

May 21, 2026

The Partitioning International Order and the Arctic: A Precursor Model of Order Formation in the Era of Climate Change

Executive Director & Distinguished Research Fellow, JFIR /
Senior Researcher, Keio Research Institute at SFC
TAKAHATA Yohei

The Core Issue and Analytical Perspective

Beneath the superficial intensification of conflicts over values and institutions, the contemporary international order is undergoing a quieter, yet structurally profound transformation. This transformation entails the reorganization of the international order—no longer as a space monolithically integrated by universal norms and institutions but as a managed domain governed in part by the coordination and division of roles among major powers.

This paper captures this transformation through the concept of *partitioning*. Partitioning refers to an order structure in which authority over the international order becomes *de facto* dispersed and entrenched through the tacit coordination of major powers and institutional vacuums, without explicit agreements or treaty-based institutionalization.

This phenomenon differs from traditional spheres of influence or bloc formation. During the Cold War, the order was relatively delineated by ideology and alliance structures. What is currently unfolding, however, is not this kind of explicit division but a structure in which influence, the division of responsibilities, and the scope of intervention are implicitly entrenched within domains wherein institutions and norms fail to function adequately. In other words, the order is transitioning from a shared public good to a divided management space.

This partitioning unfolds through the convergence of three elements. First, there is a sustained deepening of major power competition. Second, there is an expansion of institutional vacuums resulting from the dysfunction and limited scope of multilateral institutions. Third, there is tacit coordination among major powers that proceeds without explicit agreements—that is, the *ex post facto* entrenchment of order management. The simultaneous interaction of these elements is reshaping the international order.

While these changes are not confined to a specific region, their most acute manifestation has emerged in the Arctic. Although this region has long been perceived as a low-tension, cooperative space, this premise has been rapidly undermined in recent years. In particular, the convergence of physical environmental changes driven by global warming and heightened geopolitical interest is transforming the Arctic from a peripheral region into a strategic space.

In the Arctic region, warming is occurring at approximately four times the global average, and the disappearance of summer sea ice is becoming a realistic planning assumption. This profoundly impacts indigenous communities and ecosystems, while simultaneously pushing the commercial viability of Arctic sea routes and the potential for resource development to the forefront as realistic options. The transformation of the natural environment itself is fundamentally altering the premises of international politics in the Arctic.

From an institutional perspective, the Arctic also meets the conditions for partitioning. The region possesses a multilayered engagement structure: its core consists of eight nations—the five Arctic coastal states (the United States, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and Russia) in addition to Iceland, Sweden, and Finland—while non-Arctic states such as Japan, China, South Korea, and India are involved as observers. The simultaneous inclusion of Asian nations as observers in 2013 symbolizes the Arctic’s transformation from a regional issue into an arena for global order formation.

However, despite this expanding engagement, the institutional framework for comprehensive governance of this region remains fragile. The Arctic Council has functioned as the core framework for cooperation, but it is constrained by its mandate, which excludes security issues; moreover, its operations have largely stalled following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Thus, the Arctic is a space where multilayered engagement and a governance vacuum coexist.

The Arctic is not merely a regional case study. It is a precursor model where the structure of a partitioning international order manifests most acutely, serving as a key analytical lens for understanding future order formation.

Theoretical Positioning of the Partitioning Concept

The concept of partitioning presented in this paper intersects with several concepts in existing international relations theory; however, it does not simply replace them. Rather, it is positioned as a complementary lens to describe phenomena that cannot be adequately captured by existing frameworks of post-Cold War order transformation.

In English, this could tentatively correspond to the *functional fragmentation of order* or the *partitioned governance of the international order*. However, the core of *partitioning* in this paper is not mere fragmentation but the *dispersion and entrenchment of management authority*.

First, this concept is clearly distinguished from so-called spheres of influence. While a sphere of influence features relatively explicit geographical boundaries and governing entities, in partitioning, neither the managing entities nor their scopes are necessarily codified. Instead, it is characterized by an asymmetrical and multilayered structure in which multiple entities engage in different functional domains within the same space, each undertaking partial

management of the order.

Second, partitioning also differs from bloc politics. While bloc politics entails the formation of camps based on the homogeneity of values and institutions, partitioning is distinguished by the coexistence of different value systems and institutional principles within the same regional or institutional space, where functions are divided without mutually excluding each other.

Third, regarding its relationship with multipolarity, partitioning is not merely a description of power distribution. While multipolarity indicates the dispersion of relative capabilities among states, partitioning focuses on the operational structure of how those dispersed capabilities are translated into order management—namely, “who manages which domains, and how.”

Thus, partitioning can be defined as a structure emerging from the convergence of the following three conditions:

First, there is a sustained level of major power competition.

Second, there is an absence or dysfunction of an institutional framework to comprehensively manage this competition.

Third, management domains are *de facto* apportioned through tacit coordination among major powers and the accumulation of established facts, without explicit agreements.

Under these three conditions, order is not governed by a single principle but is partially managed by different entities across various functions such as security, resources, institutions, infrastructure, and science and technology. In other words, partitioning should be understood not as the collapse of an integrated order but as a form of *functional order formation* in which order is maintained without integration.

From this perspective, the Arctic is the most suitable case for testing the concept of partitioning. In this region, despite insufficient institutional integration, multiple entities engage in order management driven by differing logics, resulting in the maintenance of a certain order level. Therefore, the Arctic is positioned not as an exception to the partitioning international order but as its early manifestation.

The Arctic Order as Partitioned Governance

China and Russia’s trajectories are particularly noteworthy. The Russian government has designated the Arctic as a “strategic resource base,” positioning the Arctic Ocean at the top of its regional interests in the 2022 revised Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept lists the Arctic as the second-highest priority region, following the former Soviet space. Since the Cold War, the Arctic Ocean has been a sanctuary for nuclear deterrence, hosting the deployment of the Northern Fleet’s nuclear submarines, while simultaneously serving as a vital foundation for state finances through energy exports.

Meanwhile, China's engagement in the polar regions, although originating in scientific research, has steadily expanded through institutional and economic initiatives. Polar research, initiated in 1984, was elevated to a national interest following expeditions to the North Pole in 1995, paving the way for regular, sustained Arctic Ocean surveys. In 2004, China established its first Arctic research station, the Yellow River Station, on Norway's Svalbard archipelago; its 2018 *Arctic Policy White Paper* explicitly articulated this trajectory by incorporating Arctic sea routes into the Belt and Road Initiative as the Polar Silk Road. Further, the establishment of a joint research center in Iceland, involvement in the expansion of Greenland's airports, and the continuous deployment of the icebreaker *Xue Long* symbolize China's multifaceted expansion of its physical and institutional presence in the Arctic.

Recent U.S. developments are also indispensable for understanding the realignment of the Arctic order. In particular, President Donald Trump's renewed interest in the Western Hemisphere, including Greenland, symbolizes a shift in the U.S. strategic calculus, seeking to reconceptualize the Arctic not as a space for international cooperation but as a geostrategic frontline. U.S. engagement in the Arctic, relatively restrained since the end of the Cold War, is resurfacing within the context of competition with China and Russia. The push to exclude Chinese capital from Greenland starkly illustrates the structural tension of Arctic governance between economic assistance and security.

As outlined above, with Russia driven by security and resource imperatives, China by institutional and economic interests, and the United States by strategic re-engagement, the Arctic order is not integrated by a single ordering principle but is transforming into a space wherein multiple logics intersect in a complex, multilayered structure. Thus, not only does the Arctic vacillate between strategic stability and institutional cooperation, but it is also increasingly taking on the character of a quintessential partitioned space partially managed by disparate actors.

However, the Sino-Russian relationship is not monolithic. Although there is an alignment of interests in the joint development of natural resources and the promotion of Arctic sea route utilization, its internal dynamics present a complex picture of cooperative competition. For Russia, the Arctic is a strategic sanctuary symbolizing national identity and nuclear deterrence, and it therefore perceives China's institutional and economic expansion as a potential infringement upon its sovereign domain. Therefore, the Sino-Russian relationship in the Arctic is fundamentally an uneasy coexistence, which, while mutually complementary in the short term, harbors the potential for hegemonic friction in the medium to long term.

Such a structure aptly illustrates the essence of partitioning. This occurs without an explicit division into spheres of influence. Instead, influence is being apportioned across specific functions such as security, resources, institutions, and infrastructure, leaving the authority to manage the order *de facto* dispersed and entrenched.

The Potential of Japanese Diplomacy in a Partitioned Order

In this new phase, Japan's Arctic diplomacy requires redefinition. It has thus far been valued by Nordic countries as a stable partner because of its scientific reliability, adherence to the rule of law, and cooperative posture. As the opening of sea routes and digital connectivity initiatives become increasingly viable, this accumulated trust will serve as a crucial foundation for Japan to engage in the reconstruction of the partitioned Arctic order.

However, in a strategic environment characterized by advancing partitioning, diplomacy limited to traditional cooperative participation is insufficient. What is unfolding in the Arctic is not merely major power competition but the emergence of an order structure in which multiple domains—security, resources, institutions, infrastructure, and science and technology—overlap and shift in relation to one another, managed in each instance by disparate actors. Therefore, Japan must take on an active role in connecting these fragmented elements of order and preventing its breakdown.

First, Japan must take on the role of maintaining order in low-politics domains, centered on science, the environment, and human security. Fields such as climate observation, marine conservation, disaster prevention, and coexistence with indigenous communities can function as channels of connectivity even in an era of division. By strengthening its engagement in these domains, Japan can support the foundational stability of the Arctic order.

Second, Japan should strengthen its coordinating role anchored in law and institutions. As institutional vacuums expand, practical linkages must be built in specific fields such as maritime law, navigational rules, and environmental standards. Japan should act not merely by presenting ideals but as an intermediary that translates them into actionable mechanisms.

Third, Japan must pursue practical engagement that balances economic security with openness. Arctic infrastructure is simultaneously an object of economic cooperation and a conduit for strategic influence. By presenting an engagement model that incorporates principles such as transparency and sustainability, Japan can secure trust-based influence.

Fourth, Japan's Arctic diplomacy must be redefined as part of a broader regional order that connects the Arctic with the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia. The Arctic is a new testing ground for connectivity diplomacy and a strategic domain for extending Japan's strategic reach.

Fifth, Japan should adopt an approach to order management predicated on partitioning. The core role of Japanese diplomacy lies not in the restoration of a unified order but in maintaining connectivity among the fragmenting elements of the order.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes the Arctic from the perspective of a partitioning international order, illuminating the structure of order formation emerging therein. In the Arctic, the concurrent dynamics of institutional underdevelopment, sustained major power competition, and tacit

coordination have revealed a structure wherein authority over the order is dispersed and entrenched by function.

Crucially, such a structure is not unique to the Arctic. Rather, the Arctic is a bellwether in which the logic of a partitioning international order has emerged earliest and most distinctly, driven by the intersection of irreversible climate change and geopolitical competition. This is not the dissolution of a unified order but a novel modality of order formation—managed through major power coordination amidst institutional vacuums where no single principle can integrate the order.

Therefore, the analysis of the Arctic extends beyond specific regional studies. It foreshadows the future trajectory of the international order—a structure in which order is maintained partially and functionally amidst the simultaneous existence of competition and cooperation, as well as division and connection. In this sense, the Arctic is not the periphery of a partitioning world but the frontline, where its structure manifests most acutely.

Within this order, the significance of Japanese diplomacy must also be redefined. Japan's imperative is no longer to merely adapt to the existing order, nor to aim for the restoration of a single normative order. Rather, what is being tested is its ability to find areas for connectivity amidst a fragmenting order and reconnect them institutionally and practically.

In short, the core of Japanese diplomacy lies in order management predicated on partitioning. This is not diplomacy predicated on the resolution of conflict but an effort to maintain channels of connection and prevent the severance of order under conditions of persistent conflict. This role is an intrinsic function unique to Japan, one that is difficult for a hegemon to shoulder and cannot be replicated by a mere regional power.

Therefore, the Arctic is not merely a new policy domain for Japanese diplomacy. It is a strategic proving ground testing whether Japan will remain a passive adapter in a partitioning international order or take on a new role as a bridge between disparate orders, while simultaneously serving as a watershed that will determine the ultimate course of Japanese diplomacy in the Reiwa era.

(This is the English translation of an article written by TAKAHATA Yohei, Distinguished Research Fellow and Executive Director at the Japan Forum on International Relations, and Senior Researcher, Keio Research Institute at SFC. The original Japanese version was published on the JFIR website on April 1, 2026.)