Deconstruction of political core of the region: Arctic discourses in tatters

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Abstract: This study examines the evolving political core of the Arctic, focusing on the impact of recent political shifts, particularly Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Traditionally, the Arctic has been viewed as a region of cooperation, with the eight states and institutions such as the Arctic Council promoting stability and environmental protection. However, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 disrupted this status quo, leading to a suspension of most collaborative efforts with Russia and creating a more fragmented regional order. Using a poststructuralist approach, the research explores how the states' strategies construct and deconstruct the region through discourse. The AntConc software is employed to analyse policy documents, uncovering the persistence of strategic narratives that emphasize cooperation. The study also reveals the diversity of regional perspectives, demonstrating that each Arctic region-builder defines the Arctic differently, reflecting its own priorities and interests. This analysis highlights the fluidity of the region's political core, shaped by competing narratives and shifting power relations. It also underscores the increasing challenges posed by climate change, which both unites and divides the agents. The findings suggest that the Arctic is not a single cohesive region but a space where multiple interpretations interact, shaping its evolving political identity.

Keywords: Arctic, hegemonic discourse, poststructuralism, region-building, discourse analysis.

Introduction

The Arctic has traditionally been perceived as a zone of cooperation, exemplified by the concept of the Arctic exceptionalism, where environmental protection and sustainable development prevailed over political tensions. However, recent shifts in global dynamics, notably Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have brought these assumptions into question, highlighting the complex interactions between climate change, security issues, and political interests in the region. These changes underscore the need for a deeper understanding of the Arctic's political core, a framework that captures the key institutions, narratives, and values.

Current scholarship in the regional international relations has focused on the evolution of governance and the interplay between cooperation and conflict. While this has provided insights into institutional developments, like the Arctic Council, there is a need to go beyond this to examine how the region is discursively constructed by key agents. The Arctic's political core, as a construct, is inherently unstable, influenced by shifts in power relations and regional identities. The deconstruction of this core, therefore, becomes an essential lens for understanding the Arctic's changing dynamics, especially considering recent disruptions.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how strategic narratives, as articulated in official policy documents, construct and deconstruct the Arctic as a region while maintaining a discourse of stability despite significant political disruptions. This research seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which these narratives shape the Arctic's political identity and influence regional governance, with a specific focus on the impact of political shifts, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

By focusing on the discourse of political strategies published by key regional agents, this research explores how these texts serve as speech acts that shape the regional core. The Arctic, as a region, is not a static geographical space but a construct shaped by varying interpretations and strategic priorities. Through the lens of deconstruction, this research examines how these strategic narratives, embodied in official policy documents, maintain a discourse of stability – a strategic status quo – despite the significant political shifts. Using AntConc analysis, the study reveals how Arctic strategies act as key speech acts, framing the region's identity and governance while masking underlying tensions. These variations highlight the fragmented nature of the Arctic's political identity, challenging the idea of a cohesive regional framework and revealing a space where competing narratives interact.

While this research offers valuable insights into the discursive construction of the Arctic, it is not without limitations. The analysis is primarily focused on English-language strategies,

potentially omitting nuances from native-language documents. Additionally, the scope is concentrated on state narratives, leaving room for future studies to integrate indigenous and non–state perspectives. Nonetheless, this study provides a crucial understanding of how language and discourse continue to shape the Arctic's political core in an era of uncertainty and change.

Theory and methods

The methodological approach of this study is grounded in four pillars. The first is poststructuralism, which serves as the theoretical framework. The next two are the region-building approach, which serves as a theoretical lens, and discourse analysis, which constitutes the primary research method for this study. The fourth pillar is the utilization of the AntConc computer software as the main research tool.

Poststructuralism. – Ontological and epistemological issues form the foundation of research in the social sciences, where facts do not speak for themselves. In this context, the reflective perspective derives from an antinaturalistic approach concerning ontology. Regarding epistemology, poststructuralists lean toward hermeneutics. However, precisely defining its characteristics proves to be a challenging task.

Indeed, poststructuralists critique rationality, contending that there is no objective truth. Its ontological and epistemological approach is deeply influenced by the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, with references to Ludwig Wittgenstein as well (Nietzsche 1887; Wittgenstein 1922; Heidegger 1962). The challenges in classifying poststructuralism within contemporary social sciences lie in its connections with postmodernism. It is difficult to precisely delineate them.

Poststructuralism can be comprehended in relation to structuralism. Indeed, structuralism can be characterized as a contribution to the agent/structure debate. As the name implies, it significantly undermines the scientific explanation from an agent's perspective, favouring the influence of structure. By placing the structure at the forefront of scientific inquiry, this perspective is empowered to assign significations to objects. Nevertheless, in reference to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, attention was directed toward the signified (see de Saussure 2006).

On the contrary, poststructuralism shifts this focus and turns toward the signifier. It underscores the intrinsic instability and multiplicity inherent in linguistic symbols. This paradigm shift challenges the concept of a static, universal meaning, asserting that language functions through a play of metaphors. Consequently, it calls for the deconstruction of both overt and latent

significations. Language now becomes the primary subject of study, given its crucial role in the social construction of reality. One of the key figures who can be regarded as representative of this line of thought is Michel Foucault. In his research, he references the Nietzschean method of genealogy, which represents 'an alternative critical theory of contemporary history' (Foucault 1977). Foucault elucidates the relationship between power and knowledge within a historical context through discourses. These two elements are combined into the term 'power–knowledge' which, in his view, are inseparable. 'Power needs knowledge' and 'the truth has its history' (Foucault 1969). Language takes centre stage in the research through discourses.

The second noteworthy author is Jacques Derrida, primarily associated with the method of deconstruction within poststructuralism. He posits that there are no fixed significations or structures. Language operates through the play of metaphors, demanding their deconstruction to uncover both overt and latent significations (Derrida 1967). This implies that existing phenomena must be interrogated and subjected to critical discourse analysis (van Dijk 2015). Intertextuality holds significant importance in Derrida's framework, where all elements of discourse are interconnected, and their significations interweave (Mikiewicz and Polus 2016). Consequently, there exists no singular interpretation of a particular text or any other object as part of the postmodern discourse (Lyotard 1984). Richard Ashley and James Der Derian draw upon concepts related to postmodernism/poststructuralism in the domain of international relations (Ashley 1987; Der Derian 1987; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989).

Region–building approach. – In the field of social sciences, the works of Iver Neumann appear intriguing (Neumann 1994, 2003). The region-building approach aligns with the recent trends in new regionalism as a component of the development of area studies, a subdiscipline of international studies. Neumann demonstrates that all studies on regionalisation can be positioned along a continuum with inside-out approaches and outside-in approaches (of regionalisation) at either end. Neumann endeavours to transcend this bipolarity by posing different questions: 'How and why was the existence of a given region postulated in the first place?' and 'who perpetuates its existence with what intentions?' (Neumann 1994).

In particular, the inspiration for his works can be found in Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities' and in Foucault's version of genealogical analysis (Foucault 1969; Anderson 2006). The former author portrays the nation as an imagined community, thus depicting a nation state as a hyperreal simulacrum where the familial ties among its members are merely posited. Neumann suggests that the origins of the region and regional identity among the region-builders are also subject to scrutiny and open to criticism. Region-builders, as defined by Neumann, are the

primary agents involved in the discursive construction of a region. These include states, institutions, and other agents whose actions and narratives shape the region's identity and governance frameworks. Their intentions and strategies underpin the process of region-building, which remains central to the Arctic's evolving political core. It is also important to note that when a region is considered an imagined community, it does not imply that the region does not exist (Neumann 1994).

Nonetheless, the continuous existence of a region should not be assumed as a given (Neumann 2003). A discursive region, as described earlier, is defined in terms of speech acts and does not necessarily correspond to a geographical region (Hoogensen Gjørv and Hodgson 2019). The region-building approach emphasizes that the object under analysis is defined and redefined (Neumann 1994). These definitions may conflict with each other, but a hegemonic one often dominates the narrative. 'The region-building approach would insist on going to the root of things and ask where the criteria for what is "natural" come from, who formulated them, who chose to apply them and thereby made them relevant, and who stand to gain from them' (Neumann 2003).

Discourse analysis. – Discourse analysis constitutes another method employed in this study. 'Social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them signification' (Phillips and Hardy 2002). Reality is discursively constructed, with discourse being comprehended as an interaction and context that shapes it. Single acts of speech serve as the constituent elements that construct discourse.

In brief, the prevalence of discourse analysis over traditional science lies in its capacity to encompass multiple sign codes in research, rather than a singular sign code. This allows for the comparison and deconstruction of various sign codes, thereby broadening the scope of analysis (de Beaugrande 1997; Titscher *et al.* 2000; van Dijk 2015).

In the author's perspective, the work of Jennifer Milliken positioned discourse analysis within the realm of international relations research. In 'The study of discourse in international relations. A critique of research and methods', Milliken directs attention to the intimate connections between social processes and texts, as well as the power-knowledge relations embedded within them (Milliken 1999). Milliken posits that an object is not an independent entity but rather contingent on our interpretation. She presents three fundamental assumptions regarding discourses: they constitute systems of significations, they are productive, and their practical role is indispensable. Signification, according to Milliken, is intricately conditioned by its contextual surroundings.

Especially, the context could be better comprehended when analysed through predicate analysis. A predicate, alongside a subject, constitutes one of the two principal parts of a sentence, encompassing a verb and its completions. Predicates (the plural form of 'predicate') encompass verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and other parts of speech that interconnect with nouns, thereby defining them. Consequently, predicate analysis proves to be an efficacious method for evaluating the degree to which discourses intersect and diverge (Milliken 1999).

AntConc. – Finally, in the 'Theory and methods' section, the AntConc computer software stands as the primary research tool (Anthony 2024). It is employed for corpus analysis, or more broadly, text analysis. The AntConc automates the outcomes from the discourse analysis of the Arctic strategies. Beyond the qualitative aspect, involving document selection and queried phrases, the software ensures an accurate analysis of all documents, mitigating potential data omission errors. The AntConc allows users to establish fundamental categories for corpus analysis, such as word lists, and advanced categories, including collocates, clusters, and n-grams. The software also generates identified keywords, which are words disproportionately more frequent than those in the averaged English corpus.

The AntConc further facilitates the application of more advanced categories for the text analysis. Upon inputting a specific word, this software displays clusters, presenting the given word along with its collocate or several collocates. In this case, the collocates surrounding the searched word are essentially predicates. This highlights the significant advantage of software-based research over traditional manual content analysis (Lyse and Andersen 2012). In this way, this research tool complements predicate analysis, which pays special attention to the practice of language, an essential feature within postmodern thought.

Political core of the region

Political core and the hegemonic discourse. – The concept of a political core is present in the literature, particularly within the domain of political geography (Burghardt 1969). The term 'core' does not solely possess a spatial definition. Instead, it emerges as a product of social processes dependent on historical context (Haas 1990). In the realm of political science, the term 'political core' encompasses multifaceted meanings, resonating with its inherently versatile nature (Cox 1981). A 'core' can embody the essence of something, such as a pivotal governmental policy. It is imperative to underscore that proximity to the core is not exclusively defined in geographical terms. While spatial connections may be established, the determinant is not confined to physical space alone. Objects and ideas can be conceptually situated within or outside this core,

and it is crucial to acknowledge that, in certain instances, their placement may defy a binary categorisation. Therefore, a political core of a region is defined here as the institutions, agents, objects, ideas and values that bond the international relations in this region. It means that a core is constructed discursively, difficult to delineate, thus variable over time.

In the discourse surrounding the concept of a political core in international relations, the scholarship of Immanuel Wallerstein merits acknowledgment. This can be comprehended as a fundamental tenet within world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1974). His theoretical framework endeavours to elucidate the global political economy by classifying nations into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral regions based on their economic development and role in the global capitalist system (Wallerstein 2004).

In the realm of discourse analysis, a crucial element of a political core is the hegemonic discourse, referring to the dominant narrative or set of ideas that shape and guide international relations. This concept is deeply entrenched in the theories of international relations, drawing particularly from the works of scholars such as Antonio Gramsci and his notion of hegemony (Gramsci *et al*. 1971). In the international context, hegemonic discourse signifies the prevailing ideologies, norms, and values propagated by the most powerful agents. The term accentuates the influence wielded by dominant states or international institutions in shaping the narrative and framing the understanding of various global and regional issues. Hegemonic discourse often takes the form of narratives that reflect the interests and perspectives of hegemonic agents (Kratochwil 1989). It is pivotal in comprehending how dominant powers maintain control through the dissemination of objects. The hegemonic discourse or discourses, therefore, becomes a tool for preserving and reinforcing the *status quo*, as it molds the perceptions and actions of other states and non–state agents (Grant and Short 2002).

The emanation of the hegemonic discourse is evident in the form of Arctic strategies. For a comprehensive list of the analysed documents and their basic characteristics, refer to Table 1 and References. While it is not exclusive to the Arctic states (USA, Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia), these strategies, owing to their close ties with the region, are the most exhaustive. They encompass both an internal dimension, concerning domestic public policies, and an external dimension, reflecting the perception of the Arctic as an international region. Bearing this in mind, Arctic strategies can be deemed key speech acts within the Arctic discourse. An analysis of the strategies' content reveals that states make decisions regarding the structure of current international relations in the region and present internal and external factors influencing change. Despite acknowledging ongoing changes in the region, the

strategies express a preference for maintaining the *status quo*. This stance is rooted in the belief that any alternative development could jeopardize their interests, thereby diminishing the influence of these agents on regional international relations. The strategies articulated by the principal region–builders are integral components of the hegemonic discourse.

Core–building in the Arctic. – As previously stated, the political core is discursively constructed, rendering it inherently variable over time. Its evolution is non-linear, with certain elements being temporary or contingent upon specific historical and social contexts. The process of core–building is complex and challenging to quantify, as its perceived success is dependent on the perspectives of the core-builders – the primary agents responsible for its discursive construction.

Before the end of Cold War, the core-building process in the region was closely linked to colonialism, expansionism, and the race for the North Pole. The Arctic served as a frontier for imperial ambitions, where nations competed for territorial claims and resources, exemplified by polar explorers' expeditions. This period reflected a broader political contest for imagined control over the Arctic. In the latter half of the 20th century, the discourse began to shift as environmental concerns emerged. The Arctic was increasingly seen as a unique ecological region, leading to the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears (Lyster 1985), an early instance of international environmental cooperation. This agreement marked a turning point, recognising the need to protect the Arctic's fragile ecosystem and setting the stage for future core-building efforts.

The concepts of core–building and region–building are closely intertwined, as references to a 'region' in discourse often imply its 'core.' Here, core is a part of a region. Following the Cold War, the new global political landscape allowed for deeper cooperation between the West and Russia, creating opportunities for more structured regional governance in the Arctic. A significant milestone in this process was the establishment of the Arctic Council (1996). The discourse surrounding this forum emphasised peaceful cooperation and sustainable development, aligning with the dominant narrative of the period. Notably, security policy issues are explicitly excluded from the Arctic Council's mandate.

The period between 2005 and 2008 marked a significant shift in Arctic discourse, characterised by a series of events that intensified global attention on the region. The publication of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment highlighted the environmental vulnerability of the Arctic, attracting widespread media interest (Symon *et al*. 2005). Norway's Arctic strategy, published in 2006 in English, underscored the growing international significance of the region (NMFA 2006). In 2007, Russia planted a flag on the North Pole seabed, sparking fears of a

geopolitical race, which coincided with the record minimum sea ice extent that September (BBC News 2007; NASA Earth Observatory 2007). The Ilulissat Declaration in 2008 reaffirmed the sovereignty of the Arctic Five, while the United States Geological Survey's report fuelled narratives of a new resource rush (Bird *et al*. 2008; Ilulissat Declaration 2008). The International Polar Year 2007–2008 further amplified these issues, contributing to what Finnish political scientist Timo Koivurova described as a 'media frenzy' that shaped the subsequent discourse (Allison *et al*. 2007; Koivurova 2010).

Elements of the political core. – The elements of the political core in the Arctic are not fixed. They are continuously constructed and deconstructed through the evolving interactions and strategies of key agents. The Arctic states, comprising seven Western states and Russia, play a central role as region-builders, with their collective actions and policies actively shaping and reshaping the region's discourses. As primary agents in this process, these states leverage their political positions and historical ties to assert influence (Wilson Rowe 2007). The significance of Arctic strategies lies in their dynamic role. They not only articulate each state's evolving national priorities but also contribute to the broader, continuously developing regional discourse. Through these strategic documents, Arctic states assert their dominance, guiding the ongoing process of region–building and influencing the hegemonic discourse that defines the political core of the Arctic.

Central to this discourse are the key objects that have been elevated by region–builders as vital to the region's governance. Among these, the working groups of the Arctic Council are significant elements of the political core, addressing diverse areas critical to the region's future: Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG), Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME), Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR) and Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP) (Keskitalo 2004). The inclusion of indigenous perspectives is underscored through the active participation of Permanent Participants, making indigenous rights a vocal aspect of the Arctic Council's work. Through these working groups, Arctic states assert the importance of these objects within the discourse, solidifying their influence over the region's governance and future.

Rather than acting as an independent agent, the Arctic Council provides a negotiation space where these key region-builders shape the political core (Keskitalo 2007). While the legally binding agreements on search and rescue, oil pollution preparedness, and scientific cooperation are not direct outputs of the Arctic Council, they are influenced by the collaborative spirit it

fosters. These agreements, while promoting cooperation, also reinforce the states' dominance in regional governance, keeping their interests central in the evolving Arctic discourse (Śmieszek 2019).

Deconstructed political core. – The deconstruction of the political core has been an inherent part of the region's construction, reflecting the shifting dynamics of power and identity within the discourse. The Arctic region is not a fixed entity but a construct shaped by the narratives of its region-builders. These narratives continuously evolve, challenging the stability of regional identity and revealing the fluid nature of the political core. This deconstruction is not merely a consequence of external pressures, but also a fundamental process in redefining what the Arctic represents.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the analysis highlights the most frequent and statistically significant terms used in the Arctic strategies, providing insight into the dominant discursive patterns shaping the region's political narrative. Within the software's output structure, the source category is labelled as 'Keyword,' with the corresponding output label identified as 'Type' and the output value measured as 'Keyness (Likelihood),' which quantifies the statistical prominence of a term relative to the standard English corpus.

A key finding from the AntConc analysis, shows that the Arctic strategies continue to project a discourse of stability and status quo. These documents emphasise cooperation, environmental protection, and adherence to international law, suggesting a desire to maintain a unified regional framework. However, this strategic rhetoric stands in stark contrast to the reality of international relations. The suspension of international cooperation with Russia in the Arctic demonstrates a clear rupture between the discourse of continuity and the practice of exclusion. The AntConc results highlight the selective use of terms related to cooperation, masking the underlying tensions and the fragmentation of regional relations.

Moreover, the notion of a singular 'Arctic' has become increasingly untenable. The discourse analysis reveals that each region-builder – whether it is the United States, Canada, the European Arctic states, or Russia – constructs the Arctic with distinct narratives. These divergent discourses indicate that there is no single, cohesive Arctic region; rather, it is a space of multiple, overlapping interpretations.

In this fragmented landscape, the deconstructed political core of the Arctic challenges the previous ideals of regional unity. The differences between strategic narratives and the practical exclusion of Russia underscore the instability of the Arctic's political identity. This dynamic,

where deconstruction is integral to construction, reveals the contested nature of the Arctic and the enduring struggle over its meaning and governance.

Construction and deconstruction

Climate change as motivation – Climate change has significantly impacted the region, acting as a powerful motivator for both cooperation and competition among the states. While it brings considerable challenges, it also offers perceived economic opportunities, such as access to untapped natural resources and new shipping routes. However, the economic benefits often linked to climate change are somewhat deceptive. The thawing permafrost, for example, creates substantial barriers to infrastructure development and resource extraction, making the promise of economic gains less straightforward than it may seem (French and Scott 2009). The reality on the ground complicates any simple correlation between climate change and economic expansion.

Despite the allure of new possibilities, the practical challenges posed by climate change in the Arctic are profound. Unpredictable weather patterns, accelerated ice melt, and increased environmental risks all add to the costs and difficulties of economic ventures. While the opening of the Northern Sea Route offers shorter shipping distances between Europe and Asia, the route's seasonal availability and the harsh Arctic environment continue to present significant logistical and financial hurdles (Center for High North Logistics 2020).

Beyond the economic dimension, climate change is reshaping the political landscape of the Arctic, influencing the region's governance and strategic interactions. The Arctic states are collectively motivated to cooperate on managing the adverse effects of climate change. Shared concerns, such as environmental degradation, safety threats from melting ice caps, and the preservation of indigenous livelihoods, drive international collaboration through institutions.

At the same time, climate change has also reshaped the political core of the Arctic, reinforcing the region's complexity. While climate change fosters collective motivations for cooperation, particularly in addressing environmental and security challenges, it also exposes tensions within the political core. States must navigate competing priorities – balancing environmental protection with economic ambitions. This dynamic is reflected in the strategic decisions of the states, where some emphasize cooperation on climate resilience, while others push for resource exploitation. The political core, therefore, becomes a space where both shared vulnerabilities and diverging national interests interact, shaping the discourse and actions around regional governance. Climate change, as a motivating force, not only binds states together through

common concerns but also challenges the coherence of the political core by highlighting conflicting national and economic agendas.

External threats and internal dimension. – The Arctic's security landscape is increasingly shaped by the divide between the seven Western states (as NATO members) and Russia. As climate change opens new shipping routes and resource opportunities, this disparity becomes more pronounced. The Western states emphasise cooperation and stability, while Russia has expanded its military presence, particularly along the Northern Sea Route, presenting a challenge to collective security efforts. This imbalance underscores the dual pressures of environmental threats and strategic tensions that shape the region's governance (Olesen 2014).

The empowerment of indigenous peoples, a central issue in the Arctic governance, reflects a complex dynamic. While Western Arctic states have championed the inclusion of indigenous voices, these groups remain on the periphery of decision-making processes. Organisations such as the Saami Council hold permanent participant status in the Arctic Council, but their non–territorial sovereignty complicates their role. Despite being part of the discourse, indigenous peoples are still marginalised, operating within the established frameworks without fully disrupting the power structures that favour state–based governance (Dodds *et al.* 2022). Their presence challenges the core of the Arctic governance, yet the hegemonic interests of region–builders remain largely intact.

The inclusion of non-Arctic states, particularly China, further complicates the political core. While these states respect the sovereignty of the Arctic states, growing influence of China through initiatives like the idea of Polar Silk Road introduces external pressures. Although the actual power of observers within the Arctic governance is often exaggerated, China's global stature makes it a unique non-Arctic agent. The state has actively positioned itself as a 'near-Arctic state'. This complicates the traditional order, as the Arctic states remain cautious of outside influence. Despite formal limitations, the presence of such agents subtly disrupts the status quo, raising concerns over their potential role in shaping the region's future (Rottem and Heggelund 2024).

Influence of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. – Before Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Arctic was largely viewed as a region of cooperation, where environmental protection and sustainable development overshadowed political tensions. The concept of the Arctic exceptionalism – the discursively constructed idea that the region could remain insulated from broader global conflicts – was a cornerstone of the governance (Keskitalo 2004). Institutions like the Arctic Council facilitated this cooperative spirit, with Russia and Western Arctic states

engaging in joint efforts to preserve the region's fragile ecosystem and manage shared interests, keeping political tensions low (Knutsen and Pettersen 2024). However, even during this period of relative stability, the region's strategic importance, particularly in terms of military presence and resource potential, remained a latent concern (Busch 2021).

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a significant shift in West-Russia relations. While regional cooperation continued on the surface, Russia's increasingly assertive posture raised concerns among Western states. The erosion of exceptionalism became apparent as Russia began to focus more on militarisation. This growing tension was evident in how Russia portrayed its Arctic ambitions, emphasising sovereignty and military capabilities, while Western states shifted their narrative from cooperation to cautious monitoring.

Prior to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Arctic agents maintained a level of engagement with Russia, avoiding a complete breakdown in cooperation. However, post-2022 developments have seen the near-total suspension of collaborative efforts with Russia. The Arctic Council, for example, 'paused' its activities involving Russia, and other regional bodies, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States, Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Northern Dimension Policy, and Saami Council, have similarly suspended relations. This shift underscores a significant fracture in the cooperative framework that previously defined Arctic governance (Byers 2017).

The Western Arctic states, including Finland and Sweden, responded to the growing security challenges by accelerating their bids to join NATO, further deepening the security divide in the region. Finland completed its accession to NATO in April 2023, followed by Sweden in March 2024, solidifying their integration into the alliance. This development reflects the broader alignment of the Western Arctic states, which consist of NATO members in response to escalating regional and global tensions.

Sanctions on Russia severely impacted its northern projects, especially in the energy sector, leading to a pivot towards non-Arctic states, such as China, for investment and support. The militarisation of the Arctic, coupled with Russia's aggressive foreign policy, has cemented a new era of uncertainty, where the region's future is now intricately tied to broader global tensions (Andreeva 2023). The post-2022 Arctic is no longer seen discursively as a zone of peace (Paukkunen and Black 2023).

Many of the Arctic strategies analysed in this study were produced prior to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This timing is significant, as it underscores the contrast between the cooperative language prevalent in these documents and the subsequent political rupture caused by the invasion. The suspension of Russia's engagement in Arctic cooperation,

following the invasion, highlights a dramatic shift from the strategic status quo previously emphasised in these texts, revealing the fragility of the region's political structure under mounting geopolitical pressures.

Conclusions

The region's political core has undergone significant transformation, with key shifts occurring in recent years. The previous efforts at core-building emphasised cooperation, environmental stewardship, and stability, primarily through frameworks like the Arctic Council. This approach aimed to maintain a regional status quo that accommodated both Western states and Russia. However, the political landscape shifted dramatically after Russia's aggression in Ukraine. This shift marked a turning point where the suspension of cooperation with Russia fundamentally altered the region's dynamics, creating a more fragmented political reality.

The persistence of a strategic status quo in the official narratives of the Arctic strategies contrasts sharply with the practical realities on the ground. While these strategies continue to use the language of cooperation and regional unity, the cessation of Russian engagement reveals a deep fracture in the region's political structure. This analysis, as demonstrated through the AntConc results, highlights how official discourses often mask the underlying tensions and disruptions within the Arctic governance framework.

In this context, the role of signifiers in the Arctic discourse has shifted. The political core, once defined by ideas of unity and cooperation, is now deconstructed through competing significations. The various region-builders – whether Western states or Russia – employ differing narratives that shape their visions of the Arctic. This divergence underscores that it is not a monolithic region but a space where multiple interpretations coexist, each influencing the region's evolving identity.

Looking ahead, the Arctic faces uncertain prospects as the impacts of climate change intensify. The negative effects, such as thawing permafrost and extreme weather events, present growing challenges to regional stability. Simultaneously, security issues continue to spill over from broader political tensions, further complicating cooperation among the eight states. The concept of core-building remains relevant but is increasingly contested, requiring a re-evaluation of what constitutes the region's core in this new era. Ultimately, understanding the Arctic's political landscape requires acknowledging the complex interplay of change, deconstruction, and the enduring legacies of past strategies.

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Fig. 1. Wordcloud of keywords in the analysed documents generated by the AntConc software. L. Anthony, Antconc Version 4.3.1 [29.7.2024], http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software accessed on 15.10.2024.

Table 1.

Documents analysed in this study.

State	Document's title	Reference
USA	Arctic region policy	WH (2009)
	National strategy for the Arctic region	WH (2013)
	Implementation plan for national strategy for Arctic region	WH (2014)
	National strategy for the Arctic region	WH (2022)
	Implementation plan for the 2022 national strategy for Arctic region	WH (2023)
Canada	Canada's northern strategy. Our North, our heritage, our future	GC (2009)
	Statement on Canada's Arctic foreign policy	GC (2010)
	Canada's Arctic and Northern policy framework	GC (2019)
Denmark	Strategy for the Arctic 2011–2020	MFAD (2011)
Iceland	Iceland's Arctic policy	Alþingi (2011)
	Iceland's policy on matters concerning the Arctic region	GI (2021)
Norway	The Norwegian government's High North strategy	NMFA (2006)
	New building blocks in the North. The next step in the government's High North strategy	NMFA (2009)
	The High North. Visions and strategies	NMFA (2011)
	Norway's Arctic policy	NMFA (2014)
	Norway's Arctic strategy	NMFA (2017)
	The Norwegian Government's Arctic Policy	NMFA (2020)
Sweden	Strategy for the Arctic region	GGOS (2011)
	Sweden's strategy for the Arctic region	GGOS (2020)
Finland	Finland's strategy for the Arctic region	PMFOP (2010)
	Strategy for the Arctic region	PMFOP (2013)
	Finland's strategy for Arctic policy	PMFOP (2021)
Russia	Basics of the state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the period till 2020 and for a further perspective	PRF (2008)
	Strategy for the development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and ensuring national security for the period up to 2020	PRF (2013)
	Strategy for the development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and ensuring national security for the period up to 2035	PRF (2020a)
	Basic principles of Russian Federation state policy in the Arctic to 2035	PRF (2020b)