# Nordic Review of International Studies

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## Discussion articles



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# Editors



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# Editorial

The Arctic region has become a stage for an escalating international competition. Climate change is rapidly reshaping the region and opening new opportunities for access to vast natural resources and shipping routes. The political landscape in the Arctic is increasingly about power, sovereignty, and strategic interests.

Russia has aggressively expanded its military presence in the region, reactivating Soviet-era bases and strengthening its Arctic fleet. The ongoing war in Ukraine has only intensified these apprehensions. Meanwhile, China is investing in scientific research stations and infrastructure under its Polar Silk Road initiative. Though not an Arctic nation, China's increasing involvement in the region signals long-term ambitions that challenge traditional Arctic governance.

The Arctic Council, historically a forum for cooperation among Arctic nations, has faced disruptions in its diplomatic function, particularly after member states suspended collaboration with Russia due to its actions in Ukraine. This has left Arctic governance in a fragile state, raising questions about the future of peaceful cooperation in the region.

At the heart of these tensions lies the region's Indigenous communities, whose livelihoods are directly impacted by geopolitical decisions made by major powers. As nations scramble for influence, the voices of Arctic Indigenous peoples must be amplified, ensuring that policies reflect their rights, traditions, and climate realities.

In her article, Minna Hanhijärvi argues that the recent conceptualisations of illiberalism involving ideational and practice approaches offer helpful insights to explain Russia's Arctic and dual climate policies when carefully contextualised with historic, economic, and political developments and power-elite struggles analysed by the rich IR literature.

In her article, Laura Junka-Aikio introduces the concept of subaltern security dilemma to offer a critical, deconstructive, and decolonial approach to the study of Arctic geopolitics and security. Junka-Aikio argues that both the green transition and militarisation need to be understood as new regimes or paradigms of land use that pose a significant threat to the viability of Sámi livelihoods.

In his article, Aleksis Oreschnikoff explores how both scientific and security considerations are embedded in Arctic research infrastructures. Oreschnikoff highlights the importance of examining scientific and security concerns in the Arctic as mutually entangled rather than opposing or mutually exclusive issues.

Finally, Joonas Vola asks a key question in his article: If the Arctic is the product of scientific practice, what function is it produced for? Vola reminds us that historically the Arctic has functioned as a vast natural laboratory for field sciences. He underlines that knowledge in the Arctic context is bound to the history and practice of colonialism.

We hope that this NRIS issue on the politics of the Arctic offers new and valuable perspectives to scientific and societal debates on the Arctic.

**Johanna Vuorelma, Ville Sinkkonen and Sanna Salo**

Peer-Reviewed Article

# Mitigating black carbon emissions from gas flaring and Arctic maritime shipping: Russia's anti-Western ambitions in the Arctic

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## Abstract

The Arctic region and Russia, the major emitter of greenhouse gases, are facing effects of climate change faster than the rest of the world. Evidently, climate change and adoption to it will shape Russia's future, and vice versa, regardless of who or what kind of a government is in power. This includes addressing the problem of black carbon and other short-lived climate pollutants from hydrocarbon industry and maritime shipping in the Northern Sea Route accelerating climate warming, with harmful effects on air quality, ecosystems and human health. Drawing on insights of international relations literature, this article examines conceptualisations of illiberalism, illiberal environmentalism and their contemporary versions in Russia, and discusses how these frameworks can be applied to understand Russia's policy choices regarding climate change and the Arctic since the invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 and considers prospects for post-war Arctic collaboration. It finds that these conceptualisations when carefully contextualised help to identify ideational underpinnings intertwined with national interests in policy texts and illuminate connections to societal beliefs held by Russian conservatives and indicate authoritarian and illiberal practices guiding policymaking and implementation. Post-war international collaboration among climate scientists is viewed as worth pursuing, and perhaps essential, to mitigate Arctic warming.

## Keywords

Arctic, Arctic Council, black carbon, climate change, emissions, illiberalism, Russia, Ukraine war

## Introduction

The Arctic climate is warming irrevocably, four times as fast as the rest of world (Rantanen et al., 2022, p. 168). Since 2013 the Arctic Council (AC) member states – Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and USA – have acknowledged the harmful effects of black carbon (BC) and other short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs) on the warming of Arctic climate, air quality, and human health. This promising collaboration was strengthened by the adoption of the non-legally binding Framework for Action on Enhanced Black Carbon and Methane Emissions Reductions in 2015 and a collective BC reduction goal in 2017 (AC, 2015; 2019), and the Arctic Marine Strategic Plan 2015–2025 (AMSP, 2015). These agreements established a vision for mitigating climate change and BC emissions through national and collective actions, coordinated by the BC and Methane Expert Group (EGBCM). Although Russia has failed to provide BC monitoring data since 2015 (Böttcher et al., 2021, p. 2), expectations were high at the time that the AC as "a small climate club" (Aakre et al., 2018, pp. 85-90) and as a "node" of global governance of SLCPs (Koivurova et al., 2023, p. 208) would enhance true multilateral cooperation, supported by scientific cooperation and expert networks in monitoring and measurements, emission reduction technologies, and knowledge about BC effects. This collaboration was anticipated to provide an experimental platform to catalyse BC and SLCPs regulation in the Arctic and observer states, such as China and India (Khan and Kulovesi, 2018, pp. 10-12), and contribute to interstate confidence-building and conflict prevention (Kopra, 2022, p. 265).

The AC cooperation was minimally affected by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 (see e.g., Byers, 2017), but the full-scale war by Russia in Ukraine since February 2022 has fundamentally altered the situation. It contests the foundations of the AC intergovernmental cooperation and the joint efforts to mitigate effects of climate change and BC emissions in the Arctic. The AC responded by suspending operations in March 2022. The working-group work was resumed in May 2023 by Norway's chairmanship, although only in a virtual format. As the biggest Arctic state and major emitter of greenhouse gases (GHG) (Climate Action Tracker, 2022), Russia's involvement is considered necessary to mitigate Arctic climate warming and its effects (Humpert, 2024). The major BC and methane emissions are linked to the flaring of associated petroleum gas (APG), a side-product of oil extraction, which is traditionally burned in flares as waste in the oilfields in the Russian territory, contributing 42 percent to the annual mean BC surface concentrations in the Arctic (Böttcher et al., 2021, pp. 1-11). BC emissions from shipping are estimated to increase due to growing maritime traffic in the Northern Sea Route (NSR) (Aalto, 2025, pp. 1-2).

Despite commitments to all the key international agreements relevant to SLCPs until its offensive in Ukraine from 2022 onwards (see Aalto et al., 2023, pp. 243-245), the AC Framework for actions to mitigate BC emissions, the World Bank's Zero Routine Flaring by 2030 initiative (WB, 2015), and domestic regulation of harmful pollution from flaring based on a pollution fee system (Korppoo, 2018, pp. 236-238; Tsukerman and Ivanov, 2022, pp. 3-4), Russia has for long been the world's largest emitter of APG from flaring (WB, 2024). In 2023, the volume and intensity of APG flaring increased to a record high across Russia's oil-producing regions, accelerating climate warming (World Bank, 2024, p. 12). Regarding BC emissions from shipping in the NSR, Russia's contribution is limited as it has not ratified the Gothenburg Protocol that includes voluntary BC actions (Zhang and Yang, 2024, p. 40441), nor is it complying with the IMO regulations and guidelines on shipping emissions (Aalto et al., 2025, p. 7). Hence, salient questions concern the future of the scientific collaboration within the AC, contingent upon Russia's policy decisions and the assessments by other AC member states regarding continuation of climate collaboration with Russia in the aftermath of the war (see Dyck, 2024, pp. 6-7; Koivurova and Shibata, 2023, pp. 1-9).

The topic of BC emissions mitigation is widely studied in terms of scientific assessments of SCLPs' impact on climate change and consequences in the Arctic by, for example, the AMAP (2021a, 2021b) and the EGBCM (AC, 2019) and several research teams such as Brewer (2023, pp. 309-331), Kühn et al. (2023, pp. 14-39) as well as regarding mitigation solutions available (Aalto et al., 2025, pp. 1-12; Qi et al., 2023; Åström et al., 2021, pp. 17-66). Additionally, the actions and contribution of the AC members states are carefully analysed (e.g., Yamineva, Kulovesi and Recio, 2023, pp. 1-13; Aalto et al., 2023, pp. 214-256; Steinveg, Rottem and Andreeva, 2023, pp. 1-7).

This article aims to contribute to these openings by focusing on Russia's policies regarding climate change and the Arctic adopted since Russia began a full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022 by employing conceptualisations of illiberalism, illiberal environmentalism, and their contemporary versions in Russia. Here, key questions arise about the extent to which official policies adopted since 2022 inform illiberal thinking and whether these conceptualisations enhance our understanding of Russia's stance on climate change mitigation and international climate cooperation. Against this background, the potential for post-war Arctic cooperation on reducing BC emissions is discussed, drawing on ongoing debates and insights from IR literature.

## Illiberalism and Russia

In contemporary IR literature, Russia is commonly viewed as an authoritarian regime espousing an explicitly illiberal ideological worldview domestically and abroad, antagonising the modern liberal global order (e.g., Morozov, 2023, pp. 2302-2310; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2021, pp. 611-612). This perception has become mainstream along with a re-emergence of geopolitical thinking since the Russia–Ukraine conflict in 2014. The horrific war in Ukraine since 2022 has revived debates over the conflict between liberal democracy and illiberalism globally (Foa et al., 2022, pp. 3-5). While Russia is referred to as an authoritarian state advancing illiberal practices (Glasius, 2018, p. 515), and wartime Russia's regime is labelled imperialistic authoritarian and even fascist (Laruelle, 2024), there is a need for conceptual clarification: is authoritarian the same as illiberal? How are illiberal practices manifested? And does this conceptual distinction matter in explaining state policies on climate change mitigation?

Definitions and usage of illiberalism are not straightforward. As a term illiberalism is used only recently, and it is not treated as a "classical concept" that would have "a minimal definition which includes the necessary and jointly sufficient defining properties" (van Kessel, 2014, p. 104). Following a classic approach of IR literature focusing on distinctions and categorisations of regime types, Dimitrijevic (2021, pp. 121-140) identifies dictatorship, despotism, tyranny, autocracy, totalitarianism, and authoritarianism as distinct types of illiberal regimes. In institutional terms, these regimes are illiberal as they do not recognise the supremacy of rights, limited government, and the rule of law. In a simplified way, the definition of authoritarianism could be applied to all political regimes that are not electoral democracies (Waller, 2023, pp. 366-368). While addressing Russia's political system as authoritarian, the contemporary literature is primarily focused on describing authoritarian features of the political system and state governance (e.g., Golosov, 2023, pp. 390-408) and their influence in Russia's foreign policy choices (McFaul 2020, pp. 95-139). For example, Russian foreign policy choices are explained through the features of Putin's presidential governance named as "Putinism", which reflects authoritarianism with anti-liberal worldviews and sentiments particularly regarding US foreign policy and embracing ideological leaders and movements committed to illiberal values at home and abroad (McFaul, 2020, pp. 114-116).



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Literature appears to struggle when portraying Russia's regime as a political system that is neither fully liberal nor democratic nor fully authoritarian. Russia is frequently described as a hybrid regime (e.g., Morlino, 2022, pp. 144-146), which may depict a diminished or limited subtype of democracy or authoritarianism, or a distinct type of regime, but which may also host national competitive elections. Sakwa's (2010, pp. 185-206) dual state theory highlights the tension between the normative constitutional order and the administrative state. Under Putin, Russia has evolved into an authoritarian regime while maintaining a formal democratic façade (Ibid., p. 185) and preserving Soviet institutional legacies, including a strong security apparatus and politicised judiciary (Rutland, 2018, p. 278). Authoritarian strategies have fortified the presidency, restricted civil liberties, and curbed opposition (Klimovic, 2023, pp. 105-106). Since 2012, and especially after the 2020 constitutional amendments, Russian governance has become more centralised and personalised, with increased loyalty demands and weakened institutional authority (Ibid., pp. 110-112).

Recent conceptualisations of illiberalism by Laruelle (2022, pp. 303-327), Waller (2024, pp. 365-386), and Glasius (2021, pp. 339-350) explain Russia's policies through ideology and practice. In line with a generic definition, to qualify as a distinct ideology, illiberalism should provide "ideas, beliefs, values, and opinions that exhibit a recurring pattern, are held by significant groups, compete over providing plans for public policy and do so with the aim of justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community" (Freeden, 2003, pp. 32-34). Laruelle (2022, pp. 304, 309-315) describes elements of illiberalism as the following:

- Illiberalism is a modern cluster of ideologies opposing various forms of contemporary liberalism – political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, and civilisational – especially where liberalism is seen as failed or excessive. It merges diverse intellectual traditions and policy norms that promote majoritarianism, sovereignism, traditional hierarchies, and the right to particularism and exclusivity.
- Illiberalism and liberalism are deeply entangled. Illiberal practices are found in authoritarian regimes as well as within liberal democracies. They entail, for example, patterns of interference with legal equality, legal recourse, or recognition before the law; infringement of freedom of expression, fair trial rights, freedom of religion, the right to privacy; and violations of physical integrity rights (see Glasius, 2021, pp. 340-344).
- Illiberalism can be identified in various degrees and intensity across countries, regime types, and constituencies. It may be found within doctrines, strategies, as a project or a vision for a country and/or the world, public policies at regime and institutional level, or as a grassroots culture at societal level, shaped by collective beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours.

Glasius (2021, pp. 340-344) utilises the definitions of practices by Adler and Pouliot (2011, p. 5) as "patterned actions that are embedded in particular organised contexts" and uses practices as the core units of analysis to explain authoritarianism and illiberalism. They are conceptualised as distinct phenomena, although often overlapping and engaged in by the same political actors at the same time. While illiberal practices violate the autonomy and dignity of the person, authoritarian practices sabotage accountability to people over whom political actors exert control by means of secrecy, disinformation, inefficient or corrupted judicial oversight, and disabling voices, thus jeopardising democratic processes.

Illiberalism, distinct from authoritarianism, is defined by its situational and temporal relation to liberalism, and thus it is found in contexts that have experienced liberalism, either internally or through foreign influence (Waller, 2024, pp. 371-377). Hence, Russian illiberalism is viewed by Laruelle (2020, p. 115) as a form of post-liberalism, manifesting in a Russian version of conservative ideology that reacts against liberalism after having experienced it. It operates not only at the regime level, involving the presidency and a set of individuals and central institutions that determine practices of power and bound in patronal network of informal direct personal connections (Hale, 2017, pp. 30-33), but also among political, economic, and cultural elites, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the armed forces (Waller, 2023, pp. 8-11).

## Illiberal environmentalism

While addressing society–environment relations, literature focuses primarily on the importance of the political regime. Several studies have indicated that democracies and authoritarian regimes behave differently regarding domestic environmental policy choices as well as global environmental governance (Povitkina and Jagers, 2022, pp. 1-11). Although liberal democracies are frequently criticised for their shortcomings in addressing climate change, they are considered more effective in ratifying international environmental agreements and implementing decentralisation policies that facilitate better governance of commons (e.g., Kang et al., 2023, pp. 1-10; Shaw, 2023; pp. 1-3). Additionally, driven by electoral pressures, they are recognised as more accountable and responsive to public demands for eco-friendly policies and the promotion of environmental awareness (von Stein, 2022, pp. 340-341).

Authoritarian regimes, in general, are considered less concerned with the environmental agenda than democracies, both at a national and a global level (Brain and Pál, 2019, pp. 1-2). The rise of contemporary authoritarianism and populism, on one hand, and the destructive trends in environmental politics and governance are often equated (McCarthy, 2019, pp. 305-307). The motivations for authoritarian regimes to advance environmental protection are considered multifaceted, primarily focusing on socio-economic performance. This emphasis is grounded in the pursuit of legitimacy, which is crucial for the survival and longevity of authoritarian rule (see e.g., Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017, pp. 251-268). At the same time, contemporary environmentalism challenges social theory of the environment by highlighting, for example, that environmentalism does not require democracy nor liberalism, and illiberal environmental practices may prevail within liberal democracies (Sonnenfeld and Taylor, 2018, pp. 516-518).

Authoritarian environmentalism is used as a theoretical framework to describe a highly centralised environmental governance system often led by a handful of elite bureaucratic agencies at a central level to design and promote environmental policies (Shen and Jiang, 2021, pp. 43-46). While the idea of authoritarian environmentalism is promoted as an effective model for addressing environmental challenges, China is often cited as an example, demonstrating how the inherent characteristics of authoritarianism and authoritarian governments can arguably overcome the institutional and procedural obstacles that democracies encounter in tackling environmental issues (Gilley, 2012, pp. 287-307). On the other hand, several studies contest these claims by demonstrating opposite findings and authoritarian practices enhancing path dependence and lock-ins (e.g., Luo et al., 2023, pp. 6-8).



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When applied to the Russian environmental system, Masyutina et al. (2023, pp. 305-330) identify several features of the authoritarian environmentalism model:

- a top-down and non-participatory environmental decision-making process centralised within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNR) and a few government agencies.
- limited contribution or exclusion of scientists (see Korppoo and Alisson, 2023, p. 6).
- no cooperation with and among non-state actors (see Crotty and Ljubownikow, 2023, pp. 48-49).
- limited public deliberation in media (see Bodrunova, 2024, pp. 246-251).
- restricted operations of environmental movements and NGOs by legislation and through their dependence on state financing (see Tysiachniouk et al., 2023, pp. 13-14; Bederson and Semenov, 2021, p. 546).

The Chinese and Russian environmental systems exhibit some structural similarities and authoritarian and illiberal practices resulting in noticeable inefficiency in translating strategies and policies into effective actions to reduce harmful emissions. Scholars also highlight that this model fails to take into account some of the specifics of Russian environmentalism. Concentration of policymaking to the MNR can be interpreted as prioritising natural resource exploitation over environmental protection. Some scholars view that this structure may also elevate the importance of environmental issues within the government's hierarchy (Martus, 2021, p. 874). The Russian presidency is seen as guiding the government by shaping high-level environmental policy through broader environmental concepts and discourse, rather than direct legislative intervention (Ibid., pp. 885-886). Gustafson (2021, pp. 17-19) adds that despite the authoritarian features of centralised top-down structures, Russian climate policymaking is also influenced by individuals and groupings and scientific agencies within the NMR such as the Roshydromet, the Russian Federal Service for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring. It has reported on climate change for the Russian government since 2008 and contributed to IPCC's reports (Aalto et al., 2023, p. 234). The most influential lobbying groups include the coal and metals industries and the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, particularly the oil and gas companies, which have succeeded in blocking significant action on climate change, such as proposals for a carbon tax or a cap-and-trade market in carbon emissions (Gustafson, 2021, pp. 19-20). During Putin's third term, Russia's environmental system is shifting towards a stronger presidency, with laws and regulations increasingly serving elite interests (Korppoo and Alisson, 2023, pp. 1-6).

Environmental policies in illiberal regimes are explained through varying interpretations of the meaning of environmentalism, distinct from Western liberal thinking. The definition of environmental problems is critical, as it directs the adoption and implementation of appropriate measures. This is exemplified by the way China and Russia define the nature, scale, and causes of climate change, and the role of BC emissions, resulting in inaction and discrepancy between their official climate commitments, political rhetoric, and the enforcement of regulations (Aalto et al., 2023, pp. 225-226, 235). Although Russia has recognised the anthropogenic origins of climate change, climate scepticism and climate denialism among scientific actors and the state leaders and in media are prevalent (Asche and Poberezhkaya, 2022, pp. 1-20; Tynkkynen and Tynkkynen, 2018, pp. 1115-1116).

## The Russian version of ideational illiberalism

Recent studies on Russia's illiberalism approach it as an ideology and practice in the framework of conservatism or new conservatism specific to Russian context (e.g., Laruelle, 2020, pp. 115-129; 2024, pp. 5-37; Kangaspuro, 2021, pp. 15-24; Bluhm and Varga 2020, pp. 642-659; Robinson, 2020, pp. 10-37). Russian political conservatism is interpreted in this article as both a distinct form of ideational illiberalism and a self-defined conservatism by Russian actors.

Scholars agree that there is no single Russian conservatism. The diverse versions of conservatism are inherently different and reflect various philosophical and ideological sentiments and traditions. Russian conservatism is approached in the literature both as a continuous process originating from the early Slavophiles throughout the nineteenth century and their belief in Russia's universal mission and ideas of Russia's distinctiveness (Robinson, 2020, pp. 13-23). The contemporary version of conservatism is linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the developments during the 1990s, reflecting the disappointment of many Russians, including both elites and ordinary citizens, with the West and the liberalism they associate with it (e.g., Laruelle, 2020, pp. 115-117). Russia's present-day conservativism is linked with a conservative turn and shift of values during 2011–2013, amid mass demonstrations protesting Putin's third presidency and election fraud (Kangaspuro, 2021, p. 16) and stemming from two main sources: state-backed conservatism from presidential power centres and conservative movements led by intellectuals and activists outside the political establishment, representing various forms of Russian conservatism (e.g., Busygina and Filippov, 2018, pp. 158-159).

Scholars have differing views on conservative ideology and its influence in Russian state politics, also concerning the wartime policy choices (Snegovaya and McGlynn, 2025, pp. 43-48). During Putin's two decades in power, the presidential administration is interpreted as balancing between elite interests and ideologies and state norms and international pressures, and after February 2022, with intensifying conservative rhetoric and ideological narratives about a struggle between Russia and the West (e.g., Fomin, 2024, pp. 3-4; Laruelle, 2024, pp. 7-9). Some argue that Putin's regime lacks a coherent worldview. Instead, it has adopted a mission to create a centralised, strong state and restore regional control (Fomin, 2024, pp. 3-4). Zhavoronkov (2024, pp. 1-6) interprets the regime's value changes not as a conservative turn but as tactical and opportunistic pseudo-conservatism, characterised by pseudo-historical and anti-intellectual tendencies, and guided by the "divide et impera" principle and situational interests (Ibid.). Similarly, Fomin (2024, pp. 1-19) notes that the regime employs different ideological expressions depending on the audience and purpose, using selected ideas to legitimise actions and gain popular support to maintain its position and serve elite interests.

Other scholars claim that since the 2010s, Putin's regime is based on an ideology emphasising a strong, stable state, anti-Westernism, and cultural conservatism in envisioning Russia's future (Laruelle, 2024, pp. 7-11). The official state policy is viewed as more pragmatic and moderate compared to Orthodox/Slavophile and civilisational conservatism capable of adapting to quickly evolving realities (Robinson, 2020, pp. 28-29). In economy, "conservative modernization" enhances stable development of the country's economy, consolidating its international status, and achieving this through the reliance on the experience of previous generations (Chebankova, 2020, pp. 82-83). This is based on an idea of a strong state investing in strategic industries and large industrial and infrastructure projects, thus stimulating technological development to assist the ambitious projects of Arctic exploration, restructuring of the army, and subsequently to serve as engines of progress for smaller and medium-sized business (Shcherbak, 2023, p. 198; Bluhm and Varga, 2020, pp. 651-653).



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Russia's foreign policy is linked to the idea of a strong state that could sustain the country's geostrategic interests in the international arena to achieve stable domestic development. Russia is viewed as a sovereign world power equal to USA, China, and India in a multipolar world order. The foreign policy discourse reflects conservative thinking regarding Russia's national distinctiveness rooted in the country's values, distinct from Western values in terms of culture and religion, the strong state-centred political system, national interests, and national sovereignty and great power status in world politics (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2021, pp. 4-9). Russia's wartime conservatism reflects growing influence of the siloviki, the elite members with a force-structure background embracing anti-Western conspiracy theories and restoration of Soviet great powers (Snegovaya and McGlynn, 2025, pp. 49-50). For example, Nikolai Patrushev, presidential aide, previous Secretary of the Security Council, and newly nominated head of the Maritime Board (President of Russia, 2024) and Sergei Naryshkin, head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, are frequently mentioned as belonging to the most influential conservative elite members of the network close to Putin (e.g., Krag and Umland, 2023, pp. 374-378).

State-supported conservatism is reflected in political narratives and identity concepts promoting anti-Americanism, anti-Westernism, nationalism, and conservative values (Shcherbak, 2023, p. 196; Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2021, pp. 2-3; Laruelle, 2024, pp. 14-20). For example, the concept of a "Russian world" which asserts a distinct Russian civilisation extending far beyond Russia's borders with Russia at its core, was used by Putin to justify Russia's interference in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Kangaspuro, 2021, p. 16). Conservative narratives are promoted, for example, in the official doctrine of the largest political party, the United Russia, and by several conservative internet platforms and influential political discussion clubs such as the Izborskij Club, the widest alliance of conservative ideologists and political activists (Chebankova, 2020, pp. 84-85); the Young Conservatives which advances a more moderate, European inspired conservatism favouring a civilisationist isolationism for Russia (e.g., Laruelle, 2020, pp. 119-123; 2024, p. 24); the Neo-Eurasianist movement headed by the notorious political theorist Aleksander Dugin (Backman, 2022, pp. 9-11); and the so-called Z-patriotism developed by military bloggers after February 2022 (Laruelle, 2024, pp. 24-25).

Research on contemporary conservative environmentalism in Russia is limited. A recent study by Russian scholars (Scherbak et al., 2024, pp. 22-48) reveals that Russian conservatives view environmental issues through the lenses of state control and anti-Westernism. They advocate for the state leadership in addressing ecological issues through smart legislation, environmental oversight, and investment in modern technologies, prioritising the interests of ordinary people and local ecological problems. Conservative views reflect scepticism about global climate change, distrust of Western climate science and environmental activism, and criticism of international agreements as conspiracies by global elites to limit Russia's ecological sovereignty, the control over natural resources, aiming at undermining Russia's energy sector (Ibid., pp. 27-28).

## Arctic climate and anti-Western Russia

Russia has increasingly focused on the Arctic to enhance its interlinked economic, societal, environmental, and military-strategic interests in the region. Russia's ambitious plans are manifested in centralised Arctic governance structures coordinated by the State Commission on the Development of the Arctic under presidential guidance (Blakkisrud, 2019, pp. 197-203) and the development of several official strategies and policies envisioning the Arctic future. Since 2022, Russia has adopted, for example, the climate doctrine (President of Russia, 2023a), the foreign policy concept (President of Russia, 2023b), the maritime doctrine (President of Russia, 2022), and the amendments to the Arctic strategy (President of Russia, 2023c), all of which also address environmental or climate issues along with the development of the Arctic region.

As the scholars' debate on Russia's ideological drivers in policymaking highlights, indicating whether ideological underpinnings in state policy inform official conservative ideology or whether conservative rhetoric, narratives, and patriotic expressions are used for tactical purposes is extremely difficult. The centralised top-down policymaking of climate and Arctic policies and limited participation of regions and other than state actors correspond to the authoritarian environmentalism model. The major strategies and policies originate at the federal level and are then brought down to the regional and local levels to be implemented (Blakkisrud, 2019, pp. 197-203). Despite scientists and the Roshydromet (2023) presenting data on the warming Arctic climate and the harmful effects of BC emissions, along with plans for modernising BC emission monitoring systems from shipping and installing meteorological stations in the Arctic Ocean just before the Russia–Ukraine war (Aalto et al., 2023, pp. 234-235), these initiatives have not been translated into significant concrete emission reduction measures.

Snegovaya and McGlynn (2024, pp. 46-57) suggest examining ideological elements in policy documents through testing coherence of the key ideational narratives, their temporal consistency, elite commitment, codification into the texts, indoctrination by key institutions, internalisation in practice through new practices and rituals for the population, and provision of future vision. Evidently, the wartime policies fulfil most of these criteria, although verifying indoctrination by key institutions or internalisation of ideological narratives in a society is currently difficult. Some narratives and concepts are consistently used in these policy documents reflecting ideational conservative rhetoric and attitudes regarding the present-day world. For example, the foreign policy concept in the general provisions portrays Russia as "a unique country-civilization" and "a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" with "deep historical ties with the traditional European culture and other Eurasian cultures" and missioned to maintaining global balance of power and building a multipolar international system. The world today is viewed in terms of a global competition for power and influence among the USA-led Western states and the non-Western world.

For the first time, the Arctic is ranked second among Russia's geographic foreign-policy priorities, following the "near abroad". The focus is on regional and local socio-economic development, including the NSR, and addressing the protection of the original habitat and traditional livelihoods of indigenous people. While accentuating Russia's right to defend its sovereign rights in the Arctic zone, the focus is shifted to unfriendly states and their policies aiming at militarisation of the Arctic region and limiting Russia's rights there. Amendments to the Arctic strategy focus on economic and infrastructure development in Arctic shipping and consistently emphasise Russia's national interests legitimating and justifying the goals and tasks for socioeconomic development and self-reliance instead of international cooperation.



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Environmental issues and climate change are identified as national interests and security concerns by both the foreign policy concept and the new climate doctrine, which acknowledges the recognition of human-induced climate change. Effects of the climate change in the Arctic are framed both as a threat to human health and ecology and an economic opportunity particularly in terms of effective development of natural resources and maritime shipping in the NRS. By contrasting explicitly and implicitly Western and Russian interpretations of efficient international cooperation and methods for adapting to climate change and mitigation of harmful effects and GHG emissions, the document reveals a suspicious attitude towards the reliability of Western science, global regulation versus national interest, and Russia's self-reliance and economic interests. Goals and implementation of the climate policy focus on modernisation of the climate monitoring system. Thus, actual measures to reduce BC and other SLCPs and their enforcement are disregarded. A dual approach appears again, whereby the necessity of civil society participation and open discussion about the principles, content, and implementation mechanisms of climate policymaking is highlighted, provided that Russia's long-term interests are prioritised. In terms of international engagement, the policy documents indicate a shift in official thinking from multilateral cooperation to bilateral relations with clearly defined terms. The climate doctrine provides, however, options for international scientific collaboration and contribution of Russian scientists to the preparation of international evaluation reports on the climate change and related issues.

## Discussion

Conceptualisations of illiberalism are linked to the ongoing IR debates regarding revival of authoritarianism and the rise of political leaders with populist and conservative post-truth rhetoric, contesting the Western understandings of global order, international law, and governance of global problems, such as globalisation, migration, climate change, or pollution. In terms of its use and definitions, illiberalism is still an evolving and fluid concept. Scholars like Laurell, Waller, and Glasius portray illiberalism as an analytical framework that enables us to elucidate contemporary societal changes through combined ideational and practice lenses across various regime types, countries, and constituencies, complementing the dominant research approaches centred on structural factors and agency-driven causalities. In the context of Russia's contemporary climate and Arctic policies, ideational analysis helps to uncover conservative political ideas and anti-Western narratives present in official rhetoric and documents. These narratives serve to legitimise climate policy aims and the enhanced exploitation of Arctic hydrocarbon reserves and Arctic shipping, framed as national interests and security concerns for Russia. The practice approach enables us to interpret inefficiency of Russia's top-down environmental system stemming from authoritarian practices restricting participation of regions, non-state actors, scientists, and NGOs in the policymaking, and curbing public discussion in media.

From an IR perspective, wartime rhetoric is just one aspect of analysing Russia's national interests and stance on world politics, climate change, and the Arctic developments. The analysis needs to be contextualised with historic, economic, and political developments as well as domestic power struggles. For example, before the Russia–Ukraine war, the state-linked oil and gas companies demonstrated awareness of the climate and air quality problems of APG flaring to their customers in Western markets (Aalto et al., 2023, p. 236). Ideational analysis of Russia's wartime policy documents envisioning the Arctic future reveals how at the level of political texts the conservative expressions are normalised in justifying Russia's policy choices. Both explicitly and implicitly Europe and the USA are portrayed as threatening Russia's national interests in all policy domains, thus legitimating the war in Ukraine and altering Russia's approach to international cooperation. These may reflect

the president's personal worldviews supported by elite members dependent upon him, rather than genuine societal demand (see Lassila, 2024, pp. 1-6).

Confronted with the global calls for green energy transition and reduction of fossil fuel induced GHG emissions, Russia faces some particularly difficult issues. Since the Russian state owns or controls most of its hydrocarbon companies, the country's economy and domestic structures are heavily dependent on the hydrocarbon sector. As the large western Siberian oil and gas fields are depleting, the companies are shifting production to the Arctic, thus enhancing the strategic importance of the region (Bradshaw, 2019, pp. 7-10). In 2021, the oil and gas sector provided about 45 percent of Russian federal budget revenues and accounted for 70 percent of exports (IEA, 2022). This creates significant institutional lock-ins that hinder enforcement and inspection, along with technological and infrastructural lock-ins on the part of Russian fossil fuel companies (Aalto et al., 2023, pp. 229-231). In line with the energy strategy (Government of Russia 2020), Russia aims to continue producing and selling fossil fuels, and thus state economic interests are prioritised over environmental and climate concerns (Gunnarsson, 2024, pp. 113-116).

Russia's climate policy can be described as dual or "imitational", reflecting co-existence of official position and legal framework emphasising achieving global climate targets, but at the same time, domestic framings of climate diplomacy emphasise economic or political benefits (Korppoo and Alisson, 2023, p. 3). To ensure global efforts to monitor and assess climate change effects, scholars view it as essential to continue the Arctic collaboration of climate scientists, including those from Russia (see e.g., Dyck, 2024, pp. 6-9; Ivanova and Thiers, 2024, pp. 558-560). Despite the expressed explicit suspicion and distrust towards Western science and liberal environmentalism in the policy texts, Russian climate scientists are still provided an opportunity to engage internationally, thus opening a window for some form of post-war science diplomacy.

## Conclusion

As highlighted by scholars, Russia's climate actions in the Arctic are driven by its nuanced and powerful conceptions of national interests. They encompass economic and political benefits, as well as security concerns, while also addressing perceived threats from international climate policies. The recent conceptualisations of illiberalism involving ideational and practice approaches offer helpful insights to explain Russia's Arctic and dual climate policies when carefully contextualised with historic, economic, and political developments and power-elite struggles analysed by the rich IR literature. They allow to view Russia's policy choices in the Arctic by the ideological context and illiberal and authoritarian practices guiding the political processes and surrounding political actors, thus complementing the dominant research approaches and focusing on structural factors and agency-driven causalities. They help identify political ideas and narratives and identity concepts adopted in official rhetoric and texts that legitimise Russia's national interests and connect them to societal beliefs held by conservative groups promoting anti-Westernism, patriotism, sovereignism, and Russia's world power status. The inefficiency of Russia's environmental system apparently stems from identified authoritarian practices that restrict operations of environmental NGOs, limit the participation of regions, scientists, and non-state actors in climate policymaking, and curb public discussion of climate topics in the media. By disabling the voices of these groups, the Russian regime ensures top-down state-controlled climate policymaking.

Although Russia acknowledges anthropogenic climate change and its effects in its new climate doctrine, a dual approach emerges. It prioritises strengthening exploitation of the Arctic hydrocarbon reserves and enhancing Arctic shipping as state national and security interests over the global calls for



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green energy transition and mitigation of BC emissions and other climate forcers amid the country's focus on the war efforts against Ukraine. Scholars view post-war Arctic cooperation among climate scientists as preferable, although unlikely in short-term due to Russia's wartime policy choices. To conclude, further research is suggested to explore Russia's conservative environmentalism and conservative social media platforms promoting climate disinformation campaigns.

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Discussion Article

# Decolonising Arctic geopolitics and security: Subaltern security dilemmas of the Sámi in times of the green transition and militarisation of the Arctic

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## Abstract

Ongoing geopolitical changes and the "arctification" of world politics are introducing new pressures on the Sámi people, whose lands stretch across the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. While climate change has increased global and national interest in the Arctic region's natural resources and logistical and transport potential already for some time, today land use in Sápmi is reshaped also by acute security and defense imaginaries which are promoting strong military build-up across the region. In this article, I discuss the challenges that these changes are presenting to the Sámi and to their ability to voice concern for their own rights, security and future. Focusing especially on the challenges associated with the energy transition as well as growing military land use, the article sketches out and introduces a notion of subaltern security dilemma (SSD), which is offered here as a tool for a critical, deconstructive and decolonial approach to the study of Arctic geopolitics and security in Sápmi and more broadly.

## Keywords

green colonialism, Indigenous rights, militarization, NATO, Sápmi, security dilemma, subalternity

## Introduction

Growing world political tensions have a profound impact on land use in Sápmi, the traditional homeland region of the Indigenous Sámi people which stretches across Northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola peninsula in Russia[1]. Climate change has increased interest in the economic, extractive, logistical and military exploitation of the Arctic region already for some time, but today, land use and development in Sápmi is also reshaped by new acute security and defence imaginaries. This is reflected in Sweden and Finland's NATO memberships and in the fact that each Nordic state that comprise Sápmi has now signed a bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States. As global geopolitical and Nordic state interests in the Arctic keep rising, the region gets imagined in increasingly colonial terms – a vast or empty space that can secure not just national needs for security and natural resources but also those of the EU and the West at large, whether in terms of the green energy transition, critical mineral self-sufficiency, or military build-up and training for Arctic warfare.

These developments present a considerable challenge for the Sámi. On one hand, increasing extractive, industrial and military land use is exacerbating the colonial appropriation of their lands, eradicating the material basis of Indigenous Sámi culture and livelihoods and putting their Indigenous rights and future at risk. On the other hand, the ongoing land-grab in Sápmi is justified in national and international discourse increasingly in reference to 'common good', such as saving the planet from climate change or the need to boost national, EU and NATO defence against foreign aggression. In this context, voicing Sámi concerns for their own rights, security and future as Sámi becomes increasingly difficult, as such concerns are easily sidelined by the majority society as less relevant, or even standing in the way of the security of all.

The aim of this discussion article is to bring attention to these challenges and to sketch out an early version of the concept of *subaltern security dilemma* (SSD), which is offered here as a tool for a critical, deconstructive and decolonial approach to the study of Arctic geopolitics and security. In the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, and especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1998), *subalternity* refers to a position of disadvantage and disempowerment which derives from the subject's inability to voice their concerns and positioning, not because they lack voice as such, but because their concerns and positions are inarticulable within the hegemonic discourse. While subalternity, as such, cannot be represented (in Spivakian reading, by definition, successful representation would mean an end to the condition of subalternity), its function as a theoretical concept is mainly deconstructive. In the context of this article, subalternity represents the constant need to deconstruct hegemonic and state-centred discourses of geopolitics and security and to create space for other voices, subject positions and perspectives which also need to be accounted for and reconciled to ensure the bottom-up integrity, democracy, plurality and sustainability of the lands and societies that are to be defended and cared for.

The notion of *security dilemma,* in turn, derives from realist IR theory where it is used to explain the paradox of how a state's actions to make itself more secure militarily tend to increase the threat perception of other states, resulting in a spiral of military build-up and subsequent insecurity (Hertz,

1 This article is based on a paper that was prepared originally as a keynote speech for the 6th Nordic Conference for Rural Research conference "Nordic Ruralities: New paths to sustainable transitions?" held in Kiruna, 3rd-5th December 2024. In addition to the numerous people with whom I have discussed the topic of the article over the years, I want to thank the editor of the Nordic Review of International Studies for her valuable comments which helped me to profoundly restructure the paper.

1950). The dilemma explains why and how efforts to boost national security can end up eradicating that security. Likewise, it explains why manifestations of military capabilities and deterrence need to be balanced by various "security regimes" which, according to Jervis (1982), include the "principles, rules, and norms that permit nations to be restrained in their behaviour in the belief that others will reciprocate" if they are to maintain, rather than endanger, peace.

In a more philosophical reading, Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler consider the security dilemma as a foundational concept that engages the role of fear, or the "existential condition of uncertainty that characterizes all human relations", within the field of international politics. They argue that in the changing terrain of contemporary security and insecurity, it is increasingly central to pay attention to the various security dilemma dynamics that emerge, not just between states, but across multiple actors and political communities, "if human society in whole and in part is to have hope of emerging in decent shape." Central to such effort is the promotion of *security dilemma sensibility* which, according to Booth and Wheeler, recognises the foundational role of fear and uncertainty in determining the perceptions and actions of states and other actors, yet uses that knowledge for trust-building and searching for common ground – security "with" and not "against" others (Booth and Wheeler, 2008).

The concept of subaltern security dilemma (SSD) that I propose brings these theories and insights together by inversing the inter-state logic of the security dilemma and placing it in contact with the problematic of subalternity. A subaltern security dilemma occurs when a subject, a community, a group or a people is faced with a situation in which the efforts and measures taken to improve national, state, or (as in the case of climate change measures) planetary security simultaneously create considerable, even existential, insecurity in the context their own lives and future. Since defending their own rights and existence against such measures can be seen to stand in conflict with, or even undermine, national security or the 'common good', articulating such a position becomes highly difficult and challenging.

In line with Booth and Wheeler, I therefore argue that is the responsibility of critical research to cultivate sensibility to subaltern security dilemmas, as a way of deconstructing hegemonic discourses on geopolitics and security, and to demand state accountability also to the rights, future and security of subaltern and minority groups and Indigenous peoples, such as the Sámi. Today and in the Arctic region, this is particularly important in the context of extractive, industrial and military land use that are justified in the name of national security, defence or the 'common good'. Without attention and sensibility to the subaltern security dilemmas that emerge in these contexts, the present era will end up greatly accelerating Nordic colonialism and dispossessing the Sámi of their lands, this time increasingly through policies and practices that are justified in terms of national, EU and Western security.



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In the following, I discuss these ideas by focusing on the impact that the green transition and military land use have on the rights, traditional livelihoods and resistance of the Sámi. The discussion is based largely on my previous research, reviews of existing literature, reports and media, and numerous formal and informal discussions and research interviews that I have conducted on these topics with various actors within Sámi societies in Finland, Sweden and Norway over the past two years, especially between January-March 2025.[2]

## Colonialism and the Green Transition in Sápmi

Over recent decades, the Sámi people have become increasingly visible in Nordic societies, especially in the arts and popular culture. While such change could easily lead one to imagine this to be an era in which the colonial structures and relations between Sámi and Nordic peoples and states are finally being addressed and dismantled, the situation looks rather different on the level of land and natural resources. Instead of decolonisation, we are witnessing an era of intensive settler colonial land appropriation, for perhaps never before has there been such intensive pressure on Sámi lands as there is today.

Interestingly, much of the current pressure comes from, and is justified in the name of, the green transition. The green transition refers to systemic efforts to transition from fossils to renewable energy as part of the battle against the climate change. However, as the urgency of finding sustainable energy solutions grows, it is becoming increasingly clear how the transition in its current form is creating new problems and challenges that cannot be left unaddressed if the transition is to be sustainable and just. As such, the green transition is an example of "problem shifting" (van der Berg et al., 2015) whereby efforts to find solutions to one set of problems create new ones elsewhere.

In Sápmi, one problem caused by the green transition is the massive increase in mining needed to satisfy the mineral needs of renewable energy and energy storage. EU and Nordic state strategies consider Sápmi and the Nordic High North as mineral rich regions that are particularly suitable for mines (e.g. Laframboise, 2022). Mines may be welcomed by many locals as possible sources of economic income and development, but the benefits are not distributed evenly, and mines always pose a significant threat to the environment as well as to the practice of traditional and Indigenous livelihoods. Therefore, in Sápmi, even the prospect of a future mine tends to provoke considerable Sámi insecurity and resistance (Lassila, 2018; see also Knobblock, 2024).

The second problem is that renewable energy production requires a lot of land and space. In Sápmi, especially wind energy is now causing significant harm to reindeer herding. Fjellheim (2023) details how, in the experience of Sámi reindeer herders, overlapping land use or "coexistence" between large networks of wind energy infrastructure and reindeer is not possible. From the reindeer herders' perspective, wind energy amounts to a massive land-grab that disturbs the entire system of sustainable pasture rotation, endangering the viability and future of the entire livelihood in the regions affected. Reindeer herding is foundational for Sámi culture, yet under severe stress due to competing land use and a history of dispossession by colonial settlers. Therefore, any disruption to the remaining pastures constitutes a threat that, from a Sámi perspective, may be considered existential, not only to reindeer herding but for Sámi sense of security and peoplehood at large.

2 These most recent interviews were carried out for the purpose of a report on the impact of militarisation on Sámi culture, livelihoods, society and rights in Finland, commissioned by the Sámi Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Finland. The report, which is in Finnish and due to be published in June 2025, builds on more than 35 qualitative interviews with various actors within Sámi society. In this article, the interviews are mainly considered background material and have not been cited separately.

This is why projects associated with the green transition today provoke considerable resistance across Sápmi. In Norway, wind power built on Sámi lands has provoked large street protests, and raising awareness of their negative impacts on Sámi culture and livelihoods is also central for Sámi organisations and institutions such as the Saami Council, Amnesty International's Sámi branch, and the Sámi Parliaments in Norway, Sweden and Finland. Articulation of such resistance has not always been easy nor straightforward, however, these are projects that are justified in public in reference to the urgent need to battle the climate change and save the planet. As an Arctic Indigenous People, the Sámi have been at the forefront of national and transnational environmental movements for decades, and the warming climate already threatens the viability of their traditional livelihoods and ways of life (Saami Council and Samediggi, 2023). How could they possibly be opposed to projects that are considered 'green'?

This was the social and political context in the early 2000s when Aili Keskitalo, acting as the president of the Sámi Parliament in Norway, started using the concept of *green colonialism* as a way of communicating a subaltern Sámi experience amidst hegemonic discourses of sustainable development that left little space for criticism from within (Keskitalo, 2023; Kårtveit, 2021; Vetter, 2021). The discourse of green colonialism holds that in the context of global warming, the Sámi are victimised twice: first, by the climate change, and second, by climate action which has a disproportionately negative impact on Sámi lands, lives and futures. As Keskitalo puts it, "the world needs green power, but we have no more land to give" (Keskitalo, 2023).

In January 2025, Amnesty International and the Saami Council published a joint report "Just Transition or Green Colonialism: how mineral extraction and new energy projects without free, prior and informed consent are threatening indigenous Sámi livelihoods and culture in Sweden, Norway and Finland" (Keskitalo et al., 2025). The report details the negative impact of land-grabs, realised in the name of the green transition, on the Sámi and calls for the Nordic states to fully respect their rights to the land and Indigenous self-determination, as recognised in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and in national legislation. As the head of the Saami Council, Per Olof Nutti explains in the introduction that the report was born from the need to "highlight and explain the current unreasonable situation" that the Sámi People are facing:

> *"The Sámi People have learned to be on alert when the term 'green transition' is mentioned. We see that it is a new name for old models of action. We are used to others wanting us to step aside so that they can fulfil their needs at our expense. Mining and industry projects are usually very open about being for-profit business ventures. In the wake of the 'green transition', however, we see a development where these same kinds of ventures are suddenly being sold to us as a service to humanity. The 'green transition' becomes a way to talk about for-profit business as something that is supposedly morally good and justified and how these resources are essential for safeguarding a sustainable future. This portrayal is very difficult to stand against or even criticize." (Nutti in Keskitalo et al., 2025, p. 5)*

Although the negative impacts of the new rush for natural resources on Indigenous and other rural communities is still not widely acknowledged, in Sápmi, the language of green colonialism has nevertheless been rather successful at promoting sensibility to the subaltern concerns of the Sámi; at deconstructing the hegemonic discourse of 'green transition', at drawing lines of continuity between historical colonial injustice and present systems of environmental and land use governance, and at creating space for the articulation of Sámi rights, resistance and alliance building.



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## Militarisation

The ongoing Sámi resistance against green colonialism has contributed to a paradigm shift from the green to *just* green transition in Arctic social sciences. Meanwhile, another large change, remilitarisation and securitisation of the Arctic region, has gone largely unaddressed despite the fact that it, too, has a potentially very large impact on land use and regional development in the Arctic. The change is particularly visible in Sápmi and the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland, whose geopolitical positioning has shifted drastically in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Especially following Sweden and Finland's NATO memberships and the Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) with the US, this area has become a hot spot of military training and build-up. From the US and NATO military points of view, the Nordic cross-border region now forms one single area of operation that has high strategic value, not only due to its vicinity to Russia but also by virtue of its Northern and Arctic dimensions. Rather than peripheric borderlands of the Nordic nation-states, *Sápmi* and the Nordic High North is at the heart of the "global Artic" that is thoroughly immersed in global flows and tensions and subject to considerable extractive interest (e.g., Finger and Rekvig eds., 2022).

*Militarisation* is commonly defined as the material and discursive process whereby a society organises itself ideologically and materially around the idea of war as a way of protecting its sovereignty and security (e.g., Vastapuu et al., 2024; Lutz, 2002). A decolonial perspective on militarisation centres attention especially on military land use (Junka-Aikio, 2024a; 2024b). Military land use can mean, for instance, construction of military bases and barracks, radar stations, weapons storage facilities, and using land or fencing it off for the purpose of military training. More widely, military land use also includes roads, railways, airports and harbours that are needed for the movement of troops or for the security of supply, or population centres and settlements that emerge in response to the housing and service needs of militaries. Rather than merely serving militaries, military land use has far-reaching impacts on society and the environment. Accordingly, geographer Rachel Woodward (2004) speaks about *military geographies* to highlight its role in shaping societies through spatial organisation. Military geographies produce certain kinds of spaces, places, environments, landscapes, connections and chains, facilitating particular subjects, futures and forms of regional development while overriding others.

Historically, military geographies are deeply entangled with colonialism and imperialism. In the Arctic, the connection was particularly clear during the Cold War which turned the region into a hot spot of the nuclear arms race (Vladimirova, 2024; Bernauer, 2018; Lockenbauer and Farrish, 2007). For instance, in Arctic Canada, Indigenous lands that, until then, had remained beyond solid state control due to the cold and demanding environment were territorialised as sites of military training and preparation through massive investment in transport infrastructures such as the Alaska Highway, the network of airports serving the Canadian and Alaskan military forces, and an extensive system of radar stations (Distant Early Warning Line, DEW). These infrastructures brought large numbers of settlers to the region, resulting in the establishment of new population centres across Indigenous lands. Noise and pollution from military training and low-flying aircraft disturbed people and animals, over-hunting and fishing became issues, and new livelihoods challenged traditional ones. Although some of the infrastructure has, since then, become a lifeline for the region's Indigenous communities, at the time, they drove settler colonial land appropriation and assimilation (Bernauer, 2018; Lockenbauer and Farrish, 2007).

Today, Sápmi and the Nordic High North exist at the centre of Arctic military geographies. The change is most visible in the arrival of foreign troops and a steep increase in large international military exercises that are organised across civilian and civilian-military areas. In Northern Finland, international interest in military training is currently so high that it cannot be met, according to the Finnish Defence Forces (De Fresnes and Martikainen, 2023). Militaries consider Northern Finland particularly attractive because of its supposed "emptiness" and due to the Arctic environment, which allows training for Arctic warfare (Junka-Aikio, 2024a; 2024b; De Fresnes and Martikainen, 2023). In local Finnish and national media, the massive increase in military training and presence has so far been represented mainly in highly positive terms. Militaries are expected to bring economic opportunities and investments and boost regional development (Pylkkänen, 2023; Lapin Kansa, 2024).

Rarely discussed, however, is what kind of development militarisation brings to the Northern regions, for whom, and at what cost. What is the impact of these new military geographies on the environment and on traditional livelihoods, and how does the arrival of troops affect local life? Likewise, missing from public debate is the fact that much of the training takes place in Sápmi., where the Nordic states have a responsibility under national legislation and international law to respect Sámi Indigenous rights and self-determination, and to negotiate with the Sámi on any land use that may have a considerable impact on Sámi culture and livelihoods.

Although few people in the Nordics, the Sámi included, currently dispute the need to strengthen military defence, the Sámi Parliaments and the Saami Council have already expressed concern over militarisation's broader impact on Sámi rights and culture. The UNDRIP Article 30 particularly cautions against the military use of Indigenous lands without proper consultation, and there are growing worries, especially among Sámi reindeer herders, over the damage that extensive military training, noise, traffic and installations cause to reindeer pastures, reindeer work, and reindeer wellbeing (Junka-Aikio, 2024b). Unless these concerns are properly addressed, there is a great chance that the ongoing efforts to boost national security end up producing significant insecurity for the Sámi.

Whether the Nordic states and Defence Forces understand their legal responsibilities to the Sámi, and whether they are ready to apply them in the present context of strong military alliances, is a question that merits close attention. For instance, Finland's Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States was drafted in complete secrecy and without hearing the Sámi at all, despite the Agreement also designating an area within the Sámi homeland region (Ivalo Border Guard Base) for US use. Like anyone else, representatives of the Sámi Parliament learned about the Agreement's contents for the first time from the news a couple of days before the Agreement was signed (Paltto, 2024). In addition to an increase in military training and presence, militarisation reshapes land use on the level of transport and other infrastructures, which are planned increasingly in response to the stated interests of military defence and security, rather than a broader vision of regional social and economic development and future.

The recent decision by the Regional Council of Lapland (Lapin liitto) to add a new road that would cut across the Hammastunturi wilderness area through the Sámi village of Kuttura in Lapland's new transport strategy is a case in point. The Kuttura-Repojoentie road connection was proposed for the first time in 2009, at the time driven especially by the tourism sector which sought to establish an east-west connection between two major tourist destinations, Levi and Saariselkä. However, the proposal was rejected due to strong opposition from Kuttura villagers, local environmental groups, reindeer herders, and other locals who worried about its impact on the reindeer pastures, cultural landscape, and the environment. Although these same groups and the Sámi Parliament still



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oppose its construction, the new transport strategy gave it the green light, this time in response to a request by the Defence Forces and justified in the name of 'national security'. As with the green transition, militarisation reframes Sápmi as a sacrificial zone where local and Indigenous concerns may be sidelined, in the name of some broader objectives presented as urgent and indispensable for national security, safety, and the common good.

Examples such as these highlight how militarism and militarisation challenge democratic participation and Indigenous and minority rights. In addition to setting up a strict hierarchy of security needs, discourses of militarisation tend to centre public authority on (usually male) military personnel and points of view and portray military concerns as existential, and therefore outside public scrutiny and democratic debate (e.g., Vastapuu et al., 2024). In the Nordics, militarisation has been supported by the swift return of classical, state-centred discourses on geopolitics and security.

Despite broad efforts to expand the meaning and subjects of security over recent decades, through academic and policy frameworks such as environmental and human security, comprehensive security or planetary politics (e.g., Heininen, 2023; Hoogensen Gjørv et al., 2014; Nicol, 2019; Greaves, 2016; Patrick, 2021), today Nordic public and policy debates centre again overwhelmingly on hard security which stresses military capabilities, security of supply, and state control of land and natural resources. The hegemonisation of such discourses is visible in the fact that now even renewable energy development and mining in Sápmi and the High North is justified and advanced increasingly in reference to the need to end EU dependency on Russian oil and gas, and to boost critical mineral self-sufficiency vis-à-vis China, rather than efforts to save the planet and the environment.

In such a discursive environment, Sámi concerns over military land use can be very hard to articulate, even when such land use threatens Sámi livelihoods in ways that may be considered, from the perspective of Sámi peoplehood and future, as equally existential. Today, anyone who resists or critiques the expansion of land use justified in the name of military and hard security also risks being seen as unpatriotic, naive, or even a threat to national security. For now, few people in Sápmi seem willing to take such a position publicly, either due to the fear of social and political stigma or because they, too, may feel divided over a situation in which their own wellbeing and future as Sámi seems to be pitted against security and safety for all (see, for instance Tarkiainen, forthcoming). In addition, a number of Sámi activists and political influencers whom I have interviewed on both the Finnish and Norwegian sides of Sápmi have highlighted the need to be strategic and to choose one's battles. The Sámi already have their hands full protecting their livelihoods from other threats and forms of land use, such as tourism, logging, and the green transition. As one of my interviewees on the Norwegian side put it, "no-one wants to end up in a conflict with the Defence Forces, because it is obvious, who would win that battle".

## Subaltern security dilemmas: a decolonial approach to Arctic geopolitics and security

One main purpose of critical research is to undo hegemonic discourses, and to democratise public debate through its diversification and promoting grassroot views and participation. Within international studies and critical IR, this has meant, for instance, deconstructing nationalist and state-centred discourses on security and geopolitics and creating space for subaltern voices and perspectives. Building on the examples of the green transition and militarisation, this article has argued for a need to pursue such a critical and decolonial research agenda in the present context of Arctic geopolitics and security. Developing sensibility to the multiple *subaltern security dilemmas* (SSDs) that emerge in the intersections of hegemonic and subaltern perspectives to security should be central to such effort.

The problem of subalternity was strongly present in early debates regarding the promotion of 'green' energy projects in Sápmi. Despite the long tradition of Sámi resistance to natural resource extraction, extractive projects that are advanced in the name of climate action place such resistance face to face with discourses that, in the words of Saami Council's Per Olof Nutti, are "unreasonable" yet "difficult to stand against or criticise". The notion of green colonialism has efficiently addressed the dilemma, creating space for the articulation of Sámi rights and experience, but pressure from 'green' projects on Sámi lands continues to grow. However, in line with the growing geopolitical tensions and militarisation of public discourse, today such projects are justified increasingly not just in reference to climate action but also in terms of defence and security. Recent decisions of the European Commission to promote and fast-track three new mining projects in the Swedish part of Sápmi as "strategic projects" under the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) is a case in point. According to the EC, these strategic projects – whose approval the Saami Council describes as "devastating betrayal of Indigenous rights and Sápmi's future" – are crucial for both the "success of the green and digital transitions" and for the "resilience of the defence and aerospace sectors" (Saami Council, 2025; European Commission, 2025).

However, the concept of subaltern security dilemmas is particularly useful in the context of militarization, which is quickly becoming a new major paradigm of land use and a discourse of regional development in Sápmi. As with the 'green transition', military land use can pose a significant threat to the practice of Sámi livelihoods, but articulating Sámi rights to the land, or demanding effective measures to limit the harm done by military land use, is proving to be particularly difficult. On the one hand, such concerns may be interpreted as unpatriotic or indifferent to the exigencies of national security, and therefore result in a negative stigma and hate speech. On the other hand, upholding such rights can appear difficult also due to the ways in which the discourses and practices of national and military security appear to force individual subjects and groups to choose a side between their security as citizens of the nation state and their own rights and security as Indigenous and Sámi.

Conversely, instead of positioning local and Indigenous people's interests and concerns in a direct, clear-cut juxtaposition vis-à-vis the geopolitical and security interests of the state, the notion of subaltern security dilemma that I have suggested here appreciates the ambiguity of the subaltern position while also clearing space for the articulation of subaltern or counter-hegemonic resistance and dissent. The position of subalternity does not expect that Indigenous peoples would not share or recognise any of the national or hegemonic security concerns of the state, as they also may well feel that the need to secure the state from foreign invasion or advancing the transition to



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renewable energy should be top priorities. However, when such measures result in considerable insecurity in spheres of life that are indispensable for their own future as Indigenous peoples, they are disproportionately affected. Sensibility for subaltern security dilemmas implies recognition of such ambiguities and uncertainties while building ground for better policies and practices that can contribute to undoing the discrepancy between national and Indigenous interests and security, and safeguard the rights of Indigenous peoples, also in the context of geopolitical tensions and change.

In conclusion, both the green transition and militarisation need to be understood as new regimes or paradigms of land use which pose a significant threat to the viability of Sámi livelihoods, and thereby, to Sámi rights and future at large. In the context of the green transition, the Sámi have already addressed, through conceptual innovation that centres on green colonialism, the challenge of how to articulate resistance against land-grabs justified in the name of climate action and saving the environment. Today, new critical concepts are needed to also address colonisation through militarisation and military land use, and to find ways to make Arctic geopolitics, security and defence more accountable to the needs of the region's Indigenous peoples. Subaltern security dilemma sensibility calls for security with, not against, Indigenous peoples.

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Discussion Article

# Arctic research infrastructures between normative ideals and geopolitical objectives

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## Abstract

This discussion article explores how both scientific and security considerations are embedded in Arctic research infrastructures. It suggests that both normative ideals and geopolitical objectives can be identified in the discourses and practices surrounding the physical constructions, objects and technologies used for environmental or climate related knowledge-building in the Arctic. This has implications for developing appropriate policies that comprehensively acknowledge the science-security nexus without undue securitisation or bias. In drawing attention to the interface between Arctic science and security, and how such concerns are materially embedded, this discussion article argues that new assemblamatic approaches could allow for more relevant Arctic scientific and security related policymaking. New perspectives are needed to move beyond binary dichotomies that view Arctic politics through either normative or geopolitical frameworks. The article calls experts and academics to further address questions on the configuration of the Arctic science-security nexus, as well as on the extent to which Arctic science and security policies are mutually entangled rather than mutually exclusive.

## Keywords

Arctic security, assemblage theory, infrastructure, knowledge

## Introduction

Observations, monitoring practices and data management are crucial for polar research. In the Arctic, the interplay between security and climate change is particularly explicit. The region is warming four times faster than the global average and is considered a natural laboratory for environmental history. At the same time, the region is being increasingly viewed as an arena for power politics and geopolitical competition. A warming Arctic has spurred debates on opportunities and challenges arising from melting sea ice that opens up shipping lanes and new fishing areas or allows extractive industrial activity.

Arctic politics today is shadowed by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, carrying consequences on regional cooperation and governance. Research cooperation and political exchange between the Western Arctic countries and Russia were formally suspended shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 bringing the Arctic Council, the primary cooperative forum in the region, to a standstill. Since early 2024, however, some working group level engagement within the Council has resumed. This has invited analysts' attention to discussing associated risks in reestablishing cooperative frameworks with Russia (e.g. Paukkunen and Black, 2024).

In attempts to strengthen its political position, Russia has pushed for a new research station in Svalbard that would allow scientific and educational cooperation with non-Western and non-Arctic countries, such as Brazil, India and China. However, many non-Arctic countries – states without territory beyond the polar circle – such as India and China already have operational research stations in Ny-Ålesund, a designated area for research activities and 'company town' operated by Kings Bay AS, a Norwegian government enterprise.[1] It therefore remains unclear what added scientific value the Russian initiative would bring to such partners. As Svalbard is under Norwegian sovereignty, Russia's ambitions and increased international attention can carry security implications (Østhagen, 2024; Nilsen, 2023).

Simultaneously, tensions between the United States (US) and China are increasingly reflected in Arctic politics, as the former is updating its strategic approach to counter the growing presence of the latter in the region's affairs. Recent incidents with unidentified Chinese objects in the North American Arctic – the 'spy balloon' and 'spy buoy' incidents – have raised particular concerns on how science and security are materially intertwined, adding infrastructural and technological dimensions to a challenging science diplomatic environment.

This discussion article argues that new approaches are needed to account for the nonbinary and materially mediated configuration of the Arctic science-security nexus. The article suggests that scientific and security policies might not be mutually exclusive when research infrastructures and technologies are simultaneously mechanisms of geopolitical presence and agency. In terms of policymaking, this translates into a need to understand how science policy relates to security policy, and vice versa. The article proceeds to explore the contemporary Arctic science-security nexus in terms of infrastructure and associated concerns. It then introduces Assemblage Theory (AT) as a lens to examining the nexus, and discusses its relevance. The article concludes by calling experts and academics to further address the configuration and architecture of the Arctic science-security nexus.

1 Kings Bay AS manages operational matters in or regarding Ny-Ålesund, such as access to or management of scientific facilities.

## Materiality of the Arctic science-security nexus

Arctic scientists and the infrastructure and instruments they use are often components in security related considerations. Dual-use technologies and military-civil fusion projects (Fritz, 2021; Hoja, Zang and Yatsuzuka, 2023), such as those resulting in Chinese atmospheric balloons, or clandestine intelligence operations, as highlighted by the Russian spy case at the University of Tromsø, can be veiled behind the pursuit of a global public good – building environmental and climate knowledge – eventually casting doubts on science diplomacy or shared research activities.

Polar scientists depend on research infrastructures to build relevant knowledge used in various political decisions and policy processes ranging from local economic development to environmental conservation, but such infrastructures are also key for state actors to pursue strategic objectives or exercise geopolitically motivated presence (Vold Hansen, 2024; Vold Hansen and Moe, 2024; Andreeva and Hønneland, 2023; Pedersen, 2021). Arctic research infrastructures have therefore become objects of contention between normative ideals, such as upholding capabilities for knowledge generation and exchange, and geopolitical objectives, such as stronger security political engagement or claims to territory.

The contemporary Arctic information environment is also insecure. Russia has been actively using information operations for years to influence Norwegian policymaking (Spansvoll, 2023) or to discredit NATO and allied Arctic engagement (Eggen, 2024; Landriault and Renaud, 2024). For China, strategic communications are central to its Arctic policymaking and regional presence (Lackenbauer and Lajeunesse, 2023). The 'spy balloon' and 'spy buoy' incidents underlined the fragility of Arctic information security by highlighting potential grey zones susceptible to targeted operations or hybrid influence. When four Chinese objects used for high-altitude atmospheric monitoring drifted into the North American security space, it caused major debate on US–Canadian cooperation for appropriate policy measures (Rigby, 2023). The objects were shot down by US military aircraft in US and Canadian airspace and were quickly denounced as malign surveillance technology. China responded by stating the technology was used for civilian weather monitoring and only drifted off from its assigned course (BBC News, 2023).

Similarly, Chinese maritime technology with both civilian and military research capabilities has been found in Canadian territorial waters. These 'spy buoys' spurred debate on the limits of scientific cooperation with China or the security of scientific activity in maritime areas (Fraser, 2023). Such material objects, regardless of how or for what purposes they are used, highlight a policy-relevant relationship between science and security that calls for attention to its social, material and territorial dimensions.

Security considerations have also been historically tied to scientific activity and research practices in the Arctic where early European expeditions, often led or funded by navies, served cartographic and ethnographic objectives. Military funding and support have also been central to scientific progress more broadly, as exhibited in the development of oceanography (Oreskes, 2023) or in the management biological weapons programs (Guillemin, 2006).

Security considerations are also present in governing research activities. Export control measures or initiatives to strengthen knowledge security carry significant implications for research communities as they might curtail academic exchange or knowledge diffusion (Stalenhoef, Kanetake and van der Wende, 2022). New insight and innovation resulting from research open avenues for development, but can also be seen as spaces for malign activities and emerging security threats (Brummer, 2022). For applied innovation where new knowledge is used for technological, material or digital



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development across different sectors, be it civilian or military related, knowledge becomes a commodity with associated value and risk.

Discussing interlinkages between science and security also directs to a more nuanced debate on the philosophy of science; how to define science, knowledge, research and associated concepts? What does it mean to conduct research or to be scientific, and how do these meanings relate to political objectives, such as achieving security? Established interdisciplinary scholarship in Science and Technology Studies (STS), Sociology and Political Science has long dealt with technopolitics (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Kurban, Peña-López and Haberer, 2017), agency of non-human objects (Latour, 2005), technoscience (Haraway, 1997) and socio-material relations (Star, 1999) related to knowledge-production.

In Arctic-related contexts, technopolitics has been used to examine China's maritime politics at the International Maritime Organization (Eiterjord, 2020), and ice has been examined as a non-human actor in climate change debates (Bjørst, 2010). Science has been shown to carry implications on socio-political region-building (Väätänen, 2022), and technoscience, in line with Haraway's critical application, has been used to discuss the (geo-)politics of extractive economic activity (Avango, Hacquebord and Wråkberg, 2014). Sociomateriality, where the material and social interact, is central to the Arctic and allows for empirical investigation into the materially embedded or 'nested' (Parmiggiani and Monteiro, 2015) discourses and practices around scientific and political activity.

## Arctic assemblages

Assemblage theory (AT) could further contribute to existing scholarship by bringing an ontological and epistemological position that recognizes Arctic science and security as interwoven sociomaterial processes in dynamic territorial settings. Originally developed in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) and later detailed by Manuel DeLanda (2006, 2016), AT provides a philosophical framework to examine dynamic relational concepts and beings, such as organisations, networks, cities or nations. AT therefore allows a relational definition for science and security bound to their respective processes of sociomaterial and spatial ordering. In the Arctic, social practices such as environmental monitoring or security discourse, material objects such as infrastructures or technologies, and territory such as geographic space and place, can be identified as components of assemblamatic ordering.

Both Arctic science and Arctic security can be understood as assemblages. Assemblages can also emerge within and among other assemblages, calling attention to the different levels (micro, macro, meso and meta) and scales (local, regional, global) of assembling or assemblamatic ordering. The geographical Arctic, territories north of the Arctic Circle at around 66°34' N, can be divided into distinct subregions where security interests might differ even between allies (Gricius, 2024) or where accessibility, both physical and digital, differs due to varying levels of infrastructural or technological diffusion (Tingstad, 2024). It is critical to acknowledge such differences as they contribute to a heterogeneity of governance demands, opportunities and trajectories (Tingstad, Van Abel, Bennett et al., 2024), and as such, carry implications for assemblamatic ordering. Identifying and analysing Arctic assemblages will require conceptual clarity on the levels and scales of ordering; the spatial and contextual dimensions according to which such ordering takes place. AT should nonetheless be seen as a particularly fitting lens, as the Arctic regions experience various anthropogenic and ecological influences that impact social and material development in particular geographical environments.

Security assemblages have been researched in the context of security privatisation and private sector involvement (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011), security governance beyond state-centricity (Schouten, 2014) or more recently, in terms of security expertise and the production of security knowledge (Lopez-Lucia and de Almagro, 2023). In an Arctic context, Goes (2019) has examined security in the Murmansk region, analysing material, social and territorial aspects transcending state boundaries, and Depledge (2013) has looked at the various actors assembling a British Arctic. Tuitjer (2020) has applied an assemblage theoretical approach to ethnographic literature to examine the human and non-human dimensions of climate change caused displacement in the Arctic. However, detailed assemblamatic examinations of "Arctic security" – not least from a science- or knowledge-oriented perspective – are still lacking.

Some literature is available on scientific assemblages or conceptualising science as an assemblage, although Deleuze and Guattari as well as DeLanda have already discussed the assemblamatic characteristics of scientific practice in considerable detail. The role of mountaineers in building biology-related knowledge has been examined by Dentant et al. (2021), while Sellar (2009) has shown that new insight on agency and action can be reviewed when occupational science is approached through assemblage theory. Bruno Latour has been concerned with knowledge-building and the construction of truth in science and in doing so contributed to the development of a sociology of science (Luckhurst, 2006). Some researchers have treated actor-network and assemblage theories as mutually complementing approaches to empirical study, although differences persist (Müller, 2015).

In a useful critique of AT, Buchanan (2015) has argued that rather than a methodologically sound framework, AT only offers a descriptive lens into discussing the qualities of the studied object. To date, however, it seems that only a limited number of social research has applied or examined AT in ways that would further contribute to its conceptual and methodological development. Attempts at clarifying the concept of assemblage has been made (see e.g. Nail, 2017), but methodological review remains limited (see e.g. Yu, 2013).

Considering that actor-network theory (and ANT-inspired research) has been used extensively in studying Arctic and climate processes (e.g. Avango, Nilsson and Roberts, 2013; Blok, 2013; Kürner et al., 2015; Väätänen and Zimmerbauer, 2019), exploring the Arctic science-security nexus through relevant assemblamatic approaches could provide new theoretical and methodological insight in relevant empirical contexts. Applying AT to Arctic studies will also allow for broader theoretical and conceptual debate in International Relations scholarship as the Arctic today represents many of transboundary and multidimensional challenges widespread across the globe; climate change, technological competition and geopolitical concerns.

Recognising that the spatial configuration of the Arctic can be divided into oceanic, terrestrial and atmospheric, it becomes essential to identify the empirical contexts or sites in which social, material and territorial components can be examined. Geographically, the Arctic is an ocean surrounded by airspace and territories of sovereign states north of the Arctic Circle. Furthermore, an additional cryospheric dimension needs to be accounted for. The social, political and economic fabric – including both scientific and security activities – of the Arctic is largely defined by the existence and contemporary disappearance of ice.



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AT, as a process-oriented heuristic, is relevant particularly in the Arctic (and other polar regions) due to the dynamism of the region's assembling components, such as ice. Empirically, the framework can be applied to investigate a variety of cases: ships and operational presence in the maritime space, ground-based infrastructures, airborne technologies in the atmospheric space, or cryospheric equipment. As such empirical sites are present elsewhere as well, developing AT will likely enable further research in other geographical and spatial contexts, such as the deep sea, geological sites or outer space.

## Conclusions

Established scholarship in between STS, Political Science and Sociology has discussed human and non-human elements, geography and sociomateriality through various conceptual and methodological frameworks. The intersection of these fields remains particularly relevant in the Arctic where material, human and natural elements intersect and need to be appropriately considered in policymaking. This discussion article has highlighted the importance of examining scientific and security concerns in the Arctic as mutually entangled rather than opposing or mutually exclusive issues. As such, it suggests that developing relevant scientific or security policies might not be an either-or question, where policy actors would be required to assign preference to one over the other. Rather both science and security should be understood as partly complementary and partly contradictory components of assemblage.

Introducing an assemblamatic perspective to the Arctic science-security nexus will allow the development of new conceptual and practical tools for policymaking. As contemporary Arctic politics is marked by Russia's war in Ukraine and the increasingly contentious relations between the US and China, infrastructure-related incidents have ignited debate on dual-use capabilities and cast shadows on research cooperation. Examining the science-security nexus as an entangled assemblage will allow experts, academics and policy professionals to better understand the interplay between normative ideals and geopolitical objectives ingrained in Arctic politics and embedded in the region's knowledge-building infrastructure.

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Discussion Article

# The Arctic Fable and the Unbearable Question

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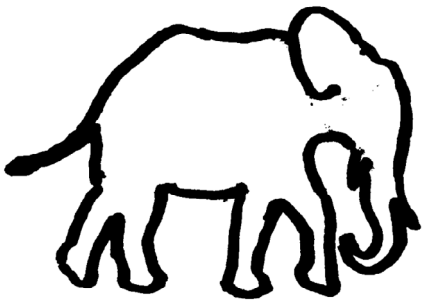
## Abstract

This discussion article addresses the means and matters that constitute a claimed entity known as 'the Arctic'. A polemic, poetic and problematising reading of the Arctic is conducted by using different parables, metaphors and literature displaying elephant as their centrepiece. They enable to illustrate the Arctic as a subjective aspect, disciplinary practice, product of power and knowledge, and imaginary lost object. These conditions are finally addressed with the unbearable question, formulated to either liberate or burden the ones who are the practitioners of Arctic studies.

## Keywords

The Arctic, science, discipline, knowledge, power



"If we lose the Arctic, we lose the whole world" (Office of the President of the Republic of Finland, 2017). President Sauli Niinistö gave this statement at the Arctic Forum in Arkhangelsk on 30th March 2017 against a backdrop of disastrous outcomes of climatic and environmental changes, first perceived and experienced in the Arctic region yet will inevitably negatively influence the rest of the world. In 2023, due to Russian military aggression and the counteractions taken by the Western world, we have ruled out, and therefore arguably now lost, half of the Arctic while scientific cooperation in Russian territory is mainly suspended. It could then be claimed that we have also already lost half of the world.

Burdened by this humanitarian and environmental crisis, what if I were to say that the Arctic is already lost? To be more precise, the Arctic has always been beyond our reach, rather serving as a bearing than a real place to reign over – that the Arctic is actually, by its very nature, a lost object in the Lacanian sense. This means that there is nothing to lose since there was nothing to be lost in the first place. Not a whole nor a half. What we perceive or imagine to be the Arctic is rather a fable. What strange fruit does this kind of claim bear? Bear with me while I try to address the elephant in the room.

Let us begin by pointing out the weight of this nonexistence with another reading of the "if" sentence. As mentioned, the quote of losing the Arctic may be read through the environmental policy discourse, but there is also at least one other possible political reading of the sentence. This emerges if we address the question of who the "we" is in this sentence, and therefore, what exactly does losing the world mean? Is it to be read as in humanity and its shared world, or something different? Markku Heikkilä (2019) used the "what if" quote in the title of a book that addresses the development of the Finnish arctic thinking (or policy) from the 1980s to the current (or 2019) day, including the announcement that Finland is an entirely arctic country, contrasting with one of the common definitions of the Arctic that only includes north of the Arctic Circle.

As the presented examples are different facets of political and policy discourses, they play a significant role in how, for example, Finland positions or announces itself in relation to this given entity. If Finland is entirely Arctic, losing the Arctic would mean that Finland loses its political significance. Therefore, if we (read as Finland) lose the Arctic, we lose the whole world (our place and significance in it). The Arctic is important for 'us' because we ought to be important and exceptional, possessing arctic know-how that others cannot do without. All the knowledge generated through that position of Arctic exceptionalism is, in a Foucauldian sense, producing power as well. That leads to the question: How does the Arctic become a body of knowledge and power intertwined? Let us ask the elephant.



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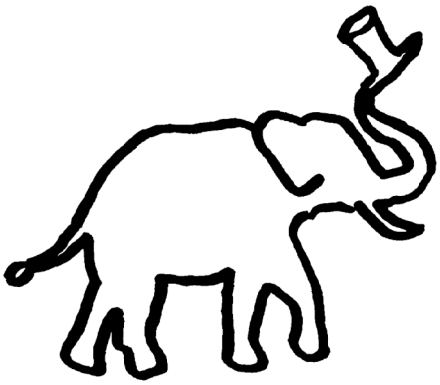
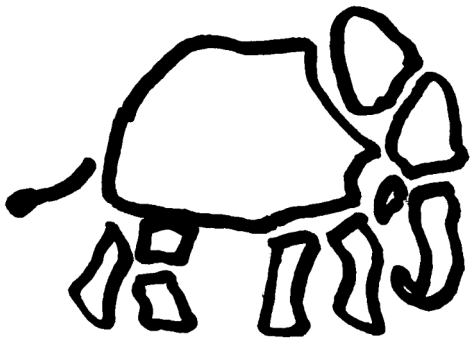


In the book *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1943), the narrator says that his drawing did not represent a hat, but a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. This reveals how adults perceive the drawing of a child, giving it a defined meaning and addressing it as a familiar object. When the narrator, as a child, draws a dissection of the hat to prove that the bump is actually an elephant being digested, the adults find this revelation unpleasant and direct the child's attention towards such subjects as geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar. The child, who by addressing questions tries to make sense of the problematic world, is in reverse subjected to discipline(s). Looking back to one's own education, school first divided the world into different subjects. The further education proceeded, subjects began to share more common ground and appeared to address the same entities in different ways and forms. This division is best illustrated by another elephant in a parable with blind men.

In the story, a group of blind men, who have never come across an elephant, are trying to discover its nature by touching it. Each of the men gives a different account of what they have encountered based on their limited reach to a specific part of the elephant's body. Descriptions vary from tree trunk to fan, wall, rope and spear, whether they have touched a leg, a side, an ear, a tail or a tusk. Besides illustrating the meaning of a limited subjective experience grounded in one's position related to the encountered phenomenon, this also depicts the ways in which Arctic studies are conducted from various scholarly standpoints.

The Arctic is not a science, or at least there is no unified Nordic or Scandinavian science for the Arctic (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002a, p. vii). Rather, it is a field of study, in touch with a multiplicity of sciences and disciplines. This only makes sense if we look at the given characteristics of the Arctic which is neither a fixed geographical, hydrological, biological, historical nor politically coherent geopolitical, socio-cultural or geophysical unit (see Sale, 2008, pp. 15–21), consisting of land, sea and ice, covering areas from eight states and three continents. Therefore, it becomes evident that the "elephant" is too large to grasp and be held by a single branch of study. It is a phenomenon approached from different angles and only joint efforts provide a fuller image of its being and characteristics, whether one depicts it in terms of tree lines, drainage basins, polar nights, celestial bodies, indigenous habitation or political discourse.

In the parable, the men assume that they are describing the same phenomenal entity, even though their understanding of it drastically differs. In other words, it is presumed that the elephant exists as one articulated whole. Even though there are changing definitions emerging from different bodies of knowledge investigating the Arctic, and they may drastically differ with their sources of evidence, all of them rely on its existence. How authentic then is the constitution and coherence of this entity?



Another elephant appears in Haruki Murakami's (1993) short story *The Dancing Dwarf*. It presents an elephant factory that constructs elephants in a Fordian fashion, assembling them from separate body parts. The manufacturing of the elephant is a very complex process due to the sheer size of the end product and therefore requires several departments to make the different parts, such as ears, heads, trunks and toenails. If personnel only work in one of the departments, the impression of manufacturing an elephant is comparable to the conception of the blind men. In the factory, it becomes obvious that the elephants produced there are not made from parts taken from one entity, but rather different characteristic objects are brought together and articulated as an elephant, where articulation literally means a joining of parts.

What adds to the complexity of the matter is that rather than being assembled, the elephant is reconstituted. This is because the factory elephants are only one-fifth genuine and four-fifths imitation. The people who view the elephant or the elephant itself are not aware of, or interested in, which parts are authentic as long as the whole functions properly. The need to add on the imitated parts, or to split the genuine into different functioning bodies, is a response to the want of the people. Therefore, answering this growing demand for elephants leads to authenticity and imitation not only becoming mixed but also indifferent. It does not matter what they are as long as they fulfil the material function of an elephant.

If the Arctic (the elephant) is considered first as a studied entity, and the scientists who try to get a hold of it as the blind men, what is the factory which produces and assembles it? In short, it may be called scientific practice. In written histories, science has been central in the formation of the Arctic region, applying and developing specific vocabulary to cover it, draw its boundaries and explain its nature. The 'manufacturing' happens in the field studies and academic departments through "collecting, sketching, measuring, recording, classifying" (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002b, p. 18) as the means of knowing and describing, or with a more radical post-modern, post-structural and new materialistic reading as the means of being made to be known. If the Arctic is the product of scientific practice, what function is it produced for? It possibly bears the same meanings as the elephant: a behemothian state of nature and the symbol of the Orient(alism).



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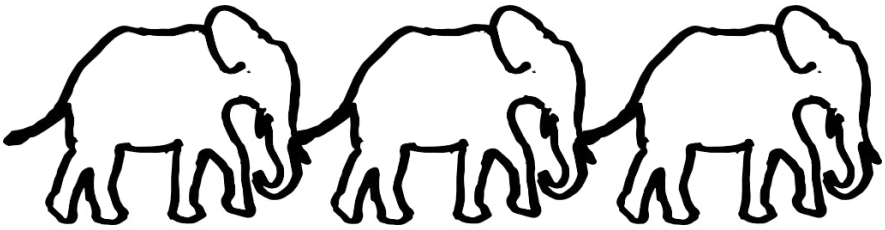


Historically, the Arctic has functioned as a vast natural laboratory for field sciences (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002a, vii). There are a variety of possible reasons for this. For the so-called Western perception and intellectual history, the Arctic emerges as Ultima Thule (see Lainemaa and Nurminen, 2001), the unknown northern periphery of the known world, a behemoth-like primeval chaos to be subjected to godly order. Additionally, due to a lack of knowledge on the past of the human lives lived in the area before the explorations of Western seafarers, it may appear as ahistorical and being more about nature than culture. The naturalness of this part of the world is partially highlighted due to the sparse population and natural resource subsistence economies. Perceiving the indigenous peoples of the region strongly in the context of nature is derived from early historical accounts of Western perceptions and relatively recent applied scientific discourses and terminology, such as adaptation and resilience, which are commonly used in the area of natural sciences. Studies on ingenious ontologies and cosmologies sometimes address closer kinship to entities or phenomena that in the Western sciences are categorised as belonging to nature rather than human relations.

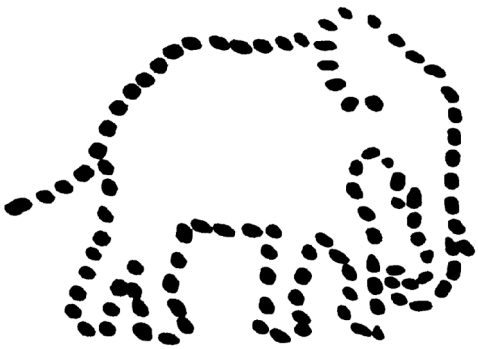
Another characteristic brought by indigeneity is the idea of originating from that place, the origins of tradition, sustaining and permanence. This permanence also emerges in terms such as permafrost, which among the glaciers contains even the remains of prehistorical life forms such as mammoths. This picture of the origins and permanence is only half of an arc. The second half, keeping the arc standing, is what the permanence is decoupled with, that is the change and development. While these terms of change challenge stability, this relational comparison is what gives meaning to both. Therefore, the Arctic in a way exists in this tension, between these polar oppositions. Therefore, the experimental field lab is capable of studying the influences of changing climate, permafrost that melts, treeless tundra that becomes greener, different dimensions of sustainable development, and indigenous resilience, to mention a few.

As the given example on the experimentation already indicates, the so-called authentic and imitated parts are at play, many of which are arguably derived from the authenticity of the Arctic and some which are presented as foreign concepts introduced to it. It therefore functions as a playfield for a cultural imagination (see Bravo and Sörlin, 2002a, p. vii). Here, the elephant marches in as an exotic beast of the Orient. Where the Arctic experimentation consists of two opposing elements, stability and change, Europe or the West owes its meaning to its counterpart. The West defined the Orient as its opposite without any ontological stability, besides the imaginary one based on this identity deriving from difference (Nordin and Ojala, 2018, p. 88). Sometimes this line of difference is not drawn by longitude but by latitude. For example, the claim of a Nordic state to become a civilised European nation required an "internal Other" (Hiltunen, 2019, p. 87), to place and displace those features that the national project wanted to close outside of its essence, to say what I am based on what I am not. "Exotic" used to stand for flora and fauna (Schaper et al., 2020, p. 118). In racialist discourse, exotic became a constructed counterpart to the conceited centre (Nordin and Ojala, 2018, p. 63). When combining exoticising orientalism with scientific field experiment, the 'foreign' elements may lead to another type of internalised Other in the attempt to include indigenous knowledge in Arctic studies (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002b, p. 5). In these processes of including the traditional in the

modern, the authentic and imitations get profoundly mixed, forming a functional whole. Despite how asymmetric the "division of power between the describer and the described" is, it is still "a form of representation" (Thisted, 2002, pp. 328–329).

The scientific field experiment is a material practice for identity-making for the Arctic (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002a, p. vii), or as the Arctic by articulating different and differentiated parts together and establishing the means of knowing and describing the colonial frontier (ibid., 2002b, p. 18). The same goes trunk-to-tail with geopolitics, where the Arctic is perceived as a homogenous periphery (ibid., 2002a, p. vii) for the centre. Contents might change, but the overall structure remains the same (Harbsmeier, 2002, p. 66).

Knowledge, in the Arctic context, is bound to the history and practice of colonialism, making 'knowing the Arctic' arguably a colonial practice deriving from the interest to capture this free-roaming unruly and wild beast. Perhaps capturing is the wrong word. Rather, this knowledge-in-making casts the Arctic – it produces rather than subordinates. This knowledge cuts, attaches and formulates, instead of capturing something that is already out there. In terms of Arctic studies, is there a "desire that lies behind modern science" (Lacan, 1973, p. 160) or rather "the drive not to know" (Miller, 1986, p. VI) how a humane desire and the nature of the Arctic are closing in such that it is impossible to tell them apart?



To weigh up this question, we have to meet the last elephant and its keeper. In Murakami's (1993) short story *The Elephant Vanishes*, both the elephant and its keeper suddenly disappear from a zoo. The disappearance cannot go unnoticed since the community and authorities need to react to a situation where a local icon has disappeared, a potentially dangerous natural force is let loose, or someone's property has been taken. The presence of the elephant and its keeper is only apparent in those material bindings from which they are now absent. The elephant is therefore not articulated as a whole but as a hole, a lack in the picture that is emphasised only by the empty frame.

What has kept the elephant in the zoo thus far is the chain that is now left empty. If the elephant is the unruly phenomenon disciplined and displayed for the audience, the chain is then evidently what discipline does to it. Following Frank Herbert (1984), most of the discipline is designed to limit, not to liberate. As mentioned previously, there is no single science of the Arctic, yet there is a collection of disciplines to discipline it. If they do not give full control, at least they give means to manage it. So, the chain does not capture the elephant from some preceding reality but the chain casts the leg, holding it together, and displaying it for the audience.



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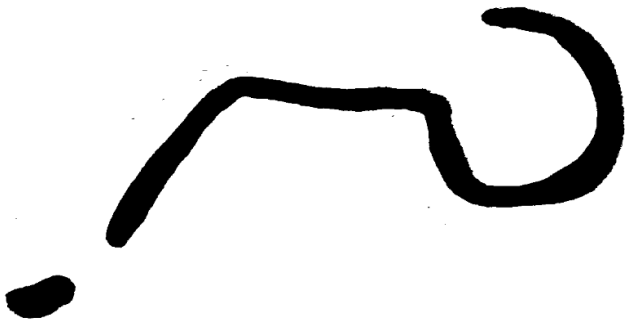
The only witness before the disappearance claimed that the difference in size between the keeper and the elephant had shrunk. It seems as if the touching by the hands of the blind men, that brought the Arctic into the sphere of subjective knowledge, and the elephant factory that turned the elephant into a manufactured and multiplied product, has left so many fingerprints and handholds to the elephant that even in its elephant shape, it carries the shape of human imprints. Our interests, our reasoning, and our goals, whether scientific, economic or political, have become so significant in shaping the Arctic that we can no longer tell them apart from what they have touched upon.

What's more, when the elephant disappears, so does its keeper. What would be the reasoning behind that? Well, if the elephant disappears, what is left of the elephant keeper? The elephant is the kept object, and the keeper is the active restraining subject that comes into being, or is defined through, the act of keeping the named object. If there is no elephant, there is no keeping and vice versa, an unkept elephant may freely vanish. So, when the elephant vanishes, so does its keeper, who is defined only by the act and the objective of such an act. Science and scientists make one another, and identities and agency are established in the enactment. What is left are the material artefacts of this co-existence. While the Arctic is the studied, displayed and managed object of science, it is shaped and kept in the artefacts of science, disciplines and academic practice, whether as painted on canvas, measurements on a chart, a photograph taken, or words written on paper. These representations convince us that there was something to present in the first place.



So, after the elephant and its keeper have vanished leaving only bareness behind, anyone touching upon the subject of "the Arctic" must come to terms with a question that I address as *the unbearable question*. For scientific inquiry, a question fills one with meaning. It provides motivation, legitimacy and orientation towards a concluding answer, or a set of new questions to proceed towards. Questions give what is known in navigation as a bearing, that expresses the relation between where one is heading and what the set target is. Questions are the reason to continue in the vastness of the undefined world of phenomena, as every academic work is supposed to begin with one, forming the basis for each trial. Questions to be answered are the aim of disciplinary practice, where every discipline works in relation to specific questions, burdening the inquirer with specific methods, meanings and traditions. Answering a question solidifies the grounds for each discipline and science.

Responding to an unbearable question is the undoing of meaning, rudiments, and direction. It questions not only the basic assumptions of a discipline, but furthermore, the very reasons for the existence of such a discipline, scientific reason, legitimacy, ethics and truthfulness of science. If such questioning would reveal the fabricated parts amongst the fragments of authenticity, these would prove to be borrowed, stolen, illegal or damaging, proof of abuse of power, violence, dominance,

hypocrisy and ignorance. Facing an unbearable question will lead to existential crises and uneased feelings of exposure, loss, shame and guilt. There are two ways to meet the question: either one dismisses and evades it, remaining in the fabrication, or embraces it, leading to disciplinary self-annihilation. The unbearable question, if responded to, can liberate from the discipline, its histories of violence, and from the reasons for scientific inquiry. An unbearable question unburdens you from all reason, beyond reasonable doubt. You don't have to bear it anymore.

The unbearable question concerning the Arctic, by imitating Murakami's (1993) words, is: *What if the Arctic reality is not something to convey to people but something to make, where it is not a question of make believe that it is out there but simply forgetting that there isn't one*? Therefore, the answer to the unbearable question of the Arctic, the elephant in the room, is that the Arctic, to be preserved, as such, does not exist, and there is no return to that which never was. This means that there is no Arctic to be lost, no Arctic to be found, no Arctic to be saved, not a whole nor a half. The Arctic does not matter, and therefore, those who bear the Arctic, *do not matter* either.

Is this an unbearable answer? Perhaps this is not wrong but a rather merciless and gruesome reading of the answer. Can we read the response not through a nihilist account but a new materialistic one? Even if one strives towards nothingness by undoing connections and relations, deconstructing them "ad infinitum […] they are knitting together again in response" (Derrida, 1967, p. 287). If the contents of the Arctic are bare in the light of evidence, we literally *do matter* through the discursive material practices conducting the Arctic. Nothingness echoes to be fulfilled. It does not unburden but makes one its bearer. The bare truth about the Arctic comes down to humans. We, you and me, as authors, readers, leaders, lecturers or the audience, as the people and representatives, witness, withstand, and participate in the making of the Arctic and comprehending its (im)possibilities. That burdens us with responsibility, yet, also with the danger of carrying it on with unbearable lightness. While the unbearable question addresses academics as the exercisers of disciplinary power through their scientific practice, articulating the Arctic goes beyond scholarly works to anyone who dares to pronounce any truths about it.

This deconstruction and new materialistic articulation of the Arctic obviously does not concern only the Arctic. The Arctic, however exceptional, is not exceptional in its exceptionality compared to any other region or entity. It is not different or indifferent when it comes to power politics, nations, race, gender or colonialism. In other words, the "Arctic is not only global but – precisely because it is global – no different from any other region in terms of being increasingly subject to politico-strategic (or other kinds of) dynamics" (Käpylä and Mikkola, 2015, p. 4). Thereafter, this manufactured Arctic is a picture of the powers that invest in it, shaped by scientific practice and based on outsiders' views of those who are on the inside. Following Oscar Wilde (1890), it is not the sitter who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who reveals himself in the painting. And here we are, already at work addressing the republican elephant in a china shop to maintain a small Nordic state's foothold on our slippery globe.

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