

NATO's Arctic Narrative After 2022: Conferences as Promoters of Security or Drivers of Destabilization?

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This article contributes to understanding the strategic shift in NATO's posture in the High North, denoting the European sector of the Arctic. Following the Cold War – during which the region held strategic relevance for the Alliance – NATO progressively deprioritized the area, redirecting its focus toward other geographic and thematic threats. This began to change during the 2010s, with Russia's re-emergence as a central strategic concern from 2017 onward. The war in Ukraine in 2022 marked a watershed moment, making NATO's increasingly securitized approach to the High North more explicit and subject to closer analysis (Østaghen, 2024; Bykova, 2024). Building on the argument that NATO has gradually re-positioned itself as a credible security actor in the region, this study investigates whether and how this shift has been accompanied by the development of a securitizing narrative disseminated through a particularly effective regional medium: Arctic conferences (Steinveg, 2023). By analyzing selected speeches delivered at these events and drawing on the theoretical frameworks of the Copenhagen School of Securitization (Buzan et al., 1998) and the Strategic Narrative approach (Miskimmon et al., 2013), the article examines the extent to which recurring terminology and framings have contributed to shaping and legitimizing NATO's growing presence and activities in the region. The study explores the communicative effects of such discourse on policy outcomes, showing how NATO not only articulates threats in the Arctic but also actively shapes the conditions for strategic action through its persuasive and discursive practices. The article considers the broader implications of NATO's expanding role and the spread of the securitizing narrative in the Arctic, questioning whether this increasingly confrontational dynamic, when combined with Russia's assertive posture, has served to enhance stability or, conversely, to further destabilize the region (Boulègue, 2019). Furthermore, it raises questions about the scope of the conference space in fostering dialogue among Arctic states or enhancing division.

Introduction

The role of NATO in the Arctic region has long been a subject of debate (Heininen et al., 2019). According to Landriault (2019), this debate has developed between those who advocate for a stronger and more permanent NATO presence and strategy in the Arctic, arguing that a revanchist Russia, with its growing regional military capabilities, poses an increasingly legitimate threat to alliance members in the area (Gouré, 2017; Wither, 2018; Tamnes, 2018). On the other hand, more

skeptical voices consider NATO itself a potential source of instability among Arctic states, especially regarding its relations with Russia (Byers, 2017; Flake, 2017).

Consistent with the academic debate, the Arctic states have lacked a unified position regarding NATO's role in the High North. As a result, since the end of the Cold War, the Alliance has maintained a secondary role in the region, aiming primarily to avoid excessive interference in existing regional dynamics.

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on 24th February 2022, NATO's role in the High North began to change fundamentally. Although the Ukrainian conflict is geographically distant from the Arctic, its strategic repercussions have significantly affected the region. In July 2022, only a few months after the outbreak of the war, the term "High North" was included for the first time as a security concern in NATO's most authoritative policy document – the 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the Madrid Summit to articulate the Alliance's medium-term strategic vision.

From that point onward, NATO's presence in the Arctic – both political and operational – expanded significantly. This expansion involved an increased frequency of military exercises in the High North, the deployment of more advanced capabilities, and a strategic and infrastructural reorganization of the Alliance's northern flank. The accession of Finland and Sweden between 2023-2024, which brought the number of Arctic states within NATO to seven (out of eight Arctic states), further signaled the Alliance's reaffirmation in the region.

This article focuses on the less visible phase of this process, analyzing how NATO strategically repositioned itself as a credible security actor within the Arctic context. It examines the concept of the *securitizing narrative* and the communicative channels through which the Alliance has employed it to legitimize its gradual yet substantive expansion of presence and activities across the region, described above. The analysis also explores the communicative effects of this narrative on policy outcomes, thereby linking NATO's discursive practices to their tangible impact on the regional security environment.

The securitizing narrative as a new conceptual framework

This article's theoretical framework revolves around the concept of the *securitizing narrative*. To analyze the communicative approach that NATO has promoted in the High North since 2022, it is necessary to establish some preliminary theoretical considerations.

As will become evident in the analysis, the communicative strategy developed by NATO in the High North – focusing here on speeches delivered at the Arctic Circle Assembly – falls short of what classical securitization theorists of the Copenhagen School, such as Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), would define as a securitization process. Indeed, the analyzed speeches cannot be considered Speech Acts in the strict sense, as they lack the essential temporal dimension of urgency. For a securitizing move to be effective, it must evoke a sense of immediacy and imminent threat – what Wæver (1995) identifies as the necessary condition prompting an audience to accept exceptional measures. Despite their authoritative tone, these features are absent from the three speeches analyzed: there is no explicit call for urgent or extraordinary action to securitize the High North.

These speeches operate more as strategic narratives. As Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) theorized, strategic narratives are communicative processes aimed at persuasion through which perceptions are gradually shaped and managed over time. They function by constructing a

coherent and recognizable storyline (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Through this repetition and institutional embedding, the strategic narrative gains credibility and resonance, enabling it to influence how audiences perceive issues and to legitimize subsequent policy actions (Zaffran, 2018).

These speeches, however, exhibit a further complexity: they are not mere strategic narratives but narratives built around the sustained reproduction of a grammar of security. Through recurring framings and lexical choices, these speeches circumscribe an existential threat and designate a referent object – thereby legitimizing NATO’s positioning as a credible securitizing actor in the region. Given this hybrid character, neither Securitization Theory nor the Strategic Narrative approach alone is fully adequate to capture the phenomenon at hand. Accordingly, I propose the concept of a *securitizing narrative* as an analytical synthesis.

I define a securitizing narrative as a long-term, hybrid communicative process that combines the Copenhagen School’s “grammar of security” (Buzan et al., 1998) with the forward-looking, persuasive mechanics of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013). A securitizing narrative serves as a communicative process through which security perceptions are gradually shaped and managed over time. It operates through repeated security framings and institutional reinforcement to reshape the perceived status quo so that measures exceptional in scope or consequence become politically and institutionally feasible – even in the absence of the immediacy and temporal pressure characteristic of classical securitizing moves.

Conferences as a methodological tool

This article integrates securitization theory with a textual analysis grounded in the strategic narrative framework (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Zaffran, 2019). On the one hand, the Copenhagen School’s discourse-analytical methodology is adapted to reconstruct the rhetorical structure of securitization (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 177–191). Specifically, a keyword frequency analysis, combined with thematic coding, is employed to identify the construction of a grammar of security – including the articulation of the existential threat, the referent object, and NATO’s positioning as a security actor.

Furthermore, the textual-analytical approach employed by strategic narrative scholars will be used to trace the structure of a securitizing narrative, with particular attention to its sequencing and to the key stages of its development – namely, formation (the “beginning” in the Aristotelian sense), projection, and reception. The concepts of sequence and continuity – both in the language employed and in the actor articulating it – along with other key notions, play a crucial role in the construction of an effective narrative (Zaffran, 2019). Furthermore, underlying objectives and strategic purposes that these communicative tools serve within the broader context of international security discourse (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993).

Once this structure is identified, the analysis seeks to deepen understanding by examining “conferences” not merely as sites where securitizing narratives are articulated, but as methodological tools for tracing how such narratives are constructed, amplified, and legitimized. This approach goes beyond analyzing the content of the narrative itself to consider the conference format as a medium particularly effective in the Arctic context, where visibility, symbolic representation, and multilevel participation make it a powerful arena for shaping security discourse. In this sense, the article contributes to discourse-analytical methodology by treating conferences

not only as empirical cases but also as methodological entry points for exploring the performative dimension of securitizing narratives.

The medium of conferences across the Arctic region is particularly widespread, with numerous forums held annually throughout Arctic territories, from Western states to Russia. However, as noted by Steinveg (2023), the novelty and significance lie not in the frequency of these events but in the distinctive role they play within an atypical region such as the Arctic. Rather than isolated diplomatic or academic occasions, Arctic conferences have increasingly evolved into a recognized mechanism of regional governance (Steinveg, 2023).

Historically, the format and tradition of Arctic conferences emerged during the period of so-called Arctic Exceptionalism, primarily serving to strengthen dialogue, providing new platforms for cooperation, and facilitating the dissemination of knowledge among the eight Arctic states, while also including interested non-Arctic actors (Storholm, 2017). However, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 has significantly reshaped the function of these forums. Several Arctic conferences, including the Arctic Circle Assembly, have adapted to the shifting international and regional geopolitical context, resulting in a clear pattern: most conferences within the European–North American Arctic are now predominantly attended by representatives from the so-called Arctic 7 (all Arctic states excluding Russia), with Russian participation largely absent (Lanteigne, 2022). Conversely, conferences held within Russia are increasingly oriented toward engagement with its strategic partners, such as members of the BRICS+ group.

This growing bifurcation, clearly observable since 2022, reinforces the argument that the role of Arctic conferences as instruments of inclusive regional governance, as originally emphasized by Steinveg, can now be complemented by a different perspective, one that highlights their potential to reshape, rather than merely sustain, regional governance. Steinveg saw the main potential of Arctic conferences in their ability to bring together all eight Arctic states within broad, multi-stakeholder formats, distinct from narrow, closed diplomatic or military meetings, and to foster dialogue among a diverse audience. However, with the fragmentation of these conferences following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, this inclusive advantage has gradually eroded, giving way to a new function that was not originally envisioned in their design.

These forums are now increasingly serving as platforms for the dissemination of securitizing narratives. The relative absence of dissenting voices and the prevalence of ideational homogeneity in many of these settings create a favorable environment for actors seeking to construct and promote particular security discourses - especially those aimed at cultivating perceptions of imminent threat or existential insecurity. In doing so, they contribute to legitimizing an expanded presence and activity of the securitizing actor.

To assess whether it is indeed possible to speak of securitizing narratives in the High North, and to test whether conferences that were originally designed as cooperative platforms have become ideal venues for advancing such narratives, this article undertakes a case study of speeches delivered by Admiral Rob Bauer, former Chair of the NATO Military Committee, at the Arctic Circle Assembly between October 2022, identified here as a watershed moment in NATO's role in the High North following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and October 2024, corresponding both to the latest edition of the Assembly examined and to Admiral Bauer's final year in office.

These conferences were selected primarily due to the relative ease of obtaining data, which is not always guaranteed for other forums. Additionally, having personally attended these events allows for a more detailed and nuanced account compared to those followed remotely or analyzed through secondary sources.

Furthermore, the Arctic Circle Assembly is widely recognized as one of the most significant annual conferences on Arctic issues, making its capacity to reach thousands of stakeholders a factor of considerable importance in this analysis. This case study was selected as particularly appropriate because, as Kenneth Burke emphasizes in his classic *Grammar of Motives* (1969), a fundamental pillar of any narrative is the actor - the one who delivers it. The credibility of this actor is crucial, both for the audience and for the state or organization on whose behalf they speak. In the case examined here, the actor is Admiral Rob Bauer, who, from June 2021 to January 2025, served as Chair of the NATO Military Committee, the second-highest position within the organization after the Secretary General. This position renders him widely acknowledged, both within NATO and by external audiences, as a legitimate spokesperson for advancing the Alliance's broader strategic narrative in the Arctic region.

Setting the stage: NATO, A New Security Actor in the High North?

Established in 1949, NATO aimed to foster stability and prosperity within the North Atlantic region, as stated in the preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty. Although the treaty does not specifically mention the Arctic or define a precise geographic scope, the region was profoundly impacted by its formation. Five of the twelve founding members – Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the United States – are Arctic nations, underscoring the area's inherent geopolitical importance from the outset.

The Arctic region held strategic value during the Cold War rivalry between the United States and NATO on one side and the Soviet Union on the other. This region provided the shortest route for potential nuclear strikes between the superpowers and was a cornerstone of the Soviet naval “Bastion Strategy.” Soviet submarines based in the Arctic posed a significant threat to NATO's maritime front by navigating through the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap (Ollivant, 1984; Østreng, 1987).

Another key maritime corridor was, and still is, the Bear Gap, located between Bear Island (the southernmost point of the Svalbard archipelago) and the mainland of Norway. This passage serves as a vital gateway to the Atlantic Ocean and possesses oceanographic features - such as salinity, temperature, and density - that make it ideal for submarine stealth (Gilli et al., 2024). The Bear Gap's strategic importance was so significant to the Soviet Union that it prompted a challenge to the Svalbard Treaty. In 1944, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov proposed amending the treaty to transfer Bear Island to Soviet control (Øystein, 2020). Although this effort was unsuccessful, tensions escalated when Norway and NATO, in 1951, placed the Svalbard archipelago, including the Bear Island, under the operational authority of the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) and the jurisdiction of NATO's Allied Forces Northern Europe (AFNORTH). This significantly deteriorated Soviet-Norwegian relations.

Following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO's strategic focus on the Arctic significantly diminished. With the collapse of the Soviet naval presence and the gradual abandonment of Arctic military bases, Russia's capabilities were notably reduced, while the

United States emerged as the dominant global power. As Washington pursued a "reset" in its relations with Moscow and in the absence of direct threats from the Arctic region, NATO – heavily influenced by its leading member – adjusted its strategic priorities accordingly (Posen, 2003).

The Alliance progressively moved away from anti-submarine warfare and deterrence strategies in the Arctic and North Atlantic, shifting its attention to broader global security challenges, especially those emerging from the Middle East. This reorientation was largely shaped by the emergence of non-traditional threats, particularly after the September 11, 2001, attacks and the onset of the "War on Terror." NATO's evolving threat perception increasingly emphasized asymmetric risks from terrorist organizations and other non-state actors, rather than conventional military threats. This change is reflected in NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, which omits any reference to the Arctic and describes the Euro-Atlantic area as largely peaceful (Landriault & MacDonald, 2019):

Today, the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace, and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low. [...] Terrorism poses a direct threat to the security of the citizens of NATO countries (NATO, 2010: Principle 1 & Principle 10).

As De Sitter notes, NATO remained largely disengaged from Arctic affairs even after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Alliance did not respond to Russia's 2015 submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), which aimed to extend its continental shelf in the Arctic. As Sitter (2015) pointed out, "High North issues are (at that time) clearly not on NATO's forefront" (Pettersen, 2016).

To better understand NATO's restrained approach, it is essential to consider the stance of the United States - NATO's largest contributor - during President Obama's second term (2013-2017), a period that encompassed the annexation of Crimea and the Russian claim before the CLCS. During this time, the Arctic was not a top priority in U.S. foreign policy. Rather than emphasizing its strategic importance, the Obama administration prioritized sustainable development to promote regional stability. It was in this context that, for the first time, the Arctic was included in a National Security Strategy. The 2010 NSS, under the section "Sustain Broad Cooperation on Key Global Challenges," described U.S. Arctic interests as follows:

The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic region, where we seek to meet our national security needs, protect the environment, responsibly manage resources, account for indigenous communities, support scientific research, and strengthen international cooperation on a wide range of issues (US Department of Justice, 2010).

Later, the 2013 U.S. Arctic Strategy further emphasized a cooperative approach, focusing on building a strong Arctic economy, developing infrastructure, and enhancing collective security through non-confrontational means, such as investing in icebreaker capabilities and supporting future-oriented industries (The White House, 2016). This collaborative, rather than adversarial, posture from NATO's most influential Arctic member, the US, helped shape the Alliance's own cautious stance toward both Russia and the broader Arctic region.

A notable shift began to take shape between 2016 and 2017, as Russia's military build-up in the Arctic showed no signs of abating, and signs of an increasing Chinese presence in the region began to emerge (Padrtova, 2017, p. 6). Compounding these developments was the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States on January 20, 2017. Unlike his

predecessor, President Trump adopted a markedly different approach to both foreign policy and Arctic affairs (Ulja, 2017). The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy emphasized the importance of American leadership in shaping international norms and institutions, explicitly recognizing the Arctic as a domain of strategic relevance. It stated:

The United States must lead and engage in the multinational arrangements that shape many of the rules that affect U.S. interests and values. A competition for influence exists in these institutions... A range of international institutions establishes the rules for how states, businesses, and individuals interact with each other, across land and sea, the Arctic, outer space, and the digital realm (U.S. National Security Strategy, 2017).

These evolving dynamics contributed to growing concerns that great power competition was increasingly extending into the High North. This raised critical questions about NATO's ability to deter revisionist ambitions - most notably from Russia, and to a lesser extent, China - aimed at reshaping the regional order unilaterally (Gouré, 2017; Wither, 2018; Tamnes, 2018).

Such concerns were echoed in key NATO documents, including the 2016 Warsaw Summit Communiqué and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's report, *NATO and Security in the Arctic*. As Connolly (2017) observed:

[...] the need to ensure comprehensive situational awareness in the North Atlantic underscores the renewed strategic significance of NATO's northern flank. [...] As the Arctic re-emerges on the international agenda, the potential for tensions between Russia and NATO Allies to spill over—combined with China's increasing presence in the region—could transform the Arctic into a theater of strategic rivalry (Connolly, 2017, p. 10).

The foundation for a more tangible and sustained NATO engagement in Arctic matters - initially marked by small steps, as Boulegue (2019, p. 32) observes - began to take shape around the time of Russia's Zapad 2017 military exercise. This event laid important groundwork for what would later develop into a more pronounced strategic shift by 2022, particularly in the context of NATO's enlargement. As highlighted in the NATO Review (2017), Zapad 2017 featured an unusually high concentration of military activity within the Northern Fleet's (Arctic) Military District, including:

Exercise activity in the Northern Fleet (Arctic) Military District was particularly intense. It included a simulated intercontinental submarine-launched ballistic missile attack by a Northern Fleet ballistic missile submarine against the simulated enemy (NATO Review, 2017).

Beyond the scale of military deployments, two critical elements of Zapad 2017 drove NATO to reassess its High North posture:

1. State-on-State Conflict Scenario: Zapad 2017 clearly simulated a large-scale, conventional state-on-state conflict scenario. Although the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command - established in December 2014 - had not previously been a stand-alone focus of strategic exercises, it was now playing a central role, indicating Russia's intent to normalize high-end military activity in the Arctic and integrate it more closely into broader strategic planning (Schmitt, 2017).

2. Violation of the Vienna Document: According to the *NATO Review* (2017), Russia failed to comply with the Vienna Document 2011 by underreporting the scale of its troop involvement during the exercise, marking the first time such a violation occurred in the Arctic context. This deliberate lack of transparency was seen as a significant breach of confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs) agreed upon under the OSCE framework (NATO Review, 2017).

This combination of assertive military behavior and the erosion of arms control norms posed a strategic dilemma for NATO: whether to continue promoting confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) – such as the Vienna Document – as a demonstration of its commitment to transparency and a rules-based order, or to adopt a more assertive posture as a securitizing actor vis-à-vis Russia (Goodman & Kertysova 2020, p. 7). While the former approach reflected normative restraint, the latter offered NATO the opportunity to reassert its role as a primary guarantor of European security - a role it had only partially exercised in European affairs since the early 2000s.

Early indications of NATO's evolving posture in the High North emerged as early as 2017, with the establishment of Joint Force Command Norfolk (JFC-N). This reflected a more integrated and forward-leaning approach to Arctic-related challenges, particularly in recognition of the region's growing operational complexity. The centrality of JFC-N was further reinforced by the adoption of NATO's three Regional Defence Plans at the 2023 Vilnius Summit, which formally designated JFC-N as the operational headquarters for both the Atlantic and the European Arctic (Loorents, 2024, p. 1–2).

An even clearer signal of NATO's strategic intent came in 2018 with the launch of Exercise Trident Juncture, the largest Allied military exercise since the end of the Cold War, underscoring NATO's renewed emphasis on readiness and collective defense in the High North. Beyond its routine nature, the unprecedented scale of personnel and capabilities deployed highlighted NATO's commitment to demonstrating its operational readiness and reinforcing collective defense in the High North, sending a strong strategic message to both allies and potential adversaries.

The exercise involved 50,000 troops from all 29 NATO member states, as well as Sweden and Finland, two Nordic partners whose participation foreshadowed their eventual accession to the Alliance. Sweden and Finland contributed 2,200 and 600 personnel, respectively, operating across land, sea, and air domains (Atlantic Forum, n.d.). While Trident Juncture was publicly framed by NATO leadership as a demonstration of readiness, unity, and credibility in the face of potential Article 5 scenarios, Admiral James G. Foggo, for instance, declared that:

Trident Juncture will show the world that NATO is relevant, united, and ready to defend itself in this Article 5 scenario, testing our collective defence" (NATO, 2018).

The exercise also had a more nuanced impact. In the eyes of many observers and media outlets, it symbolically anchored the Arctic within the broader geopolitical confrontation between the West and Russia. As a result, the cooperative frameworks that had previously dominated Arctic governance, such as the Arctic Council and the Euro-Barents Council, began to lose visibility, as security concerns started to eclipse the region's traditional emphasis on dialogue and shared interests (Landriault & MacDonald, 2019).

Tensions in the Arctic continued to escalate, notably marked by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech at the 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial, also referred to as a "verbal thunderstorm", which underscored a renewed American focus on the region's growing geostrategic importance. In his remarks, Pompeo highlighted increasing concerns about Russia's military build-up and China's expanding presence and ambitions in the Arctic, signaling a clear departure from the previously cooperative tone that had characterized Arctic Council proceedings (Holm, 2019).

This strategic reassessment was further reinforced in 2021 by NATO's Regional Perspectives Report on the Arctic, published by the Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk. The report offered a comprehensive analysis of emerging security dynamics in the High North, warning of the potential for heightened tensions and escalation. It also outlined possible NATO countermeasures, recommending enhanced coordination with existing defense structures such as NORAD and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) as part of a broader strategy to strengthen deterrence and maintain regional stability (Reynolds, 2019).

According to Østaghen and Bykova, the true watershed in NATO's engagement with the Arctic occurred with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 (Østaghen, 2024; Bykova, 2024). While the conflict is geographically distant from the Arctic, its strategic ramifications have profoundly impacted the region.

NATO's Post-2022 Arctic Discourse: From Dialogue to Division?

Although, as previously discussed, NATO had already been gradually increasing its activities in the High North in the years following Crimea's annexation in 2014, primarily through military exercises and more tangible and sustained engagement in Arctic matters, its role remained secondary.

NATO continued to respect the post - Cold War regional governance model, which was centered on cooperation among Arctic states and upheld the principle of *Arctic exceptionalism*, wherein the region was largely insulated from broader geopolitical rivalries (Greaves & Pomerants, 2017). In this context, the Arctic Council remained the principal multilateral forum for Arctic governance, including Russia as a full and active member. The Council served not only as a platform for dialogue but also as a sort of mechanism for keeping the region low-tension and distant from traditional security agendas. Consequently, NATO retained a deliberately low profile, benefiting from the Arctic's relative stability, which enabled the Alliance to concentrate on other pressing security priorities.

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 profoundly disrupted the existing equilibrium, overturning many of the long-standing paradigms that had defined Arctic governance. On one hand, the war undermined the very foundations of Arctic exceptionalism, destabilizing what had previously been stable regional and multilateral dynamics, as well as well-established cooperative frameworks (Koivurova & Shibata, 2023; Mikkola et al., 2023). On the other hand, this extraordinary event reshaped NATO's strategic calculations in the High North, triggering a profound re-evaluation of its policies and approaches toward Russia among all member states.

Before 2022, the Arctic had primarily been a matter of national interest for the five NATO members with Arctic territories. However, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the region effectively evolved into a collective security issue for the Alliance as a whole. The outbreak of war transformed the High North into a critical area for maintaining European security (Østaghen & Dordoni, 2024). This transformation was largely due to its proximity to the Kola Peninsula - the

headquarters of Russia's Northern Fleet and one of the main bases for its nuclear arsenal in the Arctic – as well as the extensive borders that Norway and Finland share with Russia. The growing presence of China in the broader strategic context further complicates this security landscape (Sheng, 2023).

Consequently, the international perception of the Arctic changed dramatically: it was no longer viewed as a peripheral or low-priority region but as a central hub for European security. This shift provided NATO with an opportunity to move beyond its previous stance as a passive observer, positioning itself instead as an active strategic actor increasingly engaged in the great-power politics shaping the region (Huebert, 2019; 2022).

While the outbreak of the war in Ukraine undeniably represented an extraordinary event that profoundly reshaped NATO's strategic calculus, it would be reductive to interpret the Alliance's increasing focus on the High North as a merely linear and inevitable reaction to Russia's aggression. Rather, this article argues that the war also functioned as a strategic communicative device through which NATO legitimized long-standing objectives – specifically, expanding its presence in the Arctic and reasserting its role as a credible security actor in a region of growing geopolitical and geoeconomic significance.

The central question guiding this analysis is how NATO has justified and legitimized its gradual expansion in the High North. The article focuses on one of the key strategies employed by the Alliance to achieve this goal: the construction and dissemination of a securitizing narrative that frames the Arctic as a security space directly linked to Euro-Atlantic stability. In doing so, the study explores not only the content of this narrative – its underlying grammar of security composed of existential threats, referent objects, and legitimizing discourses – but also the channels through which such a narrative has been diffused and normalized.

Drawing on Nye's (2014: 21) observation that, in contemporary international politics, "victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins," the article situates NATO's communicative practices within the broader framework of securitizing narrative-building as an instrument of soft power and legitimacy production. While traditional media and digital platforms (such as television, radio, and social networks) have long served as the primary vehicles for the dissemination of security narratives, this study highlights a less explored communicative arena: the role of Arctic conferences – taking the example of the Arctic Circle Assembly – as spaces where such narratives are articulated, reinforced, and institutionalized.

Notably, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, the Arctic Circle Assembly has undergone a significant transformation. Originally conceived as an inclusive forum for dialogue and cooperation among the eight Arctic states and a range of non-Arctic stakeholders, the Assembly has adapted to the rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape. As Lanteigne (2022) observes, a clear pattern has emerged: conferences within the European-North American Arctic are now predominantly attended by representatives from the so-called Arctic Seven (all Arctic states excluding Russia), with Russian participation largely absent.

This reconfiguration, while arguably detrimental to the Assembly's original spirit of exchange and inclusivity, has simultaneously created a fertile environment for actors seeking to construct and propagate specific security narratives.

Analysis

As Aristotle posited, an effective narrative must possess a beginning, a middle, and an end - each contributing to a coherent sense of direction and purpose. In the context of this case study, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine can be understood as the “beginning” of NATO’s renewed narrative construction concerning the High North.

Only a few months after the onset of the conflict, in July 2022, NATO adopted a new Strategic Concept at the Madrid Summit, replacing the previous version issued in 2010. This document, widely regarded as the Alliance’s most authoritative policy text, articulates NATO’s medium-term strategic vision and is typically revised only in response to major geopolitical turning points. Although the 2022 Strategic Concept primarily focuses on the war in Ukraine, it is at Point 8 that the High North is explicitly mentioned for the first time as a potential theatre in which Russia could decide to expand the conflict.

In the High North, its [Russia’s] capability to disrupt Allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic is a strategic challenge to the Alliance (NATO, 2022b).

This passage produces a dual effect. First, it elevates the concept of “Arctic security” to a core dimension of Euro-Atlantic defense, amplifying perceptions of a Russian “threat” both in regional media and within the policymaking arenas of the Arctic Seven. Second, following the suspension of the Arctic Council’s activities in March 2022 and Russia’s subsequent exclusion, the fragmentation of the Arctic into two distinct spheres - one Western-led and one Russian - became increasingly pronounced.

A textual analysis of the NATO statement reveals the centrality of the verb “disrupt,” a term endowed with significant narrative power. Unlike “destroy,” “disrupt” suggests interference, destabilization, and subversion - concepts that resonate with the strategic vulnerability of the High North. Within this framing, Russia is portrayed not merely as a military adversary but as an actor capable of undermining the freedom of navigation, a value-laden metaphor for the principles of liberty and democracy that NATO has sought to defend since the end of the Cold War. In this sense, the 2022 Strategic Concept marks the beginning of NATO’s substantive re-engagement in the Arctic - no longer limited to symbolic or political gestures but characterized by a concrete strategic shift northward.

The core question then becomes how this narrative evolved – specifically, through which mechanisms and communicative arenas NATO developed and disseminated its discourse to reach the “end” of Aristotle’s triadic structure: the legitimization of the Alliance’s role as a credible security actor in the High North and the justification of its expanding presence and activities (Toolan, 2001).

One of the most illustrative channels through which this narrative has been projected is NATO’s progressive participation in major Arctic conferences, most notably the Arctic Circle Assembly. Beginning in 2022, NATO’s official presence at this forum – maintained in subsequent editions – represents a significant innovation in its communication strategy. The post-2022 Assemblies, characterized by the absence of dissenting voices and an emerging ideational homogeneity, have provided a particularly conducive environment for the circulation and normalization of Western security narratives.

The Arctic Circle Assemblies (2022-2024)

The Arctic Circle Assembly was established in 2013 by Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, then President of Iceland (1996–2016), who continues to serve as its chairman. Since its inception, the Assembly has been held annually over three days each October at the Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Centre in Reykjavík. From the outset, the Assembly's inclusive philosophy – particularly its engagement with China and other non-Arctic states - raised concerns among Arctic state politicians regarding its potential impact on the established Arctic governance framework. Mr. Grímsson, who has funded and continues to lead the organization, emphasized the importance of involving non-Arctic states in regional dialogue, given that they too are affected by transformations occurring in the Arctic (Steinveg, 2023)

Despite Russia's increasingly assertive posture in the northeastern part of the European continent during the early 2010s, NATO representatives were notably absent from the initial editions of the Arctic Circle Assembly, particularly from the “plenary speeches”- the central events where high-level figures address the full assembly's audience in the main hall. Security issues were addressed in thematic panels; however, these discussions were primarily led by academics and tended to focus on regional rather than global security dynamics. There appears to have been a deliberate effort to maintain continuity and to avoid introducing politically sensitive topics - such as the conflicts in Georgia or Crimea - into the Arctic context. This suggests an intentional framing of the region as distinct from broader geopolitical tensions.

Instead, the emphasis was placed on identifying common ground and fostering mutual understanding. This approach was reflected in the participation of high-level Russian and U.S. officials, who often shared the same panels, as well as the gradual inclusion of senior Chinese representatives, further affirming the Assembly's international scope (Arctic Circle website, n.d).

Even in parallel with Russia's 2017 ZAPAD military exercise - which, as discussed in the previous paragraph, marked an early but significant turning point in NATO's approach to the Arctic - there was a shared intention during the 2017 Arctic Circle Assembly to avoid escalating tensions. This collective was captured in one of the most notable statements made at the conference by U.S. Senator from Alaska, Lisa Murkowski, who remarked, “Cooperation doesn't make news; controversy makes news. I would like to keep the Arctic away from controversy” (Arctic Circle website, n.d.). Consistent with this cautious approach, no high-level NATO representatives were present as speakers in the plenary sessions of the 2017 edition.

This absence persisted until the 2022 Assembly, when, for the first time in the conference's history, a senior NATO official - Admiral Rob Bauer, Chair of the NATO Military Committee - participated in a plenary session titled “NATO and the Arctic.” This event took place on October 15, 2022, about eight months after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (February 24, 2022) and with the suspension of the Arctic Council's activities due to the temporary exclusion of Russia.

Beginning in 2022, the Arctic Circle Assembly adjusted to the changing international and regional geopolitical landscape. Attendance became dominated by the “Arctic Seven” (the Arctic states excluding Russia), with Russian participation largely absent (Lanteigne, 2022). That narrowing of representation increased ideological homogeneity: with fewer dissenting voices, the Assembly grew more receptive to particular framings.

In the opening section of his address, Admiral Bauer explicitly characterized Russia as “*the most significant and direct threat to our [Alliance’s] security*”, initially anchoring this assessment to the situation in Ukraine. Within the first two minutes of his speech, he referred to the war in Ukraine nine times, employing phrases such as “*war in Ukraine*,” “*unprovoked war in Ukraine*,” and “*Putin’s war in Ukraine*.”

According to second-generation securitization scholars, the reference to Ukraine provides the necessary contextual frame for the speech - one that facilitates the deployment and reception of the security grammar (Balzacq, 2005; Huysmans, 2006; Stritzel, 2007; McDonald, 2008). Through this framing, the discourse mobilizes a shared sense of fear, thereby legitimizing potential subsequent securitizing actions if deemed necessary (Huysmans, 2006).

Beyond invoking fear, the key strategic objective behind NATO’s decision to participate in ACA22 – represented by its second-highest official – was to establish a discursive linkage between the conflict in Ukraine and the Arctic region, particularly the High North. At that time, the High North remained a peaceful area where Russia had not yet shown any intention of extending the conflict.

The strategic term employed in NATO’s speech during ACA22 to connect these two distinct theatres - one of active warfare and the other of relative peace – was “*close proximity to Russia*.” This expression constitutes the central narrative device of Bauer’s speech and represents a pivotal element in NATO’s evolving role in the High North. It serves as the principal rationale for a greater NATO presence in the Arctic, grounded in the perceived geographical and strategic immediacy of the Russian threat, fundamental part in constructing the “threat”.

Drawing on Nye’s concept of “power of language as a soft power”, this expression became, from that moment onward, a “powerful language tool” used to shape security perceptions in the region, particularly among Norway, Finland, and Sweden. The latter two countries – at that time in the process of joining the Alliance and abandoning their long-standing policies of military non-alignment - were especially receptive to this framing (Kyllönen, 2025). It is also important to note that Norwegian, Finnish, and Swedish participants typically make up the majority of the Arctic Circle Assembly audience. Consequently, the use of a concept capable of resonating with the audience’s own geopolitical context and self-perception represents a highly effective communicative strategy, one aimed at fostering identification, persuasion, and ultimately, support for NATO’s securitizing agenda in the High North.

The subsequent sections of Admiral Bauer’s speech further develop and reinforce the discursive linkage between the Ukrainian and Arctic theatres by providing concrete details about Russia’s “*militarization in the region*.” Bauer explicitly refers to the “*Bastion Defence*” posture of Russia’s Northern Fleet - both naval and submarine components - as well as to “*hypersonic missiles*” and “*new strategic ballistic submarine missiles*.” These references, articulated in the central part of the speech, serve to consolidate the narrative of Russia as an existential threat not only in the context of the war in Ukraine but also within the ostensibly “peaceful” Arctic region.

Several passages in the speech also delineate what, in securitization theory, is termed the referent object - that is, what is being defended and what is perceived as under threat. Admiral Bauer employs expressions such as “*rules-based international order*,” “*allied soil*,” and “*freedom and independence*” to demarcate, both physically and normatively, what is at stake and what Russia is portrayed as seeking to disrupt.

Equally significant is Bauer's instrumental use of China's growing presence in the region in the closing part of his address. He refers to China as "*another authoritarian regime*," a label that implicitly aligns Beijing with Moscow - the other authoritarian regime - and, by contrast, sets both in opposition to NATO. This implicit association becomes explicit when he states: "*Beijing and Moscow pledged to intensify practical cooperation in the Arctic*" (Arctic Circle, 2022).

Bauer's invocation of China - both as a rhetorical device and as a geopolitical actor - serves to broaden the perceived scope of the threat. By linking Russia and China within a shared authoritarian frame, the Admiral projects Arctic dynamics beyond the confines of regional security, suggesting that developments in the High North could have repercussions for the entire Alliance, including non-Arctic member states. In this way, the increased Chinese presence and the deepening Sino-Russian cooperation operate as discursive tools to engage segments of the audience less directly affected by the "close proximity" argument, thereby expanding the resonance and inclusiveness of NATO's securitizing narrative.

Finally, in the concluding section of his ACA22 speech, Admiral Bauer explicitly positions NATO as the most legitimate and capable actor in the High North to address the previously mentioned threats, thereby effectively self-positioning the Alliance as a securitizing actor.

NATO must fulfill its inherent pledge of collective defense, one for all, all for one, and increase its presence in the high North. [...] NATO has set up Joint Force Command Norfolk in the US to ensure that sea lines across the Atlantic remain free. NATO and allies are conducting more and more Arctic exercises (Arctic Circle, 2022).

These closing lines, as analyzed above, consolidate NATO's self-representation as the most credible and eligible security actor in the Arctic region - the institution uniquely endowed with the authority, legitimacy, and operational capability to protect both the territorial and normative integrity of the Alliance in the High North.

To connect discourse with policy outcomes, it is important to note that following Admiral Bauer's speech - delivered from one of the most prominent platforms in the Arctic region - significant developments took place in the dialogue concerning the admission of Finland and Sweden into NATO. At that time, in October 2022, their accession remained blocked by the vetoes of Hungary and Turkey. Although these two states were not the primary target audience of Bauer's ACA22 speech, they arguably constituted an indirect audience to whom the message could function as an additional persuasive signal aimed at encouraging the removal of their opposition.

In April 2023, Finland's accession to NATO was officially announced - arguably the most significant shift in the Arctic security architecture in recent history - admitting into the Alliance the state that possesses the longest border with Russia. This accession reshaped the strategic geography of the Arctic: for decades, Finland had functioned as a geopolitical buffer between NATO and Russia. With Finland's border now incorporated into NATO's eastern flank, the security dynamics of the region have been fundamentally transformed, effectively marking the end of Nordic neutrality (Hanhimäki, 2024). Furthermore, unlike earlier NATO enlargements - such as Montenegro (2017) and North Macedonia (2020), which required nearly a decade to complete - Finland's integration occurred with unprecedented speed (Skaluba & Wieslander, 2022).

From NATO's perspective, the accession of Finland as the Alliance's thirty-first member was celebrated as the successful outcome of both discursive and policy-negotiation efforts - the

culmination of a strategic narrative such as that conveyed by Bauer in his 2022 speech. However, this “unprecedented speed” of enlargement was also driven by the intensification of threat perceptions, thereby reactivating the dynamics of the security dilemma.

From the Russian standpoint, the accession of Finland – and the potential inclusion of Sweden – was perceived as a direct strategic threat. Historically opposed to any north-eastward expansion of NATO, Russia responded by consolidating its partnership with China through the signing of major economic agreements and by inviting other partners, particularly those within the BRICS framework, to increase investment and participation in Arctic affairs. In parallel, Russia announced its withdrawal from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and suspended its financial contributions to the Arctic Council, further deepening the paralysis of institutional cooperation and halting the exchange of scientific data (Nilsen, 2023). These dynamics have contributed to the escalation of competition in the Arctic, leading to regional destabilization instead of reviving the spirit of dialogue and cooperation that had defined the area for over two decades.

At the regional level, the speech also contributed to revitalizing public and political attention on NATO and within Arctic states - particularly Norway, Finland, and Sweden - toward the renewed strategic centrality of their northern territories (Kyllönen, 2025). Moreover, certain key terms and expressions employed by Bauer began to circulate widely across mass media and academic discourse, shaping the emerging vocabulary of Arctic security (Gricius, 2024).

Finally, this period also marked the reinvigoration of Nordic defence cooperation, characterized by closer coordination among the Arctic states and a growing commitment to a more structured and collective regional presence - increasingly supported and guided by NATO (Edvardsen, 2022).

A distinctive feature of a securitizing narrative, as opposed to a single securitizing move, is that it is designed to serve long-term goals and can be disseminated gradually over time. Whereas the effectiveness of a securitizing move depends on the immediacy and urgency of its communication, a securitizing narrative evolves through sustained repetition, continuity, and adaptation.

In this sense, the 2023 edition of the Arctic Circle Assembly (ACA23) – held from 19 to 21 October 2023 – represents a significant moment in the ongoing dissemination of NATO’s narrative on the High North. For the second consecutive year, the Alliance was represented by its second-highest-ranking official, the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, who, as in 2022, delivered a plenary address to the full conference audience.

Even prior to conducting a textual analysis of the key concepts in Bauer’s 2023 speech, this recurrence itself is analytically relevant. It highlights another essential component in the construction of a securitizing narrative: “continuity” – both in the language employed and in the actor who conveys it. In this specific case, the element of continuity assumes particular importance, as it strengthens the credibility and persuasive power of the speaker. By maintaining a consistent communicative presence, Admiral Bauer consolidates his role as a security actor, endowed with both the authoritative tone and the forward-looking posture that characterize his interventions across multiple editions of the Arctic Circle Assembly.

At the level of textual analysis, Admiral Bauer’s 2023 speech presents the same *framing* and *sequence* as his 2022 address, reiterating several key concepts to further consolidate the formation of a shared *security grammar*. The speech opens by providing a contextualization of

the Russian threat, again referring to the war in Ukraine and characterizing it as an “*unjust and brutal invasion of Ukraine*.”

Bauer then connects the war in Ukraine to the Arctic region through the geographical and military bridge represented by Russia, introducing the concept of “*military stronghold*.” Conceptually, this term provides an operational and military connotation to the earlier notion of “*close proximity*” used in 2022, expanding it from geographical immediacy to concrete militarization. This concept appears in a passage that elaborates on Russia’s military posture in the region:

The Arctic is still a Russian military stronghold. Onto the Northern Fleet’s nuclear submarines, missile facilities, airfields, radar stations and troop concentrations. Russia’s largest force is stationed on the Kola Peninsula, which shares a border with Norway and Finland, NATO’s newest member (Arctic Circle, 2023).

As in 2022, Bauer directly references Norway and Finland. Although the primary objective of Alliance enlargement had already been achieved with the *unprecedentedly rapid* accession of Finland, this reference serves to lay the groundwork for short- and medium-term goals - namely, increasing NATO’s military presence in both countries, expanding troop deployments, and intensifying the frequency of exercises in their territories.

The framing continues with the introduction of China and the perceived threat posed by its growing cooperation with Russia. Bauer underscores this link by citing examples such as the “*cooperation agreement between the Russian and Chinese Coast Guards*,” “*Chinese investment in the Power of Siberia pipeline - the largest gas project in post-Soviet Russian history*,” and “*Chinese investments in Arctic energy and mineral projects, primarily in Russia*.” He summarizes this evolving dynamic as follows:

Therefore, on the 30th of June, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called China the priority partner to Russia in the Arctic... He was right! (Arctic Circle, 2023).

He then adds a crucial qualification:

And this is concerning to us because while Russia’s intentions in the Arctic have become clearer in recent years, China’s intentions for the region remain opaque (Arctic Circle, 2023).

Through these statements, Bauer continues to portray China as an emerging challenge – not only because of its deepening ties with Russia, but also due to its unilateral initiatives in the Arctic, characterized by a lack of transparency and strategic ambiguity.

In the concluding section of his speech, Admiral Bauer once again reinforces NATO’s role in the Arctic as the most legitimate and capable security actor. He consolidates this position by justifying the Alliance’s increased military activities, operational preparedness, and allocation of resources - both among Arctic stakeholders and within non-Arctic member states. This is captured in the following assertion:

NATO has had no choice but to prepare for the unexpected. NATO is more prepared, secure, and united than ever before. We have to prepare for the fact that conflict can present itself at any point, in any domain, including in the Arctic (Arctic Circle, 2023).

These concluding remarks reaffirm NATO’s self-perception as a cohesive and proactive security actor, indirectly legitimizing the discursive and operational intensification of its presence in the High North. They also illustrate how continuity in discourse – across time, contexts, and audiences

– serves as a crucial mechanism in transforming a series of securitizing moves into a coherent and enduring securitizing narrative.

The increasingly assertive tone of Admiral Bauer's 2023 speech effectively laid the groundwork for broader legitimacy and formal authorization from the participating states for "Nordic Response 2024" – part of the large-scale Steadfast Defender 2024 exercise – which became the largest NATO mobilization in the Arctic since the Cold War. The exercise involved areas that had, until then, remained largely untouched, including territories inhabited by Indigenous populations, particularly in Finnish Lapland. It thus marked the beginning of a gradual militarization and expansion of NATO's presence across key strategic zones such as Finnish Lapland, Norway's Troms region, and the area surrounding Kiruna in northern Sweden (YLE, 2024).

Particularly noteworthy was also Dynamic Mongoose 2024 in May 2024, which focused on enhancing NATO's anti-submarine warfare capabilities in the Arctic-Atlantic theater. These maneuvers concentrated on strategic maritime chokepoints such as the GIUK Gap (linking the North Atlantic to the Arctic Ocean) and the Bear Gap along Norway's northern coast, both of which are critical to NATO–Russia naval balance.

Building on the foundation laid by Admiral Bauer's 2022 and 2023 speeches, NATO facilitated a significant boost in bilateral defense relations by signing historic agreements within arctic region that effectively made operational conditions previously reserved for wartime applicable in peacetime.

Between December 2023 and February 2024, within NATO's Arctic member states, several significant bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) were signed. These agreements strengthened the defense relationships between the United States and the four European Arctic members of NATO – Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark (Nilsen, 2024). Despite the region's continued state of peace, and in the absence of any direct escalation or explicit threat from Russia, the DCAs delineated potential wartime scenarios, granting the United States access to military facilities and bases located in Lapland, Sweden, Greenland, and the Norwegian Arctic – all situated within the High North (YLE, 2024).

Beyond their substantive content – provisions typically associated with wartime rather than peacetime arrangements – the speed and manner of approval of these measures appeared disproportionate to the actual security conditions in the High North, accelerating and streamlining the traditional democratic procedures that usually govern such decisions. Although the region had once again become a contested space, it remained free from open conflict.

The discursive confrontation, followed by an expanded military presence and the negotiation of bilateral agreements – preparing the Alliance and its Arctic members for a potential direct confrontation with Russia – has, in turn, prompted a further consolidation of the Russo-Chinese partnership. This cooperation now extends well beyond the economic sphere, encompassing technological research, naval construction, and even China's direct participation in Russia's naval and air exercise "OCEAN-24." In parallel, Russia has continued to strengthen and modernize its Arctic facilities and capabilities, citing NATO enlargement and the increasing militarization of the High North as a pretext signaling its determination to maintain strategic parity and to counterbalance NATO's expanding footprint in the region (Exner-Pirot, 2020; Piechowicz, 2025)

These dynamics further fueled the security dilemma and destabilized the region, effectively deepening the divide in the Arctic between NATO and its allies on one side, and Russia and its emerging partners on the other (Bertelsen, 2024). This growing polarization extended beyond the military and strategic dimensions, evolving into a broader confrontation between two distinct “ways of life” and value systems – the Western and the Eastern – thereby reviving discursive and ideological logics reminiscent of the Cold War era.

At the Arctic Circle Assembly 2024, Admiral Rob Bauer took the stage for the third consecutive year, reaffirming the key dynamics highlighted in this analysis: the importance of continuity, sequencing, and the crystallization of a shared security vocabulary disseminated during the previous two editions. His speech celebrated the achievements reached thus far while simultaneously setting new political and strategic objectives for the Alliance in the High North.

The framing of Bauer’s address remained consistent with earlier iterations, once again employing the war in Ukraine as a credible contextual backdrop and linking it directly to the Arctic region. As he stated:

And my message remains unchanged: major geopolitical changes drive home the need to ensure security and stability in the Arctic, as we see more strategic competition in the region. Russia’s war on Ukraine has global implications, including in the Arctic, where Russia has even used its military facilities on the Kola Peninsula to attack Ukraine. After almost 1000 days of full-scale war, Ukraine continues to bravely and successfully fight back against the Russian aggression. [...] For many years, constructive cooperation and peaceful dialogue benefited the Arctic and the nations in the region, including Russia. This has accurately been described as High North, low tension. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case (Arctic Circle, 2024).

In these lines lies the core of Bauer’s ACA24 speech, which aimed primarily at reinforcing previously introduced concepts and consolidating the discursive linkage between the Arctic and Ukraine. In doing so, the speech arguably portrayed a distorted representation of the regional reality, depicting the Arctic as a zone on the brink of escalation, despite the absence of concrete indications supporting this scenario. This selective framing, however, appears strategically oriented – serving broader objectives such as justifying the continued militarization of the European Arctic and encouraging Arctic states to significantly increase their defense expenditures, a message encapsulated in the passage:

The High North is important for all the Alliance. New structure reinforces requirements [...] There are positive developments, but we need to do more (Arctic Circle, 2024).

Following this address, in March 2024, Sweden’s official admission into NATO was announced – an event that marked the definitive end of Nordic military non-alignment. Several Russian high-level officials attributed this accelerated enlargement to what they described as a wave of “hysterical Russophobia” sweeping across Europe, which, in their view, played a catalytic role in accelerating the political momentum behind both Sweden’s and Finland’s accession to the Alliance (Sukhankin et al., 2023).

Since 2022, NATO’s presence in Arctic-related conferences – and specifically those concerning the High North – has grown, extending beyond the Arctic Circle Assembly to other significant forums, such as the 2024 Arctic Security Conference in Oslo. Although this conference is a relatively recent addition to the regional landscape, it stands out as one of the few venues to include

NATO experts. Unlike Admiral Bauer's formal plenary addresses at the Arctic Circle Assembly, the Oslo conference emphasized informal dialogue and exchanges among panelists, making it more challenging to identify a consistent securitization narrative through recurring key phrases. Nonetheless, the event remains analytically significant, as it illustrates NATO's expanding engagement and visibility in Arctic discussions and contributes to the development of a broader narrative trend previously advanced by the Alliance. In doing so, it further consolidates the "grammar of security," linking threat perceptions with the defined referent object and consolidating NATO's role as a credible security actor in the High North.

Concluding remarks

Based on an analysis of three speeches by NATO Admiral Bauer during the Arctic Circle Assembly 2022 to 2024, this article proposes securitizing narratives as an alternative conceptual frame to the Copenhagen School's securitization process (Buzan et al., 1998). Instead of emphasizing urgency or the need for imminent extraordinary measures, both core elements of securitization, NATO's communicative strategy is grounded in a longer-term temporal perspective. This is largely because there is no immediate existential threat, despite communications framing the Arctic as a zone of heightened risk. As such, classic securitization, in the strict Copenhagen School sense, cannot be fully observed (Floyd, 2016). NATO's communicative practices in the High North can be better understood as a strategic *narrative* with an implicit *securitizing* intent.

This interpretation captures the essence of a securitizing narrative: a form of communication that, through repetition and diffusion across multiple venues, normalizes security-oriented reasoning and legitimizes actions that, over time, may culminate in significant policy shifts.

The ultimate purpose of this narrative is to prepare the ground for securitizing measures. Its aim is to facilitate and persuade authoritative audiences, primarily Arctic states, to undertake actions that are "exceptional" not because of their urgency in suspending democratic procedures, but because of their historical and strategic significance, contributing to an incremental transformation of the regional status quo. This capacity to shape long-term strategic environments is precisely what a single Speech Act cannot achieve, whereas a sustained narrative can (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

In the case analyzed here, NATO's recurrent discursive patterns in the High North appear designed to facilitate historically consequential measures – such as the accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance – thereby advancing its broader strategic agenda.

In sum, while NATO's strategic narrative in the High North does not amount to full securitization, it constitutes a deliberate and effective communicative strategy. By leveraging well-established regional forums, the Alliance has succeeded in embedding its security logic, shaping perceptions of threat and stability, and consolidating its position as a credible and legitimate security actor in the Arctic region (Hossain, 2015).

Although this article examines only a portion of the broader puzzle, it provides insight into the evolution of NATO's role in the High North. While these narratives are not the sole drivers of NATO's decisions, they have proven particularly effective in sensitizing audiences, shaping perceptions of "fear" and "insecurity," and legitimizing the Alliance's activities in the region.

Importantly, the securitizing narratives propagated through Arctic conferences have produced divisive effects. As demonstrated throughout this study, NATO's discursive strategy has not opened new avenues for dialogue with Russia; rather, it has intensified regional fragmentation, a trend further reinforced by mirror narratives emanating from Moscow following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

This mutual reinforcement of securitized discourses has fueled a security dilemma that, while yielding certain strategic and operational advantages for both sides, has come at a considerable cost to scientific cooperation and data exchange within the Arctic's inherently fragile ecosystem (Heininen, 2022). The erosion of collaborative mechanisms that once underpinned Arctic governance not only undermines decades of trust-building but also jeopardizes the management of shared environmental and security challenges in one of the world's most sensitive regions.

The article further highlights the fragmentation of Arctic conferences as a factor that reinforces this divisive trend. The case study of the Arctic Circle Assembly – the largest and most representative Arctic conference and the only one to host high-level NATO participants on a repeated basis – demonstrates how the conference space, originally designed to foster dialogue, exchange, and criticism, has been transformed. Post-2022, the exclusion of Russian participants reflects a broader geopolitical realignment following the Ukraine conflict. This paradoxically undermines the original cooperative purposes of the conferences, which historically served as pillars of inclusive regional governance (Steinveg, 2023) and instead fosters discursive dynamics that exacerbate division rather than promote dialogue and consensus. The absence of Russia has not only reshaped the discursive dynamics of these gatherings but also enhanced their function as platforms for the legitimation of Western strategic visions for the Arctic, allowing NATO to subtly but effectively consolidate its discursive and political presence in the High North.

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