

# **Comparative Politics of Polar Order: An International Institutional Contrast Between Arctic Governance and the Antarctic Treaty System**

**By TAKAHATA Yohei**

## **Introduction**

This commentary examines, from a comparative political perspective, the principles shaping the international order of the Arctic and the Antarctic—"the Earth's two poles"—and its transformation, while clarifying the structural factors underlying their marked institutional asymmetry. Governance in the Antarctic, symbolized by the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, has functioned as a "depoliticized international public space" centered on the suspension of sovereignty claims and scientific cooperation. By contrast, the Arctic has increasingly taken on the character of a "re-politicized regional space," shaped by the layered intersection of geopolitical interests, resource access, and security considerations.

While grounded in international institutional theory, this commentary approaches polar order through the lens of "geopolitical institutionalism," which emphasizes how geopolitical constraints shape institutional formation. It further analyzes the emerging pressures for reorganization in both Arctic and Antarctic governance in light of changes in the international environment during the Reiwa era—particularly intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, Russia's military actions, advances in scientific observation technologies, and the acceleration of climate change. Finally, it considers the role of Japanese diplomacy and its policy implications, thereby highlighting the contemporary significance of polar governance.

## **I. The Age of Polar Politics**

In the twenty-first century, environmental transformation driven by climate change has dramatically altered the strategic value of the polar regions. The melting of sea ice in the Arctic Ocean has opened the possibility of year-round shipping routes once deemed unrealistic, while simultaneously facilitating access to natural gas, oil, and rare minerals. As a result, the Arctic has moved from the periphery of international politics to the front line of great-power competition, directly engaging the sovereign interests of surrounding littoral states.

By contrast, although strategic tensions in the Antarctic remain limited due to the normative prohibition of commercial resource development, rising temperatures, expanding tourism, and increasing base infrastructure are redefining the traditional challenge of balancing scientific cooperation with environmental protection. While both regions are affected by climate change, the Arctic is characterized by the intensification and structuring of geopolitical tensions, whereas the Antarctic is undergoing a process of institutional maintenance and adaptive adjustment. This divergence represents a defining feature of contemporary polar politics.

## **II. The Establishment and Characteristics of the Antarctic Treaty System**

The Antarctic Treaty, concluded amid early Cold War tensions and nuclear test competition, established a groundbreaking international framework based on three core principles: demilitarization, scientific cooperation, and the suspension of sovereignty claims. Article 1 prohibits military activities and use for military purposes; Article 2 guarantees freedom of scientific investigation and information exchange; and Article 4 freezes existing sovereignty claims while prohibiting the assertion of new ones. By removing sovereignty disputes from the political agenda, the Treaty successfully contained conflict and established a durable foundation for cooperation through science.

Building upon this foundation, the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) evolved through complementary agreements, including the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals, the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), and the 1991 Madrid Protocol, which imposes a long-term ban on mineral resource development. The Antarctic governance regime thus represents a rare example of “universal institutionalism,” simultaneously constraining interstate rivalry while institutionalizing the ideals of science, environmental protection, and the common heritage of humankind. The maintenance of the Antarctic as a “depoliticized international public space” owes much to this distinctive institutional design.

## **III. The Institutional Limits and Geopolitical Structure of Arctic Governance**

In contrast, the Arctic is defined by fundamentally different geographical and political conditions. Unlike the uninhabited continental space of the Antarctic, the Arctic is a maritime-centered region surrounded by littoral states—including the United States, Canada, Russia, Norway, and Denmark (via Greenland)—and inhabited by permanent populations and distinct political communities.

These states have advanced claims to extend their continental shelves under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), seeking legal recognition of resource

rights. However, overlapping claims are difficult to avoid, and sovereign interests are expanding more rapidly than institutional mechanisms can accommodate. Combined with enhanced accessibility due to environmental change, these dynamics are transforming the Arctic into a region where geopolitical tensions are increasingly structured and intensified.

The Arctic Council, established in 1996 under the Ottawa Declaration, serves as the central institutional framework for regional cooperation, focusing on environmental protection, scientific collaboration, and sustainable development. Notably, it incorporates Indigenous organizations as “Permanent Participants,” granting them a unique institutional role. However, the Council is structurally constrained from addressing military security issues, limiting its capacity to mediate geopolitical tensions. This limitation became particularly evident following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which effectively suspended meaningful cooperation involving Russia and exposed the fragility of the Arctic governance framework.

The presence of Indigenous communities further complicates Arctic politics. Groups such as the Inuit, Sámi, and Alaska Natives assert political claims rooted in historical land use and cultural identity, engaging in ongoing negotiations with states over territorial rights, environmental protection, and the incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge. While their participation represents progress toward inclusive governance, their influence remains constrained by state sovereignty and geoeconomic pressures. As resource development and infrastructure expansion intensify, Indigenous communities face the structural risk of marginalization within state-driven policy processes.

Overall, Arctic governance is characterized less by institutional coherence than by structural fragmentation. Sovereignty disputes, military considerations, resource competition, Indigenous politics, and environmental change intersect in complex and dynamic ways. The retreat of sea ice is increasing the viability of Arctic shipping routes; Russia is strategically positioning the Northern Sea Route; the United States emphasizes freedom of navigation; and China, self-identifying as a “near-Arctic state,” is expanding its involvement. Unlike the Antarctic, the Arctic lacks a unifying institutional framework and instead remains a “re-politicized polar space.”

#### **IV. Comparative Analysis: Institutional Asymmetry and Geopolitical Causality**

The stark contrast between the institutional orders of the Antarctic and the Arctic reflects the interaction of multiple factors, including spatial structure, actor configuration, legal regimes, and normative culture.

First, spatial structure plays a decisive role. The Antarctic’s remoteness and harsh climate reduce immediate incentives for military or economic competition, enabling depoliticized governance. By contrast, the Arctic’s accessibility and resource potential intensify geopolitical competition among littoral states.

Second, differences in actor structure shape institutional outcomes. In the Antarctic, the scientific community played a central role, reinforcing norms of cooperation. In the Arctic, state actors dominate, while Indigenous organizations introduce additional layers of complexity.

Third, the divergence in legal regimes is significant. The ATS constitutes a comprehensive framework encompassing demilitarization, sovereignty suspension, and scientific cooperation. In contrast, the Arctic Council remains limited in scope and is structurally constrained from addressing security issues, reflecting states' reluctance to subject sovereignty concerns to multilateral governance.

Fourth, differences in normative orientation are critical. The Antarctic is underpinned by universalist ideals of global public goods and shared scientific endeavor, whereas the Arctic is shaped by geopolitical competition and resource nationalism. This normative divergence inhibits the emergence of a unified institutional regime in the Arctic.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that institutional asymmetry between the two poles arises not from a single cause but from the combined effects of geopolitical pressures, actor interests, legal design, and normative frameworks.

## **V. Implications for Japanese Diplomacy: Strategic Engagement with Polar Order**

This analysis highlights that polar governance constitutes a strategically significant domain for Japanese diplomacy.

First, Japan can leverage science diplomacy. Its longstanding contributions to Antarctic research enhance its international credibility and soft power, particularly within the stable institutional framework of the ATS.

Second, Japan can deepen its engagement in Arctic cooperation. As an observer in the Arctic Council, Japan can strengthen relations with littoral states and contribute to discussions on maritime governance and resource management, while respecting Indigenous rights and local communities.

Third, Japan can contribute to institutional innovation. By proposing frameworks that balance scientific cooperation with geopolitical realities, Japan can help bridge institutional gaps between the Arctic and Antarctic governance models.

Through these efforts, Japan can position itself as a constructive and normatively grounded actor in polar governance.

## **Conclusion: Redesigning Polar Governance and the Role of Japanese Diplomacy**

This commentary has demonstrated that the Arctic and Antarctic represent fundamentally different models of international order. The Antarctic Treaty System embodies a depoliticized model based on sovereignty suspension and scientific cooperation, whereas the Arctic reflects a re-politicized model shaped by sovereignty, security, and resource competition.

In the Reiwa era, new dynamics—including great-power competition, climate change, and technological advancement—are reshaping polar governance. The Antarctic faces challenges of institutional adaptation, while the Arctic is increasingly defined by geopolitical competition beyond institutional frameworks.

The Arctic and Antarctic thus pose profound questions for both the theoretical sophistication and the strategic imagination of Japanese diplomacy in an increasingly unstable international order. As “barometers” of global change, the polar regions demand nuanced analysis and proactive engagement. Japan, leveraging its strengths in science, diplomacy, and normative leadership, is well positioned to play a meaningful role in shaping the future of polar governance.

**(This is the English translation of an article written by TAKAHATA Yohei, Executive Director of JFIR / Senior Researcher, Keio Research Institute at SFC / President of GFJ, which initially appeared on the GFJ website on January 13, 2026.)**