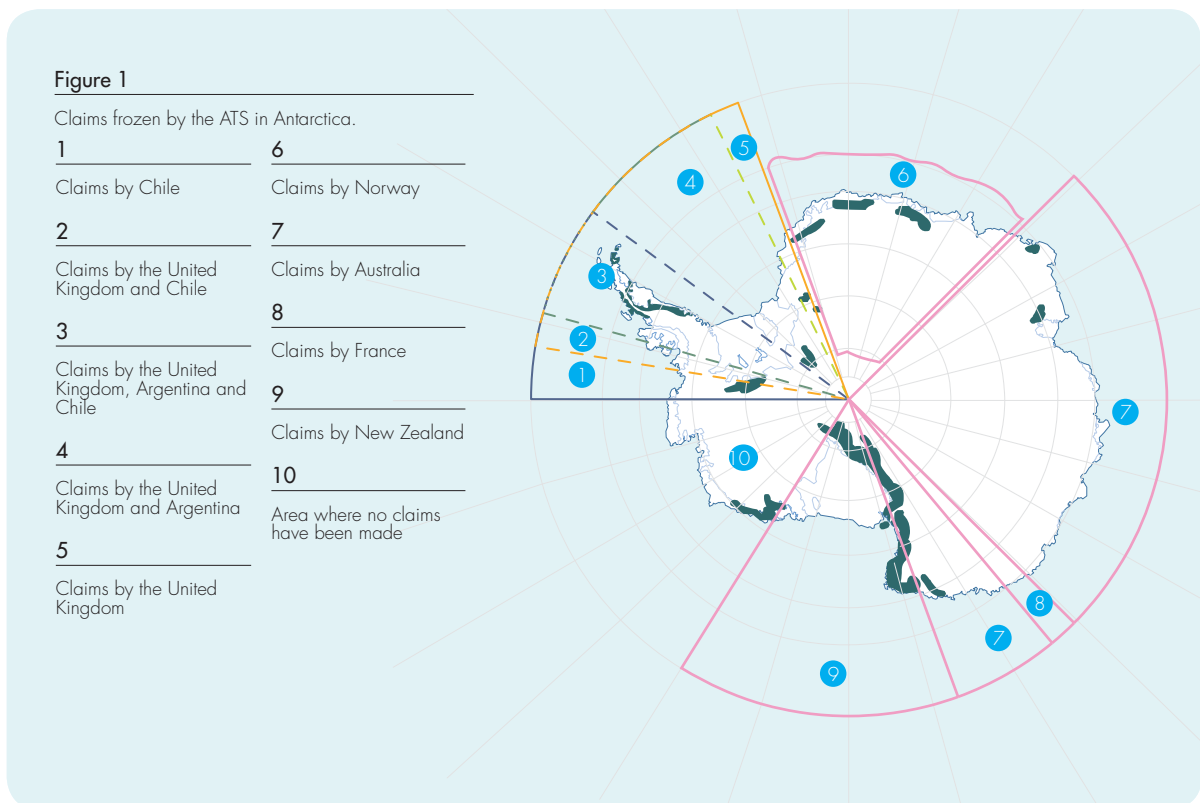


# THE GEOPOLITICAL STATUS OF THE ARCTIC AND ANTARCTIC:

Due to their extreme climate and difficulty to navigate, the Polar Regions have remained sparsely inhabited throughout human history. Only about 4 million people live permanently in the circumpolar Arctic, and there are currently no permanent inhabitants in Antarctica. The geopolitical importance of the Polar Regions has gone from virtually nothing in the early 20th century to regions of significant importance.

The Arctic Ocean and surrounding waterways have an extremely cold climate. Most areas are covered in sea ice year-round, making these regions difficult to access. However climate change is having a significant impact on the geopolitics of the region as retreating sea ice is opening up new shipping routes and access to vast natural resources (oil, natural gas, minerals) that lie underneath the seabed. This has brought issues of territorial claims and sovereignty to the fore for the Arctic circumpolar nations, and these issues will likely dominate the geopolitics of the region for decades to come.

Antarctica is governed by a system of international treaties. Set up in 1959, the [Antarctic Treaty System](#) (ATS) stipulates that Antarctica be a place for peaceful scientific research under strict environmental protection. Before the ATS was set up, seven countries made official territorial claims in the Antarctic, although these claims have never been officially recognized internationally.



## 1) WHO DOES THE ARCTIC BELONG TO?

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There is no treaty which governs the Arctic similar to the one which governs the Antarctic, so the governance scheme for most of the Arctic falls within the jurisdiction of the eight nations with territory in the Arctic: Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark (Greenland), Russia, the United States (Alaska), and Canada.

At the centre of the Arctic lies the Arctic Ocean. The ocean is bordered by five countries: Norway, Denmark, Russia, the United States and Canada. The 1982 [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#) (UNCLOS) sets out rules for how maritime borders can be determined. The convention defines an [exclusive economic zone](#), which extends up to a limit of 200 nautical miles from the coast. Beyond this limit, the rest of the Arctic Ocean is considered international waters.

However the 200 mile nautical zone limit can be extended if conclusive proof can be presented showing that the seabed beyond this limit is geologically an extension of the mainland to which it is attached. But to do this, a country must be a signatory to UNCLOS (which the US is not) and must submit evidence to the UN body that delineates the maritime borders, the UN Commission on the Limits of the [Continental Shelf](#) (see fig. 2). In 2007, the Russians provoked a bit of controversy by planting their flag on the seabed of the North Pole.

There have also been disputes over use of waterways. The most long-standing is the issue of the Northwest Passage, which runs through the Canadian Archipelagos. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Canada has tried to enforce its sovereignty over these waters - which Canada considers to be part of its internal waters but many other countries believe should be considered international waters - by conducting occasional sovereignty patrols. In June 2010, Canada declared that all vessels entering its Arctic waters will be subject to new mandatory vessel-tracking rules, which has created tension with other countries.

On a more positive note, Norway and Russia were able to resolve a 40-year dispute over their maritime border in April 2010, with the two countries agreeing to divide the disputed area in half. The agreement puts pressure on Canada, the US and Denmark to resolve their outstanding territorial disputes in the Arctic (the US and Canada disagree over their maritime border in the Beaufort Sea while Canada and Denmark disagree over who owns Hans Island in the Nares Strait).

There is also a political forum for discussing the important issues of the Arctic. Comprised of representatives from the eight Arctic countries and each of the indigenous peoples living in the Arctic, the Arctic Council was established in 1996 to address the main issues of the Arctic. The council has established scientific programmes and working groups in order to find ways to ensure the Arctic environment remains protected and the rights of the people living and working there are safeguarded. Monitoring how climate change is affecting the region is also a key component of the Arctic Council's mission. The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA), which was released in 2004, was the first pan-Arctic comprehensive study produced on how climate is affecting the Arctic.

## 2) THE GROWING AUTONOMY OF GREENLAND AND NUNAVUT

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Since the first Nordic peoples settled in Greenland in the 10th century, Europeans have shared the largest island in the world with the local indigenous peoples. The Norse settlers in Greenland were subjects of the Kingdom of Norway, which was unified with the Kingdom of Denmark starting from the late 14th century. However once the union came to an end in 1814, Denmark retained control of the territory. Although Norse settlements in Greenland had died out by the 15th century, the Danish began reasserting their claim on the territory in the 18th century, sending a new wave of Danish colonists. Greenland was officially annexed to Denmark as a province in 1953.

Yet there was movement towards autonomy. In 1979, Greenland became an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark, with its own parliament and local control over health care, schools, and social services. A special system of Home Rule was established. Greenland has continued to become more autonomous, withdrawing from the EEC in 1985 due in part to the wish of having full sovereignty over Greenlandic fishing territory. In 2008, the population passed a non-binding referendum supporting autonomy with 75% approval.

In the 1950s and 60s, the Canadian government forced the Inuit living in the Arctic to abandon their nomadic way of life and settle in permanent communities in the Arctic. Yet a movement towards establishing greater autonomy began in the late 1960s and 70s once the first generation of Inuit who had attended universities returned home and



**Figure 2**

Claims of national sovereignty over the Arctic basin

1

Alaska (United States of America)

2

Russian Federation (formerly the USSR)

3

Disputed zone between Norway and Russia (resolved in 2010)

4

Svalbard (Norway)

5

Iceland

6

Greenland (Denmark)

7

Canada



began to become politically active. Their efforts led to the establishments of organizations dedicated to the welfare of Inuit who negotiated a number of land claim settlements with the Canadian government which gave a great deal of autonomy to indigenous communities.

The first major land claims settlement was the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, which gave Quebec Inuit substantial administrative autonomy in the new region of Nunavik in northern Quebec. In 1982, negotiations began for land claims agreements on behalf of the inhabitants of the eastern part the Northwest Territories. Eventually these negotiations led to the creation of **Nunavut** (which means 'our land' in **Inuktitut**), an entirely new territory in the central Canadian Arctic, which officially split from the Northwest Territories on April 1, 1999. With the establishment of the region of Nunatsiavut in the northern part of Newfoundland and Labrador in 2005, nearly all traditional Inuit

lands in Canada now fall under a land claims agreement allowing for regional autonomy.

### 3) THE ANTARCTIC TREATY

Antarctica is the only continent governed by a treaty where claims and national territorial rights have been temporarily suspended (see fig. 1 on the cover page). Consequently, Antarctica belongs to everyone. The **Antarctic Treaty System** creates a context within which scientific and peaceful aims can coexist and take precedence over political and economic interests. The treaty governs the regions below 60°S latitude.

After two World Wars and the International Geophysical Year (1957-58) a need appeared to create a clear legal framework to curb the territorial claims of countries and ensure the protection of Antarctica's environment, flora, fauna and mineral resources.

The Antarctic Treaty was signed on December 1, 1959, in Washington DC. The 12 original signatories (Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union) ratified the treaty two years later.

Initially intended to last 30 years, the Antarctic Treaty was extended by the **Madrid Protocol** in 1991, signed by 32 countries. Of the 48 countries that have now ratified the treaty, 28 are Consultative Parties (with the right to vote at the council's consultative meetings), while 20 are Non-Consultative Parties (who can only attend these meetings as observers).

The Madrid Protocol stipulates that Antarctica be a natural reserve dedicated to peace and science, excluding any mining or military activity, or the storing of any type of waste (including nuclear waste) for 50 years until 2041. Article 11 establishes the Committee for Environmental Protection (CEP) to provide advice to the Parties for the implementation of the Protocol.

The Antarctic Treaty, the Madrid Protocol, and other annexes are known collectively as the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS). Any country may sign up to the Antarctic Treaty as a **Consultative Party** by demonstrating a particular interest in the region and conducting scientific programmes or reconnaissance missions there.



# GLOSSARY:

**ACIA:** Acronym for "Arctic Climate Impact Assessment". This is a body responsible for evaluating the impact of climate change in the Arctic.

**Antarctic Treaty System:** Group of conventions and bodies that have been added to the Antarctic Treaty, including the Madrid Protocol.

**Consultative Party:** Law. – A state that holds the right to vote at consultative meetings under the Antarctic Treaty (ATCM), held every two years between 1961 and 1991 and annually ever since.

To be considered as a "Consultative Party", a state "must demonstrate a particular interest in the Antarctic by conducting substantial research activities there, such as establishing a base or sending a mission on the ground". The group of Consultative Parties currently includes 28 states (the 12 countries that signed the original Antarctic Treaty and the 16 states that have ratified it since).

**Continental shelf:** n. Tectonics. – Extension of the continent under the surface of the sea, corresponding to a gently sloping area (syn.: continental platform).

**Exclusive economic zone (EEZ):** n. Law. – Maritime area over which a coastal State exercises sovereign economic rights. The EEZ extends 200 nautical miles beyond the shoreline and has its legal basis in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

**Inuktitut:** Language used by most Inuits.

**Madrid Protocol:** Signed in 1991, this protocol is an extension of the Antarctic Treaty and is designed to ensure the overall protection of the environment and associated ecosystems in Antarctica.

**Non-Consultative Party:** n. Law. – A state that is entitled to attend but not vote at consultative meetings under the Antarctic Treaty (ATCM). This group currently includes 20 states.

**Nunavut:** Huge territory of the Canadian Far North, officially separated from the Northwest Territories. Nunavut is the youngest of the Canadian territories.

**United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,** signed at Montego Bay, 10th December 1982.

# WEB:

See the video on "**What is the difference between Antarctica and the Arctic?**" and the animation on "**Political situation**" at **EDUCAPOLES**, the educational website of the International Polar Foundation.

<http://www.educapoles.org>

Other websites containing interesting information related to this subject:

[http://www.environment-canada.ca/international/regorgs/ca\\_f.htm](http://www.environment-canada.ca/international/regorgs/ca_f.htm)

<http://www.arctic-council.org/>

<http://www.ats.aq/>

<http://www.arcticpeoples.org/>