PROJECT
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Images of the Arctic in National Media Discourses: A Comparative Country Study

Project Office for Arctic Development

Centre for Evidence-Based Policymaking

Moscow / 2025

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Contents

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The authors of this report would like to gratefully acknowledge the Vivekananda International Foundation, represented by Captain Anurag Bisen (Retd.), Senior Fellow, for his valuable feedback and insightful suggestions, which have greatly contributed to improving the present paper.

Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
BRICS	BRICS is an intergovernmental association comprising the Federative Republic of Brazil, the Russian Federation, the Republic of India, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of South Africa, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Indonesia, and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The BRICS association was established in June 2006.
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SMO	Special Military Operation
U.S.	United States (of America)
UN	United Nations
LDA	Latent Dirichlet Allocation

01

Research Context

The Arctic is undoubtedly one of the world's most vulnerable regions, where climatic and human-induced changes have global implications, shaping environmental processes far beyond the borders of the Arctic states. Its far-reaching impact gives the Arctic a distinctive status as a space where scientific, environmental, and economic interests converge, creating a foundation for constructive intergovernmental dialogue.

At the same time, in recent years, political attention has increasingly focused on the region, which has retained relative environmental integrity while holding vast strategic resources. Cooperation in science and environmental protection, once the prevailing approach, is now increasingly overshadowed by growing competition for resources and transport routes. The Arctic is emerging as a key geopolitical arena where the interests of both Arctic and non-Arctic states intersect.

The politicization of the international Arctic agenda — together with its shift toward military security and economic competition — is clearly evident in the most recent strategic documents of the Arctic Council member states. For instance, the U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region, adopted after Russia's launch of the special military operation in Ukraine, places particular emphasis on countering Russia's Arctic policy, expanding NATO's presence, and advancing the militarization of the high latitudes[1].

→ Mass media act as a key channel for conveying state discourse both nationally and internationally, strongly influencing public perception and lending legitimacy to foreign policy initiatives

Alongside national doctrinal documents, media discourse provides a key lens for understanding how Arctic narratives are evolving. Mass media act as a key channel for conveying state discourse both nationally and internationally, strongly influencing public perception and lending legitimacy to foreign policy initiatives[2].

Governments can use the media to spotlight specific scientific issues and influence how research findings are politically interpreted[3]. The growing use of fear-based and antagonistic identity-focused discourse in the media can signal an impending shift toward the militarization of a country's policies[4]. Government officials and politicians themselves communicate their intentions and shape the political agenda through the media[5]. Consequently, a systematic analysis of the full spectrum of discursive strategies that states use to articulate and defend their Arctic interests — including their temporal dynamics — offers significant scholarly value and practical insights for understanding contemporary international relations in the region.

Long-term monitoring and comparative analysis of how Arctic issues are represented in the national media of countries with vested interests in the region are essential for identifying global trends. Empirical studies show that identical events may be highlighted and interpreted very differently by the media, thereby contributing to the formation of diametrically opposed narratives[6].

1 G. Dmitriev, Project Office for Arctic Development. "International Arctic Strategies", 2024. URL: https://porarctic.ru/ru/books/mezhdunarodnye-strategii-razvitiya-arktiki/.

2 Baum MA, Potter PB. The relationships between mass media, public opinion, and foreign policy: Toward a theoretical synthesis. Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.. 2008 Jun 15;11(1):39-65. URL: https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060406.214132.

3 Framing science: The stem cell controversy in an age of press/politics URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1081180X02251047.

4 Bleiker, Roland. (2018). Visual Global Politics.

5 Agnew, John & Muscarà, Luca. (2012). Making Political Geography. 10.4324/9780203764343.

6 Pan, Li & Liao, Sixin. (2020). News translation of reported conflicts: a corpus-based account of positioning. Perspectives Studies in Translatology.

The study aims to identify the main thematic and axiological patterns underlying the securitization of values in different national contexts, while also offering an additional perspective on global trends affecting economic cooperation and political coordination in the Arctic region. The methods, approaches, and findings of this study may have practical significance:

- → for the public sector, in mapping discursive landscapes for diplomatic positioning and in developing preventive measures to manage international communication risks;
- → for the corporate sector, in interpreting media discourse as an indicator of market and regulatory change.

This study seeks to answer two key questions.

01 First, what themes and narratives emerge in national media coverage of the Arctic?

Quantitative analysis of lexical structures is most effectively conducted within a thematic framework, which enables the identification of key directions in the shaping of public opinion. In turn, thematic analysis preserves methodological continuity with discourse analysis, as it interprets linguistic units and their organization as conceptual schemes that contribute to the social construction of reality.

02 Second, how do these themes and narratives change over time?

The key trigger examined in this study is the political turning point of 2022, marked by the onset of the SMO, which researchers have reported to cause a sharp decline in cooperation among governments within international Arctic institutions[7].

7 After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Can we still cooperate with Russia in the Arctic? Risk Representations and Confrontational Actions in the Arctic URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000049.

02

Frame Design

Being an integral part of social interaction, discourse shapes perceptions of reality through systems of meaning embedded in texts, speech, and visual images. Within the framework of critical discourse analysis, discourse is understood as a social practice that encompasses the interplay between language, power, and ideology. According to Fairclough (1989, 1995, 2001), discourse can be seen as a three-dimensional phenomenon encompassing text, interaction, and context, which makes it possible to reveal hidden mechanisms of construing social reality and influencing audiences[8]. Van Dijk (2006) emphasizes that discourses are closely linked to ideologies and serve as a tool for construing group identity, reinforcing boundaries between "us" and "them"[9]. This is particularly important in the case of media discourse, as it targets mass audiences and has significant potential for influence. Wodak (2001)[10] views discourse as a dynamic process that identifies key themes, employs persuasive strategies, and uses linguistic devices to anchor dominant narratives in public consciousness.

The mass media play a crucial role in shaping discourse, as the repetition of particular narratives fosters lasting perceptions of the issues under discussion (Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2001)[11]. Through such discourses, the media construe representations of the Arctic, defining its political and strategic significance. In collaboration with state institutions, the media generate images of the region by drawing on key concepts such as "resource competition," "military presence," and "environmental threat." In doing so, they exert influence not only on public opinion but also on political decision-making (Carvalho, 2008:170)[12].

In analyzing media discourses on the Arctic, it is important to consider the mechanisms of manipulation which, as van Dijk (2006) argues[13], involve emphasizing the positives of one's own position while underscoring opponents' negatives, downplaying one's shortcomings, and deliberately diminishing the positive qualities of competing actors. These strategies help produce ideologized narratives that reinforce the interests of a particular country and its political elite. In practice, discourse about the region is shaped not only through journalistic materials but also via visual symbols, expert commentary, and official statements, collectively forming a complex media environment capable of influencing public perceptions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009:90)[14].

In the present study, discourse is understood as a tool for shaping public opinion through framing. As Goffman (1974)[15] notes, a frame represents a "lens of meaning": it highlights certain aspects of events while ignoring others, establishing the context in which the reader (the recipient) interprets the facts. This idea is further developed by Borah (2011)[16], where frames are described as instruments of selective emphasis that construct "storylines" (Nisbet, C. et al., 2003)[17], through which the media interpret events. For instance, media coverage of the Arctic is often framed as a "race for resources", emphasizing geopolitical competition while downplaying the region's environmental and social importance.

8 Fairclough, N. (2001). Language and power (2nd ed.). Harlow, UK: Longman.Fairclough, N. (1995). Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language. London, UK: Longmann_Longman_1995_Pp_265 URL: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315838250.

9 Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. Discourse and Society, 17(2), 359–383 URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250.

10 Wodak, R. (2001). The discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak, & M. Meyer (Eds.), Methods of critical discourse analysis (pp. 63–94). London,UK: Sage.

11 Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D., & Hamilton, H. (2001). The handbook of discourse analysis. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

12 Carvalho, A. (2008). Media(ted) discourse and society. Journalism Studies, 9(2), 161–177 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616700701848162.

13 Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Ideology and discourse analysis. Journal of Political Ideologies, 11(2), 115–140. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310600687908.

14 Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2009). The discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), Methods of critical discourse analysis (2nd ed., pp. 87–121). London, UK: Sage.

15 Goffman, E. (1974). Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience. Harvard University Press.

16 Borah, P. (2011), Conceptual Issues in Framing Theory: A Systematic Examination of a Decade's Literature. Journal of Communication, 61: 246-263. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01539.x.

17 Nisbet, M. C., Brossard, D., & Kroepsch, A. (2003). Framing Science: The Stem Cell Controversy in an Age of Press/Politics. Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 8(2), 36-70. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1081180X02251047.

In turn, discourse serves as the mechanism through which these frames are conveyed into the public cognitive sphere. As noted by Entman (2009)[18], discourse does not merely reflect reality, but actively construes it by creating discussion frames. A confrontational narrative, conveyed through headlines such as "U.S. is playing catch-up with Russia in the scramble for the Arctic" (Pincus, R. 2016)[19], fosters a perception of the Arctic as a conflict zone, thereby influencing political decisions and public opinion.

→ Framing through discourse not only shapes public opinion but also constrains the political agenda by focusing attention on conflicts

The role of the media as agents of framing is emphasized in Durham (2008)[20], where the media are described as an "arena of claims," in which dominant groups determine which issues gain importance and which do not. For example, the portrayal of Arctic Indigenous peoples through stereotypical images of traditional hunting (Martello, M. L., 2008)[21] narrows their role in political discourse, effectively positioning them as symbolic figures rather than political actors. By virtue of their unique framing role, the media both establish which topics matter and further reinforce their significance in the public sphere through sustained presentation of a particular perspective.

Framing through discourse not only shapes public opinion but also constrains the political agenda by focusing attention on conflicts. Research by McCombs and Shaw (1972)[22] demonstrates how the media determine which issues are perceived as priorities through agenda setting. Critical analysis of frames, including the deconstruction of linguistic patterns, can reveal how media narratives influence public perceptions of the Arctic.

18 Entman, R. M. et al. (2009). Nature, Sources, and Effects of News Framing. The Handbook of Journalism Studies. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.5167/uzh-26408.

19 Pincus, R., & Ali, S. H. (2016). Have you been to 'The Arctic'? Frame theory and the role of media coverage in shaping Arctic discourse. Polar Geography, 39(2), 83–97. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2016.1184722.

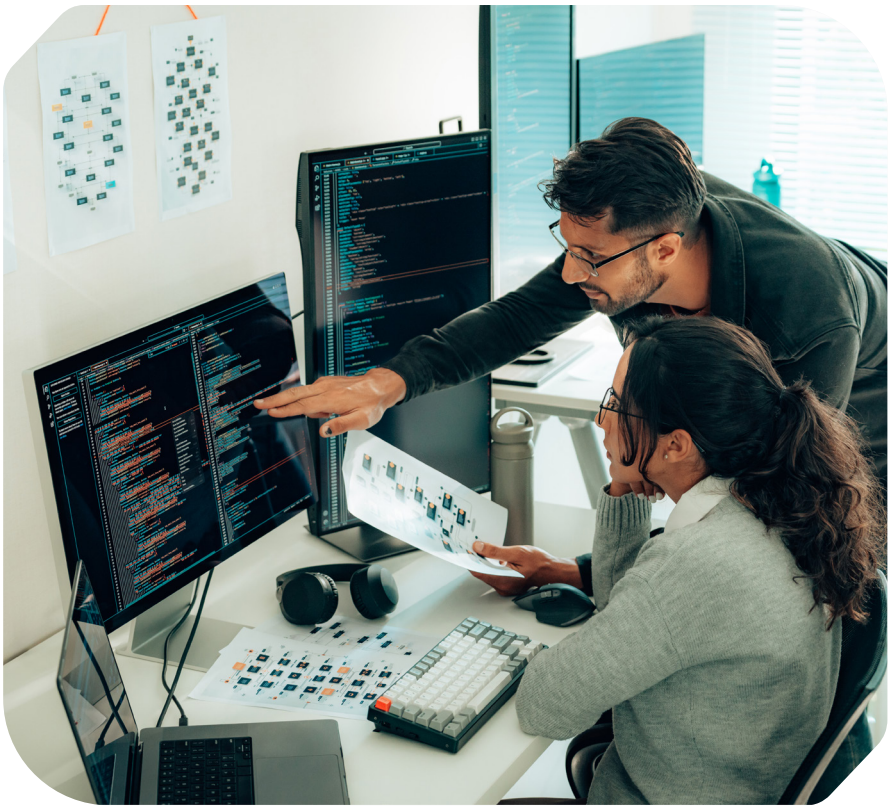
20 Durham, F. D. (2008). Breaching powerful boundaries: A postmodern critique of framing. In S. D.Reese, O. H. Gandy, & A. E. Grant (Eds.), Framing public life: Perspectives on media and ourunderstanding of the social world (pp. 123–138). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

21 Martello M. L. (2008). Arctic indigenous peoples as representations and representatives of climate change. Social studies of science, 38(3), 351–376. URL: doi:10.1177/0306312707083665.

22 McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. The Public Opinion Quarterly, 36(2), 176–187. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/267990.

03

Data



Sampling

For this study, one media outlet was selected per Arctic Council member state, as well as for two observer countries—India and China[23]. For the United States, Alaska Public Media was additionally included, since Alaska is the only U.S. state partly located in the Arctic. For India, two news outlets in different languages (English and Malayalam) were analyzed due to the limited number of Arctic-related materials.

Media Outlets Selected for Analysis

Country	Media Outlet
U.S.	New York Times, Alaska Public Media
Canada	National Post
Iceland	Visir
Norway	Aftenposten
Sweden	The Local SE
Finland	Yle
Denmark	DR
India	The Hindu, Manorama Online
China	China Daily
Russia	TASS

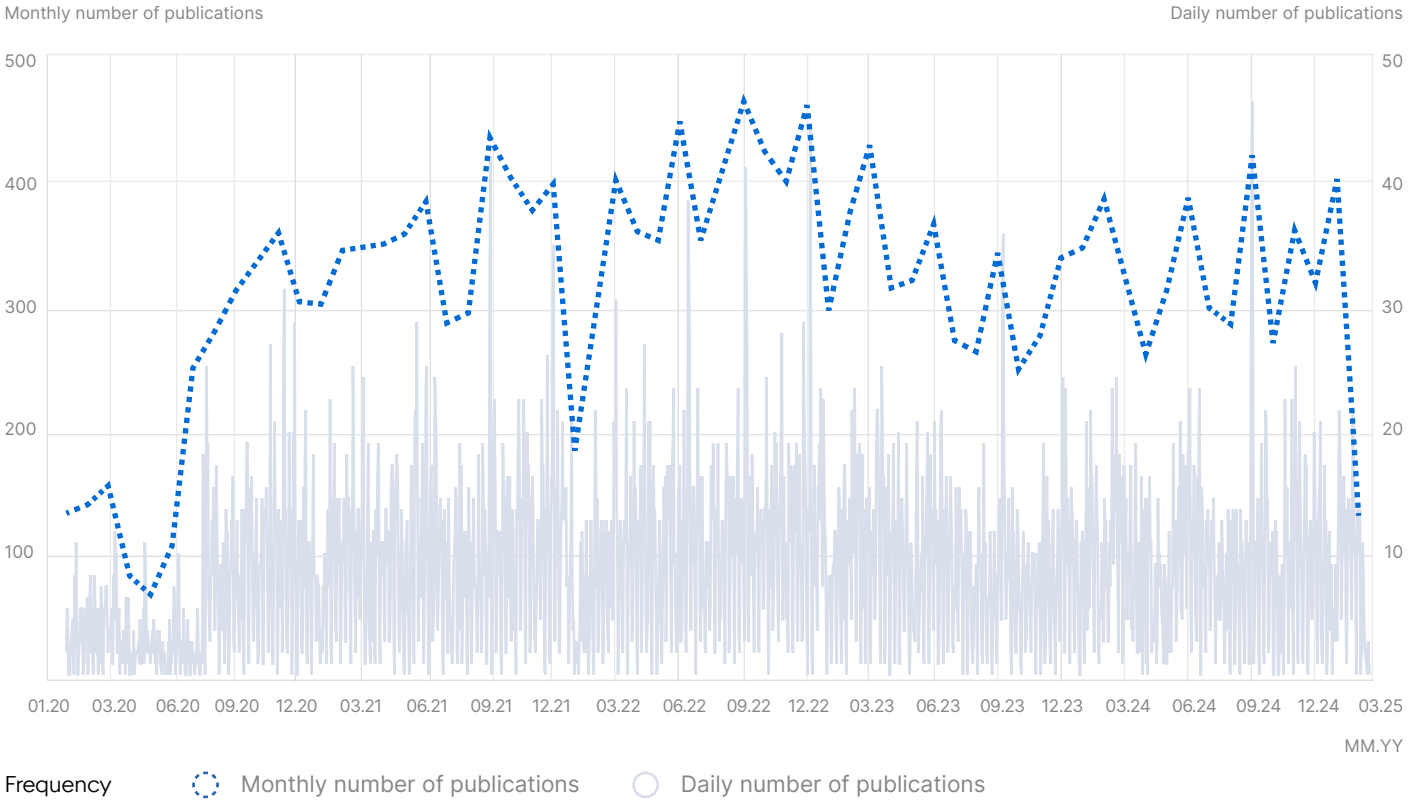
The media were selected to allow reconstruction of Arctic framing patterns, even when using a single outlet per country. Consequently, priority was given to the most widely read outlets. Due to data collection constraints, including limitations imposed by search engines, sources that allowed easier access to news were preferred.

Given these sampling considerations, the study's findings may be biased due to the affiliations of individual data sources, the limited sample size, and the underrepresentation of politically engaged media. This complicates the task of forming a comprehensive picture of how the Arctic is framed. In this context, the data provide only basic insights into Arctic representations and cannot support a thorough analysis of the region's media image. This study focuses primarily on analyzing generalized framing strategies rather than capturing all nuances of discursive practices. It also demonstrates the potential of text-analysis methods to support policy decision-making. For future research, expanding the sample of sources – together with broadening the scope of national Arctic-related narratives – is necessary to increase both representativeness and analytical depth.

23 List of Arctic Council Observers. URL: https://arctic-council.org/about/observers/.

For each outlet, data were collected over a five-year period, from 1 January 2020 to 21 February 2025. Only news items relevant to the Arctic were selected from each outlet, and all texts were translated into English (if necessary) to facilitate processing[24].

Frequency of publication of news about the Arctic



Data Processing Methods

To analyze how the Arctic is represented in the media of different countries, two main text-processing methods were employed: word frequency analysis and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA).

01 Word Frequency Analysis.

Text processing involved tokenization (splitting text into individual words), stop-word removal, and lemmatization (reducing words to their base form, or lemma)[25]). Frequency analysis was then performed on the lemmatized text.

02 Latent Dirichlet Allocation.

LDA is a topic modeling method based on the assumption that each document (text) consists of a mixture of topics, and each topic consists of a set of words. A topic is formed by words that frequently co-occur across different documents (represented

24 Where a news website provided a search function, the query “Arctic” was entered in the outlet’s language. If no search function was available, all texts from the relevant period were collected, and items not containing the term “Arctic” were subsequently removed.

25 For example, environmental and environments are reduced to environment.

in a "topic–word" matrix with beta values ranging from 0 to 1, indicating the importance of each word for defining the latent topic). Each document is assigned a score reflecting how strongly a given topic defines it (represented in a "topic–document" matrix with gamma values ranging from 0 to 1).

→ Separate topic models were created for each country to avoid cognitive distortions in automated processing

Since LDA does not automatically interpret topics, each topic was manually analyzed by experts based on its defining words (top 10 words by beta) and the documents for which it was most relevant (top 5 documents by gamma). Each text was assigned its most representative topic (gamma > 0.7). Manual annotation was cross-verified by multiple researchers: the initial annotation was reviewed by three independent experts, and each subsequent stage was conducted by a researcher not involved in the previous round. This helped minimize bias and ensure accurate interpretation.

LDA was applied separately to each country rather than to the entire dataset[26]. This approach simplified topic interpretation, as the same conceptual topic could include different sets of words in different countries. For instance, the topic "International Security" might include such words as tanks, border, army in Sweden, while in the U.S., it could include navy and warplane. Although both sets pertain to security, they represent its different aspects, so separate topic models were created for each country to avoid cognitive distortions in automated processing. For each country, 18–25 topics were extracted[27], each interpreted by experts and mapped to one of nine master topics: "Resource Extraction", "Climate Change", "Biodiversity", "Logistics", "International Security", "Culture", "Tourism", "Science", and "NATO". Topics that could not be assigned to one of the nine categories were labeled as "Other."

Total Collected

19.741	**news articles**
103.188	**unique lemmas**

26 Separate corpora were compiled for each country, and LDA was applied to each corpus to identify latent topics specific to that country, resulting in 10 distinct topic sets varying in size from 18 to 25 topics.

27 The optimal number of topics was determined by minimizing perplexity, a dimensionless measure of how well the probability distribution predicts the sample.

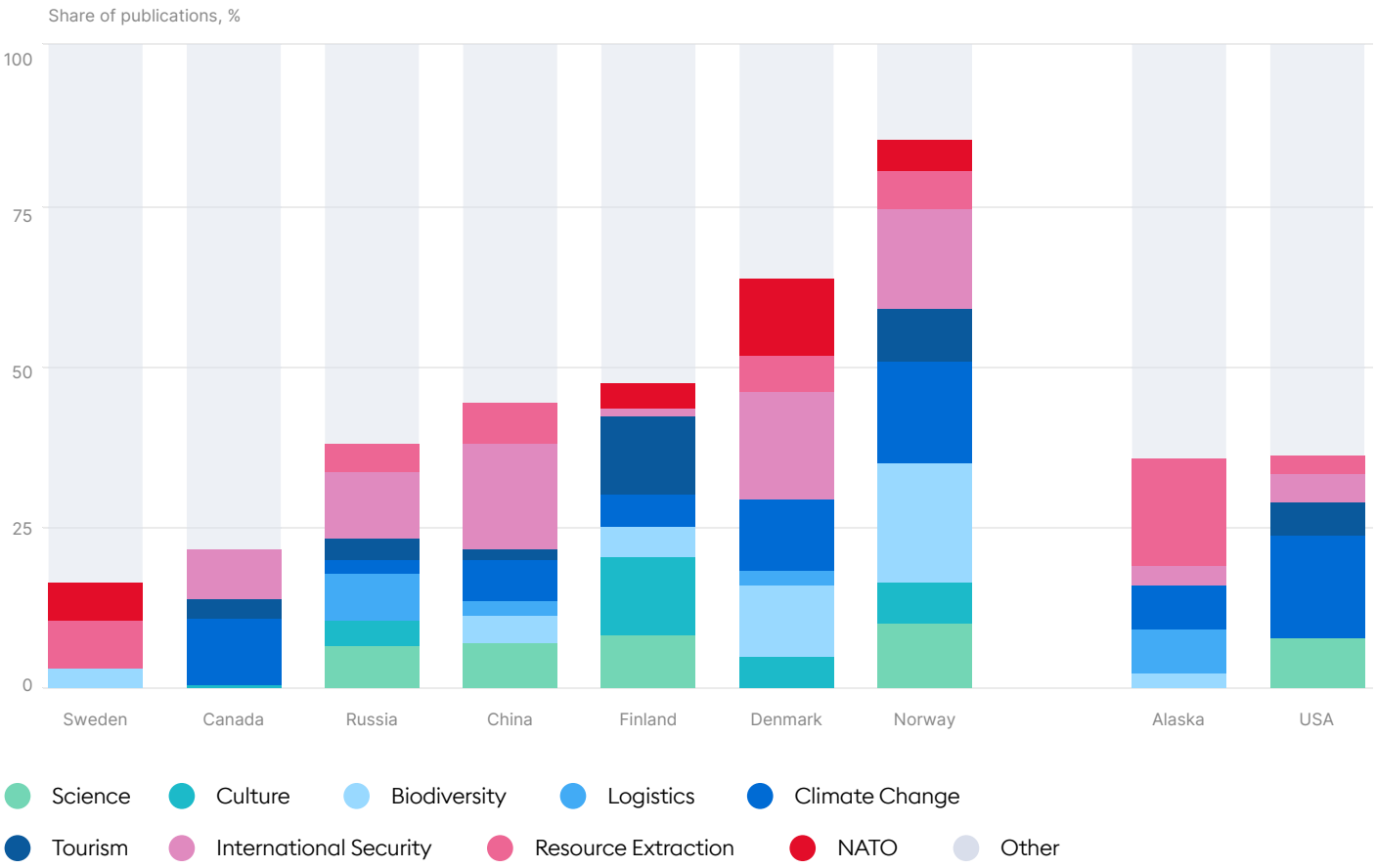
04

Research Findings

Finding 1

Over the past five years, the Arctic has been consistently portrayed as a vulnerable region, whose development requires sustainable development tools. Yet, in the media of certain countries, the Arctic is increasingly portrayed in a militarized context

Distribution of the number of publications by topic



By identifying the key topics in news articles from different countries, we can discern notable patterns that characterize each country's information landscape over the five-year period.

In the United States, "Climate Change" accounts for 26% of the media coverage, followed by 14% of articles highlighting scientific discoveries. "International Security" and "Resource Extraction" together constitute just over 10% of coverage.

In Russia, the dominant topic is "Science" (21.3%). Coverage of "Resource Extraction" and "Logistics" is also substantial. However, topics related to "NATO" and "International Security" appear to be almost entirely absent. This pattern is highly significant, as it clearly demonstrates that Arctic-related discourse is not used in Russia to justify opposition to the Western military bloc.

In Norway, unlike many other countries, a significant portion of publications is dedicated to "International Security". At the same time, "Climate Change" accounts for 18.7% of coverage and "Logistics" for 16.9%.

China stands out as the country most focused on the climate agenda. News coverage of other topics

is more evenly distributed, given sampling limitations. Chinese media pay particular attention to the Arctic's climate situation, which aligns with the government's policy on Arctic affairs[28].

A very large proportion of coverage in each country falls under the category "Other." This does not indicate errors in the automated topic classification; rather, this group includes topics that cannot be generalized. In other words, the "Other" category includes texts addressing issues and events of local significance[29].

Finding 2

Discursive practices are similar across countries from different regions and political blocs. Three overarching images of the Arctic emerge: western countries — The Arctic as a resource and a military trigger. India and China — The Arctic as a research laboratory and tourist magnet. Russia — The Arctic as a strategic region, with a focus on regional development

NATO membership and increasing political distance from Russia are key factors shaping how the Arctic is framed in Western media. The analysis reveals a polyphonic image of the Arctic, where dominant narratives center on international security. Western media devote considerable attention to NATO operations, the alliance's strategic significance, and its reinforcement in response to Russia's actions to safeguard its national interests. This hierarchy of thematic priorities demonstrates how geopolitical configuration influences discursive construction.

In Indian and Chinese media, the Arctic's image is largely shaped by scientific discourse and climate change concerns. Coverage emphasizes polar expeditions, hydro-meteorological research, and new discoveries in biology and geology, while topics related to international security or defense alliances are rarely observed in the sample. A strong scientific and environmental focus is evident here: the Arctic is seen primarily as a planetary laboratory and a marker of climate change, with all other themes taking a secondary role. For China, the Arctic represents both a source of potential climate-related threats, due to melting ice, and an opportunity for scientific and economic development[30].

Topic	East	West	Russia
Biodiversity	132 (2.3%)	4 (1.6%)	0 (0%)
Climate Change	617 (10.9%)	17 (6.6%)	243 (2.4%)
Culture	79 (1.4%)	0 (0%)	382 (3.8%)
International Security	350 (6.2%)	43 (16.8%)	1052 (10.5%)

28 China's Arctic Policy. URL:https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.

29 For example, the Swedish online news outlet The Local has a dedicated section on various holidays. This section was classified as a separate topic in the analysis due to the recurring words celebrate and holiday. In this study, such topics were grouped under the functional category "Other".

30 Zhang, W., & Zhou, T. (2020). Increasing impacts from extreme precipitation on population over China with global warming. Science Bulletin, *65*(3), 243-252. URL: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scib.2019.12.002.

Topic	East	West	Russia
Logistics	57 (1.0%)	11 (4.3%)	689 (6.9%)
NATO	56 (1.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Resource Extraction	230 (4.0%)	16 (6.2%)	453 (4.5%)
Science	174 (3.1%)	18 (7.0%)	675 (6.8%)
Tourism	205 (3.6%)	5 (2.0%)	309 (3.2%)
Other	3784 (66.5%)	142 (55.5%)	6178 (61.9%)

Russia demonstrates a distinct pattern, with science — and to a lesser extent culture — at the forefront. In terms of perceptions, Russia is positioned much closer to the East than to the West. In Russian media, the Arctic is portrayed primarily as a platform for development, international scientific cooperation, and the preservation of Indigenous cultures. At the same time, "Resource Extraction" emerges as the most extensively covered topic. This framing is explained not only by Russia's economic interests in the Arctic but also by the prominent role its oil and gas companies play in the region.

As a result, three distinct models of framing the Arctic can be identified. Western media, in one way or another, emphasize the Arctic's military significance, often highlighting NATO as a means of strengthening the West's geopolitical position, while also frequently engaging with the climate agenda. Eastern media, by contrast, focus more on the Arctic's climatic importance and on advances in its scientific exploration. In turn, Russian media merge narratives of the Arctic as a scientific and cultural space with substantial attention to resource extraction.

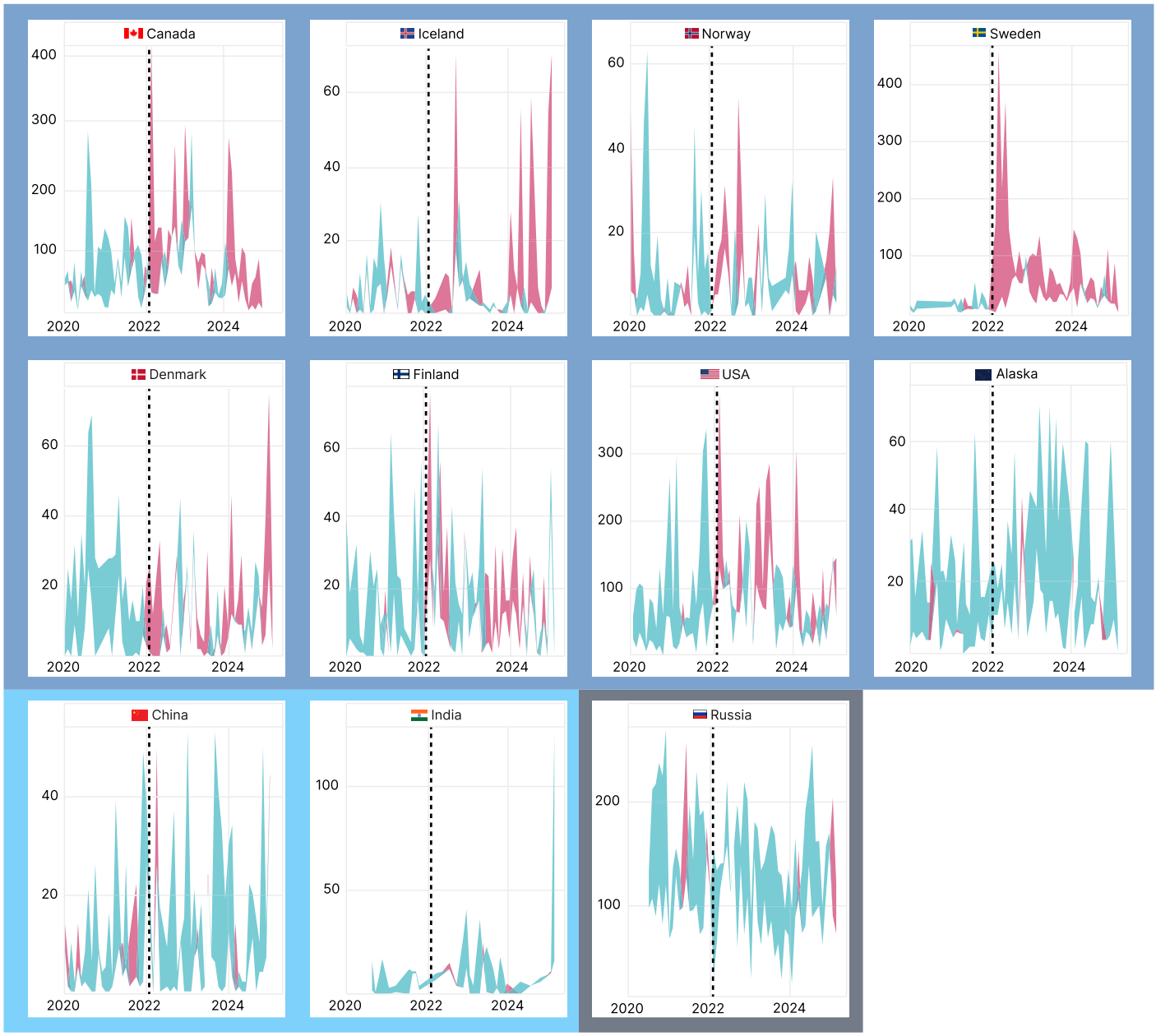
Finding 3

The image of the Arctic is dynamic and sensitive to geopolitical shocks. The events of February 2022 marked a turning point, gradually shifting its perception from that of a "vulnerable territory" to an "arena of confrontation"

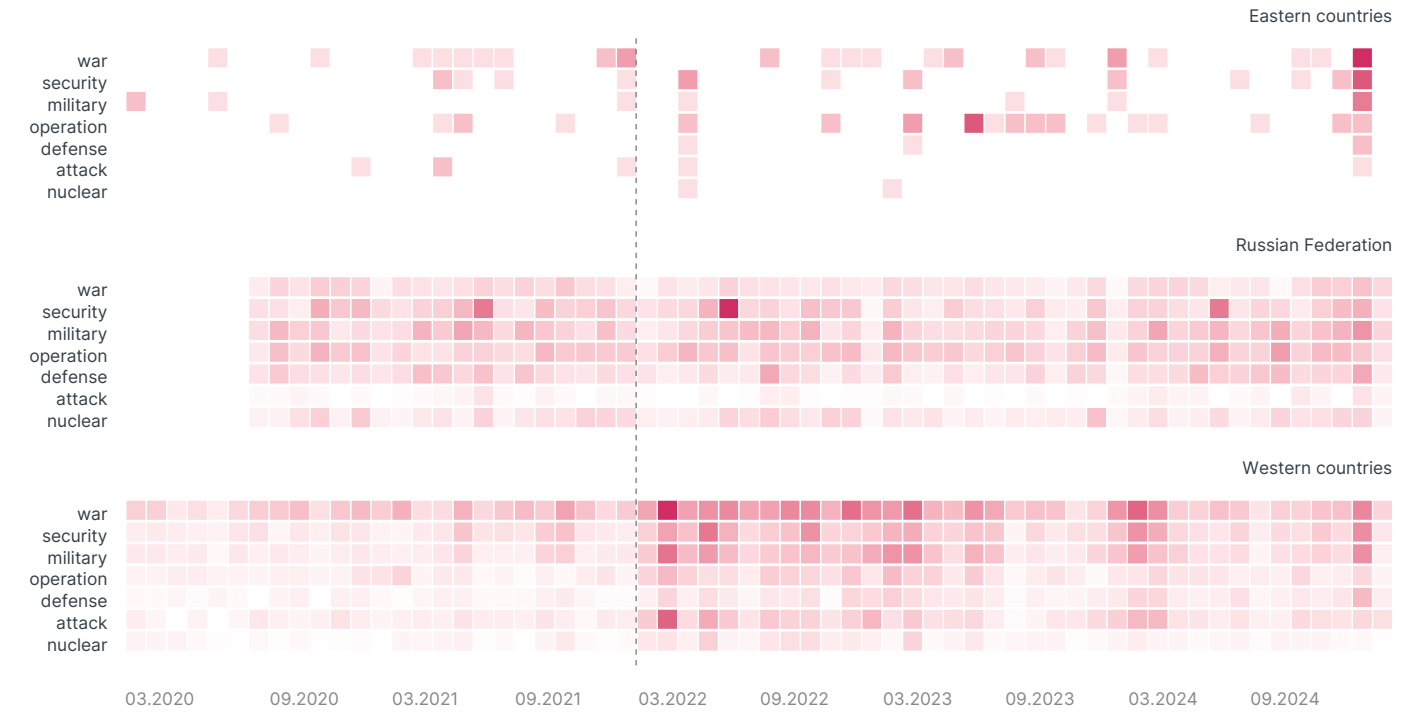
When examining the dynamics of Arctic coverage and conducting a cross-country comparison, several notable trends emerge. In the graph, turquoise highlights the time periods in which publications on themes of sustainable development outnumbered those focusing on "International Security" and "NATO." The data point to a significant thematic shift: before 2022, many countries maintained a stable emphasis on Arctic development. The region was predominantly portrayed as a space of opportunities — scientific, logistical, environmental, and cultural. Such a focus fostered the image of the Arctic as a region of peaceful exploration and international cooperation.

With the onset of 2022, coinciding with the launch of the SMO, a sharp change in the tone of Arctic coverage can be observed, especially in a number of Western states. This is particularly pronounced in Canadian and Swedish media, where reporting increasingly frames the Arctic in terms of confrontation with Russia. The Arctic is increasingly framed as a geopolitical frontier, a trend evident in the rise of news coverage using language of threat, militarization, and conflict. Therefore, in Western discourse, the Arctic partially loses its cooperative image and more often appears as a site of strategic tension.

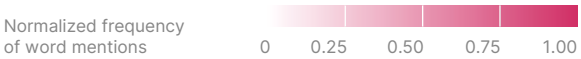
How Russia's SMO reinforced the Western security discourse



Distribution of word mentions related to security



Normalization preserves the distribution of the variable but scales the values to a range between 0 and 1, allowing for comparison between country blocks.



24 February 2022 (Start of the SMO)

The differences are also statistically confirmed. In the context of the overall media agenda, a significant change in the mean values[31] between the periods before and after the onset of the SMO is evident. On average, over the two-year periods before and after the events of February 2022, the number of news items referring to international security topics increased by 46%. When assessing the growth in the number of security-related words, the share of weekly news containing such terms rose by approximately 20%. The largest differences in mean values can be observed in Sweden, Iceland, Canada, and the United States.

At the same time, countries such as China and Russia, and, what is especially remarkable, territories like Alaska, continue to preserve a less militarized framing of the Arctic. Their media outputs retain a focus on cooperation, sustainable development, and scientific exchange. This contrast indicates diverging perceptions: despite global geopolitical tensions, these countries and territories have not shifted toward a militarized narrative, keeping sustainable development at the core of the Arctic agenda.

The Swedish case deserves particular attention. The graph shows a marked spike in Arctic-related publications with negative or confrontational connotations beginning in 2022. This shift carries symbolic weight, as it may be interpreted as a media reflection of how the public perception of threat was construed. Considering the fact that Sweden was actively debating NATO accession at the time, it may be argued that the change in Arctic media representation formed part of a broader campaign to legitimize closer defense alignment with the Alliance. Albeit the real weight of the Arctic-related framing in the eyes of the public, and its concrete impact on public opinion, are debatable and can hardly be evaluated at this point, it might have played a role in mobilizing and channeling public

31 To test the null hypothesis of no difference in mean values between the periods before and after February 22, 2022, a t-test was applied. In both cases, the p-value was found to be below the threshold of 0.05, indicating that the difference in mean values is statistically significant.

support toward the perspective of NATO membership, ultimately resulting in Sweden's joining the Alliance in 2024.

A deeper analysis of military-related topics, based on frequently used words, reveals certain distinctive patterns. Prior to February 2022, in both Western and Eastern media the appearance of terms directly related to war and defense remained very low. Media coverage touched on combat capabilities or military exercises only occasionally, while the primary context continued to focus on scientific research, ecology, and the socio-economic development in the Arctic.

With the onset of the SMO in 2022, the situation changed dramatically. In Western outlets, mentions of words such as "military," "defense," "security," and "war" increased sharply, alongside the emergence of new emphases like "attack" and "nuclear." This shift toward military discourse is evident, given the widespread use of the terms mentioned above. Notably, the word "attack," as a framing device, construes an image of direct aggression linked to the actor carrying out the attack. In the absence of actual military conflict in the Arctic, the injection of such strongly aggressive connotations into news language serves as a tool for creating an enemy image, which can be further leveraged in shaping state-level political rhetoric. The combination of military vocabulary with the term "nuclear" adds geopolitical weight to the region, portraying it as a potential site of nuclear aggression from which regional countries "must defend" themselves.

In Russian media, the opposite trend was observed during the same period: terms such as "military," "defense," "war," "troops," and "security" showed no increase in frequency. Mentions of almost all terms remained roughly constant, suggesting that security and defense issues in Russia are largely independent of specific events and are covered consistently over time.

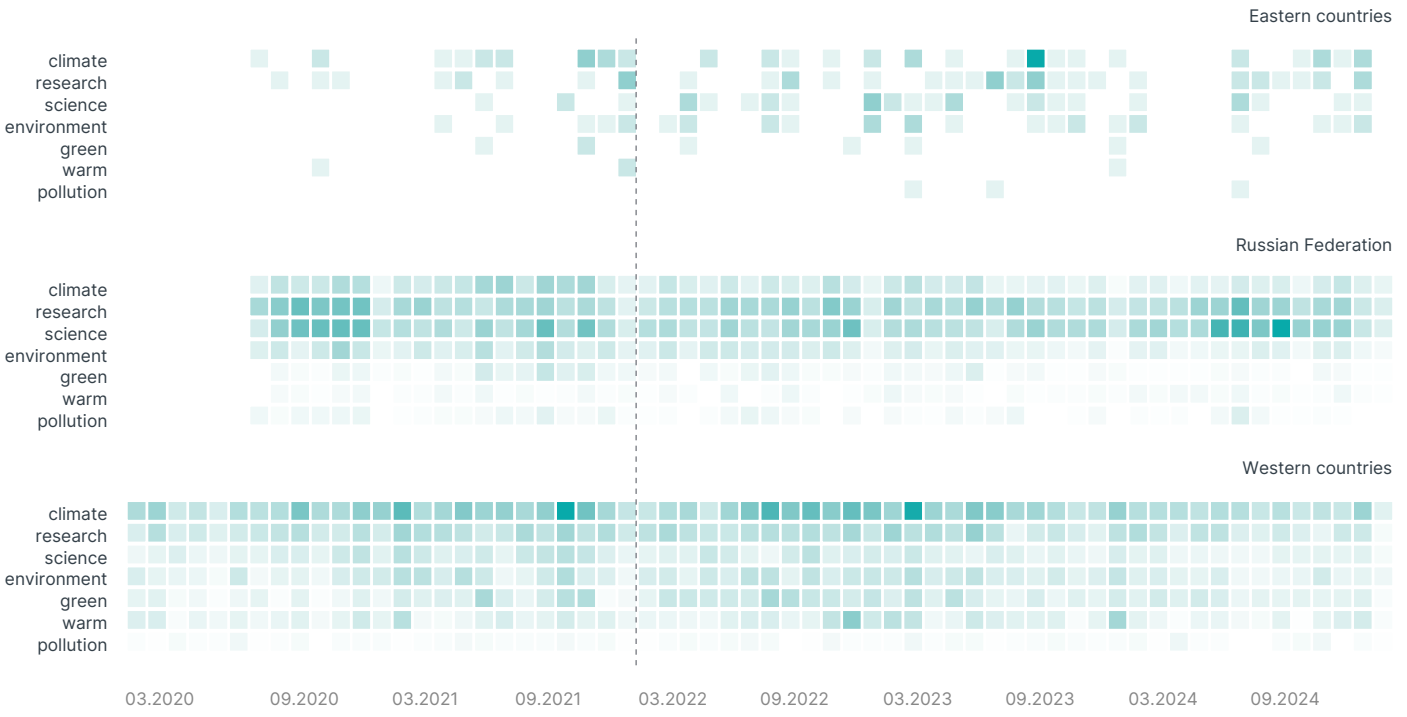
In China and India, mass media language remained largely unchanged. "Security" continues to dominate among military-related terms, while mentions of "military," "war," or "attack" changed only slightly. This suggests that their focus remains on protecting strategic interests and managing risks, rather than on conflict or aggression. Eastern media continue to frame the Arctic primarily as a zone requiring strengthened security measures, while remaining aligned with a discourse of cooperation, monitoring, and concern for regional safety rather than militarization.

Until February 2022—i.e. prior to the start of the SMO—Western outlets featured a high density of references to various environmental and social markers: "communities," "diversity," "pollution," "green," "warming," "animals," "environment," "icebreakers," "climate," "science," "air," "water," and others. During this period, each of these key terms was regularly mentioned in the Arctic coverage, producing a multifaceted image of the region as a space of environmental initiatives, as well as scientific and social engagement.

From February 2022 and over the following two months, however, military frames came to dominate Western media discourse. Mentions of environmental topics dropped sharply, as coverage shifted toward defense-related issues, pushing the sustainable development agenda into the background. Two months later, references to climate challenges, melting ice, and the quality of air and water began to rise again, though they declined toward the end of 2023. This rebound suggests that environmental risks and challenges remain significant, but in times of geopolitical crisis they are temporarily eclipsed by a militarized, threat-oriented media portrayal of the region.

In Russian media discourse, terms associated with sustainable development remained relatively stable throughout the period. Nevertheless, following the start of the SMO, the frequency of mentions of "climate" and "green" began to decline. In Russian media, the climate agenda is gradually marginalized, giving way to ecological research and to local environmental issues such as human-caused pollution and the challenge of biodiversity preservation. Notably, these issues are discussed outside the framework of global climate change, indicating a transformation of environmental discourse in national media. This change in dominant topics points to a gradual decline in sustainability-related messaging in the context of mounting tensions between Russia and the West, alongside a stronger emphasis on science and socio-economic issues in Russian coverage of the Arctic. One of the clearest indicators of the divergence between Western and Russian Arctic narratives is the contrast in climate-related references across their media.

Distribution of word mentions related to sustainable development



Normalization preserves the distribution of the variable but scales the values to a range between 0 and 1, allowing for comparison between country blocks.

Normalized frequency of word mentions: 0 0.25 0.50 0.75 1.00

24 February 2022 (Start of the SMO)

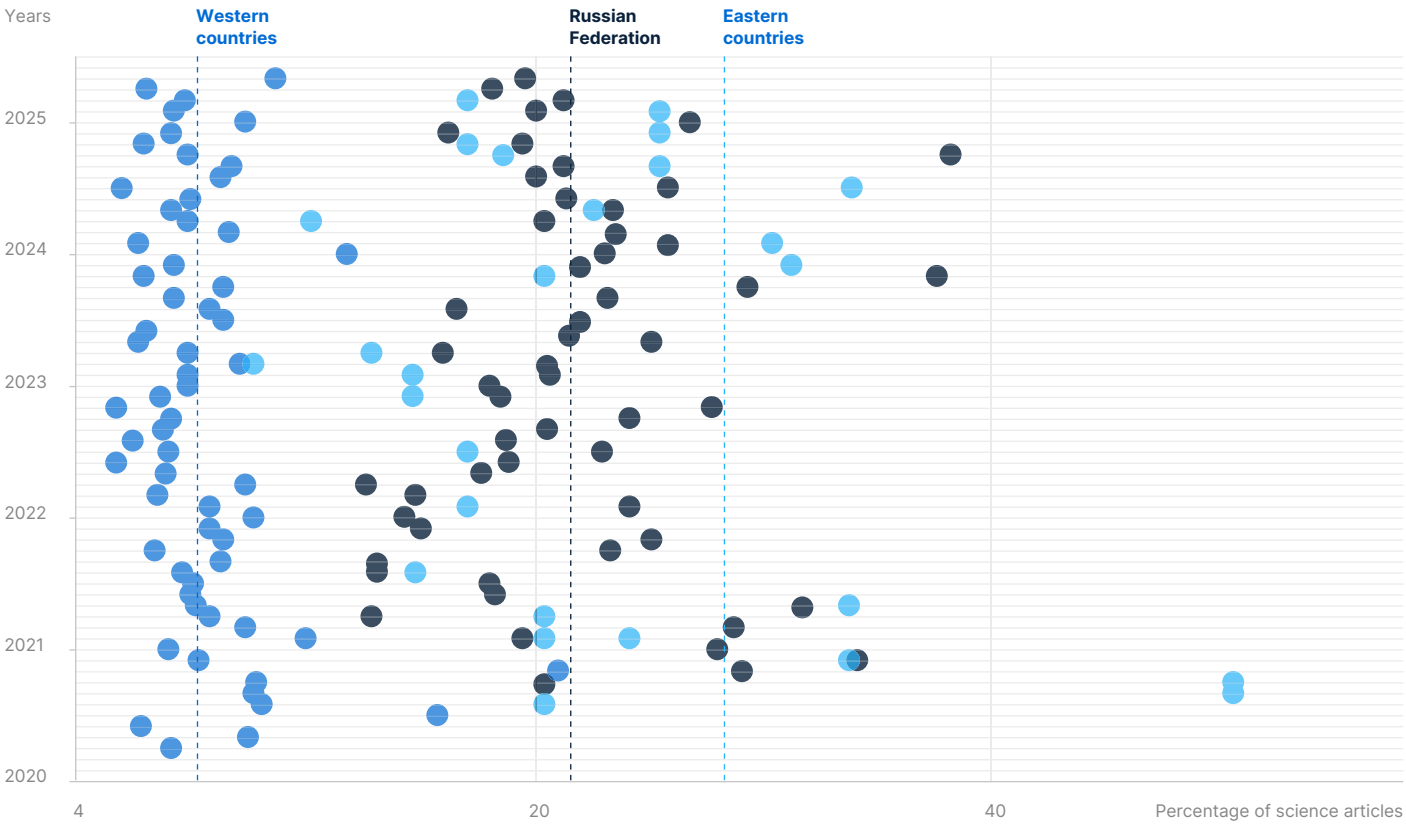
"Climate" remains the most frequently mentioned word in Western outlets, whereas in Russia, following 2022, the term has nearly disappeared from media texts. It is likely that prior to 2022, the climate agenda in Russia was shaped largely through cooperation with Western Arctic states in the Arctic Council and the UN, as well as through the citation of Western media sources. At the same time, other frequently used words such as "water" and "ice" have remained prominent in both Russian and Western media, which, at least in part, supports this conclusion.

Differences in the coverage of Arctic science can be demonstrated by examining how the share of relevant publications changes over time. In Western media, this share remains stable at around 7% of all key topics and shows little variation. This reflects a steady but relatively modest interest of Western media in the Arctic's scientific agenda: research and discoveries are regarded as one of many aspects of regional development, rather than a dominant focus.

By contrast, Russian media show a pronounced upward trend in attention to science. While at the beginning of the period under review the share of science-related coverage was comparable to that of the West, by the end it had approached the levels observed in China and India. This growth reflects a gradual strengthening of the scientific discourse in the coverage of the Arctic, with research topics and reports on polar expeditions evolving from occasional notes into a distinct strand of media attention.

In the media landscapes of India and China, science has traditionally held a leading position: roughly one in three articles about the Arctic is devoted to its scientific exploration. This feature of non-Arctic states is particularly noteworthy. Countries that, by definition, cannot use the Arctic to legitimize military activity or the buildup of strategic capabilities tend to frame it almost exclusively as a site for scientific research. As a result, an Eastern media consumer encounters scientific content in about 30% of all Arctic-related news, which significantly increases the likelihood of perceiving the region in neutral or positive terms compared to audiences in Western countries.

The Arctic as a hub for research and technology development



Finding 4

The transformation of the Arctic's image is gradual. Alongside the word "Arctic," references to "Security" are increasingly frequent, while terms associated with "Regional Development" in Russia and with "Sustainable Development" in Western countries are gradually declining. Only in India and China does the Arctic consistently continue to be framed as a "laboratory for studying climate change"

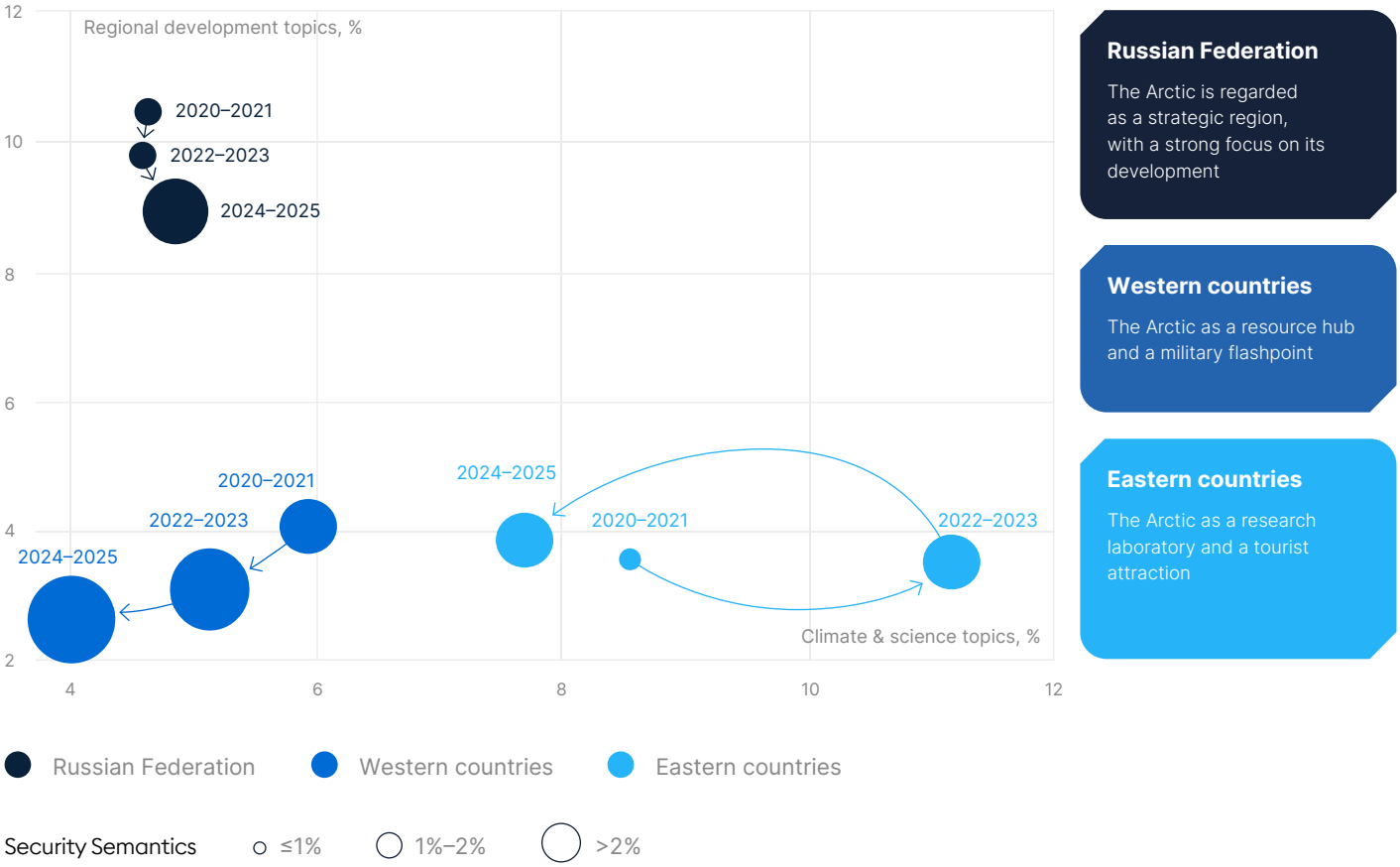
The Arctic's image changes from year to year. To describe "portraits" of the Arctic, for each country block five words preceding and five words following the word "Arctic" in the text were extracted. For each block and for each timeframe (2020–2021, 2022–2023, 2024–2025), the share of words associated with "Regional Development," "Sustainable Development," and "Security" was calculated relative to the total number of words linked to "Arctic."

Based on these data, the following differences in Arctic "portraits" can be observed:

Russia

In Russia, roughly 10% of words in each period are associated with regional development. This reflects the fact that over 44% of the world's Arctic population resides in the Russian sector of the

Three Portraits of the Arctic



region. Consequently, news often covers various development programs and new support measures. For Russia, the Arctic is not an abstract concept: more than 2 million Russian citizens live there, and ensuring a favorable social and economic environment for them is a national priority. This reality is clearly reflected in the media's portrayal of the region.

A noticeable upward trend is observed in words associated with "Security" from 2022–2023 to 2024–2025. During this period, the share increased by 0.26 percentage points, likely related to the overall rise in news coverage on "International Security" after February 2022. Words linked to "Sustainable Development" account for 4–5% of the total, a level comparable to Western countries but significantly lower than in India and China.

Western countries

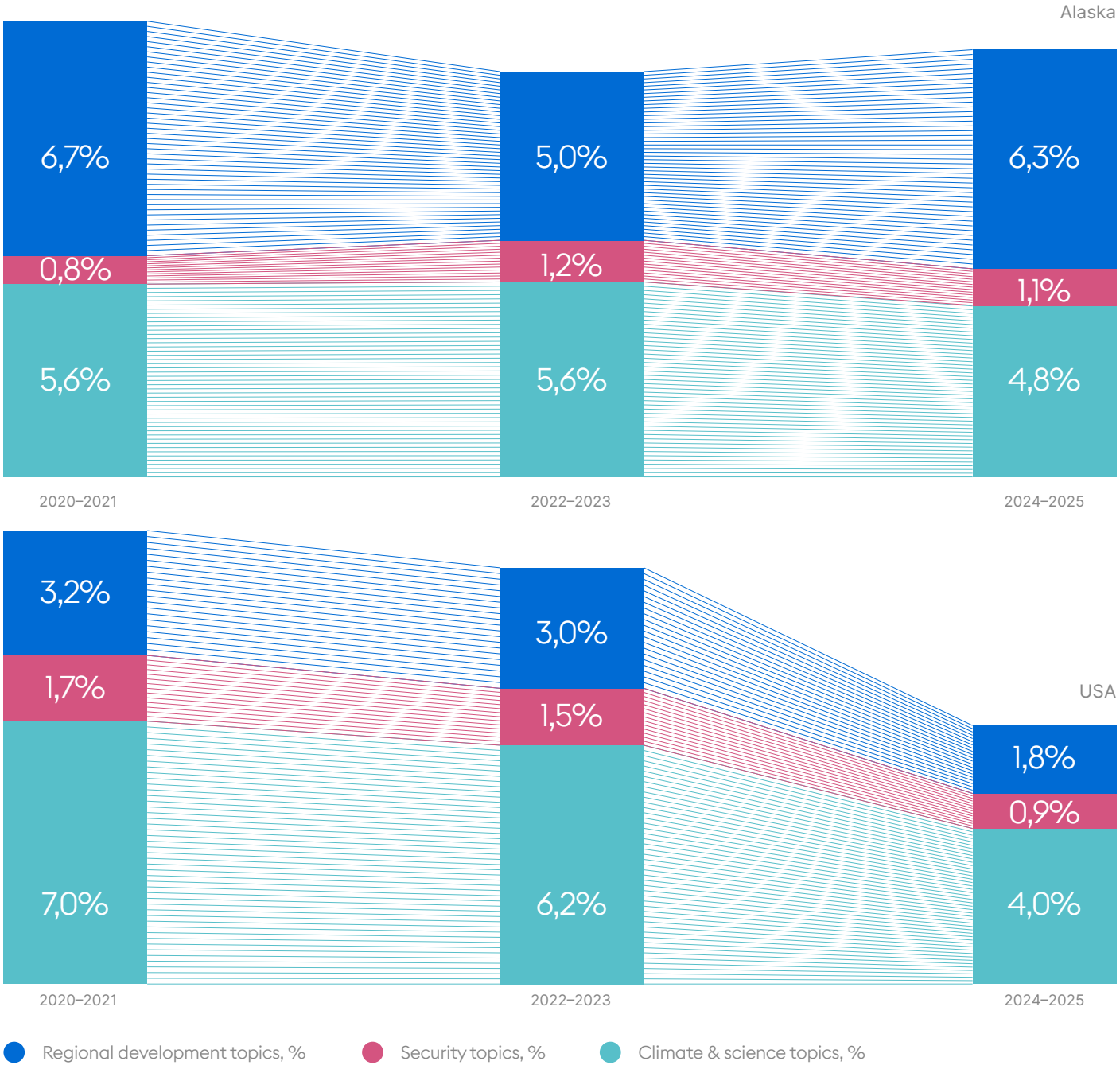
For Western countries, the Arctic is characterized by a relatively high proportion of words related to "Security" across all three time periods. It can be said that the Arctic's "portrait" appears militarized, with "Security" increasing in prominence, while "Sustainable Development" and "Regional Development" decline in both importance and visibility.

The U.S. deviates from this trend. There, the "Security" indicator nearly halved over time — from 1.7% in 2020–2021 to 0.9% in 2024–2025. However, similar declines are observed for the other two indicators as well, suggesting that the discourse is shifting toward other themes. Looking at Alaska specifically, the dynamics of the Arctic's "portrait" are similar to those in Russia: the growing prominence of "Security" occurs alongside a consistently high level of "Regional Development." This similarity can be explained by the fact that, for Alaska, news coverage of improving the quality of life is more relevant, while topics related to "International Security" may be overshadowed.

India and China

In India and China, the "Sustainable Development" themes are more prominent than others. This prominence is primarily due to the fact that most news in these countries focuses on either "Science"

Arctic's portarit change over time. Comparison of Alaska and USA Mass Media



or "Climate Change," as these two topics are directly relevant to them.

The "Regional Development" indicator stands at around 4%, comparable to Western countries, and largely reflects the Arctic as a space for cooperation. For China and India, some militarization of the Arctic's "portrait" can be observed in the 2022–2023 and 2024–2025, but the share of "Security" topics does not exceed 2%.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that partial militarization of the Arctic's image occurs only in Russia and Western countries: words associated with "Security" increasingly appear alongside "Arctic," while terms related to "Regional" or "Sustainable Development" appear less frequently. Such a trend is not observed for India and China. Despite the slight increase in the "Security" indicator, the other two remain roughly at the same level.

05

Conclusions & Recommendations

→ Since the onset of the SMO, the perception of the Arctic — particularly in Western media — shifted markedly toward militarization and geopolitical tension

Since early 2022, political developments have impacted the Arctic, altering its geopolitical significance and its role in shaping discourse. Prior to this period, the region was primarily perceived as a space for sustainable development, scientific research, and international cooperation; however, since the onset of the SMO, the perception of the Arctic — particularly in Western media — shifted markedly toward militarization and geopolitical tension. The United States, Canada, Sweden, and Norway increasingly framed Arctic narratives in the context of war and security. Following February 2022, terms such as "attack," "defense," "military," and "nuclear" became central motifs in media coverage. These changes reflect not only the West's reaction to Russian foreign policy but also a new strategic approach to the Arctic, as outlined in official documents. For instance, the U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region (2022) and Canada's 2024 defense concept (Our North, Strong and Free) both emphasize increased attention to control over the Northern Sea Route, strengthening defense presence in the region, and modernizing military infrastructure.

→ Environmental issues, together with the broader agenda of peaceful Arctic cooperation, are gradually being marginalized in the media

Environmental issues, together with the broader agenda of peaceful Arctic cooperation, are gradually being marginalized in the media. This is largely driven by the shift in rhetoric among Western nations, which comprise nearly the entire Arctic Council and most of the influential countries with Arctic interests. Meanwhile, narratives concerning scientific development, tourism, resource extraction, and environmental policies have remained largely intact in Russia, India, and China.

A notable example of this rhetorical shift is Sweden. Prior to 2022, Swedish Arctic coverage was characterized by neutrality, with emphasis on sustainability and international cooperation. Starting in 2022, however, there was a sharp rise in publications portraying the Arctic as a theater of confrontation with Russia. This coincided with intensified domestic discussions about NATO membership. By shaping public rhetoric to heighten political tensions and exert psychological pressure on voters, the Swedish government was able to legitimize the country's accession to NATO in 2024. It is difficult to precisely assess the extent to which the construction of a militarized Arctic frame contributed to this political decision. The fact remains, however, that Sweden conducted a campaign highlighting security concerns, ultimately presenting the population with a "favorable" solution—joining a military alliance. In January 2022, 37% of Swedes supported NATO membership[32]; by February, this rose to 41%[33], and by April, it reached 51%[34].

There is a clear correlation between the transformation of Western rhetoric and the evolution of discursive strategies in other countries.

32 In Sweden, over 40% of Survey Respondents Support the Country's Accession to NATO. URL: https://tass.ru/obschestvo/13875815.

33 Ibid.

34 More than Half of Swedes Support Joining NATO. URL:https://www.interfax.ru/world/837285.

Notably, even when the frequency of references to certain topics remains stable, qualitative changes in how they are framed can have significant geopolitical and social consequences in the long run. A striking example is Russia's approach to the climate agenda. The analysis reveals a systematic exclusion of concepts such as "climate" and "green economy" from news discourse—indicative of increasing isolation between Russian and Western media and a growing lack of common ground. Issues related to sea-level rise, ice degradation, and global climate change occupy a peripheral position both in state rhetoric and public consciousness. This trend reflects a deeper process: the formation of an autonomous discursive space in which environmental issues are interpreted outside the climate-crisis paradigm dominant in Western media. In turn, this may lead to divergent perceptions of environmental risks, potentially complicating international cooperation and ultimately causing systemic fragmentation of the global climate discourse.

→ Even when the frequency of references to certain topics remains stable, qualitative changes in how they are framed can have significant geopolitical and social consequences in the long run

Public priorities and political strategies on environmental protection gradually lose alignment, inevitably reducing the effectiveness of international cooperation. In particular, Russia's discursive distancing from Western-promoted sustainable development frameworks creates additional institutional barriers for implementing climate initiatives. At the same time, the increasing focus on security and defense sidelines the environmental agenda, weakening the legitimacy of existing mechanisms for multilateral governance of environmental initiatives. This trend aligns with the concept of "climate isolationism"[35]. The prospect of rising rhetorical polarization underscores the need to develop adaptive forms of environmental governance capable of remaining functional amid increasing discursive heterogeneity and competing national narratives.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the transformation of the region's geopolitical status is bound to have long-term negative consequences for the global community. It is important to emphasize that the observed discursive changes are not ontological but are the product of deliberate construction—they have been artificially modeled.

→ This means that international actors consciously reformulate narrative frameworks of the Arctic, adapting them to their current political objectives and strategic interests

35 Stephens JC. Beyond climate isolationism: a necessary shift for climate justice. Current Climate Change Reports. 2022 Dec;8(4):83-90. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s40641-022-00186-6.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been developed:

01 Public bodies responsible for safeguarding Russia's national interests and security in the High North are advised to continuously monitor the international media agenda on Arctic issues.

As this study has shown, even a limited sample of media outlets allows for well-founded conclusions regarding the evolution of the Arctic's image in relation to changes in the geopolitical environment. Establishing ongoing and more comprehensive monitoring will make it possible to accurately identify the emerging strategic priorities of states operating in the Arctic, the specific narratives they transmit to shape the region's image, and the rationale for their presence there, as well as document specific threats, challenges, and opportunities.

The PORA Expert Centre is ready to take part in both developing the methodology and practical implementation of such monitoring, and invites collaboration with federal executive authorities, relevant research institutions, and the international expert community.

To keep track of both the existing and emerging narratives regarding the Arctic, a comprehensive and systematic observatory could be established. It could focus on discourse across all key actors, including Arctic Council members, observer states such as India, China, Japan, South Korea, and the EU, as well as emerging Global South stakeholders. Such an initiative may also incorporate social media platforms like Twitter/X, WeChat, and YouTube, which increasingly shape narratives. In parallel, it could compare media trends with national strategies and policy documents, allowing policymakers to detect points of alignment or divergence between rhetoric and policy.

Such monitoring may serve as a tool for strategic forecasting: changes in tone and the dynamics of Arctic-related media narratives can offer valuable insights into evolving political priorities and help identify significant developments that may influence Arctic planning and negotiations.

02 The ongoing securitization of the Arctic's image in Western media, as demonstrated by this study, should be considered in the media policies of Russian institutions.

Specifically, it is advisable to consistently emphasize the growing military and political narratives in the Arctic discourse of Western governments, their rhetorical focus on demonizing Russia, and the purported need to counter the "Russian threat" and strengthen NATO's operational capabilities in the Polar region.

Militarized frames spread by Western media should be countered strategically by Russia through the implementation of communication strategies that avoid reproducing the same militarized frames and focus on de-securitizing Arctic-related topics instead. This entails consistently promoting the Arctic as a space for development, environmental research, and the welfare of local communities. By focusing on themes such as shipping safety, renewable energy, and peaceful regional cooperation, Russia can present an alternative discourse that resonates more broadly with international audiences.

03 Indigenous communities could be showcased more actively in Russia's cultural diplomacy and international fora, with emphasis placed on traditional knowledge, biodiversity conservation, and regional development.

By presenting the Arctic as a human-centered space rather than merely a resource frontier, Russia can counter Western portrayals while strengthening legitimacy in environmental and indigenous rights debates.

04 Climate and environmental messaging can be reinforced.

The report notes a decline in climate-related terms in Russian media after 2022. It may be constructive to reintegrating climate issues into discourse within a developmental and cooperative frame. This could include promoting joint climate monitoring and adaptation projects with India, China, and other Global South partners, and positioning Russia as an active contributor to global climate governance. By doing so, Russia would not only counter narratives of isolation but also strengthen international cooperation in areas where interests converge.

05 It is advisable to further promote Russia-BRICS engagement in the Arctic.

The differences between the narratives promoted by Western Arctic states and those of Eastern countries can serve as an additional argument for a "pivot to the East" and the deepening of cooperation—including in the High North—within the BRICS framework. Russia's BRICS and other Global South partners have the potential to play a significant role in Arctic research and resource exploration, as well as in examining the region's influence on climate and livelihoods worldwide.

06

Appendix

Three Portraits of the Arctic

Regional Development

development region zone territory center growth

part municipal urban district city residential

regional rural **regional development** infrastructure plan

construction project investment economic local

industrial community population settlement road

housing transport

Sustainable Development

climate environment ecology sustainable monitor sea

research arctic **sustainable development** study wildlife

temperature warming change glacier permafrost ice

conservation protection pollution clean green data

energy renewable carbon emission resource water

ecosystem polar science natural scientific analysis

ocean biodiversity weather researcher expedition

Security


security
conflict
military
defense
navy
border
safety
emergency
protection
risk
surveillance
threat
war
security
terror
attack
intelligence
radar
patrol
naval
force
weapon
sovereignty
stability
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We invite dialogue on key topics in sustainable Arctic development and welcome proposals for collaboration.

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