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On Thin Ice

A Discourse Analysis on Cooperation in the Arctic Council following
the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

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Abstract

The Arctic Council has long been portrayed as an arena for stable and depoliticized cooperation, often referred to as exemplifying the idea of Arctic exceptionalism. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the following pause in cooperation, did however raise questions about the resilience of the cooperation in the council. This paper presents a discourse analysis of ministerial meeting statements delivered within the Arctic Council in 2021 and 2025. The material consists of official statements from all eight member states, covering the periods before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By applying a theoretical framework combining security communities and securitization theory, the paper examines how cooperation, threats and referent objects are discursively constructed, and how these constructions change in a context of heightened geopolitical tension. The paper concludes that Arctic cooperation has not collapsed, but has been discursively transformed, indicating a weakening of Arctic exceptionalism and a security community operating under increased strain.

Keywords: Arctic Council, Cooperation, Security, Arctic exceptionalism, Russia-Ukraine, Discourse, Security community, Securitization

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Theoretical Framework.....	5
2.1. Previous Research.....	5
2.2. Security Communities.....	6
2.3. Securitization Theory.....	7
3. Research Design.....	8
3.1. Methodology.....	8
3.2. Data Selection and Material.....	9
3.3. Delimitations.....	11
4. Background.....	12
4.1. Creating the Arctic Council.....	12
4.2. Cooperation and Exceptionalism in the Arctic.....	13
4.3. Russia's Invasion of Ukraine 2022 and Consequences.....	14
5. Discourse Analysis.....	16
5.1. Ministerial Meeting 2021.....	16
5.1.1. Constructions of Cooperation.....	16
5.1.2. Constructions of Threat and Risk.....	18
5.1.3. Referent Objects.....	19
5.2. Ministerial Meeting 2025.....	20
5.2.1. Constructions of Cooperation.....	20
5.2.2. Constructions of Threat and Risk.....	21
5.2.3. Referent Objects.....	23
5.3. Discursive Shifts and Discussion.....	24
6. Conclusion.....	26
7. References.....	28

1. Introduction

The Arctic Council was established in 1996, by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Canada, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States, through the Ottawa Declaration, as an intergovernmental forum to promote cooperation on environmental protection and sustainable development. The Council was explicitly created without a mandate to deal with military security issues, which was seen as a way to keep cooperation depoliticized and inclusive. The Council is based on consensus between the eight member states and provides permanent seats for representatives of indigenous groups in the region. (Arctic Council, n.d.).

The Council has been presented as one of the few international forums where states have been able to cooperate in a stable and depoliticized manner, despite increased geopolitical tensions globally. This phenomenon has been described as *Arctic exceptionalism*, i.e. the idea that the Arctic constitutes an exception in international politics (Exner-Pirot & Murray 2017, p. 47). After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the other seven member states paused all cooperation with Russia (Government offices of Sweden 2022). Since Russia controls over half of the Arctic coastline and is one of the most central actors in the Council, this decision sparked controversy in the international community.

1.1. Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this paper is to examine how cooperation and security is discursively constructed within the Arctic Council in the periods before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, by analyzing changes in constructions of cooperation, threats, and referent objects between the 2021 and 2025 ministerial meetings. By applying security communities and securitization theory, the paper seeks to examine how Arctic cooperation is discursively transformed in a context of heightened geopolitical tension.

The research question guiding the analysis is:

How has the discourse on cooperation and security within the Arctic Council shifted before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine 2022?

For the purpose of this paper, Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is referred to as a major geopolitical shock, this event functions as the *independent variable*. The dependent variable is the construction of cooperation and security within the Arctic council, examined through changes in how the concepts of cooperation and security are articulated, justified, or problematized in ministerial statements.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Previous Research

Arctic exceptionalism refers to an old norm or narrative that frames the Arctic as a unique region characterized by favorable security conditions and sustained peaceful cooperation, detached from global political dynamics (Hoogensen Gjørsv & Hodgson 2019, p. 2). This narrative has been developed in research emphasizing cooperation, consensus based governance, and the deliberate exclusion of military security from Arctic institutions, particularly the Arctic Council (Gricius & Fitz 2022, p. 2). However, recent research increasingly questions the analytical sufficiency of exceptionalism as a stable explanatory framework. Hoogensen Gjørsv and Hodgson accentuate that the concept risks depoliticising security by privileging institutional continuity and the absence of armed conflict (2019, p. 2), while Gricius and Fitz argue that exceptionalism reflects a normative aspiration rather than institutional capacity (2022, p. 3). Across this research, crises are treated as critical moments that expose the limitations of exceptionalist governance and challenge assumptions about the Arctic's isolation from global security politics (Gricius & Fitz 2022, p. 4). This points to a research gap concerning how exceptionalist cooperation changes during major geopolitical ruptures.

2.2. Security Communities

Karl Deutsch introduced the concept of security communities as an alternative to realist conceptions of international politics, arguing that durable peace can emerge through social integration rather than repression or balance of power (Deutsch et al. 1957, p.18). A security community exists when states share dependable expectations of peaceful exchange, meaning that the use of force in resolving disputes becomes unthinkable rather than unlikely (Deutsch et al. 1957, p. 5). According to Deutsch, such communities are not primarily the product of formal treaties or military alliances, but of sustained communication, shared norms and mutual trust that can foster a collective sense of identity among political units.

The theoretical framework of this paper is mainly constituted of Adler and Barnett's three tier model, based on Deutsch original theory. The framework offers a structured way to identify the causal elements that constitute and sustain a security community. The model distinguishes between three separate but mutually reinforcing levels. Tier One encompasses the precipitating conditions that can initially draw states towards closer coordination, such as geopolitical shocks, technological change, or shifts in collective interpretations of regional circumstances (Adler & Barnett 1998, p. 37-38). Tier Two refers to the structural and processual foundations of a potential security community, including power configurations, shared knowledge, transnational transactions, institutionalized cooperation and social learning practices that together shape patterns of interactions (Adler & Barnett 1998 pp. 39-40). Tier Three builds upon the previous tiers and identifies the necessary conditions for the actual existence of a security community: mutual trust and the emergence of a collective identity, which together produce what Deutsch termed "dependable expectations of peaceful exchange" (Deutsch et al. 1957, p. 5).

Using this model allows for systematic examination of how the Arctic Council's discourse and cooperative logic may have shifted following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Although Adler and Barnett's framework provides a valuable perspective in analyzing security communities, one could note that the tier-based model may risk being interpreted as overly deterministic if applied uncritically. In this paper, the framework is therefore not treated as fully decisive but as a guideline to interpret the changes in discourse. The concept of Arctic Council cooperation, often associated with depoliticized dialogue and the representation of the Arctic as a stable and apolitical space, can therefore be evaluated in

relation to the conditions that Adler and Barnett describe as fundamental for a pluralistic security community. By tracing how conditions for the three tiers were transformed by the 2022 geopolitical crisis, the analysis aims to assess whether the cooperative order in the Arctic Council maintained the properties of a security community or whether these foundations have weakened.

2.3. Securitization Theory

Stemming from the Copenhagen School; Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) conceptualize securitization as a process in which an issue is articulated as an existential threat, thereby legitimizing responses that fall outside ordinary political procedures. In this view, language and discourse play a central role, as securitization operates through speech acts by which issues are framed and accepted in ways that legitimate extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, pp. 23-24). It is important to highlight that a discourse presenting an issue as an existential threat to a specific referent object does not by itself constitute securitization, but is categorized as a securitizing move. The issue becomes securitized only when the audience accepts it as such, otherwise it is not a successful securitization. Thus, securitization theory focuses on how issues are discursively constructed and moved onto the security agenda as existential threats (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 26).

Following previous studies of securitization theory, this paper focuses on securitizing moves rather than on successful securitization. As shown by Sjöstedt (2008), tracing audience acceptance is not always necessary when the research interest lies in how decision makers articulate security claims and frame issues as threats within policy discourse (Sjöstedt 2008, p. 10). In line with this approach, our paper examines how Arctic states construct cooperation and security through institutional meeting statements, rather than how such constructions are accepted by an audience. The securitizing move is therefore operationalized as the discursive framing of an issue as an existential threat within Arctic Council meeting statements.

Building on recent work by Sjöstedt and Noreen (2025), this paper brings together security communities and securitization theory in order to analyze how discursive constructions of security interact with patterns of cooperation. In place of treating securitization as external to security communities, the authors conceptualize it as an internal process that can both

challenge and reshape the dynamics within a security community (Sjöstedt & Noreen 2025, p. 5). This approach allows our paper to examine how securitizing moves influence cooperation, trust, and stability within the Arctic Council.

3. Research Design

3.1. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative and comparative discourse analysis in order to examine how cooperation and security are discursively constructed in Arctic Council ministerial meeting statements before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The empirical materials are analyzed through security community and securitization theory. The analysis examines how language is used to construct meanings of cooperation and security, and how these constructions shift over time. The comparison between 2021 and 2025 is designed to capture discursive changes in response to a major geopolitical shock. The qualitative nature of discourse analysis necessarily involves interpretative choices by the analyst regarding what is considered analytically relevant, which must be taken into account throughout the analysis.

To operationalize the theoretical framework, the analysis is structured around three analytical categories derived from securitization theory: constructions of cooperation, constructions of threat and risk, and referent objects. These categories guide the interpretation of the statements in both periods.

First, constructions of cooperation are analyzed by identifying how cooperation is described, justified and normalized. Particular attention is paid to references to shared values, consensus, continuity, trust and the role of the Arctic Council itself. These elements are then interpreted in relation to Adler and Barnett's three-tier model, allowing cooperation to be assessed in relation to the dynamics of the tiers.

Second, constructions of threat and risk are examined by identifying which issues are framed as security concerns and how severe these are portrayed. Drawing on securitization theory, the analysis distinguishes between existential threats and non-existential risks, and between

issues framed as requiring extraordinary measures and those managed through political and institutional processes. Attention is also paid to whether challenges are articulated as securitizing moves, or whether securitization is actively avoided.

Third, referent objects are identified by analyzing what is constructed as being in need of protection. The securitization theory enables a perspective where it becomes evident what kind of object is framed as something requiring protection. In the case of cooperation in the Arctic Council, this allows us to examine articulations of protection in the statements, tracing shifts in prioritization. Articulations including vulnerability, necessity, and protection are of particular attention in order to analyze how referent objects are constructed.

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, the 2021 and 2025 statements are analyzed separately using the same analytical categories to ensure consistency. Second, a comparative discussion identifies discursive shifts between the two periods. Through this approach, the paper assesses how securitizing moves and changes in cooperative discourse affect the Arctic Council's character as a pluralistic security community.

3.2. Data Selection and Material

In this Paper, we will be analyzing meeting statements from all member states given at the Ministerial meetings in 2021 and 2025. The Ministerial meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland (May 20, 2021) was the last meeting held before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The first meeting following the invasion was held in Salekhard, Russia, (May 11, 2023) (Arctic Council, n.d.) but no ministerial statements were delivered, most likely due to all member states deciding to pause cooperation with the Russian federation, and therefore not travel to the meeting in question. Due to these circumstances, we have decided to analyze meeting statements delivered by the member states at the Fourteenth Meeting of the Arctic Council in Tromsø, Norway (May 12th 2025).

Arctic Council ministerial meetings are held every two years and serve as an opportunity for the minister-level representatives of the Arctic States to meet and review the Council's work. Meeting statements are formal and publicly available statements in which member states

present their national positions and priorities within the Council (Arctic Council Secretariat 2023, p. 14).

This selection makes it possible to compare how member states describe cooperation, risks, and referent objects within the Arctic Council in two different political contexts. At the same time, the paper focuses only on official statements and does not cover discussions that take place outside the official statements.

Ministerial meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, May 20, 2021

State	Representative	Type of document	Position
Canada	Marc Garneau	Minister's remarks	Minister of Foreign Affairs
Finland	H.E. Pekka Haavisto	Ministers speech	Minister of Foreign Affairs
Iceland	Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson	Minister's Statement	Minister of the Environment, Energy and Climate
Kingdom of Denmark	Jeppe Kofod	Ministers speech	Minister of Foreign Affairs
Norway	Ine Eriksen Søreide	Ministers Speech	Minister of Foreign Affairs
Russia	Sergey Lavrov	Minister's Statement	Minister of Foreign Affairs
Sweden	Ann Linde	Minister's Statement	Minister of Foreign Affairs
United States of America	Antony J. Blinken	Ministers Intervention	Secretary of State

Fourteenth Meeting of the Arctic Council in Tromsø, Norway, May 12th 2025

State	Representative	Type of Document	Position
Canada	Robert Sinclair	Meeting Statement	Senior Arctic Official
Finland	Petteri Vuorimäki	Meeting Statement	Senior Arctic Official
Iceland	Bergdís Ellertsdóttir	Meeting Statement	Senior Arctic Official
Kingdom of Denmark	Torsten Kjølby Nielsen	Meeting Statement	Senior Arctic Official
Norway	Solveig Rossebø	Meeting Statement	Senior Arctic Official
Russia	Vladislav Maslennikov	Meeting Statement	Senior Arctic Official
Sweden	Anna Hamrell	Meeting Statement	Senior Arctic Advisor
United States of America	Eric Carlson	Meeting Statement	Senior Arctic Official

3.3. Delimitations

This study is deliberately limited in scope in order to remain analytically concise and focused. First, the empirical material is limited to official speeches and statements delivered by member states within the Arctic Council ministerial meetings, thereby excluding working group reports, similar documents and other interactions within the council, as well as statements delivered by permanent members representing indigenous groups in the region. This choice reflects an interest in how Arctic cooperation is constructed at the highest political level, rather than how cooperation functions in practice. Second, the temporal scope is restricted to two periods: Before and after 2022, in order to create a structured comparison. Finally, the paper is limited to the Arctic Council as an organization and does not aim to account for Arctic geopolitics more generally.

4. Background

4.1. Creating the Arctic Council

The Establishment of the Arctic council in 1996 can be linked to the geopolitical changes that followed the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, The Arctic region primarily functioned as a strategic military space, with limited opportunity for political cooperation (Bloom 1999, p. 712). As tensions eased in the late 1980s, Arctic states began identifying environmental and sustainable development as shared concerns that possibly could serve as a base for cooperation without invoking sensitive security issues. An early indication of this shift can be seen in Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 Murmansk Speech, which framed the Arctic as a potential region of peace through proposals on demobilization, scientific cooperation, environmental protection, as well as the inclusion of indigenous concerns (Exner-Pirot & Murray 2017, p. 52). The shift can later be observed through the creation of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) in 1991, which is described as an important predecessor to the Arctic council (Bloom 1999, pp. 714-716).

Building on the AEPS, The Arctic Council was formally established in September 1996 through the signing of the *Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council* (the Ottawa Declaration) by the eight Arctic states: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States. The Council was created as a high-level Intergovernmental forum intended to promote cooperation, coordination and interaction on common Arctic issues, with emphasis on environmental protection and sustainable development, while explicitly excluding military security from its mandate (Arctic council 1996). This exclusion has been seen as a deliberate choice intended to preserve cooperation by distancing the Council from the security dynamics that had dominated the Arctic during the Cold War (Bloom 1999, p. 718).

Today, the Arctic Council carries out its work through six permanent working groups, which are responsible for implementing the programmes and projects mandated by the Arctic Council ministers. These mandates are formally articulated in the Ministerial declarations adopted at the Councils Ministerial meetings. The working groups cover a wide range of areas and include: the Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP), the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF),

Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR), Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME), and the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG). All activities within the Arctic Council, including decisions taken by its subsidiary bodies, are guided by the principle of consensus, meaning that agreement among all Arctic member states is required (Arctic Council, n.d.).

4.2. Cooperation and Exceptionalism in the Arctic

The Arctic region has often been described as a context in which cooperation has persisted, even as conflicting interests have shaped Russia's relations with Western states in other arenas since the end of the Cold War. This perception has contributed to the notion of *Arctic exceptionalism*, referring to the deliberate compartmentalization of Arctic relations from conflicts and rivalries present elsewhere in international politics (Exner-Pirot & Murray 2017, p. 47). Thereby meaning that events which have proven destabilizing in other regions have not had the same effect on Arctic relations, where cooperation has been treated as a protected domain.

This exceptionalist understanding was tested following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 as geopolitical tensions intensified. According to Wither (2021), the previously cooperative and diplomatic character of Arctic relations became increasingly strained as military competition grew in the aftermath of Crimea, contributing to an "Arctic security dilemma" (2021, p. 649; 653). Dialogue between Russia and Western states was suspended in several military forums, and Russia ceased to participate in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable and the Northern Chiefs of Defence Conference (Wither 2021, p. 654). Despite these developments, cooperation did not cease entirely. Russia and the Western states continued to collaborate on issues such as climate change, nuclear safety and scientific research, showing that states were able to compartmentalize these issues from the broader geopolitical conflict (Wither 2021, p. 656). A crucial factor in maintaining this cooperation is Russia's interest in preserving stability in the Arctic region. The region is of economic importance to Russia, accounting for a significant portion of its GDP, making the Arctic much more important to Russia than to its potential competitors (Exner-Pirot & Murray 2017, p. 59).

Despite rising military activity, the Arctic's balance of power remains largely stable. Arctic diplomacy has continued to emphasize cooperation, dialogue, and multilateralism in its exceptional spirit. Cooperation has been further supported by a strong reliance on international law and so called confidence building measures. While ongoing militarization poses potential challenges, these mechanisms and shared interests have so far sustained collaborative practices in the region (Exner- Pirot & Murray 2017, pp. 60-61).

4.3. Russia's Invasion of Ukraine 2022 and Consequences

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represented a major turning point in European security and had consequences that extended beyond the immediate conflict. President Vladimir Putin justified the invasion by framing it as a continuation of the fight against Nazism, a narrative that has been widely criticized as a form of historical reinterpretation used to justify Russia's military actions (Lapenkova 2024). In response, the seven other Arctic Council member states decided to pause all cooperation with Russia, referring to Russia's violation of international law as well as the principles of peaceful cooperation within the Arctic Council. This decision marked a decisive break with the idea of Arctic exceptionalism and generated uncertainty regarding the Council's future (Dyck 2024, p. 3).

At the time of the invasion, Russia held the chairmanship of the Arctic Council which complicated the suspension of activities and generated new strategic and institutional dilemmas for the remaining member states. While the pause in cooperation was intended as a political response to Russian aggression, Scholars warned that excluding Russia entirely could undermine the Council's role as a circumpolar forum, given Russia's position as the preeminent Arctic state. These concerns were reflected by the American coordinator for the Arctic region, James P. Deltart, who stated that "Creating an alternative structure to the Arctic Council is not on our agenda." (Dyck 2024, p. 3).

During the pause, Russia actively sought to increase its leverage by signalling alternative pathways for Arctic cooperation. In April 2022, Russia and China signed a memorandum on Arctic coast guard cooperation, indicating Russia's willingness to deepen non-Western

partnerships if excluded from existing institutions (Paukkunen & Black 2024, p. 2642). Alongside this, President Putin publicly described the Arctic's seven states as “unfriendly”, portraying the other members as hostile to the Russian state (Paukkunen & Black 2024, p. 2644). As Dyck (2024, p. 4) argues, this situation revealed the Arctic Council’s institutional fragility, as the Council lacks formal procedures for excluding a member or transferring the Chairship without Russia, while also risking reduced legitimacy among observers of the Council, such as China, if Russia were fully excluded.

In September 2023, the Arctic Council approved a gradual return of work for the working groups, allowing limited cooperation with Russian participation. However, the conditions for cooperation had fundamentally changed. Trust remained fragile and cooperation was increasingly justified in instrumental rather than normative terms. As Dyck (2024, p. 5) notes, rebuilding that trust is critical as the Arctic experiences rising ecological and geopolitical stressors.

5. Discourse Analysis

5.1. Ministerial Meeting 2021

5.1.1. Constructions of Cooperation

The ministerial statements delivered at the Arctic Council Ministerial meeting in Reykjavik on May 20, 2021 depict and construct cooperation as a highly important fundament for stability in the Arctic region and is repeatedly referred to within the realm of “spirit of cooperation” (Norway; Russia 2021). The Arctic Council is constructed as the primary and legitimate forum for this cooperation (Finland; Canada; Norway 2021). This framing positions cooperation as not only a practical arrangement, but as a defining feature of Arctic governance. This construction of cooperation closely aligns with Deutsch’s original understanding of security communities. The emphasis of cooperation as a taken for granted condition of Arctic interaction reflects what Deutsch referred to as “dependable expectations of peaceful exchange” (Adler & Barnett 1998, p. 7), where the use of force is unthinkable, rather than merely unlikely (Deutsch et al. 1957, p. 5).

Cooperation within the Arctic Council is further articulated through references to an idea of “shared responsibility” between the Arctic states (Russia 2021), as well as the importance of “consensus” (Finland; Sweden 2021). Here, the idea of consensus can be seen as functioning both as a norm as well as a signal of mutual trust. These references point to Tier Two dynamics, as introduced by Adler & Barnett (1998, p. 39), where institutionalized cooperation and practices shape stable patterns of interaction.

Multiple statements include discussions regarding the “Arctic Council Strategic Plan 2030”, which is framed as expressing the Arctic States “shared values” and providing a shared long-term direction for cooperation (Russia; Denmark; Norway 2021). Discursively, the plan functions as a symbol of continuity and collective purpose, reinforcing the idea that cooperation is grounded in shared identity rather than political interests. Within the theory of security communities, this can be seen as corresponding to Tier Three dynamics (Adler & Barnett 1998, pp. 146-147) as the strategic plan helps sustain mutual trust and dependable expectations of peaceful exchange.

The cooperative tone is particularly evident in statements about Russia's incoming chairmanship. While Sweden's (2021) statement is framed in a supportive and cooperative language, it also carries a subtle tone of caution. By explicitly encouraging Russia to “maintain and seek consensus”. Sweden (2021) reaffirms consensus as a core norm within Arctic cooperation, but could also be interpreted as implicitly signaling concern that such behaviour cannot be taken for granted. Rather than constituting a securitizing move, this can be understood as a form of boundary-setting aimed at preserving cooperative expectations.

A central aspect in the discourse is the recognition of the permanent members of the council representing the indigenous groups inhabiting the region. Cooperation within this sector involves integration of “Indigenous Knowledge” as well as the recognizing Native groups as “true and equal partners” in decision making (Canada; United States 2021). This framing extends cooperation beyond intergovernmental interaction and reinforces a shared regional identity, further supporting the social foundations of a pluralistic security community (Adler & Barnett 1998, p. 30).

Finally, multiple statements emphasize how Arctic cooperation is built on international law, as well as a “rules-based international order” (Canada; Norway; Sweden 2021). Iceland's

(2021) explicit reference to the “spirit of Reykjavik” links contemporary Arctic cooperation to historical narratives of de-escalation following the Cold War. “I hope, Mr. Chair, that the spirit of Reykjavik will again today serve to remind us that for the greater good to prevail [...] That has been the true spirit of Arctic cooperation for the last quarter of a century. May it so remain” (Iceland 2021). By referencing the 1986 Reykjavik Summit, Iceland reinforces the image of the Arctic as a region shaped by dialogue and the deliberate avoidance of confrontation.

Overall, the discourse seen in the 2021 ministerial meeting regarding cooperation in the council reflects many of the core characteristics of a pluralistic security community (Adler & Barnett p. 30). Cooperation is framed as normative and institutionalized, created by trust and shared expectations of peaceful interaction. At the same time, subtle signals of caution, might suggest that the cooperative order might not be entirely immune to geopolitical shifts. Importantly, cooperation is not articulated as a response to existential threat (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 26), but as the normal and legitimate foundation of Arctic governance, indicating a low level of securitization.

5.1.2. Constructions of Threat and Risk

In the ministerial statements from May 2021, constructions of threat are dominated by environmental and climate-related risks. Climate change is continuously described as a “crisis” and the “most serious long-term threat” (Canada; United States 2021). Several states emphasize the scientific observation that the Arctic is warming at a significantly faster rate than the global average (Sweden; US; Denmark; Iceland 2021), a fact used to underline both the urgency, as well as the exceptional vulnerability of the region. Climate change is further described as potentially risking reaching a “dangerous turning point” where the mere existence of the region is threatened (Iceland 2021).

Beyond climate change, a range of “environmental risks” are identified as threats to both ecosystems and human security within the region. These include marine litter and plastic contamination (Denmark 2021), radioactive waste from sunken Russian submarines, as well as the risks associated with thawing permafrost (Finland 2021). These issues are presented as serious challenges, to be addressed through scientific cooperation, monitoring and regulating

frameworks, rather than through extraordinary political or security measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 25).

Geopolitical and military risks can be seen as having a marginal position in the 2021 discourse. The United States (2021) refers to the Arctic as an upcoming arena for “strategic competition”, in relation to natural resources and territorial control. Similarly, Canada (2021) warns of challenges to the “rules-based international order”. While these statements introduce a higher level of security language, they are not constructing immediate or existential threats (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 26) within the Arctic context. Russia (2021), on the other hand, expresses a will to extend Arctic cooperation into the military sphere, proposing the resumption of multilateral dialogue among the Chiefs of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Arctic states. However, this proposal is framed as constructive rather than threatening. It is presented as an extension of existing cooperation rather than as a response to imminent threat.

Overall, the 2021 discourse regarding threat and risk reflect a low level of securitization. Environmental risks dominate constructions of threat, while geopolitical tensions are recognized but not in a critical manner. In line with Adler and Barnett's Tier Two and Tier Three dynamics (1998, p. 38), the Arctic Council in 2021 is discursively constructed as an organisation where shared risks are managed through cooperation and mutual trust, reinforcing dependable expectations of peaceful exchange.

5.1.3. Referent Objects

The referent object, what is framed as requiring protection, varies across the ministerial statements from 2021, yet three main categories can be identified. These constructions provide further insight into how security is articulated within the Arctic council discourse.

The most prominent referent object is the people living in the Arctic. Several states emphasize that decision making should be grounded in the needs and well-being of Arctic inhabitants, describing the region as “home of our people” (United States 2021) and referring explicitly to those who “inhabit the Arctic” (Denmark 2021). Finland, Norway, and Russia (2021) similarly stress societal well-being as a central concern of Arctic governance. This framing locates security at the societal and human level rather than at the state level,

reinforcing a people-centered understanding of Arctic security, thereby lowering the likelihood of militarized or exceptional responses.

A second key referent object is the Arctic environment, frequently described as unique and fragile, and in need of protection from climate change and human activity (Sweden; United States 2021). Environmental protection is framed as essential not only for ecosystems but also for human security in the region. In this context, the concept of resilience is used (Finland 2021) to frame environmental protection as a long-term societal responsibility, rather than as an immediate security threat, which can be interpreted as consistent with low levels of securitization.

Peace and stability in the Arctic region can be seen as a third, largely implicit referent object. References to preserving the Arctic as a “zone of peace” (Finland 2021), and as a region of “low tension” (Iceland 2021) frame peace as something to be maintained and protected. These references are articulated so as to frame the region as stable and cooperative, rather than as facing immediate or existential threats (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 26).

Taken together, these referent objects reflect a discourse in which security is constructed around people, environment, and stability rather than military power or territorial defense. This aligns with the characteristics of Adler & Barnett’s Third Tier and the foundations of a pluralistic security community where shared values, mutual trust and institutionalized cooperation create dependable expectations of peaceful exchange. The absence of explicit state-centric or military referent objects further reinforces the low level of securitization that characterizes Arctic Council discourse prior to 2022.

5. 2. Ministerial Meeting 2025

5.2.1. Constructions of Cooperation

The ministerial meeting in Tromsø on May 12 2025, is characterized by an underlying discourse in which cooperation between Arctic Council members must constantly be legitimized. References to the Council as “the only functioning structure” (Norway 2025) signal that cooperation is no longer taken for granted, but rather something that must be

actively upheld. In this sense, cooperation is constructed less as a natural outcome and more as a political project requiring ongoing commitment.

This is further strengthened by Sweden, Denmark, Russia and Norway's (2025) underlining on the joint statement, which manifests that the eight member states remain committed to a stronger role of the Arctic Council as the "preeminent forum for Arctic cooperation" (Sweden 2025). Such reaffirmations suggest an awareness that cooperation within the Council is potentially fragile and that its continued existence can not be assumed. The repeated commitments therefore function as a stabilizing discourse aimed at preserving cooperation without directly framing it as an existential security threat (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 26).

Beyond the repeated reaffirmations of commitment, cooperation is further constructed through an emphasis on institutional continuity and routine practices. Several statements including Finland's (2025) assertion that "bona fide cooperation benefits all" or Russia (2025) expressing that the Council "has potential to restore the "spirit of cooperation" stresses the need to safeguard the work of the Arctic Council. Although, Russia's view of cooperation differs from the others, as they suggest a different temporal framing where cooperation is portrayed as having been disrupted and in need of recovery.

Furthermore, the importance of maintaining the work in the Council's working groups is highlighted, framing them as the primary forces through which cooperation can persist despite broader political challenges. Denmark (2025) emphasizes that it was a significant milestone when the Working Group meetings were able to resume in February 2024, in addition Norway (2025) described the groups as "the engine of the Arctic Council". This can be interpreted as meaning that members base cooperation on the institutional structure of the Council, rather than through an assumed or fully restored sense of mutual trust among the member states. From the perspective of security communities, this reflects a reliance on what Adler and Barnett describe as Tier Two dynamics, where institutionalized cooperation and shared procedures shape engagement among states (Adler & Barnett 1998 pp. 39-40).

Given these points, the 2025 discourse constructs cooperation as a practice that must be actively preserved through institutional work rather than as a natural continuation grounded in mutual trust. In accordance with the security community theory, this suggests that

cooperation in 2025 is mainly grounded in Tier Two dynamics, while the Tier Three conditions of mutual trust and collective identity remain only partially articulated (Adler & Barnett 1998 pp. 146-147).

5.2.2. Constructions of Threat and Risk

Constructions of threat and risk are articulated through environmental and societal challenges that are accepted as legitimate concerns within the Arctic Council. Iceland states that “Our duty is to the people who call the Arctic home. We need to address their concerns, mitigate the sometimes-devastating effects of the climate crisis and ensure sustainable economic development.” (2025), similarly Finland emphasizes these concerns by stating that “[...] we must not forget that the Indigenous People are at the frontline of climate change.” (2025). Issues including indigenous rights and climate change are constantly framed as urgent and extensive risks to the Arctic region and its inhabitants. While these challenges are described in severe terms, they are still embedded within the Council’s existing mandate, rather than presented as threats requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 25). They thus constitute securitizing moves that reinforce cooperation without challenging peaceful interaction.

In contrast to these accepted environmental and societal risks, geopolitical tensions are largely present through indirect formulations. References to “challenging times” (Norway 2025), “volatile times” (Sweden 2025) or “conflict outside the region” (United States 2025) acknowledge a changed security environment without explicitly articulating geopolitical confrontation as a threat within the Arctic Council. This restrained language suggests an effort to keep geopolitical tensions out of the Council in order to protect expectations of continued cooperation. Viewed through securitization theory, this can be understood as a deliberate avoidance of framing interstate conflict as a security threat, since such a move would risk disrupting the spirit of cooperation that sustains the Arctic Council as a security community (Sjöstedt & Noreen 2025, p. 5).

Different from the others, Russia’s statement includes a symbolic reference to the “Great Victory over Nazism” (Russia 2025). Rather than addressing contemporary sources of tensions, such as Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine, this historical framing points to a shared past in which Arctic states were united against a universally recognized existential threat

(Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 26). This can be understood as an attempt to place Russia within a shared historical narrative of unity, while shifting attention away from current conflicts that complicate Russia's role in the Council.

To summarize, the 2025 discourse constructs a hierarchy of threats in which environmental risks are openly articulated, while geopolitical conflict is acknowledged implicitly or displaced through historical references. This pattern illustrates how threat constructions are selectively articulated in order to maintain cooperative norms associated with Arctic exceptionalism. In accordance with security community theory, this way of keeping geopolitics out of the discussion can be interpreted as “helping” protect cooperation through the Council's institutions, even though it also shows that trust and a shared sense of community are still limited.

5.2.3. Referent Objects

In the 2025 ministerial statements, referent objects are constructed around human and environmental security rather than around the protection of states or territory. Iceland expresses the “ [...] importance of including indigenous Peoples' knowledge, experience and awareness of the environment and nature in our work” (2025), thereby positioning indigenous people as central objects of protection. Finland further reinforces this understanding by noting that, although the Ottawa Declaration excludes military security, the Council plays a key role in addressing other forms of security, such as wildfires (Finland 2025). In doing so, Finland frames environmental and societal risks as legitimate security concerns and positions them as key referent objects within the Council's mandate. From the perspective of securitization theory, this allows security to be articulated without invoking military threat narratives or extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998, p. 25), keeping these referent objects within the realm of accepted cooperation.

Aside from people and the environment, the Arctic Council itself is implicitly constructed as something that must be protected. This is shown by the members describing the Council as a “unique platform”, “It's imperative that this continues” (Norway 2025), or “It is a unique and invaluable body” (Sweden 2025). Frequent emphasis on the Council's relevance, continuity and ability to function suggest that the institution is understood as essential for

managing the risks facing the region. While the Council is not portrayed as being under direct threat, its legitimacy and operational capacity become necessary conditions for safeguarding the other referent objects. In this sense, what is being protected is not only people and the environment, but also the institutional framework that enables cooperation. Within the theory of security communities, this suggests an illustration in which cooperation is maintained through institutional continuity, rather than through explicit references to shared values or collective identity (Adler & Barnett 1998 p. 146). Overall, the referent objects constructed in the 2025 discourse prioritize human and environmental security, while also implicitly safeguarding the institutional framework through which cooperation in the Arctic is sustained.

5.3. Discursive Shifts and Discussion

A comparison of the ministerial meeting statements from 2021 and 2025 reveals a discursive shift in how cooperation, threat, and security are articulated within the Arctic council. While the core commitment to cooperation and non-militarized security remains intact, the discourse moves from being characterized by confidence and stability to being marked by caution, justification and some degree of institutional self-preservation.

In 2021, cooperation is constructed as a stable and normalized condition for Arctic governance. It is framed as being grounded in shared values, mutual trust, and implicit dependable expectations of peaceful exchange. This discourse aligns closely with Adler and Barnett's Tier Three dynamics, where cooperation is sustained not only through institutions, but through a shared collective identity and deeply internalized norms.

In contrast, The 2025 discourse reflects a significant shift in how cooperation is framed. Cooperation is no longer assumed but repeatedly reaffirmed and actively legitimized. References to the council as the "only functioning structure" and as a "unique and invaluable" might suggest an awareness of fragility. Rather than expressing confidence in shared identity or trust, the discourse emphasizes working groups and continuity of practices. This shift may indicate a movement away from Tier Three dynamics toward a stronger reliance on Tier Two dynamics, where cooperation is maintained primarily through formal structures and routines.

This shift indicates a thinning of the foundations of the security community rather than its complete breakdown. We find that this transformation is not only visible at the institutional level, but also reflected in the changing discursive role of individual member states. In 2021, Russia's statement aligns with the dominant language of cooperation and institutional responsibility. By contrast, the 2025 statement exhibits a deliberate avoidance of Russia's current invasion of Ukraine and refers to a time of unity, to the victory over Nazism, with the other member states of the Council. As mentioned earlier, Russia's justification of the invasion of Ukraine has been framed as a continuation of the combat against Nazism. By referring to a time when the member states were unified, this can be understood as a discursive move that shifts attention away from the contemporary conflict by situating Russia's actions within a broader historical narrative that emphasizes moral legitimacy rather than contemporary responsibility. The security community theory enables an interpretation that suggests a weakening of the Arctic Council as a pluralistic security community, as shared understandings of security and legitimacy no longer appear to be fully aligned among all member states.

Securitization theory makes it possible to identify shifts in what is constructed as worthy of protection, even in the absence of explicit existential threats or extraordinary measures. Applied to the Arctic Council, this perspective highlights how security can be articulated through the prioritization of institutional continuity. In 2021, security is primarily expressed in relation to people living in the Arctic, the environment, and the maintenance of peace in the region. These referent objects are embedded in a discourse that emphasizes shared responsibility, collective identity, and long-term cooperation.

Although these references remain visible in the 2025 statements, there is a shift in what is prioritized. The Arctic Council itself increasingly appears as an implicit referent object, frequently described in terms of its unique character and continued functioning. Based on our analysis, we interpret the discourse in 2021 as portraying cooperation as means for protecting referent objects, while the 2025 discourse constructs cooperation as an object requiring protection.

Another key discursive shift concerns the level of political representation at the ministerial meetings. While the 2021 statements were mainly delivered by foreign ministers, the 2025

statements were made by senior Arctic officials. We interpret this shift not as a decline in the Council's relevance, but as an effort to depoliticize cooperation in a context of heightened geopolitical tension. By lowering the level of political visibility, member states appear to seek to protect the Arctic Council from becoming an arena for symbolic confrontation.

This change suggests an acknowledgement that the Council is affected by broader geopolitical developments, even as its mandate formally excludes military and security issues. Rather than acting as if geopolitical tensions are irrelevant, the Arctic Council appears to respond to them directly by adjusting its institutional practices. From a securitization perspective, this can be understood as a securitizing move in which geopolitical tension is identified as a threat to institutional cooperation, and managed through a shift from high-level political engagement to lower-level representation. In this sense, security is articulated not through escalation, but through institutional adjustment aimed at safeguarding the Council from conflict.

Altogether, these discursive shifts suggest that while the Arctic Council continues to reflect key characteristics of a pluralistic security community, the nature of that community has changed. Prior to 2022, cooperation was grounded in trust and shared identity. By 2025, cooperation persists, but is increasingly maintained through institutional capacity. This does not indicate a collapse of the Arctic security community, but a transformation in which cooperation survives under more strained conditions.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how discursive constructions of cooperation and security have shifted following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and what these changes indicate about the Council's continued character as a security community. By comparing ministerial statements from 2021 and 2025 through combined lenses of security communities and securitization theory, the analysis shows that while cooperation within the Arctic has persisted, its discourse has been transformed. The discourse on cooperation and security within the Arctic Council has shifted from a general perception of cooperation as something natural and fundamental, to a discourse where cooperation must be actively upheld to maintain security within the region.

Importantly, these changes do not indicate a collapse of the Arctic security community. Rather, they point to a transformation in which cooperation survives under changed conditions shaped by geopolitical crises. The absence of ministerial statements from the 2023 meeting in Salekhard, Russia underscores the depth of this disruption and highlights how the invasion affected the institutional practices within the Council.

This paper has exclusively focused on the Arctic Council and its official statements, leaving aside securitizing moves that may occur in other forums or military arenas related to the Arctic. Evaluation of developments outside the council could potentially produce different results but could not be included in the scope of this paper. Furthermore, the analysis also does not account for the most recent political developments affecting the Arctic Council, particularly the United States proposing acquisition of Greenland, which is likely to be highly relevant for the future role of the Council.

In conclusion, the Arctic Council continues to function as a security community, but one that operates on thinner ice, where cooperation requires active maintenance rather than being taken for granted. Arctic exceptionalism has not disappeared but has been substantially weakened.

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