

The Evolving Geopolitics of Polar Regions

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Polar Geopolitics: An Overview

A variety of different national, historical, cultural, political, and scientific perspectives and perceptions inform our understanding of polar geopolitics. In the Arctic, these intersect in different ways with nation building and national interest, as well as with region building. As to whether Arctic and Antarctic geopolitics are in any way comparable, it is useful to remember that the geopolitical landscapes of either region are deeply and historically contingent. The exploration of the Arctic and Arctic waters by European explorers and whalers began in the sixteenth century, but Indigenous peoples had already lived in the region for centuries, even millennia. While explorers were bringing back early accounts of a Eurasian and American Arctic, Antarctica was still a legendary continent of dubious status, believed to exist within a southern sea. Captain Cook may have discovered the island of South Georgia in 1775, but exploration of the Antarctic only began in earnest in the nineteenth century by Russian and then British explorers (Willson, Frog, and Bertell 2018; Dodds 2002, 2012). By the time the main era of Antarctic exploration began, the *terra firma* of the Arctic region had been largely mapped and entirely claimed by the eight Arctic states.

Both polar regions, once they had been discovered by Europeans, were witness to a flurry of further exploration and mapping, claiming of territory, and exploitation of natural resources. Explorers, whalers, sealers, hunters, scientific researchers, and state-sponsored expeditions were among the earliest historical actors who sought to discover new resources, routes, and territories. Despite their differences, all were motivated by very similar desires and the common ambitions of colonialism. This included accumulation of wealth, nation building, and dreams of establishing empires that extended European power overseas. Supported by national governments, these projects were highly colonial. The geopolitics of empire dominated these projects, and they were clearly competitive in nature.

The Arctic and Antarctic continue to excite the geopolitical imagination, but today, it is globalization, rapid climate change, and greater degrees of accessibility that are opening the Arctic region to new environmental, geographical, and geopolitical realities (ACIA 2014). What these new “realities” mean for Arctic states and Antarctic stakeholders is uncertain. The Arctic region is governed by eight different sovereign states in conformity with their own domestic interests and international legal conventions (for example, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea concerning the Arctic Ocean) and by forums for intergovernmental co-operation (such as the Arctic Council). The result has been remarkable geopolitical stability and peaceful intergovernmental co-operation. While in recent months the collaborative work of the Arctic Council (AC) has been paused, consistent with the Western community’s condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it remains true that geopolitical order has been remarkably stable in the North. Rules and international agreements negotiated through the AC, and outside of it, still hold.

On the other side of the world, however, the Antarctic is today governed and controlled by an international Antarctic Treaty System (ATS). The ATS has had a damping effect on the geopolitics of competition by forbidding militarization of the continent and imposing strict regulations for resource utilization (Dodds 2012; Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011; Hemmings, Rothwell, and Scott 2012). The Madrid Protocol has imposed a moratorium on resource exploitation as a part of the treaty system, ensuring that the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions will remain an environmentally protected area over the near future (Watts 1992; Hemming

et al. 2012). Looking beyond the mid-twenty-first century, however, a degree of uncertainty attends the question of exactly what new developments will shape the geopolitics of this region. Some experts remain convinced of the continuing peaceful use of the Antarctic, as well as the continuing prohibition of resource extraction, while others suggest that, similar to the Arctic region, there could be a “resource race” (Dodds 2012; Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011), even though the notion of an abundance of Antarctic resources is itself speculative (Watts 1992).

Given that governance structures in the Arctic and Antarctic are deeply divergent (one an international treaty system, the other co-operation involving both national governments and non-state actors), are there lessons that apply to both regions? It is now common for scholars, as well as the popular press, to narrate the geopolitics of the Arctic region using one of two opposing understandings of geopolitical events: “co-operative” or “competitive” (Nicol and Heininen, 2013; Østhagen 2017). The Antarctic is less often described as a potential zone of competitive tension, but this analytical frame has nonetheless begun to take hold given current global tensions and the anticipation of change—rightly or wrongly—to the Antarctic’s treaty system in years to come. Yet few examine, critically or comparatively, what either co-operation (Heininen 2004; Fenge 2013) or competition (Borgerson 2008; Huebert 2013) means, or has meant, for the geopolitics of both regions relative to larger issues of colonialism or post-colonialism, realism and neo-realism, neo-liberalism, interdependence, or globalization (Heininen and Finger 2017; Heininen and Southcott 2010; Dittmer et al. 2011; Dodds 2010; Dodds and Nuttall 2015). Are the challenges facing northern and southern polar regions now similar, despite these regions’ different histories and governance structures? Will their geopolitical futures be similar?

In this chapter, we conclude that if there is a growing threat that polar geopolitics could become competitive as a result of geostrategic considerations surrounding increased shipping, pressures for resource development, and disputed maritime claims, this is offset by a greater developing awareness of the threats related to climate change (see Causey, Kee, and Dunkle, this volume) and the development of a comprehensive understanding of human security over time (Heininen and Exner-Pirot 2019; Kee 2019; Nicol and Barnes 2019). Although imagining what the

future holds for the geopolitics of the region is a speculative exercise, it is clear that subsequent developments will influence the way in which states' geopolitical interests and agendas interact with broader notions of comprehensive security—whether this be at the global, regional, or domestic levels. These are different for northern and southern polar regions.

The International Context

It is worth looking at the larger international systems that shape geopolitics within both circumpolar regions. Polar geopolitical processes are, and always have been, intimately tied to broader processes of international relations, global development, and geographical change (Heininen and Southcott 2010). Today, both polar regions currently find themselves situated within a global context characterized by shifting international relations, as “hot spots” of grand environmental challenges and therefore as critical spaces for collaborative scientific knowledge. Both regions remain exemplars of co-operative governance and peaceful relations. However, while there is a clear argument to be made for the uniqueness of the polar regions as zones of peace in a more tumultuous global geopolitical context, a peaceful, co-operative future is not assured. This is particularly true for the Arctic, where much focus has recently been directed at events in Russia and the Ukraine, and the potential for “spillover” into an Arctic conflict. Here, there is also speculation about new military-security agendas in the context of a global polar resource race, competition for maritime space, and shipping and transportation developments (Borgerson 2008; Dodds 2012; Dodds and Nuttall 2015; Heininen 2013; Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011; Huebert 2010; Sheng 2022).

While there is much more recent speculation about the militarization of the Arctic, in the Antarctic, the longevity of peaceful geopolitics seems more assured. There have been suggestions that this is due to the treaty system now in place, and that, despite the well-established national context of its governance, the Arctic should emulate this arrangement. There have indeed been several treaties or binding agreements negotiated in the Arctic in recent decades, and indications are that more could be possible. However, a region-wide binding treaty there, as in the Antarctic, remains improbable. To date, however, there remain high levels of geopolitical stability in the region, maintained by the strength of constructive functional

co-operation. Treaties aside, Arctic co-operation has been resilient despite clear challenges, and can be seen, thus far, as “exceptional” (Heininen 2022; see also Arctic Council 2021).

Overall, both regions are increasingly subject to very similar types of security and geopolitical narratives, shaped by similar concerns about climate change and melting ice, as well as by the increasingly ambitious agenda of many non-Arctic states in the areas of scientific research and regional geopolitics. But there are foundational differences too, making the notion that there can be a singular history of “polar geopolitics” problematic. The following discussion explores these similarities and differences, beginning with a brief overview of geopolitical thought pertaining to the region, and concluding with thoughts about the future of geopolitics in both the Arctic and Antarctic. Again, we caution against a singular, all-embracing notion of polar geopolitics in favour of a more nuanced, comparative one.

Geopolitical Definitions: Situating the Poles in a Global Geopolitical Framework

The history of polar geopolitics reflects national processes of nation building and state sovereignty. But it also reflects global processes, such as growing international scientific cooperation (see International Arctic Science Committee 2015). Both polar regions have been incorporated into the global system through a series of geopolitical agendas that range from satisfying the specific political-economic ambitions of colonizing states and their competitive empire-building narratives (see Chaturvedi 2000; Dodds 2002, 2012; Dodds and Nuttall 2015; Grant 2010; Roberts 2011), to classical and competitive (i.e., realist) perspectives (e.g., Cold War politics that had the effect of implicating the region in East-West conflict; see Farish 2010; Heininen 2004; Lackenbauer and Farish 2007; Östreng 2008), to the current post-Cold War era of international (environmental) co-operation (Byers 2008; English 2013; Heininen 2013; Nicol and Heininen 2013; Østhagen 2017; Young 2012).

The following discussion recounts both the development of these different interpretive strands of “polar geopolitics” and their points of convergence. It is particularly interesting to trace how specific geopolitical

threads or narratives have grown out of a series of distinct international events and perspectives, rather than the strategic assessments of any one particular Arctic state. To this end, we show the way in which both polar regions have historically been constructed and positioned within the larger imperial, colonial, realist, and neo-realist discourses and geopolitical frameworks of their time. As Owens (2015) suggests, the stories we tell of European, Russian, and North American polar exploration and subsequent territorial claims—that is to say, the history of polar geopolitics itself—reflects a deeply colonial mindset. The narrative lenses through which such projects were understood promoted classical geopolitical understandings framed by realist international relations. Realist because classical geopolitics is one variety of realist international relations, offering “description of the spatial aspects of power politics . . . modified by technology and economics, and their strategic implication ensuring states” (Owens 2015, 467); “classic” because its geopolitical assumptions rest on the presumption that the power of the state has “some relation to the territory that it occupies, controls, or influences,” while “resources and strategic potential, the sources of state power, are unequally distributed worldwide” (2015, 467).

Such geopolitical thinking also emphasizes the strategic importance of technologies in geopolitical assessments and prediction, promoting a military or traditional security focus on a limited number of factors, such as territorial integrity, natural resources, and national interest. Classical geopolitics is not, however, the only framework that informs the contemporary analysis of polar spaces (Tuathail and Dalby 1998). There are, in fact, a number of other important geopolitical frameworks (Agnew 2003), including that of critical geopolitics, a more recent framing of geopolitical thought that examines the factors influencing the constructed nature of geopolitical discourse. Critical geopolitics recognizes that in addition to territory and state power—themselves constructed entities according to critical geopolitical theory—are a plethora of other influences such as ideology, knowledge (as power), identity or cultural and social assessments, and the environment (e.g., Heininen, Ahola, and Frog 2014).

While critical geopolitics have created a contemporary framework through which to understand the constructivist nature of international relations, more recently, there has been an even greater recognition of how

geopolitical frameworks intersect with and are influenced by environmental agency. Climate change and unpredictable weather events have forced national defence agencies in the polar regions to rethink the roster of “threats” to their territories. The effect has been twofold. On one level, the growing need for a large-scale environmental response in response to the increasing threat to life and limb from events triggered through natural processes has resulted in a reorientation of competitive geopolitics around realist or neo-realist concerns (Borgerson 2008). On another level, it has directed state agencies toward functional co-operation in the areas of environmental protection and science, and has fostered a broader understanding of human security, due to states’ common interests in transnational co-operation, in particular in the Arctic (Heininen 2022; Nicol 2020). It has also been highly oriented toward decolonization.

We undertake this discussion about the different ways in which polar geopolitics have been conducted because it contextualizes our geopolitical analysis going forward. The informing narratives of classical geopolitics and its colonial mindset is considerably different from that of critical geopolitics as it is practised today. But today’s geopolitical framing of polar regions, no matter how critical, must now recognize a new type of strategic challenge: climate change and environmental deterioration. In this novel scenario, new understandings of human security shape new strategic assessments of national interest that are existential in nature and related to environmental change. When exploring geopolitics in the context of both polar regions, then, changes to the geopolitical framing of events matter. They determine the extent to which it can be claimed that there is such thing as “polar geopolitics”—that is to say, a geopolitics that encompasses both polar regions. In a volume such as this, which seeks to undertake comparative analysis of both polar regions, it is important to understand where and when polar geopolitics converges, and where and when it does not.

Histories of Polar Exploration: the Arctic

The rise of international interest in the northern polar region began in earnest in the nineteenth century. Over much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, polar exploration, and its associated strategic interests, reflected a state-centred geopolitical narrative embedded in

imperialist and global colonial systems. These narratives reflected the thinking of late nineteenth-century geopolitical theorists like Halford Mackinder, the founder of what has subsequently become known as the field of “classical” geopolitics. Mackinder promoted and codified realist geopolitics “based on the influence of the natural environments defined by geography and technology” (Wu 2018, 787). This view suggested that certain parts of the world were simply more strategically valuable than others. The Arctic was seen as being on the periphery of the world, and of little importance.

Although in the grand balance, the polar regions’ importance lay less in the claiming of a specific piece of territory and more in the symbolic importance of circumnavigation of that territory,¹ the Arctic and Antarctic nevertheless had their purposes. While the circumpolar North itself was peripheral (though populated by Indigenous peoples in North America and Eurasia), during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Arctic Ocean increasingly became a venue for a popularized geopolitics, one heavily influenced by externally produced representations of “Arcticness.” The values of scientific prowess and masculinity were embodied in the stories of polar explorers who conquered this harsh, unforgiving, and wild environment, in turn accruing prestige on behalf of their national governments. The race for the North Pole (and its southern counterpart) made tremendous newspaper copy worldwide, and eager audiences consumed this news with interest and excitement. Indeed, the geopolitics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries posited the Arctic and Antarctic as frontiers that served several state-centric purposes (Heininen and Nicol 2008). These included the testing of Victorian values, encouraging the rising power of the United States, contextualizing the enduring power of the Russian Empire, and propagating a racialized discourse prizing masculinity and northern hardiness (Dodds 2002, 2012; Dodds and Nuttall 2015). The geopolitics of this era constructed a space for American “know-how,” while giving breadth to European and Russian interests. It was, simultaneously, a “civilizational geopolitics” (see Agnew 2003) rich in an imagery of naturalizations as much as “a framework of analysis for policy and strategy in world politics” (Wu 2018, 787). Thus, while the polar regions served as frontiers for civilization, or as paths to riches, they also invited a race for the survival of the fittest and strongest,

and provided narratives for heroic and even self-indulgent exploration. This was a highly competitive view of global relations. Wu has called this geopolitical meme a “modern geopolitics,” one whose origins lie “in fin de siècle Europe in response to a series of technological changes.” The result was the creation of a “closed political system” as European geographic discoveries and imperialist competition extinguished the world’s “frontiers” (2018, 786). And, because the Arctic and Antarctic were some of the few remaining frontiers, their discovery, exploration, and mapping were justified with reference to realist thinking on political and environmental relationships. Here, again, polar geopolitics marched in step with contemporary geostrategic thinking. So pronounced was this view of the deterministic relationship between natural order and political balance that Halford MacKinder (1904) wrote that the world had entered a post-Columbian age characterized by a “closed” political system. But, in the European and North American imagination in particular, unclosed territory existed still in the form of the polar regions. Here, the so-called Heroic Age of exploration led by Shackleton, Scott, Amundsen, and others was just getting under way (see Dodds 2002, 2012; Roberts 2011).

True to the requirements of classical geopolitics, then, the main discourses associated with the northern and southern polar regions came from outside. Abstract and simplified, yet embedded in colonial and hegemonic ambitions, they were inspired by the realist geopolitical assessments of the period. Both polar regions, by this time, had been deliberately constructed in British, European, and North American newspapers and journals as a “frontier” or “no man’s land,” and in doing so fulfilled the romantic, and decidedly Victorian, visions of any number of European states with an interest in polar exploration (see Dodds 2002, 2012; Dittmer et al. 2011; Gale Ambassadors 2019).

While popular imagination in much of the world was focused on the North American Arctic and Britain’s Heroic Age in the Antarctic, the Russian Arctic was also under construction, as settlements and towns (for example, Arkhangelsk and Kola) were built for the benefit of the Russian Empire. While Russia had “sold” Alaska to the United States in 1867, this did not signal its retreat from the Arctic region more generally. A railway was constructed from Murmansk to Saint Petersburg in the early twentieth century, for example, to strengthen northern infrastructure and to

promote regional development in the vast tracts of the Russian North (Gale Ambassadors 2019; Yarovoy 2014).

Despite the strategic positioning of the northern polar region in the global narratives referencing empire and power, these narratives did not represent a direct threat to global stability. For example, after Britain transferred the Arctic Archipelago to Canada, Canadian claims to sovereignty over its Arctic islands and waters (advanced according to the sector principal in 1909; see Cavell 2014) largely fell on deaf ears. True, expeditions and efforts to claim various islands within the archipelago were occasionally launched by other nations (Grant 2010), but for most, including the United States, these remained peripheral and sporadic. Some nations challenged Canada's sovereignty over certain Arctic islands before agreement as to the extent of ownership was complete, but these territories and disagreements were of little real importance to the larger global community.

In the European Arctic, there was, however, a growing interest in control and ownership of Arctic waters and archipelagos by the early twentieth century (for example, those between Norway and Russia on Svalbard and Novaya Zemlya). Nonetheless, open disputes were avoided.²

Overall, geopolitics in the North, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, could be considered "classic" in orientation. The race for the North Pole saw nations compete, sometimes to the death of their expeditionary teams, to reach this iconographic place. Yet the competition remained geopolitically benign; Cook, Peary, Byrd, Amundsen, and others mounted expeditions, but their goals were less about conquest than national prestige. By the mid-twentieth century, the race had been subsumed by the Cold War, with control of the Arctic for strategic purposes resulting in a need for military bases, exploitation of strategic national resources, and a great reliance on science. These were symbolic as well as strategic concerns.

History of Polar Exploration: the Antarctic

Meanwhile, the Antarctic saw its own Heroic Age develop and the attendant development of an Antarctic version of classical geopolitical thought. While the region was considered less strategically significant in the late eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries, it nonetheless remained on the agendas of European powers. That said, it was more important to sealers

and whalers than navy expeditions. That changed in the late nineteenth century. The Antarctic remained on the periphery of a resource frontier for global markets long after the Arctic had been converted to a region of states and national interests (see Grant 2010; Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011). It also remained a virtual *terra nullius*, or no man's land, well into the first decade of the twentieth century, in ways that the Arctic was not.

But increasingly, in the early twentieth century, the world powers became more interested in claiming this far-flung polar continent. As if to make up for lost time, the United States sent scientific expeditions to Antarctica in the early twentieth century, while Britain attempted to “paint the Antarctic pink” through its expeditions in the region. British explorers suffered a series of temporary setbacks, as Amundsen and his fellow Norwegians entered the race for the South Pole, effectively challenging the British Empire's attempted expansion on the southern continent (Dodds 2002, 2012). Nonetheless, by the early twentieth century, Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Russia met in the Antarctic. Their efforts prioritized the exploitation of marine resources and the collection of scientific data. Yet even this early geopolitics of the Antarctic was less about establishing settlements and more about acquiring geographical knowledge and scientific prowess. Above all else, it was about the building of a narrative and imagery with which to project power through new military and scientific technologies.

Unlike the Arctic region, however, the Antarctic—although it had been important to late nineteenth-century empire-building projects in much the same way the Arctic had been—remained in a state of “legal limbo” during the first half of the twentieth century. By 1907, the governments of Argentina, Australia, Great Britain, Chile, France, New Zealand, and Norway had all made claims on the region. However, these were not recognized by the global system (Joyner 1998). The apportioning of the Antarctic continent was disputed and contested, so much so that no clear state colonies or boundaries emerged. Instead, the Antarctic was the object of an international effort to create a “management plan” in an attempt to diffuse these territorial claims (Dodds 2002, 2012; Heininen and Zebeich-Knos 2011; Joyner 1998; Roberts 2011). Nonetheless, the launch of the now famous Antarctic expeditions of Scott, Shackleton, and others in the century's early decades were narrated according to classical geopolitical

discourses: the search for the last place on earth and the closing of the globe to new territorial claims.

The early history of Antarctic exploration and exploitation serves to underscore the fact that, much like the Arctic, the “big picture” has always been a necessary aspect of the geopolitical constructions of global power in the polar regions. And, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was clear that the big picture was increasingly oriented toward Arctic and Antarctic exploration, territorial claims, and sovereignty facilitated by a colonial governance system implemented through technologies of state power (Heininen and Nicol 2008). Nonetheless, outcomes differed widely. By mid-century, one polar region was fragmented among eight Arctic states, the other consolidated under an international treaty system that awarded no one single country sovereign rights.

The Mid-Twentieth Century: Geopolitics, Military Security, and the Cold War

As we have seen, during the first half of the twentieth century, the development of the polar regions, whether for scientific, empire-building, or realist strategic purposes, clearly facilitated the advancement of state interests and domestic agendas. This was a geopolitical era that emphasized occupation and/or control of physical space and natural resources (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 1990, 58–67). By mid-century, war and the Cold War had changed the landscape. The Arctic, once considered an area with vast potential for the exploitation of natural resources (and the development of scientific knowledge), was increasingly seen as a military space for the performance of sovereignty, national security, and other state interests.³ In the European North, the Barents Sea become increasingly strategic, first due to German capabilities in submarine warfare in the North Atlantic, and the interest during the Second World War in utilizing a newly found nickel deposit in Pechenga/Petsamo (then a Finnish territory); and second, due to the presence of Soviet naval bases for strategic submarines on the Kola Peninsula during the Cold War. The latter were intended to ensure nuclear deterrence against the United States (Heininen 1991). Correspondingly, in the North American North, military securitization of the Arctic advanced

because of a fear of Soviet missiles, leading to the construction of the Distant Early Warning Line (Coates et al. 2008).

These developments placed vast—although fragmented (by national territory)—areas of the circumpolar region within a realist international relations framework that perpetuated a geopolitical narrative focused on military threat. In this realist-inspired “military-security” model of geopolitics, the Arctic was often abstracted and simplified, portrayed as a space needing robust expressions of sovereignty (Heininen 1991; Nicol 2015; Till 1987). It also validated an “ideological geopolitics” (see Agnew 2003) whereby the so-called Free World and the Communist Bloc were pitted against each other, with the Arctic serving as a buffer zone.

Thus, if the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War saw Arctic geopolitics take on a newfound importance in the European, Asian, and North American North, it also saw the North incorporated into new models of international relations (Østhagen 2020). Any number of researchers (e.g., Bone 2012; Coates et al. 2008) have suggested that the Second World War transformed the Arctic from a backwater into an area of international importance. No longer the frontier for Victorian and early twentieth-century exploration, the Arctic, from a North American perspective, took on a new significance as a place where the world was divided between two ideological camps and two superpowers (Coates et al. 2008). The Canadian North, in particular, “became a military bridge, and its geopolitical role in world affairs involved providing a safe, inland supply route to the European and Pacific theaters of war” (Bone 2012, 87).

This situation ensured that North American Arctic security was shared between Canada and the United States, and that military infrastructure was developed to mobilize troops, weapons, and radar surveillance throughout this contiguous region (Farrish 2010; Lackenbauer 2010; Lackenbauer and Farrish 2007). In the European Arctic, however, no such bridge developed, as the region became a border, though a peaceful one, between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Soviet Union.

In the Antarctic, tensions also mounted during this period. Although this was arguably for different reasons, classical geopolitics still framed international thinking in the region. A number of interested states had laid a claim to the Antarctic continent, and this, “coupled with increased human presence on the continent, became so contentious that many in

policy-making circles worldwide agreed that an international effort was needed jointly to work out a management plan for Antarctic to protect it from human expansionist incursions and possible destruction from war” (Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011, 208). By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the continued exploration of the Antarctic region for minerals and subsequent state claims had brought the region to a tipping point. The claims of states like Great Britain for sectors of the Antarctic—especially the Falkland Islands (Malvinas)—and its encouragement of other nation-states to do likewise, put them at odds with South American nations like Argentina and Chile, which traced their right to the same Antarctic territories through the fifteenth century’s Treaty of Tordesillas, and as such regarded the Antarctic as an “imperial inheritance” (Dodds 2002).

This phase of geopolitics, with its jockeying for Antarctic territory, created the context for a mounting of tensions in the region (Dodds 2012; Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011). But it also brought about greater pressure for a solution to these tensions. This came in the form of the Third International Polar Year (IPY) (part of the 1957–58 International Geophysical Year (IGY)⁴ and the subsequent Antarctic Treaty of 1959. Dedicated to “the peaceful advancement of the world,” the Antarctic was henceforth characterized as an area of co-operation thanks to a treaty system that formed the basis for a lasting sharing of space, and a series of conventions to ensure the preservation of Antarctic fauna, flora, and environments (Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011; Joyner 1998). As Watson (2009) reminds us, “The existing dispute over the Arctic is similar to the one that transpired approximately fifty years ago over Antarctica. At that time, seven nations were vying for Antarctic territory. These nations resolved their conflicting claims through the Antarctic Treaty, thereby establishing a legal framework of joint governance over the continent” (326).

Although advocates of a single-treaty polar governance scheme often see the Antarctic Treaty as a single binding treaty, it is not. Instead, the Antarctic Treaty is one of several significant agreements that the Australian government uses to guide its Antarctic program. Another is the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (the so-called Madrid Protocol). It provides for comprehensive protection of Antarctica and expands the range of earlier provisions regarding protection of the Antarctic environment. In doing so, its article 7 protects the

land and marine environments and ecosystems lying below 60 degrees south latitude by prohibiting “activity relating to mineral resources except scientific research activity.” It will expire fifty years after its entry into force in 1998 (United Nations 1998; see also Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011). Other agreements include:

- Agreed Measures for the Conservation of Antarctic Fauna and Flora (1964) (entered into force in 1982)
- The Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals (1972)
- The Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (1980)
- The Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities (1988; although it was signed in 1988, it was subsequently rejected and never entered into force)

With the creation of this system of agreements and treaties, the era of classical geopolitics came to an end in the Antarctic region. It was henceforth replaced by “a different vision—one that was potentially far removed from the contest between nations for defined sovereign rights” (Dodds 2012, 60; see also Roberts 2011). The Antarctic Treaty itself provides for use of Antarctica for peaceful purposes only, including the facilitation of scientific research in Antarctica, international scientific co-operation, the exercise of the rights of inspection provided for in article 8 of the treaty, questions relating to the exercise of jurisdiction in Antarctica, and preservation and conservation of the region’s living resources.

New Realities: The Twenty-First-Century Arctic and Environmental Co-operation

The end of a competitive, classical, and indeed military-oriented geopolitics arrived in the North somewhat later than in the southern polar region. Although there are structural and legal differences between the two areas, the point is that, to date, environmental and scientific co-operation—whether through one or many binding agreements—has proven to be the

most effective means for regional governance designed to exclude any form of military activity, as well as for dialogue. Tensions have been met through cultivating greater degrees of structural efficiency, co-operation, and efficacy. By the 1990s, Cold War military confrontation in the North had diminished (Lackenbauer 2010), as had the Arctic's perceived role as a space for geopolitical confrontation (Coates et al. 2008). As Heininen (2013), Wilson Rowe and Blakkisrud (2013), and others have reminded us, in contrast to the high levels of militarization that characterized the Cold War Arctic, there was a proliferation of environmental, scientific, social, and even military co-operation just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. After Gorbachev's 1987 "Murmansk Speech" and the subsequent the fall of the Berlin Wall, a more general concern with environmental co-operation and stability grew. This was a turning point in the Cold War, and it meant a significant paradigm shift from confrontation toward co-operation. This was in many ways the beginning of the modern Arctic era (Heininen, Jalonen, and Käkönen 1995).

Indeed, NATO and the Warsaw Pact began to play increasingly smaller roles in the Arctic, while regional agreements favouring environmental co-operation were to replace them as instruments for international comity, facilitating what Chaturvedi (2000) called a shift from "confrontation" to "cooperation," diminishing the conceptual importance of the Arctic as a theatre for military confrontation. Even where tensions lingered in some post-Cold War arenas, a strategic focus on military activities and confrontation was overshadowed by growing concern for environmental issues, such as long-range air and water pollution and nuclear safety (Heininen 2013).

Similar to what occurred in the late 1950s with the ATS, the Arctic region retained its saliency on the international stage, but in new ways. As its military role diminished, the importance of international co-operation in many fields such as environmental protection, research, and higher education grew, as did the range of actors and agencies who could play a legitimate role in regional governance. The late twentieth century saw a broad and expansive "North" that included not only all of the Arctic states (see Young 2000), but also non-state actors, such as Indigenous peoples' organizations, sub-national governments, and non-governmental

organizations, which were all very much concerned with the environment (Heininen 2004).

The story of the development of the Arctic Council and the circumpolar North is worth repeating here to explain how new geopolitical narratives have come to define the region. It begins with the now Murmansk Speech by Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987 (Pravda 1987). This set the stage for the development of a series of regimes, treaties, agreements, and regional organizations through which an “international North” and a new international space for Arctic geopolitics was subsequently constructed (Fenge 2013; Keskitalo 2004; Heininen, Jalonen, and Käkönen 1995; Young 2000). For example, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, launched in 1991, was supplanted five years later by the establishment of the Arctic Council. With its focus on environmental protection and co-operative institutional arrangements, the Arctic Council initiative suggested that Arctic geopolitics would now subsume earlier institutional and international arrangements. For some, the point of the new Arctic geopolitics and its regional institutions was to create an encompassing treaty system, much like the Antarctic Treaty (see Young 2000); it has not, however, been supported by the Arctic states.

In addition to ushering in a period of relative geopolitical quiet, the agenda pursued by the Arctic Council began to reshape the region. The 2004 *Arctic Human Development Report*, for example, identified the following as the main themes of Arctic international relations and geopolitics during the early twenty-first century: increased circumpolar co-operation by Indigenous peoples’ organizations and sub-national governments; region building, with nations serving as major actors; and the promotion of a new kind of relationship between the Arctic and the outside world with regard to functional co-operation in non-military policy fields such as environmental protection and science (Heininen 2004). All this suggested that, if in the outside world new geopolitical perspectives were gaining ground, the Arctic might play the role of a “zone of peace,” thereby living up to Gorbachev’s dream. The major characteristic of geopolitical discourse in the early twenty-first century was its stability (Heininen 2004), institutional co-operation (Fenge 2013; Keskitalo 2004; Young 2000), and self-determination (Zellen 2009a, 2009b).

All of this is to say that, although the 1950s saw the development of an international treaty for the Antarctic, it was not until the late twentieth century that Arctic geopolitics was reimagined through the lens of institutional co-operation, and in particular through the Arctic Council (AHDR 2004; Heininen and Nicol 2007; Keskitalo 2004; Østhagen 2017). Moreover, definitions of security were changing apace. The paramount importance of military security was slowly replaced by the notion that security was a broadly defined concept implying environmental security and human well-being, not just national security (Heininen and Exner-Pirot 2019; Nicol and Barnes 2019).⁵

However, while co-operation was the norm in the Arctic during the opening years of the twenty-first century, this did not preclude a focus on territorial sovereignty or a new emphasis on competition for Arctic Ocean spaces. Border disputes assumed an increasing importance as the first decade of the twenty-first century closed. The United States renewed its Arctic security position, for example, through a series of presidential directives in 2008 and 2010 that reflected a renewed interest among American policy-makers (Nicol 2020). This was the first time since the Cold War that the United States had overtly indicated its concern with Arctic Ocean regional stability and security. A similar concern was echoed by Canadian governmental representatives at the time, who increasingly articulated a military presence in the North to protect Canada's national sovereignty and military-security interests (Huebert 2010). Potential disputes over Canadian claims to the Northwest Passage, US and Canadian disputes concerning international boundaries in the Beaufort Sea, and other unresolved boundary issues were believed to be potential powder kegs that were exacerbated by the increase of economic activities in the region. Unlike Norway and the Russian Federation, which managed to agree on the shelves of the Barents Sea, there was division over which states were entitled to influence determinations concerning allocation of the Arctic Ocean coastal states. The latter is determined through the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Similarly, China's heightened interest in the Arctic, as well as that of certain European non-Arctic states, has triggered a larger discussion about what exactly constitutes an Arctic state or an Arctic stakeholder (Lasserre 2010), and about the role of these actors in regional co-operation. China's

potential “threat” as an external national presence in the Arctic was somewhat moderated by the acceptance of new observer states, including China, into the Arctic Council in 2013. Still, China’s interest in the Arctic was thought to foreshadow a future in which the race for resources in the North would trigger conflict. Building on the commonly held assumption that melting sea ice will allow for better access to the strategic resources needed for North American and Eurasian states to achieve energy security, the emerging discourse argued that conflict rather than co-operation would characterize the future of Arctic governance. The planting of a Russian flag under the Arctic Ocean in the area of the North Pole was interpreted as a provocation in this regard. Likewise, the impact of climate change on polar sea ice has created a flurry of interest in the region, both in terms of the implications for natural resource exploitation (mostly hydrocarbons) as well as the potential impacts of intensified shipping. There was renewed concern about the potential status of the Northwest Passage. In Canada in particular, this heightened dialogue about state sovereignty and national security has provoked what Dodds (2010) called a return to the colonial-like territorial mappings of great powers. Instead of furthering co-operation and a focus on matters of human security (broadly defined), this new geopolitical discourse suggested the potential emergence of “Arctic boom or doom” or “Arctic paradox” scenarios, as unlikely as they might seem (Palosaari 2012; Zellen 2009a, 2009b).

However, as Wilson Rowe and Blakkisrud (2013) have reminded us, “many official statements are somewhere in between these two extremes of cooperation or competition.” And furthermore, though the Arctic states dominating the region “are searching for a balance between environmental protection and economic activities, and proclaim that there must be such a balance, there is ambivalence when it comes to environmental protection versus economic development” (Heininen et al. 2019, 249–53). The result has been the institutionalization of a geo-economic perspective in the Arctic that promises sustainable development and resiliency as a complement to peaceful international co-operation through a series of regional and global economic institutions. This neo-liberal re-mapping of geopolitical space acknowledges the unlikelihood of resource wars and conflict within the Arctic region. Much of the contemporary analysis of post-Cold War geopolitical co-operation in the Arctic is thus concerned

with the role of Arctic states in brokering co-operation and facilitating inclusion (English 2013; Lackenbauer, Nicol, and Greaves 2017; Śmieszek and Koivurova 2017).

Environmental Cooperation: The Twenty-First-Century Antarctic

Is there a comparable movement toward twenty-first-century co-operative geopolitics in the southern polar region? Here, the legacy is somewhat different as regards state sovereignty, Indigenous peoples, and the structure of intergovernmental co-operation. There is, for example, no state sovereignty in the Antarctic, only deferred claims. Moreover, there are no Indigenous peoples in a sense that would align with the normative definitions of various UN declarations and conventions, only people working at state-sponsored research stations. The Antarctic Treaty System is an umbrella term for multiple treaties and agreements capable of maintaining the degree of co-operation necessary for a peaceful Antarctic. It is ably supported by the annual Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM). Our research suggests that over the years since the establishment of the ATCM, such meetings have covered at least thirty-nine broad themes ranging from “co-operation with other organizations” to “exchange of information” to “multi-year strategic work plans.” Environmental protection, the operation of the ATCM, and protected areas are also on the list, as are numerous mechanisms concerning the reporting and monitoring of research stations, projects, and operational activities. The point is that much like the Arctic Council, such monitoring, meeting, and reporting systems are key not just for effective science, but for bringing about co-operation and compliance as well. Environmental co-operation is deeply embedded, broadly consultative. Where that occurs, other forms of co-operation follow.

Indeed, if in the future, the consensus clause of the Madrid Protocol lapses, there are fears that strategic competition for potential resources in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean could lead to greater geopolitical tensions. However, this only serves to underline the need for greater consultative analysis of the ATS and its emphasis on environmental co-operation. As the Arctic Council has shown, the strength of environmental co-operation lies in its focus, the commitment of its members and observers, and, present circumstances aside, the fact that military-security is excluded from discussion. In contrast, the ATS has managed unprecedented

geopolitical tensions simply by establishing an effective platform for managing regional, and in particular scientific co-operation, by establishing the continent's status as a non-militarized area within a binding agreement: "Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only" (see National Science Foundation n.d.). Can these two different models achieve the same ends?

Speculating on the Future

The most enduring and mainstream discourse concerning Arctic geopolitics remains the one that sees geopolitical stability as the result of institutional co-operation, particularly in the context of the Arctic Council and other international bodies that focus on functional co-operation, mainly for environmental protection and, increasingly, for human security (Byers 2017; Heininen 2022). This narrative of geopolitical stability and co-operation is supported by the Arctic states through their commitment to co-operating on sustainable development and the protection of the polar environment. Such commitment reflects these states' common interest in decreasing military tension and increasing political stability and promoting trans-boundary co-operation on environmental protection and a host of other issues. It also includes regional organizations and sub-national actors whose growing agency is derived from ongoing processes of decolonization and neo-liberalism, among them Indigenous peoples' organizations, regional organizations, and territorial governments (see Heininen 2004, 2013; Shadian 2014; Wilson Rowe 2019).⁶

While in the past, the challenges faced by both polar regions included national conflict and competition for territory, which to a large extent defined the regions' respective geopolitical importance, today new strategic challenges affect this assessment. We see changing definitions of security as the climate changes and local environments become unstable. We also see a greater concern with community and the safety of regional inhabitants and infrastructures (Hemmings, Rothwell, and Scott 2012; Menezes and Nicol 2019; Nicol 2010). Indeed, environmental security has emerged as a one of the greatest geostrategic challenges in both regions (Heininen and Nicol 2007; Hemmings, Rothwell, and Scott 2012; Kee et al. 2019). Moreover, there are similar concerns about the activities of some states that cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered "polar," not

least because of their lack of geographical proximity to the polar regions. Although the instruments for controlling such activities are in place in both regions, it would be fair to say that this does not prevent speculation and some degree of concern about how “peaceful” agreements can be used to contain more concerted or militant agendas.

Conclusions

Many geopolitical rationales and criteria have been used to assess the polar regions. However, while the Arctic and the Antarctic are very different places (geographically, environmentally, demographically, and from the point of view of international law), and while each has its own unique geopolitical history, there are nonetheless some real similarities in the geopolitics of these regions, which have been shaped by the broader political interests of nation-states. This is particularly true of the way in which both polar regions have been positioned within a geopolitical tradition of colonialism, empire building, and the strengthening of state power, as well as the way in which each region was explored and claimed with reference to a scientific curiosity that was used to appropriate the polar regions to serve state interests. The Antarctic Treaty established the Antarctic as “a natural reserve devoted to peace and science” (see APECS n.d.). Although the potential for geopolitical competition is not seen as a near-term threat in the Antarctic region, some experts fear that such competition may cause problems in the long term. Although there is no treaty system in the Arctic comparable to the ATS, the Arctic Council has built a successful environmental agenda and established a series of working groups and programs aimed at fostering environmental co-operation and peaceful circumpolar coexistence. For more than two decades, it has maintained the Arctic as a zone of peace by playing an active policy-shaping role, all in the face of the rising pressure of increasing economic activity and the more forceful announcement of national security interests. To these we can add a host of new challenges, such as the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the potentially more aggressive role of China in polar lands and waters.

On the other hand, it is also true that both regions have been positioned within a larger international framework of customary law and legal regimes, and in a multi-national context of functional co-operation. The trend is most probably toward the continued institutionalization of

relations and co-operation in both polar regions through treaties and agreements, governance organizations, and forums and networks.

The biggest geopolitical similarity between both poles, however, has been the environmental co-operation that forms the basis of successful polar co-operation. Indeed, the concern is that, if the Madrid Protocol's consensus requirement lapses, the resource potential of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean will drive strategic competition in the future. This could lead to greater geopolitical tensions, which only goes to indicate the need for greater consultative analysis of the ATS and its emphasis on environmental co-operation. As the Arctic Council has shown, the strength of co-operation is in its focus on the environment, and the commitment of its consultative members. The ATS must therefore ensure that in the future it is reinforced by strong national support, that its flexibility and complexity is enhanced to allow for sectoral as well as territorial management, and that it remains inclusive of member states' interests.

In short, the ATS is an effective way to manage new geopolitical tensions as they develop, simply because it has established an effective platform for managing regional co-operation without reference to military or security imperatives. For this reason, the experience of the Arctic Council is perhaps as important to the Antarctic as the ATS's experience managing Arctic environments may be in the future.

That said, we have seen that the geopolitical interest in polar regions has shifted focus and frameworks several times over the past two centuries or more. Beginning with the curiosity of polar explorers, these regions have been drawn into the international system, first through realist/classical geopolitical narratives, and then through more critical geopolitical narratives based on co-operative relations and agreements that stressed functional co-operation—often scientific and environmental—rather than confrontation. There is no reason to assume that this will change in the near future so long as the institutions of Arctic governance can withstand the political crises that are now challenging our ability to engage in co-operation. Although there are structural and legal differences between the two polar regions, the point is that to date, environmental co-operation—whether through one or many binding agreements—has proven to be the most effective means to achieve the sort of regional governance designed to foster dialogue and exclude any form of military activity.

Tensions have been met through the cultivation of greater degrees of structural efficiency, co-operation, and efficacy. Currently, the Antarctic is still considered as a “global commons” (Sheng 2022) that has served and continues to serve the benefit of humankind; the Arctic, for its part, has the potential to serve as a model of mutually beneficial co-operation for peaceful coexistence.

The question we have pursued in this chapter, however, is not whether classical geopolitics is still a useful framework through which to explain the geostrategic similarities between the two polar regions, but rather, how the geopolitics of polar regions has survived, transformed, and retained their saliency within larger strategic and increasingly global frameworks even as the explanatory power of classical geopolitics wanes. We affirm the continuing role of geopolitical perspectives in a world where environmental and economic co-operation has eclipsed realist geopolitical assessments. Different rationales and normative strategic doctrines have continuously informed states’ engagement with Arctic and Antarctic locales. These changing rationales have, however, played out in similar ways at both ends of the earth, so that in the early twenty-first century, the geopolitical concerns that inform both polar regions are themselves informed by similar co-operative international relations. Here, growing concern about the changing environment and climate, peaceful political relations, and the need for stability and the rule of international law and treaties prevail.

NOTES

- 1 Consider, for example, the famous British explorer Sir John Franklin, whose failed expedition to the Northwest Passage triggered a massive and protracted search-and-rescue effort that spanned centuries (Grant 2010). Similarly, the Finnish-Swedish explorer Nordenskiöld sailed through the Northeast Passage in the 1870s to connect the Atlantic Pacific Oceans, as England and Holland had attempted to do a few centuries earlier (Gale Review 2019).
- 2 This was true even when tensions became even more pronounced after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War (1918–20).
- 3 In North America, for example, major wartime projects included the building of the Alaska Highway and Northwest Staging Route by the US government (a highway and series of airstrips for ferrying aircraft); the Norman Wells and Canol Pipeline projects

(developed to enhance energy security and supplies for US bases in Alaska); Project Crimson, a series of airfields in the eastern Canadian Arctic; and the military complex built at Goose Bay in Labrador, which served as a US air base during the Second World War (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraft 1990; see also Bone 2012).

- 4 The IPY is an interdisciplinary international scientific program focusing on the unique environment of the Arctic and the Antarctic: “The First IPY, from 1881 to 1884, involved 11 nations and was the first coordinated international polar research activity ever undertaken, inspiring subsequent international research programs. There was a Second IPY in 1932–1933 involving 40 nations, and a Third IPY in 1957–1958 (67 nations) that was also called the International Geophysical Year or IGY because it included research outside the Polar areas. Planning for the Fourth IPY, 2007–2008, started in 2004” (NOAA n.d.)
- 5 Nonetheless, it was not all clear sailing, as the Arctic states excluded military security from the Arctic Council agenda. There was also the question of who was to speak for international Arctic co-operation and at what scale, best represented by the meetings of the Arctic Ocean littoral states in Greenland in 2008 (the Ilulissat Declaration 2008) and in Canada in 2010 (at Chelsea, Quebec). The meetings at Ilulissat and Chelsea effectively narrowed down the rightful discussants of Arctic sovereignty and security to those Arctic littoral states recognized under the law of the sea, particularly those who had ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The notion that there was a core “Arctic 5,” as well as a larger “Arctic 8,” emerged. Alongside this, however, were increasing attempts to better position the voices of permanent participants within the Arctic Council, and to strengthen the role of the Arctic Council itself. While not diminishing the importance of co-operation, this was a reminder that beneath the veneer of friendship and collaboration, Arctic states retained their own, often disparate, national interests and agendas (see Bailes and Heininen 2012; Heininen et al. 2020; Östregren 2017).
- 6 The Inuit Circumpolar Council, for example, issued its own declaration on Arctic resource sovereignty in response to its exclusion from the deliberations of the coastal Arctic states in the Ilulissat Agreement (ICC 2009). The role for Indigenous peoples in Arctic international relations and geopolitical narratives is, therefore, changing (Nicol 2010, 2017). In particular, the involvement of Indigenous peoples’ organizations as permanent participants is an increasingly important ethical consideration in Arctic Council negotiations, despite inadequacies in funding (Shadian and Gamble 2017).

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