

"An Australian Geopolitical Perspective on Living in a World Without Ice: From the Pole to the Equator"

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Setting the Scene

Australia is both the world's smallest continent and its largest island. In the context of this conference, perhaps most importantly, Australia is a middle power with a very keen interest in ice. It claims the largest expanse of ice of any country in the world despite having very little within recognised borders. Nevertheless, its interest in ice is somewhat conflicted by its own national interests and the diversity of geopolitical arenas within which it seeks influence.

Australia is the world's fifth largest producer of coal. It ranks 18th globally as a natural gas supplier and 29th in petroleum production. Being a major energy producer has made the issue of climate change highly politically contentious in Australia. In addition, forest-based industries constitute Australia's second largest area of manufacturing. These economic factors have influenced the domestic debate very strongly making climate change scepticism a political reality.

The newly elected Labour Government ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2007 but failed in passing legislation subsequently for an emissions trading system. Recently the minority Government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, pressured by the Greens Party, has introduced a price on carbon for 2012 despite wide spread industry and public opposition.

The climate change debate is scarcely contentious for Australia in Antarctica where scientific, rather than public, opinion dominates. Australia claims 42 percent of the continent and has one of the larger research commitments in the region. Australia's engagement with Antarctica has been dominated by environmental protection and climate change for several decades. The scientific

research into climate change is one of four key themes of the Australian Antarctic research programme.

Unlike the Antarctic arena, the South Pacific region has produced significant and geopolitically sensitive dilemmas for Australia in responding to the challenge of a world without ice. Australia is a member of the important regional heads of government agency, the Pacific Islands Forum. In 2010, this meeting of Pacific Islands' leaders affirmed climate change as "the greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific." Yet, Australia has not been able to be wholly supportive of the Islands concerns. In consequence, there have been rather harsh criticisms of Australia across the Pacific Islands region for protecting its fossil fuel industries at the expense of the security of small islands.

A Middle Power - From the Pole to the Equator

Australia is well recognised as a middle power but there are few middle powers that have as many areas of regional influence as Australia. It has been an active middle power in at least four arenas – Antarctica, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Climate change is important to all four regions but especially in the two where Australia has assumed a leading role.

Australia has been a formative influence on regional systems in both the Antarctic and the South Pacific. In so doing, Canberra has helped to established systems of soft law to manage a range of regional interests in both these arenas. The South Pacific regional system that began in 1947 at a meeting in Canberra is now highly institutionalised but primarily focused on meeting the development needs of its Islands members. Australia was also a founding member of the Antarctic Treaty system (ATS). The ATS is far less institutionalised than the Pacific Islands regional system and primarily is focused on the scientific and economic interests of its "non-resident" members.

There is a curious parallel of bifocalism for Australia in both these regional systems. In Antarctica, if one looks through the members' lens of the Antarctic

Treaty, sovereignty is frozen as an issue to a large extent for its fellow members. However, sovereignty is very much an issue for if one looks at Antarctica through a lens of non-members of the ATS. Through this lens, Australia is the continent's largest landlord with responsibilities to match.

In the South Pacific, a different, but perhaps even more important, bifocalism exists. Viewed through the geographic parameters of the Pacific Islands, Australia is an "outsider" – it is not included within region. Yet, considered through the political lens of the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia is a key member of the region. The Forum is the highest policy-making body for the Pacific Islands' region.

A World of Ice: Australia's Antarctic Interests

Australia has enjoyed a leadership role in Antarctic Treaty affairs not just for the size of its territorial claims. It has invested heavily in Antarctic research as well as active administrative engagement with the ATS. Hobart, Tasmania hosts the headquarters for Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources. Australia took a catalytic role in developing the 1998 Madrid Protocol on Environmental Protection.

Australia maintains three permanent stations in the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT). There are six other permanent stations in the AAT of which three are Russian, one Chinese, one European and one Romanian.

Australia has taken its sovereign claims in Antarctica seriously and passed domestic legislation against mining in the AAT despite some international protests that this was strengthening its sovereignty despite the Antarctic Treaty's Article 4 provisions. In addition Australia has made a submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) to maintain its rights to the outer continental shelf off the AAT.

Some have argued that Australia has geopolitical interests for seeking to enhance its territorial claims in Antarctica. The recent high demand for minerals have

raised concerns that the Madrid Protocol may be challenged in the intermediate future and Australia will need to protect its own interests outside the ATS as well as inside it.

The South Pacific Region in a World without Ice

Climate change has been a vexed issue for Australia within the Pacific Islands regional system in part because of its leadership role through the Forum. The Pacific Islands Forum was established as a post-colonial body to unite the efforts of the independent states of the region against French nuclear testing and to promote their development needs.

The inclusion of Australia in the Forum from its first meeting in Wellington in 1971 was both a pragmatic diplomatic gesture and an act of faith. At a practical level, the invitation for Australia to join the new regional association recognised the need for international influence beyond the capacity of the Islands. On the other hand, the Islands accepted on faith that Australia would be willing and able to protect their interests in the broader international community – even against Western allies such as France and the US.

However, the fundamentals of the international debate on climate change have prevented Australia from being a committed advocate for the Pacific Islands in international conferences such as the 2010 Copenhagen meeting. This has led to differences that have weakened the trust in Australia's role as a regional leader.

Australia has been asked to consider making arrangements for climate change refugees as rising sea levels threaten the low-lying atolls across the region. The risks to the sovereignty of states such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu will come long before these islands are covered by the tides. The soil for food production and the water lens that support habitation will compel their people to move long before then.

This proposal has not enjoyed wide favour in either the Islands or Australia for a number of reasons. The Islands would prefer to save their homelands. This

explains their pressure on Australia to support the highest levels of emissions controls internationally. For its part, Australia has no special immigration arrangements for Pacific Islands and is reluctant to over a domestic debate on what would be a politically contentious domestic issue. Nevertheless, Australia did once propose just this solution to Nauru in 1962 when phosphate mining was expected to make the Nauruans homeless.

Instead, Australia has offered substantial aid for climate change adaptation. The International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative, a recent three-year programme has been developed to meet high priority adaptation needs in the region. The project is intended to strengthen food security; guarantee access to reliable water; assist coastal zone management; and enhance disaster preparedness.

Interestingly one of the more obscure connections between the South Pacific and Antarctica may be a source of wealth for the Islands at least during the transition to a world without ice. This has to do with manganese nodules and other precipitates of heavy metals from cold Antarctic waters reaching the South Pacific tropics. This has a significant geopolitical dimension for Australia and the Islands as mineral exploitation has gone offshore. Licenses have been issued by the Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea and Tonga.

The Geopolitics of a World without Ice for Australia

Australia is very concerned with climate change and the risks to the ice covered parts of the world that will be affected. Its direct interests stretch from the South Pole to the Equator through its leadership role in two region systems – the ATS and the Pacific Islands. However, even the Arctic cannot be excluded. There are projections that the Greenland ice sheets may constitute a more immediate threat to the Pacific Islands through raise sea levels rise than changes in the Antarctic where most of the melt is from ice resting on the sea rather than land.

The geopolitics of managing these roles while balancing domestic economic interests has made for policy conflicts and inconsistencies as Australia addresses

climate change and its impact in both domestic and international arenas. The current domestic debate on a “carbon tax”, alienation within the Pacific Islands on the climate change policy and protecting its claims to sovereignty in Antarctica guarantee that these tensions will continue for the foreseeable future.