According to Chapter I, Article I of the United Nations (UN) Charter, the purpose of the UN is:

-- To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;

-- To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;

-- To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

As the General Assembly subcommittee charged with security issues, the General Assembly First Committee (GA-1) considers ways to strengthen international security and cooperation. Thus a frequent topic is how the three goals listed above fit together in particular regions.

In the coming decades, the Arctic and Antarctic regions could face some of the most serious international, national, and human security challenges in the world. As polar ice melts, opportunities for new resource exploitation and shipping lanes may increase international tensions. Already, Arctic states have made claims on the Arctic seabed to gain ownership of oil and natural gas, and goods shipped through the Arctic have increased tenfold from 111,000 tons in 2010 to 1.26 million tons in 2012. Moreover, states worldwide have expressed interest in Arctic resources and transportation.

Thus far, conflicts in the polar regions have not risen to the level of war, but they have increased tension among states. Arctic states have begun to increase military spending and operations, and it is possible that Antarctic rivalries could emerge as well, limiting scientific cooperation and creating arms races that detract from social spending. Melting ice and pollution from increased economic activity could also threaten human security by endangering the traditions of the half-million indigenous peoples in the Arctic and posing health risks to the region’s 4 million inhabitants.

What can the GA-1 do to prevent and resolve conflicts among states in and interested in the polar regions before they imperil human, national, and international security?

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1 This background guide was written by Karen Ruth Adams, Montana Model UN faculty advisor, and Nicholas Potratz, 2013 research assistant. Copyright 2013 by Karen Ruth Adams.


History and Current Events

To promote security in the Arctic and Antarctic regions, one must understand the characteristics of the regions and the histories, people, territorial claims, and agreements of the states that inhabit them. It is also important to understand climate change and its security implications.

The Arctic

The Arctic region encompasses the ocean, islands, and other land masses surrounding the North Pole and Arctic Circle. According to scientists, the region is best defined not by the Arctic Circle or by the Arctic Ocean, but by the northernmost extent of trees. The Arctic’s largest islands are Greenland (controlled by Denmark) and Baffin Island (Canada). Countries whose northern lands extend into the Arctic are Russia, Iceland, Canada, and the US (Alaska). In addition, Norway directly borders the region, and Sweden and Finland do so indirectly via their narrow borders with Norway.5

In the 4th Century B.C., the ancient Greeks may have ventured to the Arctic. In the 8th and 9th centuries, Irish monks visited Iceland, and in the 9th century Vikings from Norway settled Iceland and Greenland and visited North America. In the 1500s, the Dutch and English explored for a Northwest Passage to Asia and engaged in trade with Russia that expanded to include many nations.6

It was not until the last 200 years that explorers left the coastlines and went into the interior. In the 20th century, after explorers discovered that most of the region was covered with ice, charting the region became secondary to international competition to reach the North Pole. The competitive and strategic atmosphere of Arctic exploration was most visible in the Cold War, when submarines from the US and ice-breaking ships from the Soviet Union often traveled to the North Pole.7

In addition to national mapping and trading, many early expeditions carried out scientific research. In 1882-1883, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Russia, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, the United States, and Great Britain held the first International Polar Year, in which they pooled their resources, findings, and arctic stations for scientific study.8 The fourth International Polar Year took place in 2007-2008, when thousands of scientists from 60 countries pooled resources and information to study the physical, chemical, and biological processes of the region.9

Unlike most world regions, the Arctic refers to geographic sections of states primarily identified with other regions, including the United States and Canada (North America) and Denmark/Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland (Europe), and Russia (Europe and Asia). Nevertheless, states accept that the northern areas of these countries represent a geographically and culturally distinct Arctic region with Arctic people.10 Approximately 550,000 indigenous people live in the region, including more than 4,000 Aleuts in Russia and Alaska; 45,000

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Indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic live pastorally, relying on herding, hunting, fishing, and trapping rather than agriculture for survival. In North America, indigenous people who live in treeless, barren tundra near the sea are considered to be Arctic peoples, while inhabitants of forests south of the tundra are seen as culturally distinct sub-Arctic groups. By contrast, in Europe and Asia, people who live in Arctic tundra and sub-Arctic forests are considered culturally homogenous and are all treated as Arctic people.

Like other indigenous people, Arctic groups have historically suffered from disease and the loss of traditional practices as a result of colonization and assimilation. In the 20th century, Arctic people from different parts of the region began to recognize their common challenges and aspirations, and they came together to call for “fourth world” indigenous rights, reparations for damages, and a stronger international voice on environmental and cultural issues. For example, Inuit groups from North America and Greenland formed the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, which gained UN recognition as a non-governmental organization in 1983. This enables the ICC to attend and speak at UN meetings on economic and social issues.

The eight Arctic countries (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the US) discuss regional regulation through an intergovernmental organization called the Arctic Council. The Council accepts observer members, such as groups of Arctic indigenous peoples and states without Arctic territory. Although states have not agreed to a single treaty or treaty regime to conduct Arctic activities, a number of bilateral agreements govern states’ activities and territory claims. For instance, in 1973, Denmark and Canada adopted an agreement that demarcated their territories on the continental shelf between them. In addition to bilateral agreements, other, more general treaties apply to the region. For instance, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway have ratified ILO 169, a binding convention that protects the traditions and rights of indigenous peoples. Under the treaty, the three states are bound to provide legal protections to their Arctic indigenous peoples.

With the exception of the US, all of the Arctic states have ratified the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III) and have therefore agreed to common definitions of each state’s territorial waters (12 nautical miles from the state’s “baseline”), exclusive economic zone (200 nm beyond the baseline), and continental shelf (200 nm from the baseline or “the edge of the continental margin,” whichever is greater). Owning a

13 NGO Branch, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “About Us,” http://esango.un.org/paperless/Web?page=static&content=about
continental shelf gives each state the right to resources such as natural gas and oil in the seabed. Under UNCLOS, a state has 10 years to provide scientific evidence that its continental shelf extends beyond 200 nautical miles.19

State that have ratified UNCLOS further agree that waters and resources beyond any state’s EEZ (in other words, the “high seas”) are the “common heritage of mankind” and can therefore be used by all states for peaceful purposes such as navigation and research, as well as sustainable and equitable fishing and resource extraction.20 They have also agreed to resolve any disputes that arise peacefully and using whatever mediators or courts they prefer, including the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), and special tribunals.21 UNCLOS does not specify criteria for determining how competing claims to sovereignty over particular pieces of territory should be resolved, except that this should be done peacefully.

Of the Arctic states, Russia has been the most active in trying to extend its territory. In 2007, Russian scientists placed a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole. Russia has also submitted claims under UNCLOS to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to expand its ownership of the Arctic seabed. The commission returned the first submission, stating that Russia required more scientific evidence to support its assertions. Russia contends that the Lomonosov Ridge connects its continental shelf to a large portion of the Arctic seabed. Canada, Denmark, and Norway have also claimed that the Lomonosov Ridge extends from each of their continental shelves.22

The US has not ratified UNCLOS, and thus cannot submit claims under it. But the US does have territorial disputes in the Arctic. The US and Canada have two major disputes. First, they disagree on their maritime boundary in the Beaufort Sea. Second, they disagree on shipping rights through the Northwest Passage. Canada claims to have exclusive shipping rights, while the US contends that all states have universal rights to use the passage.23 The US, Denmark, and Canada also have conflicting claims on extended continental shelves, although they have been cooperating to define their claims.24

The Antarctic

Like the Arctic, the Antarctic is the region surrounding a pole, in this case the South Pole. Unlike the Arctic, the Antarctic has a central landmass. In fact, Antarctica is the fifth largest of the world’s seven continents. Because it has historically been completely covered with ice and because it is separated from other landmasses by large distances, it has no indigenous human population.25 The Maori people of New Zealand do, however, have a 7th century legend of travel to the continent.26

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19 Conley, Toland, Kraut, Osthagen, “A New Security Architecture for the Arctic.”
20 UNCLOS III, Part II, Article 15; Part I, Article 1; Part VII and Part XI.
21 UNCLOS III, Part II, Article 15; Part XV, Articles 279, 287.
22 Conley, Toland, Kraut, Osthagen, “A New Security Architecture for the Arctic.”
In the 1760s, ships from many nations – including the US, Argentina, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Germany, and Norway – explored the Antarctic sea and hunted seals and whales. The continent was not sighted until 1820, when Russian, British, and American explorers claimed to discover it at the same time. Naval activity continued until the invention of the airplane and the import of “hardy Manchurian ponies” and dog teams made it possible to travel inland to stake national territorial claims and conduct scientific expeditions.27

Scientific study accelerated after the International Geophysical Year in 1957-1958. Since then, scientists from many states have conducted both national and cooperative research in the region. Subjects range from astrophysics to biology and the stratospheric ozone layer, and findings often apply to the entire world.28

Between 1908 and 1942, seven countries claimed territory in the region, and two countries (the UK and Argentina) twice came to blows.29 Today, seven countries claim territory. The United Kingdom, Argentina, and Chile have overlapping and conflictive claims, while Norway, Australia, France, and New Zealand’s have non-conflicting claims. One-sixth of the region’s ice sheets and land have never been claimed. Of states that have no claims, some recognize the existing claims of other states, others (such as the US) take a stance of complete non-recognition of states’ claims due to lack of permanent settlement, and still others reserve the right to make future claims of their own.30

States interested in the Arctic have developed a group of treaties known as the Antarctic Treaty System. Most of these treaties focus on scientific and environmental cooperation. The primary agreement, the Antarctic Treaty, was initially ratified in 1961 by 12 states seeking to maintain scientific cooperation beyond the International Geophysical Year. The treaty states that parties will reserve the Antarctic for peaceful purposes and scientific study, and that they will demilitarize the region and preserve it as a nuclear-weapons-free zone.31

Climate Change
In 1896, a Swedish scientist noted that carbon dioxide levels were increasing in the Earth’s atmosphere.32 In 1931, an American physicist named E.O. Hulbert published a paper linking rising carbon dioxide levels with rising temperatures. According to Hulbert, when humans release carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, the Earth is warmed because the sun’s rays are reflected back to Earth by the gases.33 Today, scientists worldwide agree that climate change is happening, that it is primarily anthropogenic (caused by humans), and that it is overwhelmingly the effect of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, caused by burning fossil fuels such as coal, petroleum, and natural gas for energy. Moreover, there is a strong scientific consensus that the effects of climate

change are already apparent in changing and more severe weather patterns and that the long-range effects are likely to include melting glaciers and polar ice caps, rising sea levels, and increasing desertification.\textsuperscript{34}

In 2013, Arctic winter ice reached its fifth lowest levels in decades.\textsuperscript{35} Since 1979, summer ice has receded by half. In the Antarctic, by contrast, changing weather patterns have contributed to ice sheet growth of approximately 6,600 square miles per year. Because the increase of Antarctic ice is less than the decline of Arctic ice, global sea levels are rising. Whether the Antarctic ice will continue to grow or will start to melt is unknown because as the extent of ice has grown, it has decreased in depth. In addition, growth has varied across Antarctica’s sub-regions. For instance, ice has grown in the Ross Sea but has declined in the Amundsen Sea.\textsuperscript{36}

Arctic melting presents two opportunities. First, it allows states and corporations to extract more natural resources from the region, whose oil, natural gas, and precious gems have been relatively untouched.\textsuperscript{37} The region is thought to have 13% of the world’s remaining oil and 30% of the world’s remaining natural gas.\textsuperscript{38} The second opportunity is faster shipping between Asia, Europe, and North America. Within several decades, new passages are likely to become major commercial and military routes, at least during the summer.\textsuperscript{39} These Arctic opportunities may come with high costs for the environment and for regional security. For example, resource extraction and transportation can damage ecosystems through pollution and accidents such as oil spills. According to Greenpeace, companies and states do not currently possess the technology to clean oil from ice, jeopardizing marine and bird life, as well as indigenous people who depend on fishing to survive.\textsuperscript{40}

In Antarctica, although the extent of ice has increased, the region’s temperatures have increased, and the volume of ice has decreased.\textsuperscript{41} If temperatures continue to rise, the ice cap may recede and become thinner. This may imperil the historical international commitment to scientific cooperation and demilitarization in the region, which has derived from the notion that the continent serves no practical purpose beyond scientific study. Geological


\textsuperscript{39} “Arctic: Transporation,” \textit{Encyclopedia Britannica}, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/33100/Arctic/57882/Biological-resources


studies suggest that Antarctica has valuable mineral deposits similar to those on other continents. Thus states could begin to view Antarctica as a new focus of resource extraction and national competition.

Security Challenges and the Potential for Cooperation

Climate change is likely to affect the security of the Arctic’s indigenous peoples, as well as the security of states in the Arctic and Antarctic regions, and states that would like to benefit from new resources and transportation routes.

As weather patterns change, the migration patterns and ranges for Arctic wildlife are likely to shift, challenging communities that rely on hunting for their traditional practices and well-being. Climate change is also likely to reduce the mobility of groups that use ice passages to travel. Moreover, pollution from increased shipping and resource extraction could diminish indigenous peoples’ health and resources. With these human security costs may come opportunities for indigenous people to adopt new means of livelihood, such as jobs in resource extraction. But even if indigenous people are willing to adapt to these changes, it is unclear that they will benefit, as most of the jobs in the region currently go to non-indigenous citizens of Arctic states.

Climate change could also affect the security of states in and beyond the regions. As the Arctic and possibly the Antarctic develop major shipping lanes and as resource extraction booms, states will have to consider not only threats from one another as they jockey for position but also new threats, such as the need for search and rescue operations, protection against terrorism, and increased sea lane and border security to address organized crime such as piracy and human trafficking. Already, both Arctic and non-Arctic states have begun to use their political and economic clout to compete for access and natural resources. Non-Arctic states such as Japan, South Korea, and China have sought and gained observer status in the Arctic Council, and China has offered trade deals to local governments, including the semi-autonomous government in Greenland, which is part of Denmark.

To date, according to Kristofer Bergh and Ingmar Oldberg of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “With the exception of disputes over maritime borders, the Arctic [has been] a peaceful region with high stability based on intergovernmental and regional cooperation.” The US, Denmark, and Canada agreed to peacefully resolve their disputes over the seabed, and, in 2008, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the US agreed in the Ilulissat Declaration to use UNCLOS to settle seabed disputes. In 2010, Norway and Russia agreed on the demarcation of the Arctic Ocean and Barents Sea.

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46 Steven Lee Myers, “Arctic Council Adds 6 Nations as Observer States, Including China.”


Yet there are growing tensions. According to Bergh and Oldberg, “What we see is changing positions and a proliferation of national agendas, strategies and policies among the Arctic countries as a result of changing conditions.”\(^{51}\) The US maintains military bases in both Alaska and Greenland, and would like to base a missile defense system in the Arctic.\(^{52}\) Russia, Norway, Denmark, and Canada have increased military spending and operations. Russia and Norway have been especially confrontational, responding negatively to one another’s military build ups.\(^{53}\) Russian political discourse frequently refers to other states in the region as rivals. As a result, American analysts have noted the potential for conflict and suggested increasing US naval presence.\(^{54}\)

Some of the increased military activity in the Arctic is a response to mutual security concerns such as terrorism. But regardless of their purpose, military buildups can raise tensions as states wonder how other states will use their capabilities. The resulting rivalries and fears can inhibit scientific and environmental cooperation. Moreover, military spending and arms races can diminish human security by reducing funds for social programs such as education and healthcare.

Over time, the security effects of resource and territorial rivalry in the Arctic and Antarctic could escalate, particularly as the world’s supply of natural resources dwindles. Thus, although no direct military conflict has occurred in either the Arctic or the Antarctic, some experts have called for increased consultation between regional states and emerging powers such as China so that future conflict can be avoided.\(^{55}\)

**Previous Committee Work on This Topic**

The General Assembly (GA) has played a key role in encouraging states and scientists to monitor climate change and to adapt to its effects. In addition, the GA-1 plays an important role in assessing the prospects for peace, security, and disarmament worldwide.

In the Arctic Council and Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings, UN programs overseen by the GA have consultative status.\(^{56}\) In this capacity, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has made proposals to the Arctic Council to help communities adjust to climate change. Similarly, in the Antarctic, the UNEP has reported to the Secretary-General on issues of concern.\(^{57}\) In 2007, UN-Habitat encouraged its executive director to apply for observer status in the Arctic Council so it could promote the needs of urban populations.\(^{58}\) Since 2009, the UN

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\(^{51}\) Kristofer Bergh and Ingmar Oldberg, “The New Arctic.”


Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples has reported to both the UN and the Arctic Council on challenges faced by indigenous peoples, such as reindeer herders, whose livelihood has been affected by weather changes.\(^59\)

After a trip to the Arctic in 2009, Secretary-General (SG) Ban Ki-Moon called on states to foster cooperation on climate change, which he said could have devastating environmental consequences for the region.\(^60\) Ban did not discuss security issues such as military operations.

The most recent GA resolution on Antarctica was in 2005. In “The Question of Antarctica,” the GA reaffirmed the Antarctic Treaty and committed to keeping Antarctica a peaceful region focused on scientific research. The resolution also accepted the Secretary-General’s 2005 report on Antarctica.\(^61\) In the report, SG Ban noted the importance of science in both polar regions and urged states not to allow resource competition to hinder scientific and other forms of cooperation.\(^62\)

In December 2012, the GA adopted A/RES/67/78, “Oceans and the Law of the Sea,” which addresses UNCLOS’s role throughout the world. On the issue of the Arctic Sea and ice cap, the resolution notes the vulnerability of the region as a whole to climate change and of the region’s marine life to pollution from oil drilling and transportation. The resolution primarily affirms the content and procedures of UNCLOS, as well as agreements on marine protection and ensuring that ships do not harm fish and their ecosystems.\(^63\)

**Conclusion**

How can the GA-1 ensure that changing circumstances in the polar regions do not threaten human, national, and international security? In researching your country’s position on this issue, consider the following questions:

--Does your country have Arctic or Antarctic territory or territorial claims? Is it a member of the Arctic Council or Antarctic Treaty? If so, what are its security concerns? Does it cooperate scientifically and/or environmentally with other states in the region? Has it begun to increase its military spending or military presence, or is it wary of other states that have?

--If your country is not in a polar region, what are its security concerns with regard to those regions? Does it seek passage through their waters or access to their resources? What allies, trading partners, and other interests does your country currently have in the Arctic and Antarctic, and how might they influence its perspective?

--Is your country a party to UNCLOS? Has it been involved in resource or territorial disputes covered by UNCLOS, either in the polar regions or in other parts of the world? What has it learned from those experiences that could help to reduce conflict and increase security in the polar regions?

--Does your country have indigenous people? If so, how has it addressed their rights?

--How can your country in particular and the UN in general contribute to the prevention and resolution of conflicts in the Arctic and Antarctic? Should the GA propose efforts to mediate the conflicts? If so, which states or international organizations should take the lead?

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**Recommended Reading**


This document focuses on the environmental threat of climate change to the polar regions. It also discusses the ramifications of polar change on indigenous people, health, the economy, and infrastructure, and the challenges that Arctic communities will face in dealing with changes in the region.


(See links at the bottom of the page. The first 12 pages are the English translation.) Although this guide discusses the potential for security issues in the Arctic more extensively than in the Antarctic, the authors argue that the Antarctic Treaty is irrelevant to modern security challenges. As you read the treaty, consider security gaps that need to be filled and how the GA could help states address them.


This speech by the former United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs describes the possibility of applying existing international law such as presidential agreements to the Arctic region.


This article discusses the effects of climate change in the Arctic. See also the related slideshow and video, which help to visualize the region and its challenges.


This article presents the Inuit perspective on and experience of industrial development and climate change, including animal extinctions and food shortages.


On this site, you can find out if your country has ratified UNCLOS III. If so, you can scroll down to see if it has made any statements about how it interprets the treaty. For the text of the treaty, see footnote 18.
