, current events notwithstanding. In the southern polar region, similar trends appear to be unfolding, yet in different ways and through different

processes that are regionally specific and draw upon different governance structures. Nonetheless, there are concerns that future events and regional geopolitical tensions might also emerge. Will the tensions in the Arctic reproduce themselves in the South in similar ways, or might the governance structures of the Antarctic provide a road map that might eventually be applicable to the North? We may wish to circle back to the beginning of this volume for the answer. The potential for destabilizing change very much depends upon the nature and direction of change in the environment, human security needs, and defence imperatives, and the legal, diplomatic, and governance strategies they encounter. Stark geopolitical outcomes and a legacy of disaster and conflict are not the only options. Instead, they are the result of a failure to reconceptualize the new security environment.

This volume raises the possibility that the polar regions can be understood as comparative and comparable yet differing in detail. Their experience of transformative paradigms in environmental and defence security are comparable and include elements of global human security that are at risk from large-scale changes to sea levels, weather conditions, and the context for both human and traditional security. In the latter case, the dimensions of human security are different, but not incommensurate in their significance.

This volume has outlined some of the specific ways in which an argument can be made for comparative study. As we are writing at a time of political instability, it remains to be seen how events currently unfolding because of tensions elsewhere will affect the polar regions. The test will be whether Arctic international co-operation remains viable, or whether the Antarctic will stand alone as the only peaceful polar region. Regardless, considerable environmental challenges await.