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Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos

The polar spaces in the  
era of globalisation

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## *The polar spaces in the era of globalisation*

### *Abstract:*

*Globalization has brought polar spaces onto the international scene when they are affected by climate change. The result is that the global and regional agendas have overlapped, ending with their marginality but also incorporating their conflicts. All this when the lack of institutionalized governance favors the logic of power while scientific competition is transformed into geopolitical competition; real interests do not find a clear formulation that facilitates their management. The scene is confusing and alterations to the status quo are often the cause of conflicts. The poles offer resources of all kinds in a world in which they are stressed and allow the opening of new communication routes. They are a geoeconomically relevant reality.*

*Keywords: Arctic, Antarctic, globalization, geopolitics, geoeconomics, Antarctic Treaty.*

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## Los espacios polares en la era de la globalización

### Resumen:

La globalización y el cambio climático han introducido los espacios polares en el escenario internacional. El resultado es que las agendas global y regional de estos espacios se han superpuesto acabando con su marginalidad pero también incorporándolos a sus conflictos. Todo ello cuando la falta de una gobernabilidad institucionalizada favorece las lógicas de poder mientras la competencia científica se transforma en competencia geopolítica y los intereses reales no encuentran una formulación clara que facilite su gestión. El escenario es confuso y las alteraciones del estatus quo son causa habitual de conflictos. Los polos ofrecen recursos de todo tipo en un mundo en que estos se encuentran tensionados y también permiten abrir nuevas rutas de comunicaciones. Estamos ante una realidad geoeconómicamente relevante.

**Palabras clave:** Ártico, Antártico, globalización, geopolítica, geoeconomía, Tratado Antártico.

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The terms Arctic and Antarctic are derived from the Greek word *arktos* meaning “bear”. This referred to the northern region which correlated with the “Ursa Major” constellation. The symmetrical presence (*Anti-Arkos*) of the Antarctic continent, designated as *Terra Australis Incognita*, was intuited under the same logic that naturally led to the existence of the northern border.

In any case, the polar spaces have many similarities between them, starting with their extreme characteristics which mean that, quite often, they are treated in a similar way despite their opposite nature. The fact is that the Antarctic is an isolated land mass, a continent –the fourth largest in the world– while the Arctic is physically quite the opposite, an ocean basin surrounded by the Eurasian and American continents that have served as its physical boundaries.

One is uninhabited, although it has a population of around 10,000 researchers in summer and 1,000 in winter. The other has a stable population of four million –half of them in Russia– from more than 30 native peoples (about 10% of the total population), and speaking at least 10 different languages.

Temperatures in the Arctic are not as extreme as those in the Antarctic, which makes it possible for secular settlements of tribal groups to occur alongside the fauna that exists in both. Both spaces do, however, play a uniquely relevant role in global climate as they facilitate solar reflection on large surfaces of ice, acting as a refrigerant and stabiliser of global temperatures.

The Arctic is in fact, and in contrast to Antarctica, a paradoxically solid set of seas. These make up 90% of the region, even though they are covered by an ice floe, and enclosed by continental land and an icy subsoil. The area spans some 14.1 billion km<sup>2</sup>, approximately 8% of the earth’s surface.

The *Antarctic*, as the *Antarctic Treaty* states, is defined by the land mass located south of the 60th parallel south, and separated from the rest of the continents. In the case of the Arctic, the space to the north of the 66°33’45” parallel north is generally accepted as a geographical definition element, although there are other geographically broader and politically more interested definition criteria.

Antarctica, due to the special hostility of its circumstances, has been identified as the “continent of extremes” in that it is the coldest –its temperatures reach  $-89.3^{\circ}\text{C}$ –, the driest –with rainfall similar to a desert; no more than 150mm on the coast and even less inland– the windiest and highest, as its average height reaches 2000m above sea level, which explains its unique climate.

But it is not only the Antarctic continent but also the space surrounding it. This is because the troposphere in this area is between 6.5 and 7.5 km high, compared to 14/15 km at intertropical latitudes, which adds up to a very low circumferential rotation speed (non-existent at the pole), and does not cause the dynamic effect of centrifugal expansion. It is also free of radio interference, which facilitates deep space research and satellite tracking. We are faced with a “window open to cosmic space”.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, between permanent and summer stations, there were 68 stations from different countries dedicated to scientific research.

This continent has a surface area of 14.2 million km in summer that becomes 32 million km in winter, with an average ice surface that is 1.9 km thick.

### **Relevance of the polar areas**

Another issue is that concerning its resources, whose extent and size are not fully known due to legal issues, but also for technical and accessibility reasons.

Antarctica is rich in metallic and non-metallic resources. This is coupled with its energy resources, estimated, depending on the source, at between 36 and 200 billion barrels of oil and natural gas, or around a quarter of the resources yet to be discovered. The limited number of surveys explains the variability of results; mining is prohibited until 2048.

These are in addition to other renewable energies, whose benefits are increased by the extremism of the region and the significant fishing resources in the surrounding area. Special mention should be made of a small crustacean called krill, which is the food base of the local fauna and could be, in the opinion of some, the food of the future of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> RIESCO, Ricardo. “La Antártida: Algunas consideraciones geopolíticas”. Estudios Públicos N° 25/ 1987 *Centro de Estudios Políticos*.

<https://www.cepchile.cl/la-antartida-algunas-consideraciones-geopoliticas/cep/2016-03-03/183932.html>

Other resources to be highlighted are water resources, which are the subject of particular tension at the global level. Some estimates put Antarctic reserves at 27 million cubic kilometres, which is about 70% of global drinking water reserves.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, 96% of the world's frozen water is distributed between the North and South Poles.

In the Arctic, where prospecting is not subject to so many legal restrictions, it is estimated that around 30% of gas reserves and between 13 and 20% of the world's oil are located, depending on the source; of these, 50% of potential oil reserves and 70% of gas reserves are under Russian control. In addition to this, there are also mineral resources: gold, silver, platinum, nickel, lead, molybdenum and tin found on the seabed; and of course fisheries (catches in the area account for 4% of world catches). And diamonds like those provided by the Diavik mine located on a frozen island ten months a year.

Most of these riches are still difficult to access, although in some comparatively hotter areas, this is already being done efficiently. In fact, the cooperation that takes place in the Arctic between Russia and Norway explains very well the technology transfers that have made its exploitation possible. Furthermore, in 2010, an area of 175,000 square kilometres corresponding to its Exclusive Economic Zones was divided in half, establishing a co-management regime for hydrocarbons and fisheries. This makes a sort of official Norwegian mantra valid: "High North - Low Voltage" but which is in contrast to the Russian pressure on the country's borders, where military manoeuvres are common.

Another issue in relation to all of the above is that arising from the legal status of the polar areas. Both have common bases that have allowed them to be treated jointly in what is common, forming a kind of "Polar Law" as there are common and overlapping models. However, their sources of law take full account of their different constitution and the circumstances and interests surrounding them.

All this has led to different statutes. The characteristics of the former have made an *ad hoc* agreement possible, thus making it a legally ordered space. In the second case, the diversity, strength and multiplicity of the interests involved have not allowed this to happen. As a result, while Antarctica has been internationally declared a zone for research and science, free of commercial, economic or military activity, a true *global*

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<sup>2</sup> RIESCO, Ricardo. La Antártida, *Op. cit.*

*commons*; in the Arctic region, on the contrary, each country decides on the exploitation of its resources<sup>3</sup>.

The fact is that the nature of Antarctica as an isolated continent has made it possible for a cohesive legal form to be created, which is known as the *Antarctic Treaty System* centred on the Antarctic Treaty of 1959 –to be noted for its relevance– the Environmental Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty (1991) also known as the Madrid Protocol, which, with all the imperfections and gaps it leaves –including the different way it treats those who have or may have legitimate interests– has created a highly consolidated management regime that can be presented –in spite of lacking a central institutionality– as an example of global governance, and which also allowed the continent to be left out of the Cold War and demilitarised.

In any event, the Treaty marked a historic break with current practice and the emergence of a new paradigm, a prototype in the relationship between states. This has led to Antarctica becoming a unique nature reserve and an exceptional laboratory.

But, conversely, in the case of the Arctic, it has not been possible to establish a specific internationalised legal regime, and the primacy of International Maritime Law has been maintained, which is a response to its status as an oceanic space, however frozen it may be. The 1982 *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS) has not been ratified by all the parties concerned, particularly the United States, which nevertheless refers to it for the settlement of disputes in the region.

### **Income from the polar area**

Geopolitics explains how states proceed in relation to geography. The control of the seas is particularly relevant from this perspective, considering that more than 90% of the world's international trade is carried out using different maritime routes.

Thus, the Antarctic is a platform for projection towards the remaining southern oceans of the planet, forming geographical crossings with the African, South American and southern continents. However, the northern hemisphere is more important owing to the volume of its merchant traffic, although the southern passages are currently undergoing a major strategic reassessment.

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<sup>3</sup> MOLTÓ, Aurea. "El Ártico y la política exterior de Canadá" *Revista Política Exterior*, Marzo 2011

<https://www.politicaexterior.com/actualidad/el-artico-y-la-politica-exterior-de-canada/>

The geostrategic importance of the Arctic was already great during the Cold War, and this led to its militarisation, particularly of its airspace. The area, known to NATO as the GIUK (an acronym for Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom) that links the Arctic to the Atlantic, was then a major theatre of confrontation.<sup>4</sup>

This situation continues today as the geographical constraints remain. Both now and then, the Scandinavian peninsula stands between Russia's northwest and the free waters of the Atlantic, providing the control of maritime access to Russia's northwest; indeed, up to 80% of this Arctic traffic passes through its vicinity. Russia perceives this situation as vulnerability, both because it determines an insufficient strategic depth to defend its Arctic ports and because of the commitment to freedom of action of the Northern Fleet, as its units have to operate in areas where allied naval superiority is manifest.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the Arctic is undergoing a process of melting which, over the last 30 years, has reduced the thickness of its ice cover by 30 to 40%, making it likely that the summer will be completely free of ice within a reasonable period of time, which some sources estimate to be 2035.

As a result, the so-called Northeast and Northwest Route are steps that are making the Arctic increasingly accessible. The second, located in the Canadian Arctic and with a distance of 7000 miles, links the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and will reduce the distance between the United States and Asia by approximately 15%.

But it is the North-East Route that currently presents the best characteristics for navigation and is becoming increasingly accessible. It runs along the Arctic coast and directly connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans without having to cross the Suez Canal, Panama or the Cape of Good Hope.

This route is 40% shorter in distance between Europe and the Far East, some 3900 miles, which we have seen is equivalent to 12 to 15 days, although the adverse climate to be expected in the Arctic and the dangers for navigation present in the area reduce the advantage factor to 30%.

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<sup>4</sup> ALBERT FERRERO, Julio. "Incidencia del deshielo en la geopolítica del Ártico" *Revista de Marina* noviembre 2011 pgs. 681-690.

<sup>5</sup> MACKINLAY, Alejandro. *Escandinavia, una geopolítica marcada por lo marítimo*. Documento de Opinión IEEE 46/2018 [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2018/DIEEEO46-2018\\_Escandinavia\\_A.Mackinlay.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEEO46-2018_Escandinavia_A.Mackinlay.pdf)

Geography thus gives Russia a strategic pre-eminence in the region, even greater than that of Canada, whose route –the North-East– is not as developed, nor does the country have an Arctic culture so embedded in its national culture. This is why Russia seeks to dictate the rules in its immediate surroundings even outside its territorial sea, on the basis of a legitimate interest, at least of an environmental nature.<sup>6</sup> Some 20% of its GDP is located in the Arctic.

### Conflict and cooperation in the polar areas

There are many elements of uncertainty and even confrontation at the Poles, although the contentious issues have been resolved in a cooperative manner, particularly after the Cold War, when the physical meltdown has increased significantly. The transformation of water from solid to liquid and vice versa naturally increases the complexity.

The multiplicity of regulations in a cohesive and even solid space such as the Arctic makes it more conflictive than the Antarctic.<sup>7</sup> There are no clear and accepted jurisdictional rules by all parties that serve to define their borders, and there are significant gaps and physical and legal grey areas. In addition, there is no operational body to resolve disputes between the parties, and we are in a space where the interests of states can be brought into conflict with those of the international community as a whole.

As a result, what has come to be called an “Arctic race” is taking place, like the Norwegian and British race in Antarctica at the beginning of the 20th century. It is not strictly speaking a distribution of this sea, but rather an extension of the territory from the one already allocated, using different reasons as elements of legitimacy. Canada is focusing on the rights of indigenous peoples, the United States is focusing on the environment, Denmark on climate, and Norway on fisheries resources. And in the

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<sup>6</sup> SÁNCHEZ ANDRÉS, Antonio. “Rusia y la geoestrategia del Ártico”. *Real Instituto Elcano*. ARI 63/2010 06/04/ 2010

<sup>7</sup> CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. “El régimen de los espacios polares. El espacio ártico” en PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia . MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ Fernando M (dir.), *Instrumentos y regímenes de cooperación internacional*, Editorial Trotta, 2017

<https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20El%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>



Antarctic, scientific research or environmental protection are legitimising factors. But the ultimate goals of each of them go beyond the motivations they enunciate.

This gives rise to various problems which, although formulated in legal terms, are undoubtedly of a political nature and are not dealt with adequately. This is compounded by the risk of a progressive extension of the continental shelves, and with it, the possible change in the international water regime.

The debate on the Lomonosov mountain range or submarine ridge, which practically reaches the North Pole and is simultaneously claimed by Canada, Denmark and Russia (which adds the Mendeleev mountain range to its reasons) as part of the continental platform or margin for extending its waters, is based on this logic and key. The acceptance implies, for example and in the Russian case, a claim on 1.2 million square kilometres of the Arctic Ocean.

The *High North* (a NATO reformulation of Arctic space) is the most important strategic priority of Norwegian foreign policy that has been transferred to NATO, despite the fact that it does not have the sympathy of Canada, which seeks to exclude non-regional physical actors. Norway is obviously concerned about the actions of Moscow in the region, which has aggressively increased its forces on its own borders and organises exercises there. But it tries to redress the situation in a cooperative manner.

Canada claims part of the North Passage as its territorial waters, while the United States (and the European Union) maintains that these are international waters, as the territorial sea extends to 12 miles and the channel in some sections reaches 60 miles. To justify its reasons, Canada cites technical criteria relating to islands as well as Inuit tribes camping on it during the time it is frozen.<sup>8</sup> Russia, as we have seen, also wants the waters of the North-East passage to be part of its territorial sea while it claims environmental reasons, which could dictate conditions of access or prevent it, which the United States and the EU reject.

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<sup>8</sup> FIGUEROA GONZÁLEZ, Silvia. "El Ártico en disputa". Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Guadalajara. <https://biblat.unam.mx/hevila/TendenciasZapopan/primavera/7.pdf>

The fact is that the established powers seek to prevent the arrival of new players by maintaining their exclusivity, as is the case of the EU and NATO.

In the case of Antarctica, territorial claims began in the 20th century, preceded by a race between the United Kingdom and Norway, although this began in 1908 when the United Kingdom extended the dependencies of the Falkland Islands by incorporating the Southern Sandwich Islands and Graham Land, claiming dominance over one tenth of the territories at the South Pole. The Antarctic is thus associated with an Argentine national issue, with which it also fought to the limits of armed confrontation in its race to the Arctic.

In 1959, the Antarctic Treaty was the definitive consolidation of the legal status of Antarctica and of the conflicts, taking the continent out of the framework of the Cold War and even of armed clashes between Western countries. But there are the claims made with the legitimacy of the exploration effort or the geographical proximity. Scientific competition in the Antarctic is an expression of geopolitical competition.

The majority of the claim is for a cornerstone geographical sector presented by the United Kingdom (of nearly one million square kilometres, which overlaps with the Chilean and Argentine claims; in 2018 a portion of this territory was named “Queen Elizabeth’s Land”, which was not well received in Argentina), Chile (1.25 million km<sup>2</sup> next to the Drake Pass, which partly overlaps with the claims of Argentina and the United Kingdom), Argentina (966,000 km<sup>2</sup>, which partly overlaps with the claims of Chile and the United Kingdom), Australia (5.9 million km<sup>2</sup>), New Zealand (450,000 km<sup>2</sup>), Norway (2.5 million km<sup>2</sup>, its claim is not clearly defined as it is coastal and its depth is not indicated, 6 times more than its own territory) and France (432,000 km<sup>2</sup>).

The region with the largest share is Europe, 51%, followed by the Americas, 23%, with Asia, 19%, and Oceania and Africa, 6% and 2% respectively. To correct this, models such as the theory of defrontation have emerged, which supports the distribution of territory between the Ibero-American states on the basis of the projection of the South American coasts on the Antarctic coast using the same meridians.

While an immense land ends up becoming *Terra Nullius*, a land unclaimed by anyone. Russia and the United States have not made any territorial claims in support of the *Antarctic Treaty*, but this does not mean that they cannot do so in the future, nor do they recognise the claims made. And then there are others –Japan, Belgium and South Africa– who neither claim territory nor recognise sovereign rights.

### **The polar areas in the reaffirmation of China as a global power**

China's interest in the polar areas is related to its revisionist attempt to rethink the framework of the international relations system in order to be recognised as a global power, and goes beyond a mere prestige policy - which also affects its demand for resources and the thalassocratic component of its foreign policy. This led to its being defined as a “quasi-arctic state” in 2018.

China has major interests in the polar areas, if only because of its geostrategic location, as can be understood if one considers that 46% of China's GDP depends on maritime traffic and its need for resources. In this sense the country has seven of the 20 largest container terminals in the world, which is the result of the need for raw materials required to become “the factory of the world”. Companies such as COSCO and *China Shipping* are among the ten largest container service operators in the world.<sup>9</sup>

With the progressive cooling of relations with the West, China has moved closer to Russia –both were part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation since 2001– seeking to gain strategic depth and avoid an eventual encirclement. In this way it can take part in the design of Arctic policies and promote the development of the Russian Arctic for its own benefit. The Russian-Chinese manoeuvres that took place in the Barents Sea in 2017 deserve to be highlighted for their symbolism.

With this logic, it has deployed its political and financial efforts in the countries of the Arctic environment with which it does not compete geopolitically. Significant investments have also been made in Greenland –a significant geostrategic position with important mineral resources– Iceland (with which a free trade agreement was reached in 2013, it aims to become a logistics base and is interested in its hydrocarbons); Finland, with which it has a significant trade relationship; Sweden forms part of the financing of

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<sup>9</sup> VV.AA. *Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur*. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

projects of the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* (AIIB), as do Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Norway.<sup>10</sup>

But China has also maintained an active presence in Antarctica since it was admitted to the Antarctic Treaty System in 1983. Up until 2020, China had carried out 36 expeditions to the region where it already has four stations, three of them located in the area claimed by Australia, and a fifth is expected to be built by 2022 in the Ross Sea area, in the territory claimed by New Zealand.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, it is strategically positioning itself pending a possible review of the regulatory framework. This could help to legitimise any future claims. In addition, it is one of the countries in the world that allocates the most budget to this continent in terms of scientific research and infrastructure development<sup>12</sup>

As can be seen, China acts in the Poles under the same strategic logic as it does in other territories: seeking mainly access to hydrocarbons and raw materials but also future recognition of its status as a superpower, an alternative route –and moreover one that is smaller and economically beneficial– in anticipation of the eventual closure of the strategic Straits of Malacca. It accepts the existing framework and seeks to fill its legitimacy deficit with the long-term commitment that its funding capacity brings with it, promoting with it and by way of a Marshall Plan, the generation of lasting links with surrounding countries.

This has provoked different reactions from countries and not only from the United States, which of course includes both the Arctic and the Antarctic as part of its global policy. Thus, New Zealand has increased the resources allocated to Antarctica. Or Australia –which claims 42% of the territory as its own– is spending \$2.2 billion to secure its interests in the area.

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<sup>10</sup> FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. “(Re)militarización del Ártico:¿Cautivos de un dilema de seguridad?” *Universidad de Barcelona*, 2019

<https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fern%C3%A1ndez%20G%C3%B3mez%2C%20Iv%C3%A1n.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>11</sup> HERRING BAZO, Alexia. *¿Está siendo desafiado el ‘statu quo’ de la Antártida por el nuevo contexto geopolítico con el surgimiento de China como potencia global?* Documento de Análisis IEEE 42/2020.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusions

At the beginning of the 16th century, when the Palencian Gabriel of Castile surpassed 60°S and saw the Antarctic, Spain showed the world its global dimension. We left little to the others.

Finally, globalisation has inevitably brought the polar areas onto the international stage at a time when they are also suffering the consequences of climate change. The result is that the global and regional agendas have overlapped, thus definitively breaking away from their remoteness and marginality. In the logic of globalisation, these spaces no longer belong exclusively to the states that surround them, however much they may contribute to their identity. This is even natural: for example, the climate in these regions affects that of the rest of the world. Tourism –which goes beyond a scientific presence– is an expression of the new reality, and of the definitive break with the isolation of the polar masses.

All this when the lack of institutionalised governance favours the logic of power while scientific competition is transformed into geopolitical competition and real interests do not find a clear formulation to facilitate their management.

The scenario is confusing. Alterations in the status quo are a cause of conflict. The struggle between states is being waged in terms of the future and in terms of international law, and on the basis of a change that has not yet fully materialised. But even if it is approached in legal terms, we should never lose sight of the fact that we are facing political confrontation. And this could lead to military confrontation, particularly in a space such as the increasingly militarised Arctic.

In 2049 the Antarctic legal framework will have to be renegotiated, while in the Arctic the melting of ice and the arrival of new players such as China will alter the geopolitical framework in that region. All this in a world with a growing and more developed population that requires more resources (water and hydrocarbons, among others), while new and advantageous communication channels are being opened.

Spain is well positioned in this context. It is an observer at the Arctic Council and maintains a regular presence on the Antarctic continent. The 1991 Treaty of Madrid is recognition of its efforts and contribution towards multilateral understanding. .

As far as possible, our country must promote a legal regime favourable to its economic interests by providing legal certainty to companies and by benefiting from the accessibility that climate change is offering. The interests of Spanish companies must be defended and their potential must be realised in the area, encouraging their involvement and knowledge of the opportunities that these territories offer.<sup>13</sup>

The polar areas have come closer to our societies, becoming definitively integrated into their daily reality.

*Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos\**

Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies

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<sup>13</sup> CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. “Geopolítica del Ártico. Especial referencia los intereses de España en la región ártica “en VV.AA. *Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur*. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.