

Polar security:

Strategic competition at the ends of the Earth

REPORT

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Executive summary

This report examines contemporary strategic competition in the polar regions (the Arctic and Antarctica). The polar regions are often at the periphery of Australia's international security discourse. But they're becoming more central to the global strategies of traditional great powers and rising nations alike. Australia needs to be an active player in this competition.

While the Arctic and Antarctica were strategic theatres in which the Cold War played out, they were also regions in which concerted efforts were made to bring together the rival superpowers. The polar regions became beacons of global cooperation, East–West dialogue and best practice statecraft.

Today, the polar regions host new 'players' or stakeholders and are shaped by increasingly novel forces. The dynamics at the ends of the Earth have clearly changed, and the fragile *status quo* born from our Cold War system of managing state power (and ambitions) is extremely brittle.

Extant governance models and institutions in the polar regions are under immense stress. The convergence of global resource insecurities, renewed strategic competition and environmental changes is actively reshaping the strategic dynamics of our polar regions.

Yet the strategic implications of evolving security dynamics in the polar regions are under-researched, particularly in terms of the apparent interlinkages between affairs in the Arctic and Antarctica.

Five Eyes policymakers continue to treat the 'high north' (the Arctic) and the 'deep south' (Antarctica) as isolated strategic theatres. Meanwhile, many other states simply publish 'polar strategies'.¹

For example, revisionist powers such as China, rising powers such as India, and emergent polar stakeholders such as the United Arab Emirates and Türkiye have deliberately collapsed notions of 'two poles' within their strategic plans.

There are assumptions of a burgeoning Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the polar regions. However, the nuance is important here. China is up-front with its ambitions to pursue 'polar great power' status by 2030.² In the Arctic, Beijing positions itself in future resource terms and works to shape, to revise, governance in the region by pushing the narrative that it's a global commons.

In Antarctica, Beijing is expanding its footprint via research infrastructure to secure options in the future to act on resource interests, while also working to influence the continent's governance system. China is a revisionist actor in the poles, not necessarily an exceptionalist one.

Russia's Arctic strategy rests at the intersection of sovereignty, military security and economic exploitation. It treats the region as a strategic resource base and next-generation global trade corridor. In Antarctica, Moscow maintains both research presence

and protected rights under the Antarctic Treaty to stake a territorial claim based on historical exploration.

It's important to understand the, in many ways divergent, enduring interests that shape China's and Russia's polar strategies. Principally, China, with no territorial claims in either pole, increasingly *behaves* like a claimant. Beijing's assertive posture challenges the existing legal and governance frameworks.

The polar regions reveal clear limits to the Sino-Russian 'no-limits' partnership. Cooperation is rather narrow, constrained to logistical support, research and often strategic coordination on governance issues (such as opposing new environmental regulations in Antarctica).

Russia continues to avoid granting China a meaningful Arctic foothold, fearing erosion of its control and strategic interests. Both have a shared interest in diluting and revising traditional rules and norms in most global domains—but the polar regions are different. For Russia, the norms and rules that regulate Antarctica protect Moscow's rights via the Antarctic Treaty. Similarly, in the Arctic, the extant rules—specifically, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—facilitate Russian strategic interests as an Arctic power.

Such nuances are exploitable fault lines for the Sino-Russian partnership. Australia and partners including the US, Japan and South Korea can develop more effective polar strategies only by understanding exactly where Beijing's and Moscow's objectives converge and diverge.

A more granular understanding enables targeted, selective engagement where interests split. The two powers shouldn't be treated as a monolithic 'bloc' in the polar regions.

Technological advances across the board are modernising the ways or methods in which strategic competition plays out in the polar regions. The blurring of lines between capabilities that have purely civilian (research) or ostensible military application (such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) is making it harder to detect the more competitive, and perhaps aggressive, policy shifts at the poles. For example, geospatial surveying is a key research endeavour for most Antarctic stakeholders, with obvious scientific utility. However, the information collected does assist with infrastructure development and positioning for future exploitative activities.

Stakeholders in the polar regions have long placed immense trust in the notion that fellow parties are operating in transparent terms and in the 'spirit' of international cooperative agreements. But the world today has new strategic contours. The historical *status quo* approach to the polar regions is increasingly a tenuous one. Likewise, existing international rules and agreements or frameworks for managing strategic competition at the poles aren't entirely fit for purpose today.

A systematic ‘reshaping’ of international norms and laws in the polar regions is well underway. However, the method in which that’s occurring is a slow-burn one, involving the persistent ‘stretching’ and creative interpretations of international law. This is sustained and often occurs beneath the threshold for reaction, which ultimately continues to weaken any collective response in defence of the rules-based order at the ends of the Earth.

While Australia should be cognisant of limited practical strategic capabilities in the polar regions, the nation will need to radically strengthen polar ties with like-minded partners and allies. Canberra should move beyond a ‘polar science as strategic influence’ mindset and shed its legacy assumptions about the indefinite nature of Cold War–era global cooperation.

The polar regions require a modernised system or framework to manage strategic competition, to facilitate the ebbs and flows of geopolitics—the organic state of play between powers. Australia’s strategic interests in the polar regions will be protected only

through enhanced physical presence, deeper security partnerships and credible investment in deterrent capabilities. Blind faith in institutionalism is no longer an option; indeed, it’s one that increasingly appears to sustain competitor national interests at the expense of our own.

This report finds value in states adopting a unified polar security framework. A more holistic approach to the polar regions recognises that global resource insecurity, renewed strategic competition and environmental change are converging at the poles.

To most effectively manage Australia’s polar interests, both working with and competing against other nations, Australia should consider developing a dedicated Polar Strategy and appointing a Polar Ambassador. Canberra would be joining close partners who already field polar ambassadors, including the European Union, the Netherlands, France and the Republic of Korea.

Policy recommendations

- Establish an Australian Polar Security Centre of Excellence.
- Introduce Australian polar history into the primary school curriculum.
- Review all projects related to the polar regions (specifically, Antarctica) funded by the Australian Research Council and compare them against the government’s ‘national interest’ test.
- Australia’s intelligence community should conduct a foreign interference assessment of Australia’s Antarctic higher education and polar research sector.
- Seek membership to the International Cooperative Engagement Program for Polar Research (ICE-PPR) and the ICE Pact.
- Establish a Track 1.5 polar security dialogue with both Japan and South Korea, focused on future maritime trade plans.
- Establish a Quad polar working group.
- Develop a polar security working group in the Five Eyes intelligence grouping.

The Cold War might have ended, but competition at the poles is returning

The polar regions are generally still viewed through cooperative legacies rooted in the Cold War era. Existing discourse often overlooks the fact that both the Arctic and Antarctica, while largely zones of ‘low tension’, are also critical enablers of strategic competition through which resource insecurity, strategic competition and environmental change increasingly converge.

The Arctic is essentially a maritime domain challenge, defined increasingly by new global shipping routes and potential resource bonanzas, whereas the Antarctic is a continental challenge in which any potential raid on her ‘riches’ will be tempered (for now) by an international treaty. However, there are commonalities at the broader strategic level, driven in part by the emergence of self-prescribed ‘polar powers’ such as Russia, China and India. Beijing has even codified strategic policy planning to reach that status by 2030,³ despite being neither an Arctic nor an Antarctic claimant.

Polar powers do have some complementary strategies across the Arctic and Antarctica despite their geographical (and other) differences. Across both theatres, states are increasingly building partnerships to meet operational and logistical requirements. Many are honing their ‘interpretive’ reading of the extant international rules and norms that anchor the polar zones.

Dual-use infrastructure, lawfare arguments and activities in the ‘grey zone’ (beneath the threshold for response and sometimes not clearly attributable) are sharpening challenges in the Arctic and Antarctica.

Many are honing their ‘interpretive’ reading of the extant international rules and norms that anchor the polar zones.

However, those polar states are also locked in long-term competition with each other. China and Russia ink agreements every other day under the guise of their ‘comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era’, but their actions in the Arctic and Antarctica are important to distil. What becomes evident is the extent to which the Sino-Russia polar partnership is one of practical utility, if not limited pragmatic collaboration. The evidence tells us a story, and it’s quite far from the notion of a burgeoning alliance or ‘axis’.

In the Arctic, their partnership is defined by mutual economic interests pegged to the development of a new global transport artery—the Northern Sea Route (NSR). China purchases plenty of Russian Arctic oil and gas, too. But Beijing’s social licence and capital for normalising its Arctic identity is focused elsewhere. China engages and supports Arctic-thematic conferences and summits globally. Beijing also focuses on the Arctic’s role in the

international ‘green energy’ movement. Russia offsets, at every chance, China’s Arctic presence. From the United Arab Emirates and India to South Korea, Moscow is diversifying its NSR partners and client-states. This is occurring despite the challenges stemming from Russia’s international isolation since its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Sino-Russia polar dynamic gets even more interesting in Antarctica. Ultimately, China goes it alone. Its unilateral footprint is enabled by a modernised domestic icebreaker production industry and diversified state-of-the-art Antarctic stations operating on the continent. Russia partners with India on Antarctic resupply missions; in early 2026, for the first time, they managed to resupply direct from Goa by air.⁴

At the centre of the Sino-Russia Antarctic tension are their respective positions within the broader issue of ‘who owns the Antarctic’. Russia has inherited the Soviet Union’s position as an original signatory to the Antarctic Treaty. Protected by Moscow’s foundational involvement in treaty negotiations is Russia’s ability to ‘maintain a basis of claim’ to Antarctica.⁵ China signed the treaty some two decades later and is also a consultative party but has no dormant claim nor the ability to establish one while the treaty is in place.

Of course, plenty does rhyme in the polar regions when it comes to contemporary geopolitics. Recognising how strategy at one pole shapes risk perceptions, capabilities and political dynamics at the other is a matter of pressing importance for liberal democracies. Continuing to treat the Arctic and Antarctica as two distinct theatres risks strategic miscalculation at a time when their points of commonality are increasingly converging.

Situating the Arctic

Decades of Arctic achievements have been undermined in just a few years, initially by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and then the dispute between the US and Europe over Greenland. Uncertainty in the Arctic is now the norm, and geostrategic competition is fierce.

Picture the Arctic at the top of the world: a vast ocean basin ringed by sovereign territories and (for now) blanketed by year-round sea ice retreating at an unprecedented rate. The region's immense strategic value is evident. The Arctic bridges the shortest air and sea routes between North America, Europe and Asia. Central Arctic Ocean fisheries are coveted, albeit currently protected by a brokered international agreement between 10 nations to ban fishing.⁶ China, Russia and the US are party to the ban, which is in effect until 2037. Hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas) have long been part of the international 'allure' narrative of the Arctic. However, most Arctic hydrocarbons fall within delimited territorial Arctic zones. Therefore, the idea of an oil scramble is rather hyperbolic.

Hydrocarbons are also quite dependent on the international market dynamics of supply and demand. The extractive tools needed to extract ice-locked or polar environment oil and gas are restrictive and costly, if not dangerous ecologically. That makes such endeavours, particularly offshore, expensive and prohibitive in an age when easier access to deposits elsewhere is prioritised.

The Arctic lacks a single overarching treaty like the Antarctic Treaty System. Governance rests on the sovereignty of eight Arctic states over their land territories and adjacent maritime zones, above the Arctic Circle. The eight Arctic states are Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (by way of Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US.

The region's governance is underpinned by UNCLOS and reinforced by the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration.⁷ That declaration was significant, as it formally rejected the need for a 'new' Arctic governance framework to be developed or for the list of stakeholders with a vote to be expanded.

Intergovernmental cooperation in the Arctic was once facilitated by the Arctic Council. A prime example of Cold War East-West cooperation and an exemplar of the notion of 'high north, low tension', the Arctic Council operated in an era when the zone was 'exceptional'.

That was an era when observers of the Arctic Council (including China) and their ambitions were managed. Arctic decision-making was the remit of a closed club of a few stakeholders. Of course, this 'low tension' environment may have simply been the product of the rigid primary governance agenda. The council explicitly excludes discussion or debate over military security issues; this ensures that defence and strategic matters are dealt with (or not) in alternative forums.

In 2022, the Russia-Ukraine War ruptured the Arctic *status quo*. The Arctic Council paused operations for a time, in solidarity with Kyiv, assuming that phased re-engagement with Moscow would

occur at a future time. However, Moscow used the sidelining (which it argued was in breach of the Arctic Council remit) to build out its own Arctic pathway—unilaterally inviting outsiders, China and India, to deepen their Arctic footprint.

Enhanced and broadened international interest appears to be a feature of the Arctic today, but that doesn't mean that brewing conflict or war is on the horizon. Indeed, despite the Arctic Council rupture and splintered diplomatic ties between Russia and its neighbouring Arctic stakeholders, parties are still adhering to the principles of international law at the North Pole. There's an enduring process underway to 'carve up' or establish the boundaries of the seabed of the Central Arctic Ocean (around and including the North Pole).

Under UNCLOS, three Arctic states—Denmark (by way of Greenland), Canada and Russia—have overlapping claims to the region. All three have scientific evidence of the seabed in question being extensions of their respective continental shelves. For now, all three continue to abide by international law set down by UNCLOS when it comes to dealing with ownership and rights to the seabed. This process will determine who gets to profit from the vast seabed and the resources beneath it.

Enhanced and broadened international interest appears to be a feature of the Arctic today, but that doesn't mean that brewing conflict or war is on the horizon.

The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf is a body within UNCLOS that's tasked with determining whether evidence submitted is 'valid' or not.⁸ It's unable to 'award' the seabed to a claimant. In the case of overlapping submissions, based on valid science, respondents are required to essentially sort it out among themselves. This next step holds plenty of uncertainty, particularly in an age in which Russia-West cooperation is strained due to Russia's war on Ukraine.

In the past few years, decades of Arctic achievements have been erased. The era of 'high north, low tension' is no more. A fragmented Arctic with new players is set to be even more congested. There are new North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) dynamics in the Arctic, forging an entirely different Arctic strategic environment from that of pre-2022. With Finland and Sweden joining the alliance, Russia is now the sole non-NATO Arctic power.⁹

Economic interdependencies, shared interests for Arctic indigenous peoples and the basic operational constraints of the polar environment (including its longstanding search-and-rescue agreements), no longer underpin Arctic state relations.

It's unclear whether the Arctic will ever revert to the exceptionally stable and cooperative strategic environment it was pre-2022.

Situating the Antarctic

Now, picture a globe turned upside down so that you're seeing Antarctica at the top of the world. And, opposite to the Arctic, in Antarctica—China is unrestrained.

The obvious strategic value of the continent is quite staggering. Reaching into all three major global ocean basins (the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific), Antarctica is alluring for any serious sea-power state chasing unfettered access to and control of the world's oceans.

Global resource pressures, primarily in krill fisheries and freshwater terms, coupled with rapid advances in technology, continue to promote deep strategic interest in Antarctica. Murmurs of brewing conflict and disputes over territorial claims or access to resources make Antarctica forever relevant to Australia's national-security discourse.

There's limited public discussion and an even more limited understanding of the unique nature of Antarctic geopolitics. While there's currently no immediate risk of war on (or for) Antarctica, contemporary challenges and the prospect of sharper future tensions make it crucial to understand the 'health' of the continent's *status quo*. Allowing territorial integrity to be undermined without a fight is certainly cause for concern, particularly given the West's vocal support for the rules-based international order.

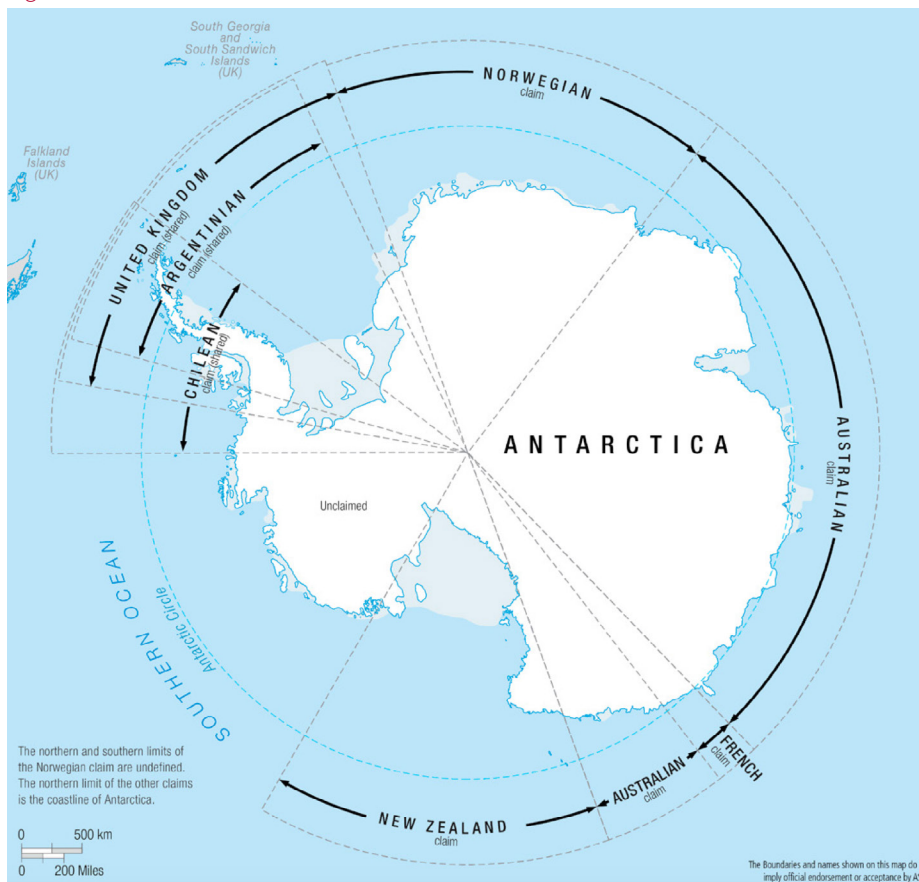
The Antarctic Treaty placed dispute over claims to Antarctica into a 'holding pattern'. The treaty essentially sets aside the debate as to the legitimacy of claims, instead opening the continent for international scientific endeavours and the cultivation of global peace and cooperation.

Figure 1 shows the states with current (albeit dormant) territorial claims to Antarctica. The seven states are Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway and the UK. The Antarctic Treaty further protects the US's and Russia's assertions of rights to maintain a 'basis of claim' to any or all of Antarctica.

Essentially, neither miss the boat to stake a territorial claim while the treaty remains in force. Nor can new Antarctic players use immense fiscal investments, as China has recently done, in Antarctica to substantiate a future territorial claim.¹⁰

Figure 2 summarises key articles of the Antarctic Treaty. The treaty came into effect in 1961 and today consists of 58 parties (states). Of those 58 states, 29 are 'consultative parties', which means they have voting rights at Antarctic Treaty consultative meetings. Australia, the US, Russia and China are consultative parties.

Figure 1: Territorial claims to Antarctica



Source: ASPI. Based on Australian Antarctic Program, 'Antarctic territorial claims', Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, Australian Government, 2016, [online](#).

Figure 2: Summary of key Antarctic Treaty articles

Antarctic Treaty
I. Antarctica is to be used for peaceful purposes only. Military activities (base establishment, manoeuvres, testing of weapons) are banned. Military personnel and equipment in support of scientific research are permitted.
II. Freedom of scientific investigation and cooperation in Antarctica is to continue (subject to the provisions of this treaty).
III. To the 'greatest extent practicable', signatories are to share information related to scientific plans, exchange scientific personnel, and share observations or results.
IV. The treaty cannot be interpreted as the renunciation of rights or claims to territorial sovereignty, or the diminution of claims, and does not prejudice any party regardless of its recognition or non-recognition position. No actions taken while the treaty is in force constitute a basis for asserting, enlarging, supporting or denying a claim to territorial sovereignty.
V. Nuclear explosions and the disposal of nuclear waste are prohibited.
VI. The area of application is south of 60 degrees latitude, inclusive of the continent and ice shelves.
VII. All facilities in all areas of Antarctica are always open to inspection.
VIII. All persons in Antarctica are subject to the jurisdiction of the party of which they are nationals.
IX. Parties agree to meet regularly to consult on Antarctic matters.
X. Parties commit to engage in the Antarctic spirit—and not contrary to the principles and purposes of the treaty.
XI. Disputes are to be managed between parties and resolved through peaceful means.
XII. The treaty can be modified or amended at any time by the unanimous agreement of contracting parties. After 30 years (from 1991), any of the contracting parties can call for a conference to review the operation of the treaty, but any changes to the treaty require majority agreement.
XIII. The treaty is subject to ratification by signatory states.
XIV. The treaty is deposited in the archives of the US Government.
Source: The full text of the Antarctic Treaty is available, online .

Strategic competition at the poles

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally transformed the Arctic from a region once celebrated for 'low tension' into a theatre of heightened strategic competition and institutional fragmentation.

Due in part to NATO's newfound Arctic identity, cemented through the accession of Finland and Sweden, the alliance has placed emphasis on domain awareness, joint exercises and infrastructure development in the region. At the same time, Russia has intensified its militarisation of the Russian Arctic coastline. Moscow is rebuilding Soviet-era military bases and outposts, investing in and establishing new Arctic defence communities and conducting more frequent military patrols and exercises. Debate between the US and European nations risks distracting the allies from responding effectively to Russia's manoeuvring.

Three tangible activities have resulted in Western sanctions on Russian Arctic oil and gas not having the desired impact. First, Moscow sought to partner with new Arctic players for investment.¹¹ Second, loopholes in global oil markets, including limits on sanctioning refined products when the country of origin isn't clear, have enabled many states to continue to fuel Russia's war economy. And third, the 2026 Iran War and the prolonged challenges associated with the Strait of Hormuz resulted in the US issuing 'waivers' for importing Russian energy.¹² While many

commentators claim sanctions don't work, it's difficult to be effective at changing behaviour when known loopholes are left wide open or sanctions aren't enforced or paused when economic circumstances, not the reasons for the initial imposition, change.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine also eroded the long-held ideal of Antarctic exceptionalism. The Antarctic Treaty System was deeply committed to ensuring that the continent would 'not become the scene or object of international discord'.¹³ Yet, strategic competition and spillover from conflict far beyond 60° south have penetrated the past few iterations of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM). This is despite the fact that, unlike the Arctic Council, where Western states paused participation with Russia and have since essentially struggled to rebuild engagement with Moscow, the ATCMs continued.

In fact, both Russia and Ukraine have sent delegations despite their full-scale war raging in Eastern Europe.

But 'continued' doesn't mean 'unaffected'. The diplomatic atmosphere has hardened dramatically, featuring unprecedented démarches, walkouts and explicit references to the Russia-Ukraine War in plenary meeting sessions.¹⁴

Gridlock has intensified on key agenda items, from establishing new marine protected areas or environmental safeguards to (now)

regulating tourism. Increasingly, the ATCM is appearing to be a performative assembly, the continued membership of which, for some states, is a low-cost and low-risk activity to distract from perhaps a more pervasive strategic agenda. Indeed, the lax nature of the treaty wording and the absence of defined constructs for what constitutes ‘military activity’ or ‘peaceful purposes’ afford states plenty of wriggle room.

Should states opt to all-out break with the obligations of the treaty, there’s a question about exactly what would be done in response. The Antarctic Treaty System itself has no enforcement mechanism and, in any case, Australia’s partners and competitors alike appear to now assign diluted commitment (if not complete rejection) to some principles of international law and norms.

Antarctic governance is under sustained, although increasingly less obscure, strain, and fragmentation in the Arctic is hardening. Each theatre is amplifying the strategic risk profile of the other.

Three key forces are shaping strategic competition in the polar regions: resource insecurity, strategic competition and environmental change.

1. Resource insecurity

Resource ‘wars’ aren’t new. Contemporary resource insecurity is driven by growing population pressures that are compounded by supply-chain vulnerabilities and the climate-induced scarcity of existing, known resources. Resources aren’t solely hydrocarbons or critical minerals. Food, water and key components of producing those resources (logistics, fertiliser, manpower etc.) require diversified and layered strategies in an increasingly competitive (and crowded) world.

Resource-security efforts and future-positioning state policies have affected the strategic dynamics in both the Arctic and Antarctica. Insecurity in living resources, particularly fisheries, produces immediate tensions because of its finite nature. Indeed, there’s a clear ‘haves and have-nots’ dynamic in fishery capabilities. From China’s mega-trawlers to her distant-sea flotillas, Beijing is immensely capable and actively blurring the lines between civil maritime and naval military operations across the polar oceans.

In a historic first, in 2025, Antarctica’s krill fishing quota (currently a 620,000-ton limit) was reached just seven months into the season.¹⁵ That triggered the premature closure of the season, but loopholes and lack of enforcement left doubt about Beijing’s adherence to the closure. Strategic ‘scientific’ fishing continued, masking potential commercial activities.

In the Arctic, the fisheries in the Barents Sea and Bering Sea have become mini-proxies for Russia–West strategic competition. Enduring spats between Moscow and Oslo over their respective fishing rights around the Svalbard Archipelago threaten the 1920 Svalbard Treaty (to which Canberra is party).¹⁶

Non-living resource insecurity also drives strategic competition in the polar regions. The complications (economically) of extracting Arctic offshore hydrocarbons are examined above. In extracting

Arctic critical minerals, there are hurdles to overcome first, related largely to the polar environment, which poses logistical challenges. The labour-intensive nature of critical-minerals mining requires a ready workforce in a very sparsely populated and unforgiving environment.

In Antarctica, vast potential reserves (hundreds of billions of tons of oil) remain off limits for commercial production. The Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, also known as the Madrid Protocol, bans mining, unless it’s for scientific research purposes.¹⁷ Contrary to popular belief, the often-associated 2048 date isn’t when the protocol ends. Indeed, there’s no termination point.

2048 merely marks 50 years of the protocol being in place. Until that 50-year point, any modifications to the ban will require *unanimous* agreement from all 29 consultative parties to the Antarctic Treaty. From 2048, a review conference can be called by any consultative party to discuss the ban. But any modification or amendment can enter into force only through the *unanimous* agreement of the (then) 26 consultative parties that adopted the protocol in 1991.

A further complication, should a consensus emerge, is that the ban on mining can’t really be fully lifted. No free-for-all future is possible under the guise of the protocol. Instead, a binding legal regime to facilitate or oversee mining activities must be implemented—and it must be a regime forged through consensus.¹⁸

Freshwater reserves and the space domain are also alluring resource features of the polar regions. Antarctica stores 70% of the world’s freshwater.¹⁹ Australia’s 42% territorial claim essentially means that Canberra is sitting on roughly 30% of the Earth’s supply.

The polar regions’ space utility hinges on their hosting of ground stations for Earth-orbiting satellites. China’s BeiDou network relies on key Arctic facilities (based on Svalbard, in Iceland and in Sweden).²⁰ Various Antarctic stations host network infrastructure that supports BeiDou’s accuracy.

It’s true that global satellite infrastructure in the polar regions can have a purely scientific research application, such as mapping ice-calving or fishery stocks. But such infrastructure also supports military domain awareness and provides resilience for national communication systems. The inherent dual-use application of satellite infrastructure has made once remote polar outposts strategic assets in the emerging and evolving space ‘race’.

2. Strategic competition

Strategic competition is an enduring feature of global politics. However, the character of strategic competition and the targeted theatres in which it plays out are changing. The polar regions are increasingly in the crosshairs.

Strategic competition is alive and well in the polar regions, despite their relative isolation or absence from everyday security discourse. In Antarctica, competition is managed, if not facilitated, via the Antarctic Treaty System. The Arctic is clear evidence of just how

fast the *status quo* can shatter should collective efforts to deal with the pressures of strategic competition fail.

A 'polar power' strategic identity has become a central narrative for rising states. Australia long ago heralded the early 1900s era of exploration and endeavour (think Sir Douglas Mawson).²¹ In the Arctic, Canberra celebrates a range of polar flight 'firsts' achieved by Sir Hubert Wilkins.²² Australia needs to both be proud of its legacy polar footprint and invest more in the future of those theatres. An Australian story about the Antarctic that's only about the past because we've allowed others to degrade our current and future interests would mean a strategic failure.

Other nations without our polar history are focused on next steps. For those nations, including ones that don't share our strategic and democratic principles, the polar regions are central in shaping contemporary domestic political narratives and underscoring the quest for wealth and power.

For Russia, the Arctic remains a frontier for securing and prolonging its great-power status. It's also a wide, open and increasingly contested flank. Arctic security challenges are merely placing pressure on the long existent siege mentality that haunts Moscow. In the Antarctic, continued engagement in governance mechanisms reflects Moscow's relevance to the contemporary world. Russia has shown an ability to multitask, staying involved in these issues despite its war on Ukraine. If Russia (and China) aren't distracted from the strategic significance of the polar regions, Australia and its partners can't afford to deprioritise or postpone polar strategy and action.

China has already taken advantage of the rest of the world being distracted—whether by domestic political and economic matters or by Russia's war in Europe or the tension between the US and its European allies. China, with no territorial claims at either end of the Earth, has constructed a parallel narrative altogether. The notion that China is just a polar observer or only interested in scientific research needs to be dispelled. In the Arctic, Beijing spent the best part of two decades branding itself a 'near-Arctic state'. That was referenced in China's 2018 Arctic Policy.²³ Beijing essentially internationalised the Arctic by drawing attention to the indivisible global rights of the region and China's commitment to both safeguarding and sustainably developing the region. Now, Beijing doesn't even refer to itself as just a 'near-Arctic' state. It has seemingly achieved its goal of normalising Chinese Arctic engagement, and Beijing has largely dropped all references to its 'near-Arctic' identity.

Indeed, China's recent 15th Five Year Plan made zero references to the Arctic (or Antarctica). One reference was made to 'polar' in terms of plans to enhance 'deep-sea polar exploration'.²⁴ The 14th Five Year Plan had included an entire section on global ocean governance that specifically noted the intent to support 'pragmatic cooperation in the Arctic' to build the 'Silk Road on Ice'.²⁵ Antarctica also featured in the previous Five Year Plan documentation: Beijing aimed to 'improve' its 'ability to participate in the protection and utilisation of Antarctica'.²⁶

The US is active in strategic competition at the ends of the Earth. In Antarctica, Washington has long rejected all existing claims to the continent. That's been an awkward point of difference for Canberra and Washington, which has been managed by the topic not being on the bilateral agenda. The competing activities of other nations, in particular China, mean that common interests should now outweigh the elephant in the room. The allies should prioritise their respective Antarctic strategies and joint activities to ensure that their inaction isn't defeated by Beijing's action.

In the Arctic, the US is an Arctic power by way of Alaska. However, Arctic policy has long been at the margins of Washington's international priorities.

The second Trump presidency has ushered in the 'Donroe Doctrine', which is described as a new era for 'Hemispheric Defense'.²⁷ The Arctic plays a crucial role in the defence of the American homeland, but Washington's designs on Greenland have been met with pushback. Hemispheric defence has pushed NATO and the trans-Atlantic bond to breaking point.

If the Arctic is the 'roof' of the Western hemisphere, the 'floor' of it is naturally Antarctica. At the South Pole, Washington appears to be realigning scientific funds and research priorities to align with the America First agenda.

The polar regions aren't a new interest for Trump, and there was relevant unfinished business at the time his first administration came to an end in 2020.²⁸ One specific focus is the rebuilding of Washington's icebreaker capability—restoring her ability to project power in the polar frontiers.²⁹

An age-old element of strategic competition has been innovation, whether it was the 'race to space' or to be the first to go nuclear. Supremacy in the field of science, which knows no national bounds, has long acted as a vehicle for great-power ambition. In the polar regions, strategic science follows a similar pattern. Scientific datasets and cutting-edge research missions are enablers of national pride and international standing. Research stations at the poles are modernised, expanded or even rebuilt to further legitimise the enduring presence and deepening national sense of purpose in the Arctic and Antarctica.

Research stations also illustrate profound divergences between polar nations in terms of fiscal commitment and resource prioritisation. Australia might claim 42% of the Antarctic as sovereign territory, but we operate one icebreaker, with no secure redundancy, and our key station sites are more or less 'huts'. In comparison, both China and Russia have new stations, while India and New Zealand have plans for forthcoming stations. Canberra should ensure that the official Australian Antarctic Division tagline ('Antarctica: valued, protected and understood') is prioritised and implemented.³⁰

A significant limitation is the Australian funding being placed in Antarctica compared to funding from both partner and competing nations. As the saying goes, 'Show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value'.³¹

Canberra's strategy and rhetoric on Antarctica should also be more up-front about the strategic interests of other nations and the strategic competition related to the polar regions. Polar stations do enable scientific activities, but they also provide plausible deniability for more pervasive ends. From seabed mapping, satellite ground station operations and logistical resupply networks to higher education research exchange programs, science can be used to 'mask' military-strategic action. Seabed mapping is both critical to scientific knowledge and important for future positioning in a resource-scarce future.

Polar science is no longer just the 'currency' of power in the Arctic and Antarctica. It's now a *tool* used in polar strategic competition to support new interpretations of legal agreements and set new standards of operation, and is often employed to veto and delay

consensus decision-making. China often argues that more scientific investigation is required to establish new marine protected zones in Antarctica. But stalling through 'science' essentially normalises erosive tactics and serves to weaken cooperative norms.

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of contemporary strategic competition in the polar regions is the quest to control or access (sometimes both) maritime trade corridors. Figure 3 illustrates key polar corridors. The Arctic is home to three maritime routes: the Transpolar Route, the Northeast Passage and the Northwest Passage. The Transpolar Route connects Asia with Europe through and over the North Pole. Thick winter ice and the logistical challenges associated with the sheer isolation of the route (far from deployable search-and-rescue capabilities) make it (currently) unviable for commercial use.

Figure 3: Polar maritime corridors



Source: ASPI.

The Northeast Passage is also referred to as the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Most of the passage, linking the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic, hugs Russia's Arctic coastline. Moscow has implemented a domestic legal framework to manage this maritime corridor, which intersects for quite some length with the Russian EEZ. The route is open for much of the year, mainly servicing oil and gas markets that are engaging with a burgeoning Russian Arctic Zone.

There's increasing global use of the NSR. Engagement is, however, at the discretion of Moscow. Fees, permits and Russian pilotage of the route are mandated. In early 2026, South Korea legislated a pivot towards the NSR and has confirmed that trials are underway for commercial shipping.³² China has long used the NSR, testing the viability of commercial shipping between Asia and Europe.³³

The Northwest Passage links Asia and Europe via North America. This route is less developed than the NSR, hosting more polar tourist traffic. This passage is also diplomatically complex: the US views it as international waters, while Canada deems it to be internal waters.

The Southern Ocean is home to Antarctica's maritime corridors. These are crucial in their role as 'redundancies' for maritime choke-points elsewhere. Should the Panama Canal be lost or unviable, Washington would need to use the Drake Passage. The perilous and often unforgiving operational conditions of the passage make it a challenging alternative, yet a redundancy, nonetheless. Competition over (and within) emerging and established polar maritime corridors will increasingly test, stretch and shape the rules-based order.

3. Environmental change

Environmental change is perhaps the most obvious and tangible evidence that the polar regions are under transformation. At the poles, temperatures are rising far faster than the global average. In one study published by *Nature*, the Arctic is said to be warming four times faster than the rest of the world.³⁴ Should the entire Antarctic ice sheet melt, the world's oceans could rise by some 58 metres.³⁵

Many low-lying states (think the Marshall Islands, the Maldives, Tuvalu) would vanish altogether. Amsterdam would be submerged, as would Venice and New Orleans. Vietnam's Mekong Delta would be consumed by the ocean, as would many of the densely populated Southeast Asian nations, such as Bangladesh.³⁶ Climate refugees are a future source of insecurity for the global community.

For now, attention appears to be fixed on the 'opportunities' unlocked by our melting polar ice caps. Previously inaccessible zones now have thinner winter ice caps. New transport routes, principally through the Arctic, are 'opening' for longer stretches. During summer months, the ice that once required freighters and tankers to have icebreaker support is either gone or thin enough to allow ice-hardened vessels to pass. As more vessels use the Arctic polar routes, we can expect their once prohibitive insurance premiums to fall.

Economic opportunities for the resource world are also exposed by retreating ice in the polar regions. Part of the commercial hurdle for Arctic oil and gas (indeed, for Antarctic hydrocarbons, too) is the high cost of extraction and the operational constraints of those icy environments. Over time, those restrictions are disappearing, although that isn't to argue the polar regions will be easy to work in.

The Arctic is undergoing a real-time, multinational, mass infrastructure crisis sparked by melting permafrost. The once frozen ground that supports community roads, gas pipelines, military airstrips and oil industrial facilities is disappearing.

In Antarctica, German scientists lost critical fuel supplies and shelter and inadvertently dumped diesel waste into pristine Antarctic waters when an iceberg broke away carrying seven shipping containers.³⁷ The researchers indicated their inability to determine clearly signs of crevasses, cracks or fissures in the ice that broke away. Ultimately, despite access becoming 'easier' in the polar regions, the operational risks and costs are still immense.

The Arctic is undergoing a real-time, multinational, mass infrastructure crisis sparked by melting permafrost.

Indigenous communities that populate the Arctic are particularly vulnerable to a changing environment. Such changes are already disrupting traditional hunting and fishing zones, amplifying social stressors and fracturing communities.

The polar regions are often described as global refrigerators, as they help to regulate the Earth's temperature by reflecting solar radiation. Changes underway in environmental terms extend far beyond the polar theatres. The Arctic and Antarctic environments not only influence global weather patterns, shape biodiversity, and change the maritime trade game, but they affect human security in the broadest sense.

Implications for Australia

Shifting power dynamics in the polar regions pose direct challenges to Australian national interests, ranging from vital interests linked to Canberra's sovereign territorial claim in Antarctica to the promotion of Australia's economic rights protected by the Svalbard Treaty in the Arctic. The continued functioning of the extant rules-based global order, and the norms and laws that underpin it, also accounts for Australia's interest in the polar regions.

In the Arctic and Antarctica, Canberra confronts a more assertive, if not revisionist, strategic climate. Business as usual at either end of the Earth won't suffice in this new normal. With fragmentation and erosion of the governance forums and systems in place in the polar regions, it's crucial that Canberra leads middle-power stakeholders in mounting a collective stand to salvage and ideally, future-proof, the *status quo* in Antarctica and the Arctic.

A dedicated national Polar Strategy and associated diplomatic support (for instance, a Polar Ambassador) would align Australia with our European and Southeast Asian counterparts moving to do the same. An Australian Polar Strategy would prioritise 'friend-shoring' in the polar domain. Like-minded partners with their respective polar interests can work smarter to pool assets

(icebreakers, satellites, datasets and domain awareness) for collective gain. Canberra's interest in joining the US-led ICE Pact (the icebreaker industrial ecosystem partnership with Canada and Finland) should be flagged as a matter of priority.

Scientific capability (dubbed 'leadership' in Antarctic circles) remains one of Australia's strongest sources of legitimacy in polar affairs. The Australian Government should expand funding for polar research to maintain that strategic edge. However, investment in telling Australia's polar story is also necessary. This is how we bolster a sense of national buy-in to such seemingly distant theatres. Australia's polar identity can't be narrowly defined in stewardship or environmental research terms. The polar regions should be framed as core national-security interests.

Resource insecurity, renewed strategic competition and environmental change are converging at the poles, determining the future history of the Arctic and Antarctica. Australia is no passenger in polar affairs; nor are we relevant only to the Antarctic domain. Canberra needs to rediscover Australia's polar history, clearly articulate the associated national interests at risk, and develop a cohesive plan to navigate the changing polar regions.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ATCM	Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSR	Northern Sea Route
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea



25
YEARS
2001–2026