

CONFERENCE PROGRAM AND INFORMATION

World Order and Polar Geopolitics

Friday, October 16, 2026

University of Iceland

Venue: National Museum

Suðurgata 41

Reykjavík, Iceland

Hosted by

The EDDA Research Center, University of Iceland

LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science



Concept Note

Context

The liberal international order that emerged in the post-Cold War period is under increasing strain. China's challenge to Western primacy, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the U.S. turn against multilateralism and institutional norms have unsettled assumptions about its durability. Territoriality, spheres of influence, and expansionist geopolitical imaginaries have again become defining features of international relations. Intensifying competition over maritime and polar spaces further points towards a broader reconfiguration of global power. The Arctic and Antarctic provide important vantage points from which to examine these transformations.

The EDDA Research Center at the University of Iceland and LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics will host a one-day conference on October 16, 2026 in Reykjavík, bringing together scholars and practitioners to explore the topic from a broad range of theoretical, empirical, and comparative perspectives. Traditionally portrayed as spaces of exception—largely insulated from interstate rivalry and governed through separate international legal regimes—the Arctic and Antarctica have been increasingly subjected to geopolitical pressures. While experiencing some of the most acute effects of climate change and biodiversity loss, both regions are witnessing shifting patterns of maritime access, resource interests, territorial claims, and scientific infrastructure, with broader strategic and military implications.

The Arctic is currently experiencing two major geopolitical disruptions. First, while the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) remains intact, the Arctic Council, the region's main intergovernmental venue, has been partially paralyzed following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This casts doubt on the future viability of a governance regime dominated by the eight Arctic states and evokes the possibility of a regional reordering, with additional states becoming involved individually or collectively. Second, the U.S. challenge to the territorial integrity of states has disrupted security alliances and raised the specter of a return to great-power spheres of influence.

Antarctica is undergoing a comparable, albeit more gradual, transformation. Great Powers—including the United States, China, and Russia—continue to operate within the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), which preserves territorial sovereignty claims and commits the continent to peaceful purposes and demilitarization. Yet the region is increasingly subject to pressures that test the founding principles of peaceful use and scientific cooperation. Geopolitical tensions following the Russia-Ukraine war have spilled over into the Antarctic—though less markedly than into the Arctic. The nearly decade-long impasse over the establishment of new marine protected areas and the rapid expansion of research infrastructure incorporating technologies with potential dual-use applications have raised doubts about continued commitment to the regime's founding principles. These developments may reflect forms of anticipatory geopolitics, through which states seek to

preserve strategic options—such as sovereignty claims and economic exploitation—and position themselves for a different future. Examining the Arctic and Antarctic together provides a basis for assessing how evolving geopolitics operates across two regions with different political, legal, and institutional arrangements, and whether and how it is eroding the forms of cooperation that have governed them.

Purpose and Scope

The Reykjavík conference will explore the manifestations of these geopolitical and governance trends in the polar regions, including the Southern Ocean. It will focus on issues such as the strategies and influence of large, middle, and small powers in the Arctic and Antarctica; polar security developments with an emphasis on Arctic militarization and the viability of Antarctic demilitarization; alliance politics and international groupings, including NATO and BRICS; and polar governance and maritime regimes with reference to UNCLOS, the Arctic Council, and the ATS. It will also consider jurisdictional and stakeholder claims, resource extraction, emerging actors in polar politics, shipping and maritime routes, climate security, environmental policy and conservation, scientific practices and diplomacy, and the role of cultural representations and national identities in shaping polar imaginaries.

Organizers

Professor Valur Ingimundarson, University of Iceland

Professor Chris Alden, London School of Economics

Daniela Marggraff, University of Pretoria and the University of Iceland

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Conference Program

Friday, October 16, 2026 · National Museum

9:00–9:30 **Conference Opening**

Valur Ingimundarson, University of Iceland
Introductory Remarks

Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, Iceland's Minister for Foreign Affairs
Between Power and Possibility in the Arctic

9:30–11:30 **Panel 1: Contesting the International Liberal Order**

Chair: **Rósa Magnúsdóttir**, University of Iceland

Kristina Spohr, London School of Economics
World (Dis)order? 1945, 1989, 2022

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, South African Institute of International Affairs
The Global South: Visions of the International System

Francis J. Gavin, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies
World Order in an Age of Disenchantment: Unanswered Questions

Jón Ólafsson, University of Iceland
Reading Russia: Can Realist Policies Be Propelled by Geopolitical Fantasies?

Sveinn Máni Jóhannesson, Wadham College, University of Oxford
Whither the Angloworld? Imperial Temporalities and International Order

Commentator: **Chris Alden**, London School of Economics

11:30–11:45 **Coffee Break**

11:45–13:15 **Panel 2: Redefining Arctic Geopolitics**

Chair: **Daniela Marggraff**, University of Pretoria/University of Iceland

Valur Ingimundarson, University of Iceland
Recasting Arctic Temporalities: Narratives of Exceptionalism and Imperial Legacies

Maria Ackrén, Stefansson Arctic Institute, University of Akureyri
Alliance Dilemma between Greenland and the United States

Egill Þór Nielsson, University of Iceland
China's Arctic Engagement: Nordic Case Studies

Page Wilson, University of Iceland
Poles Apart: Rethinking Arctic Narratives for the Social Sciences and Humanities

13:15–14:45 Lunch

14:45–16:15 Panel 3: Antarctic Futures: Reimagining the Political Order

Chair: **Valur Ingimundarson**, University of Iceland

Alejandra Mancilla, University of Oslo
The Need for a New Wave of Antarctic Political Imagination

Daniela Marggraff, University of Pretoria/University of Iceland
Whither Antarctic Exceptionalism? The Politics of an Enduring Narrative

Vishal Surbun, University of KwaZulu-Natal
South Africa's Antarctic Policy: Legal Perspectives in a Changing Geopolitical Environment

Sune Tamm, Director of Operations, Arctic Trucks Polar
Who Operates Antarctica: Continuity and Change from the Heroic Age to the Present

16:15–16:30 Coffee Break

16:30–18:00 Panel 4: Security Regimes: Oceans, Spaces, and Poles

Chair: **Kristina Spohr**, London School of Economics

Chris Alden, London School of Economics
The Concept of Ocean Regions: The Case of the Polar Regions

Mark Blaine, Stellenbosch University
Strategic Direction South: South African Maritime Security – Regional Stewardship to Antarctic Strategic Gateway

Dimitrios Stroikos, University of Bologna/LSE IDEAS
China's Space Power and Polar Geopolitics

Yeonji Ghim, University of Iceland
South Korea and the Northern Sea Route: Geopolitical Arctic Ambitions

Biographies

Maria Ackrén

Stefansson Arctic Institute, University of Akureyri

Maria Ackrén has been Director of Stefansson Arctic Institute at University of Akureyri in Iceland from May 2026. She previously worked as Professor of Political Science at Ilisimatusarfik/University of Greenland until 2026. She has a PhD degree from Åbo Akademi University in Finland back in 2009. Her research focuses on territorial autonomies in the world, with a special focus on the Nordic self-governing areas (the Faroe Islands, Greenland and the Åland Islands), Arctic international relations, island studies, crisis management, and comparative methodology. Her most recent publication is *Foreign Policy in Greenland – 20 Years of Development* (Routledge, 2025).

Chris Alden

London School of Economics and Political Science

Chris Alden is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and is Director of LSE IDEAS and a Research Associate at the South African Institute of International Affairs. He completed his PhD at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts/Harvard). His most recent books include *China and Latin America - Development, Agency and Geopolitics* (Bloomsbury, 2023), *Foreign Policy Analysis: New Approaches, 2nd edition* (Routledge, 2017), and the co-edited volumes *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent* (Palgrave, 2017) and *New Directions in Africa-China Studies* (Routledge, 2019). He has published widely in international journals and held fellowships at Cambridge University, the University of Tokyo, Ritsumeikan University, École Normale Supérieure, CERI and the University of Pretoria.

Mark Blaine

Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa, Stellenbosch University

Mark Blaine is a retired combat officer of the South African Navy. He has an MA degree in maritime security from Coventry University. He is currently a research fellow at the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA) of Stellenbosch University. His primary research focus is on African maritime security matters, including maritime governance, undersea cable networks, subsea infrastructure and cybersecurity.

Francis J. Gavin

Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

Francis J. Gavin is the Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor and the Director of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins SAIS. He has a PhD in History from the University of Pennsylvania. Gavin's books include *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations* (2004); *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (2012); *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy* (2020); *The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty: Rethinking International Relations and American Grand Strategy in a New Era* (2024); *Wonder and Worry* (2025); and *Thinking Historically – A Guide to Statecraft and Strategy* (2025), which was awarded the 2026 Lionel Gelber Prize.

Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Iceland

Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir is Iceland's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Chair of the Liberal Reform Party. She previously served as Minister of Education, Science, Sport, and Culture (2003–2009) and Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture (2017). From 2013 to 2016, she was Head of Education and Innovation at the SA Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise. Her parliamentary career includes service on the Foreign Affairs Committee and the EU–Iceland Joint Parliamentary Committee, as well as deputy chairmanships of Iceland's delegations to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the EFTA and EEA Parliamentary Committees.

Yeonji Ghim

University of Iceland

Yeonji Ghim is a PhD student in History at the University of Iceland, where she also received her MA degree. Her research explores the role of Asian countries in Arctic economic development, with a particular focus on shipbuilding and nuclear energy sectors. Her recent journal article examines the involvement of South Korean shipyards – and the role of the government – in Russian oil and gas projects.

Valur Ingimundarson

University of Iceland

Valur Ingimundarson is Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Iceland. He also serves as the Chair of the Department of History and of the Board of the EDDA Research Center. He received his PhD from Columbia University in New York. He has published widely on international history as well as on geopolitics and its relationship to international law, and post-conflict and memory politics. His work has explored U.S.-European relations during and after the Cold War; Arctic geopolitics and governance; Iceland's foreign, security, and Arctic policies and its relationship with the United States and NATO; and the politics of military interventions in the former Yugoslavia. His latest book is entitled *Embellished Promise: Iceland's Arctic Policies and Shifting Geopolitics* (Palgrave, 2024).

Sveinn M. Jóhannesson

Wadham College, University of Oxford

Sveinn M. Jóhannesson is a Koch History Centre Research Fellow at Wadham College and the University of Oxford. His research explores American and global history from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, with particular emphasis on the interconnected histories of the state, science, and empire. He received his PhD in History from the University of Cambridge in 2019 and has held research fellowships at the University of Edinburgh, the Past and Present Society at the Institute of Historical Research, London, the University of Iceland, and the American Philosophical Society. His first monograph, *The Scientific-Military State: How Enlightened Engineers Reinvented Early American Government*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2026. His research has also appeared in the *Journal of American History*, *Journal of Global History*, *Historical Journal*, and other journals.

Rósa Magnúsdóttir

University of Iceland

Rósa Magnúsdóttir is Professor of History at the University of Iceland. She is the author of *Enemy Number One: The United States of America in Soviet Ideology and Propaganda, 1945-1959* (Oxford University Press, 2019), a biography of Icelandic Stalinists, and most recently a book about Reykjavík as a Cold War City. She has authored numerous articles on Soviet-American cultural relations, the cultural Cold War, and Communist lives. She is currently working on female peace activism, the effects of nuclear radiation, and Cold War propaganda.

Alejandra Mancilla

University of Oslo

Alejandra Mancilla is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oslo and a member of the steering group of the Standing Committee of the Humanities & Social Sciences, Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR SC-HASS). Her main research interests lie at the intersection between political and environmental philosophy, which she has been exploring as PI of Dynamic Territory, a five-year ERC-funded project. In her recent book, *From Sovereignty to Guardianship: Governing Antarctica, Governing the World* (Oxford University Press, 2026), she takes the model of Antarctic governance as an inspiration for the governance of other places like ecoregions and the oceans, but points at the same time to its limitations and to how it could move beyond them. Her work has been published in *Political Philosophy*, *Ethics and International Affairs*, *Grotiana*, and *The Polar Journal*, among others.

Daniela Marggraff

University of Iceland/University of Pretoria

Daniela Marggraff is a Visiting Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Iceland. She is based in the Department of History, Heritage and Cultural Tourism at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, where she completed her PhD in International Relations in 2025. Her research examines geopolitics in ocean regions, with a particular focus on Small Island Developing States and an emerging focus on Antarctica. She is the author of the forthcoming monograph *The Rise of Small Island Developing States in the Indo-Pacific* (Routledge, November 2026) and co-editor of the two-volume collection *Africa and the Politics of Ocean Regions* (forthcoming December 2026).

Egill Þór Níelsson

University of Iceland

Egill Þór Níelsson is a PhD Candidate at the University of Iceland and Senior Adviser at the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís). He is a Council Member of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), a Representative to the European Polar Board (ExCom member 2021–2025), Chair/Vice-Chair of the Arctic Science Funders Forum (2021–2025), and a Board Member of the Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network. Previously, he was Executive Secretary of the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center and Visiting Scholar at the Polar Research Institute of China (2011–2019). His work on economic and geopolitical aspects of the Arctic has been featured widely, including in *Internasjonal Politikk*, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, *World Policy*, *The Maritime Executive*, and *The Diplomat*.

Jón Ólafsson

University of Iceland

Jón Ólafsson is Professor of Cultural Studies and Russian Studies at the University of Iceland. His research focuses on democratic theory, democratic participation and constitutional reform. He received his PhD in Philosophy from Columbia University in New York. He has published extensively on political thought, deliberative democracy, international communism, and Soviet history. He is a frequent commentator on Russian affairs in Icelandic media and has served as an adviser to the Prime Minister of Iceland on government integrity and public participation in constitutional reform. He is currently completing a book on Iceland's constitutional reform process, 2010–2025.

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos

South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos is the Chief Executive of the South African Institute of International Affairs. She has published on South African foreign policy, Africa and external powers and global governance, including on the Antarctic. Her co-edited books include *Values, Interests and Power: South African Foreign Policy in Uncertain Times* (Pretoria University Law Press, 2020) and the *Handbook on Development Cooperation for Achieving the 2030 Agenda* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). Since December 2020 she serves on the UN's High-Level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs. She is a member of DIRCO's South African Council of International Relations (SACOIR).

Kristina Spohr

London School of Economics and Political Science

Kristina Spohr is Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Senior Fellow at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington DC, where she was the inaugural Helmut Schmidt Distinguished Visiting Chair from 2018 to 2020. She is the author and editor of a dozen books. Her books include *Post Wall, Post Square: Rebuilding the World after 1989* (William Collins, 2019; Yale University Press, 2020); *Wendezeit* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2019) won the prize for best political science book in 2020. Other titles include *Arctic and World Order* (FPI-SAIS/Brookings, 2020), *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security after the Cold War* (FPI-SAIS/Brookings, 2019), *The Global Chancellor* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *Transcending the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2016). In 2023–2024, she held a Fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Polar Institute. She is currently completing a long durée global history of the Arctic.

Dimitrios Stroikos

University of Bologna/LSE IDEAS

Dimitrios Stroikos is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Bologna and Head of the Space Policy Project at LSE IDEAS. His research focuses on the international politics of space, with a particular focus on China, India, and Europe. His work has appeared in *Astropolitics*, *India Review*, *International Affairs*, *International Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Journal of Space Safety Engineering*, *Review of International Studies*, *Space Policy*, and *The Pacific Review*. He has also co-edited *Rising Power, Limited Influence: The Politics of Chinese Investments in Europe and the Liberal International Order* (2024), published by Oxford University Press.

Vishal Surbun

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Vishal Surbun is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Law at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where he has taught maritime law for 17 years. He holds postgraduate qualifications specialising in maritime and oceans law. His research interests include the international law of the sea, maritime law, marine environmental law, ocean governance and maritime security, with a particular focus on Africa and the Indian and Southern Oceans. He has published on these issues and participated in multidisciplinary maritime and ocean governance fora.

Sune Tamm

Arctic Trucks Polar

Sune Tamm is Director of Operations at Arctic Trucks Polar, overseeing logistics for scientific, governmental, and private-sector activities in the Arctic and Antarctic. He has spent two years in Antarctica, including a full winter on the continent, and previously worked for the British Antarctic Survey, the United States Antarctic Program, and the Arctic Council. His experience includes deep-field expeditions, search and rescue, and support for polar research. He chairs the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators' (IAATO) Deep Field and Air Operations Committee and has attended Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings since 2016 as part of two delegations. He was a special editor of the *Yearbook of Polar Law*.

Page Wilson

University of Iceland

Page Wilson is Professor of International Affairs at the University of Iceland. She completed her PhD at the London School of Economics, after graduating with a BA(Hons), LLB and a postgraduate diploma of education from the Universities of Queensland and Melbourne. Before her move to Iceland, she held academic positions at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (UK) and at the University of Greenland. Her publications include *Aggression, Crime and International Security* (2009) and contributions to the *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security* (2020) and articles in journals including *Global Society*, *International Affairs*, *Polar Record*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, and *Journal of the History of International Law*.