Interview – Klaus Dodds

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Klaus Dodds is Executive Dean and Professor of Geopolitics at Royal Holloway, University of London, and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. He completed his PhD at the University of Bristol in 1994 and took up a position at the University of Edinburgh. Thereafter he joined Royal Holloway. He has held a Visiting Erskine Fellowship at Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury (2002) and been a Visiting Fellow at St Cross College, University of Oxford (2010-11) and St Johns College, University of Oxford (2017-18). In 2005 he was awarded the Philip Leverhulme Prize for Geography and a Major Research Fellowship by the Leverhulme Trust (2017-2020) for a project concerned with the 'Global Arctic'. He has published many books and articles concerned with the geopolitics and governance of the Polar Regions, as well as the cultural politics of ice and border geopolitics. These include*The Scramble for the Poles* (2016), *Ice: Nature and Culture* (2018) and *Border Wars (*2022). His latest book, co-written with Mia Bennett is provisionally titled *Unfrozen: The Battle for the Future of the Arctic* (Yale University Press 2025).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

A perennial challenge many researchers face is being able to track and trace research and debates let alone identify "exciting" themes and trends. One thing I have learnt from my academic career thus far is that serendipity matters. If you had asked me 30 years ago, "Would you expect to be interested in digital geopolitics or security?", I would have thought "unlikely". Nowadays, thanks to professional partnerships forged at Royal Holloway and elsewhere, I have had the pleasure of supervising a range of PhD students and consequently discovered more about their fields. Supervising students more generally is a great way of being exposed to things that can turn out to be exciting, intriguing, and thought-provoking.

As you might expect, given my long-standing interests, I follow closely the evolving literature on critical and popular geopolitics and enjoy reading papers and books that stretch the conceptual, empirical, and policy-relevant limits of that scholarship. For example, it is very satisfying to read how interest in humour and satire has expanded alongside interest in cartoons, comics and other forms of performative art. My earliest foray into Steve Bell's If… cartoons in the mid-1990s was largely informed by my reading outside political geography, International Relations, and security studies. Fast-forward three decades, one could point to a suite of studies that interrogate how humour is put to work in formal, practical, and everyday political, diplomatic, and para-diplomatic contexts and pretexts.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Contexts and events matter. First, academic scholarship has its trends, cycles, and preoccupations with theory matters and how one engages with that in part depends on partnerships, opportunities, and disposition to transformation. As a geographer, I embrace with great affection interdisciplinary research and enjoy engagement with multi-disciplinary research teams. My publications over the last three decades reflect an academic eclecticism – working with others, experimenting with approaches, and tackling topics and issues that were comparatively new to me. An example would be writing about the political materiality of frozen soils or permafrost with an anthropologist.

Second, events matter. I have researched and written about a suite of things such as the war on terror, pandemics, and the Arctic (originally, I focused on the Antarctic in my earliest work), all of which have been enabled and enriched

by partnerships in geography, law, health studies, computer science, physical and environmental sciences, anthropology, and IR/political science.

Finally, as I noted above, who and where you teach and supervise makes a difference. I have spent most of my academic career at Royal Holloway but deliberately seized opportunities to work elsewhere in other universities. More importantly in the UK Parliament, UK government departments, NATO, EU and other third-party organizations as a specialist adviser, a consultant, a project team member and so on. All of this has helped to ensure that my work as an educator and scholar has been subject to productive challenges. A good example was presenting a report I co-wrote on the EU and having to present it to MEPs live in the European Parliament in November 2023.

How has the discourse on Arctic affairs developed/changed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022?

Prior to 2022, notwithstanding the disruptive consequences of the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, there was a concerted desire on the part of the seven other Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the USA), and the intergovernmental forum, Arctic Council to emphasise that the Arctic was an exception to the norm of world politics. A circumpolar region of peace and shared interests in the form of environmental protection and sustainable development. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 threw all of that into the air. Shortly afterwards the 'Arctic 7' announced that they would seek to "pause" the work of the Arctic Council recognising that in the last two years, it has been difficult to restore business as normal.

Three things have changed consequently. First, Arctic discourse is more likely to be punctuated by words like "spillover" and infused with a recognition of "cross-contamination". Recently, Ukrainian drones targeted Russian assets in the Russian northwest and highlighted how Arctic-based material and personnel are being drawn into a conflict hundreds of miles away to the south. Russian ground forces normally based in the Arctic have endured heavy losses in Ukraine itself.

Second, we have an Arctic region where seven Arctic States are now NATO members and one is not i.e., Russia, yet 50% of the Arctic is Russian. As a consequence, we are now looking at a region split between a Russian-Asian portion and a European-US segment. Not quite a return to the Cold War but a far cry from what was hoped when the Arctic Council was launched in 1996.

Finally, the Arctic is becoming ever more globalized with a suite of other actors – both state and non-state – making their presence felt. In the Russian Arctic, for instance, it is going to become far more normal to see BRICS+ countries involved in energy, shipping, and infrastructure projects.

Post-invasion of Ukraine, cooperation through the Arctic Council has come to a halt. To what extent does this affect the crucial non-military issues pertaining to the region?

Under the Norwegian chair-ship of the Arctic Council (May 2023-May 2025), there have been tentative attempts to restore some semblance of pre-2022 order. This is going to be difficult given the parlous state of Arctic exceptionalism – geostrategic competition seems a great deal more dominant compared to circumpolar collaboration, which jeopardises things that do depend on the latter such as science, indigenous affairs, and people-to-people community engagement, especially in border regions. There is now inevitably a greater NATO presence in the Arctic and Russia's geostrategic priorities for the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation have not altered.

Much of the work the Arctic Council does is through its working groups and task forces and many of those projects have been paused or suspended since February 2022. Arctic science, environmental protection and conservation will always be more effective if those involved including Indigenous Peoples are able to work across, with and through Arctic ecologies and landscapes. Russia has suspended payments to the Arctic Council and placed restrictions on access to the Russian Arctic sector and accompanying data points. This makes long-term monitoring of environmental change including permafrost thaw and methane release a great deal harder. All of this is not going to change unless the Arctic 7 restore full collaboration with Russia under the auspices of the Arctic Council which

formally does not address matters of military security.

In the meantime, Russia will continue to seek partnerships with others whether it be China, India, and other BRICS+ nations and has already voiced a proposal to work with the latter in Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago with its own special treaty regime in place. In short, the "pause" in Arctic Council work makes it harder to imagine a return to the relatively halcyon days of circumpolar scientific collaboration and knowledge-sharing in the 1990s and 2000s.

In what ways could China's involvement in the Arctic increase in the coming years?

China is a major polar power and it is not uncommon to hear Chinese officials describe the country as tri-polar-Arctic, Antarctic, and Himalayan-Hindu-Kush region. Some of this has practical consequences such as China being a major generator of knowledge about permafrost (in large part because of its occupation of the Tibetan plateau). China describes itself as a "near-Arctic state" and has been an Arctic Council observer since 2013. Moreover, it maintains the Yellow River station in Svalbard and uses its icebreakers to conduct summer voyages in places like the Central Arctic Ocean.

China engages with the Arctic because it is framed as a space for economic opportunity and at one stage there were smaller Arctic states such as Iceland, Finland, Norway, and the Government of Greenland interested in forging closer relationships. Sometimes that created tensions with national capitals further south. Anecdotally, I can report plenty of experiences where hotel owners in the Nordic Arctic have expressed gratitude for visiting Chinese tourists eager to see the Northern Lights. Commercially, China is interested in utilising Arctic Sea routes including the Northern Sea Route and more speculatively the trans-polar route in the future as well as the Arctic resource potential, both onshore and offshore.

China is a legitimate stakeholder whether it be in Svalbard, Central Arctic Ocean (including commercial fisheries potential) and as a formal observer to the Arctic Council. Finally, there are plenty of Chinese colleagues who will make the point if asked that China will also be affected by climate breakdown in the polar regions – low-lying cities such as Shanghai are vulnerable to sea level change.

Has the war in Ukraine changed the status quo over Antarctica in any way?

The conflict in Ukraine has soured Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ACTMs) – 2022 and 2023. Governance through the Antarctic Treaty is conducted via consensus so unsurprisingly there have been points of tension as the Russian delegation has been affronted by the way in which "Ukraine" intrudes into the matters of the Treaty. The bubble surrounding Antarctic exceptionalism like its Arctic counterpart has burst. The 2024 meeting in India witnessed for the third year in a row, measures to acknowledge the Emperor Penguin as a specially protected species being blocked by Russia and China to make a non-consensual point. It underscored the harmful trend of the political weaponization of scientific research to the detriment of endangered species.

It also revealed a failure to find consensus over whether to extend consultative party (CP) status to both Belarus and Canada. CP status represents a formal recognition by existing CPs that a candidate has demonstrated *"substantial scientific research activity"*. CP status also affords voting rights in future ATCMs. Belarus is a principal Russian ally and Canada would attract strong support from NATO member states and others.

The 2024 ATCM revealed tentative signs that BRICS+ nations such as India, Brazil, and South Africa might be members to watch in terms of working with China and Russia in disrupting Antarctic governance. Saudi Arabia has joined as an acceding party very recently. My reasonably educated guess is that the BRICS+ coalition might very well start introducing bargains and trade-offs concerning the creation of future Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) or wildlife protection measures in exchange for concessions in Antarctic resource governance or elsewhere. Such a situation would essentially take good regional governance hostage and dim the spirit of consensus.

Russian state-owned geological holding company RosGeo's claims of potential hydrocarbon reserves in Antarctica have sparked a discussion on Russian interests in the region. How have the Antarctic Treaty

parties and the international community responded to this?

The "RosGeo" was an interesting example of misinformation and I found myself being quoted liberally as an authoritative source for some of this. For me, it was a textbook example of how academic contributions can be framed and reframed in mainstream and social media, in ways that ensure all nuance is lost. I took the opportunity to write a blog for the British magazine *Spectator* about all of this and corrected profound misunderstandings.

Antarctic Treaty parties have been content to take Russia at its word and assume that the country does not actively look to undermine the permanent ban on mining that is part and parcel of the Protocol on Environmental Protection. The story broke at the same time of the meeting in India and I suspect the parties have enough difficulties with Russia without creating more tension. A South African newspaper called the *Daily Maverick* has been at the forefront of carefully reporting on this story and in essence the Russian vessel concerned has been involved in a long-term geophysical survey of various parts of the Antarctic coastline and surrounding seas. Whatever the purpose of these surveys, Russian engagement in the Antarctic is awkward – it is a country that reserves the right to make a territorial claim in the future; it looks with concern at attempts to prevent fishing in the name of ocean conservation; it is interested in Antarctica's mineral potential; it works with China but is at the same time anxious about China's growing presence in Antarctica; and it deeply resents Antarctic Treaty matters being "corrupted" by Ukraine.

In parallel, Russian diplomats will be keenly aware that *apartheid* South Africa was allowed to be a full member of the Antarctic Treaty without anyone publicly naming and shaming the country in Antarctic Treaty meetings. The analogy with an invasion of Ukraine is far from perfect but there is this abiding sense that the ATCMs should preoccupy themselves with Antarctic matters only.

But as I have written recently with a Russian specialist, RosGeo's surveying and tectonic seismic research is one thing, but Moscow's longer-term agenda is another. Russia wants to ensure a commercial presence even long-term dominance, and factor in a future where its 'rights' are respected by others. Unlike the UK, Russia is not currently a claimant state (and for the sake of peace and cooperation all territorial claims are considered to be suspended by the Treaty).

How would you explain the centrality of melting ice in society's future?

Melting ice is essential for billions of people and other living beings as every spring/summer meltwater feeds nutrients into lakes, rivers, and oceans. Glaciers have been rightly described as frozen water towers but once they turn into liquid, they end up supporting a suite of food chains. Ice stupas (artificial glaciers) are essential in many parts of the world and act as an essential source of water in the summer months.

In case of overwhelmed melting, there can be disastrous flooding, whereas underwhelming melting has the spectre of drought. Excessive melting in Greenland and Antarctica will in all likelihood contribute to profound sea level change (SLC) in the future, the effects of which will not be felt evenly around the world.

Ice is essential to planetary well-being, especially when you factor in the contribution of ice to the earth's albedo. Less ice means more solar radiation is absorbed by ocean and land with knock-on consequences for planetary warming. The loss of ice is being felt first-hand by Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic and other "cold places". One example would be how the long-term loss of sea ice has meant that coastal communities are now more exposed to violent seas and winter storms. In some cases, communities have had to relocate. In other cases, thinner sea ice has meant that travelling is now more precarious even deadly. Furthermore, permafrost thawing has also played a part in perpetuating destructive fires across the northern latitudes.

In recent years, I have been very interested in the emergence of a field that I would term 'ice humanities', but I think there is scope to enhance this work into the social sciences as well. With ice no longer being reliably solid in higher latitudes and a regular feature of winter, there are a host of challenges to confront ranging from the transformation of ice-covered waters into open water; the terra-forming consequences of excessive flooding; ice-loss in mountainous regions with consequences for border delimitation; the impact of ice loss on Indigenous communities and the values

placed on ice by state and non-state actors seeking competitive advantage in a warming world.

In which direction should polar researchers focus to tackle the emerging governance challenges of the polar regions?

I would continue to encourage interdisciplinary scholarship in general as the governance challenges facing the polar regions require both academic and Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and perspectives. In the Antarctic, there is growing evidence of some respectful knowledge partnerships between New Zealand Māori and scientific and political communities. This should sit alongside a concerted effort in the Arctic to listen and learn from indigenous communities who are bearing the brunt of climate breakdown including drought, fire, and sea ice loss.

Second, we need further research into how global geopolitical or strategic competition is challenging regional governance, as well as factor into the equation, important global developments (e.g. BBNJ treaty) that will bring their own challenges and opportunities to regional forums and treaty-based organisations. But to be clear there is no shortage of "polar governance" per se.

Both polar regions are going to experience profound state-change. We know what the drivers of that state-change are ranging from the physical and environmental to the geopolitical and technological. But do we have the collective wisdom and restraint to ensure that those regions are governed responsibly, safely, and securely? How do we coordinate governance when there are far more interested parties, conventions, and frameworks to acknowledge? Moreover, can we secure the necessary agreement and support for governance that anticipates the likely environmental and geophysical transformation of both the Arctic and Antarctic?

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

My starting position is that there is a great deal to learn from early career scholars including PhD students. As I noted above, I have ended up learning about digital security, cybersecurity policy, planetary health, and China's role as a polar power. I hesitate to offer advice because my career has had and continues to have its own intersectional qualities and quirks. But there are some things I have learnt along the way.

First, be humble when you enjoy unearned privileges. I have the good fortune to be a native English speaker working in a world which favours Anglophone scholarship. As a journal editor – most recently Editor in Chief of*Territory Politics Governance* – I was grateful to be surrounded by multi-lingual co-editors based around the world. English is a global language, and we need to be respectful that scholarly English will vary as well and that is to be celebrated not policed.

Second, please do not review other people's work if you are tired, hungry, or frazzled. Peer review is so important, and we have an obligation to our scholar communities to do it in good faith. Third, having a network of allies and critical friends is so important – I can think of one distinguished political geographer who invited me to stay at their house in Canada in the summer of 1994. It was life-changing and helped me transition into a post-doctoral scholar and university lecturer/assistant professor.

Fourth, seize opportunities where and when you can. Over the years, I took the opportunity to write a monthly column on geopolitics for a magazine, work for the UK Parliament as a specialist adviser, be a visiting fellow, and edit two journals. The opportunities will of course vary as will the ability to seize them. In each case, it helped me to develop professionally and intellectually.

Finally, after 30 years and counting, academic life still gives me a great deal of pleasure and I think that comes from both education and research. When I started at the University of Edinburgh in 1994, I would never have imagined I would be an Executive Dean. Such a trajectory is not for everyone, but it has allowed me to reflect further on academic leadership, educational and research cultures, and partnership-building.