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Research article

Conceptualising the Arctic as a Zone of Conflict

The winner of the 15th anniversary award*

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Abstract

The Arctic has been conceptualised as a zone of geopolitical competition, an international zone of peace and the dreamlike realm for extractive industries. While states such as Russia and the United States have commenced a militarisation and nuclearisation of the Arctic, other Arctic states like Canada and Norway have mobilised support for Arctic cooperation. Due to changing geopolitical pressures, the desecuritisation of the Arctic in the late 1980s was not successful. This lack of attainment begs the question as to why today, the Arctic seems to be heating up faster than ever.

This article aims to determine how the Arctic is conceptualised as a zone of conflict by the United States and Russia. In doing so, the article examines different analytical dimensions that play a role in this conceptualisation, including the changing natural environment, evolving historical context such as the changing power dynamics between countries, and domestic politics. These different framings of a securitised Arctic help to explain how and why security becomes involved in Arctic discourse. To do so, I draw upon discourses in target states and examine the extent to which these particular discourses are manifested in practice and build on critical geopolitics.

Keywords: conflict, Arctic, Russia, geopolitics, the United States

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Introduction

The Arctic has been conceptualised as a zone of geopolitical competition, an international zone of peace and the dreamlike realm for extractive industries. While some states have continued to treat the Arctic like a zone of exception that stood apart from ordinary politics, other states have not. For the purpose of this research, I compare two cases of the United States and Russia from 2016 onwards. This research aims to answer the question of which dimensions play a role in how Russia and the United States are conceptualising the Arctic as a zone of conflict. In doing so, this research examines different analytical dimensions that play a role in this conceptualisation, including the changing natural environment, the evolving historical context – such as changing power dynamics between countries – and domestic politics to see whether any present convincing cases to explain a changing conceptualisation of the Arctic. While Russian approaches to conceptualising the Arctic rely on diversionary politics and using the Arctic as an external from a domestic side, they also suggest that Russia's relational position on how it sees itself in the world – a revanchist power seeking to disrupt the current world order – matters when constructing space. American social constructions that influence its imagining of the Arctic space rely on the vast chaos resulting from the Trump administration as well as attempts to contain Russia in the broader way that the US sees itself attempting to regain hegemony on the world stage. These two approaches interestingly differ in an important way: temporality. Because America's political system shifts drastically every four or eight years, America's construction of space in the Arctic is not as stable as the case of Russia, where stability is more often the case in both the domestic political context as well as Russia's drive for more influence relative to other states. This temporality dimension also plays a role in how Russia and the US see environmental change in the Arctic. While discourse shifted very quickly between the Trump and Biden administrations, Russia's social construction has remained relatively ambivalent towards drastic environmental shifts. In this research, I take the position of critical geopolitical scholars who look beyond purely geography to explain political change. Geography matters, they claim, insofar as it forces actors to reimagine and reconceptualise a changing geographic space to fit the way they see the world.¹

I aim to show that of the three dimensions, Russia and the United States' changing imagining of the Arctic may be due to a combination of domestic politics and evolving historical context/changing world order, and that a changing natural environment acts as a macro driver for states to reimagine the Arctic. My primary contribution to this research is twofold. I aim to provide a more

thorough examination of Russian and American social constructions that have led to this conflict conceptualisation of the Arctic, focusing on domestic politics, and evolving historical context while also suggesting that in an era of climate change, critical geopolitical scholars should also pay attention to temporality when considering how states must reimagine regions like the Arctic, which are undergoing rapid geographic changes.

This research begins by exploring the current literature that surrounds how scholars focus on Russian and American aspirations and motivations in the Arctic, describing three different camps – one focused on geopolitical competition and security, another focusing on economic cooperation and natural resources and another looking at more holistic understandings of aspirations. I then address critical geopolitical scholars and their approach to the Arctic. Next, I discuss my theoretical approach and methods in order to describe, firstly, how the Arctic was conceptualised by both the United States and Russia post 2016. Then, I go through each possible dimension: 1) domestic politics 2) evolving historical context and 3) the environment to determine whether they seem like convincing explanations for Russia and the United States' reimagining of the Arctic.

Literature review

Geopolitical competition and security

Scholars focusing on Russian and American aspirations and motivations in the Arctic look at different explanations of which social constructions and narratives are important when examining how the Arctic is conceptualised, tending to prioritise certain explanations over others. Some scholars look at geopolitical competition and security as the main drivers for behaviour in the North.² These drivers can originate from both Russian and American domestic politics as well as Russia's reaction to the changing international order. However, what is striking about scholars who, in general, focus on geopolitical competition as an explanation is that they assume that this driver is prominent and discuss the consequences rather than engaging in reasons how such a driver came to be the primary mover. Heininen (2018) notes that many neorealist observers assume Cold War history to be repetitive and use that basis for their explanations.³

Some authors, for example, look specifically at possibilities for strategic competition or cooperation between the United States and Russia in the Arctic.⁴ The authors argue that Russia is increasing its military presence decisively, as is the United States, which will inevitably lead to confrontation of some sort between the two powers.⁵ The authors focus on what they call 'Russia's Arctic Obsession' – noting that Moscow has been strengthening its military presence in the region and has been restricting foreign warships in the Arctic Ocean since 2018.⁶

Others expand on the argument of militarisation by exploring Russian actions in the Arctic between 2014-2020 and argue that Russia is acting provocatively towards other Arctic states, specifically pointing to a trend towards more sovereignty-oriented and nationalistic language in regard to the Arctic.⁷ By looking at different policy documents such as Russia's National Security Strategy and other Arctic policy documents, Cherpako (2020) concludes that Russian policies have developed a new emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity but that it has remained cooperative on non-divisive issues.⁸ A CSIS report also highlights Russia's nationalistic rhetoric, both externally to other countries as well as the historical Arctic narrative that supports it 'both one of man conquering the forces of nature and the relentless focus to achieve military and industrial progress... as a source of national pride and identity'.⁹ The authors do note the importance of Russian economic development as a separate driver of Russian policy, but argue that since the crisis in Ukraine, economic development has slowed – particularly given sanctions and the drop in global energy prices. Related to many of the other scholars that focus on geopolitical competition, Klimenko, Nilsson and Christenson (2019) also note that while Russian behaviour may not point overtly to conflict, it does illustrate increasingly assertive rhetoric and military activity.¹⁰ The Congressional Research Service's Report (2020) supplements Klimenko's argument, dedicating an entire subheading to US, Canadian and Nordic relations with Russia in the Arctic – describing the situation as a renewal of great power competition.¹¹ In her work on Russian metanarratives, Laruelle (2012) discusses how the Arctic has become an opportunity for Russia to present itself as 'a fortress of under siege, caught in a vice-like grip by the advance of NATO'.¹² While she does note that *some* Russian policymakers appear to be more nationalist-minded than others and overly focus on the Arctic's geopolitical role in foreign policy – which implies there are others that do not – she does not explicitly discuss those dissenting voices, leaving a reader to assume that it is only the nationalist's opinions that matter.

Scholars that focus on American ambitions and motivations for Arctic development and interest tend to frame Western interest in the Arctic as extremely reactive. US administrations have, generally, not treated the Arctic as a national security priority. It is only with increased Russian and Chinese interest in the Arctic that the United States has begun to frame the region in terms of geopolitical competition and security.¹³ The region is often framed as a New Cold War.¹⁴ Moreover, scholars bring attention to the inclusion of China as a near-Arctic state and the role that China is already playing and will in the future play in the Arctic.¹⁵

Economic cooperation and extraction of natural resources

However, geopolitical competition and security are not the only social constructions that scholars focus on. Others highlight economic cooperation and the extraction of natural resources as the primary narratives that drive Russian and American interests and actions.¹⁶ While these scholars take a different approach to what motivates and fuels specifically Russian action, these drivers can still be relatively easily traced back to Russian domestic politics and Russia's reaction to the changing international order. While extraction of natural resources is important for American motivations in the Arctic, is it not nearly as written about compared to Russia. Instead, American motivations for Arctic interest tend to be focused on cooperating with other states. Again, nonetheless, the majority of these scholars do not look at *how* this driver came to be predominant in their analyses. In other words, they do not engage with an analysis of how the world is constituted but take the world as it is and move forward from there.

For example, in her piece exploring why the Arctic is important to Russia, Klimovna Kharlampyeva (2013) looks at a variety of different drivers but settles on economic and energy potential as the most important.¹⁷ Goodman and Sun (2020) similarly look at Sino-Russian cooperation and highlight its importance.¹⁸ In their article, there is no discussion about how Russia sees the Arctic as a zone of conflict, but instead it is assumed that Russia's main goal is to commercialise the Arctic and needs China's financial assistance to do so. In an analysis of Russia's 2013 Arctic Policy, Gogoberide et al. (2017) similarly do not focus on conflict, instead highlighting Russia's main interests as socioeconomic development, science and technology diffusion, environmental security and cooperation.¹⁹ Many scholars that look at American ambitions and aspirations in the Arctic also look at economic cooperation and the extraction of natural resources. Given interest in drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, it is no surprise that much scholarship looks at the economic costs of increased extraction.²⁰ Conley and Rohloff (2015) also discusses the implication of climate change for communities in the Arctic, particularly as the Arctic becomes more appealing for resource extraction.²¹

In contrast to the other scholars who generally do not look at the conditions under which cooperation could emerge, Atland (2008) looks extensively at Gorbachev's Murmansk Initiative, analysing the policy itself, the extent to which it was materialised, how much it contributed to changing relations in the Arctic and, most importantly, the context in which it was launched. This article explores not only the case of the Murmansk Initiative as one important period in time when the Arctic was conceived of as a zone of cooperation but takes a comprehensive approach in understanding how it happened.²²

Holistic approach

Other scholars still take a more holistic approach in analysing American and Russian practices and discourses in the Arctic. These scholars acknowledge that there are a variety of different motivations for state behaviour.²³ However, as with the other two approaches, many scholars here assume their analyses of drivers as accurate and do not step back to look at how and under what conditions these drivers came to be prominent. Instead of claiming that there is one motivation for Russian actions, for example, Bochkarev (2010) takes a rounded approach, pointing to five main reasons for why the Arctic is so critical to Russia: 1) the Arctic is an economic engine for Russia, 2) the Arctic is a huge untapped resource base, 3) Russia's geographic proximity to the Arctic makes a focus on the region obvious, 4) the Arctic represents a potential transport corridor for Russian goods and military and 5) border protection. This wide diversity of reasons allows Bochkarev to look more broadly at Russian interests rather than prioritising any one reason. Nonetheless, there is no deep dive into the conditions under which these five drivers take prominence, nor how those conditions came to be.

Following along Bochkarev's holistic approach, Godzimirski and Sergunin (2020) show that there are many differences amongst Russian expert narratives about the Arctic and different motivations driving Russian interests. They point to four reasons for the Arctic being high on Russia's agenda: 1) natural resource extraction, 2) enhancing Russia's foreign policy and security position, 3) the Arctic is seen as a new territory for new opportunities and 4) the opening of the Arctic coincides with the decline of the West.²⁴ How different experts approached the Arctic was informed by whether they agreed more with a neorealist or liberal-institutionalist vocabulary.²⁵ While a more neorealist approach looked at the Arctic primarily in geopolitical terms, a liberal-institutionalist approach sees the Arctic as a territory to be developed in concert with other countries. These two different dialogues within Russia are also elaborated on by Staun (2017), who addresses this domestic debate and concludes that while many Western countries seem to think Russia is a revanchist power, it is actually acting like a status-quo power following a long-term strategy.²⁶

American scholars also take a holistic view of analysing America and Russian actions in the Arctic. Weitz (2019) for example takes a broad view of the changing conditions of the Arctic – taking into account geopolitical tensions between Russia, the United States and China, as well as economic interests.²⁷ Similarly, Conley (2015) tries to address a variety of different views including a focus on social security of communities in the Arctic, economic and climate consequences, as well as geopolitical pressures coming from competition.²⁸ While this array of scholarship does note many of the different narrations that the US and Russia

use in the Arctic, they do not tend to approach the implications for why. This is because these narratives are naturalised in foreign policy discourse.

Critical geopolitical scholars

Critical geopolitical scholars take a different approach to conceptualising aspirations and actions in the Arctic. As a starting point, critical theory aims to think through the implications of particular interpretations, specifically who benefits from those interpretations and how they are constructed. Rather than looking at purely geography as a rationale for state behaviour, these scholars acknowledge that geography is important but that it is the knowledge and re-imagining of that geography by different actors that truly matters.²⁹ In their classic definition, O Tuathail and Agnew (1992) define critical geopolitics as ‘discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft “spatialise” international politics in such a way as to represent it as a “world” characterised by particular types of places, peoples and dramas’.³⁰ From this definition, Knecht and Keil (2013) theorised that spatiality is not fixed, that the social reality of the Arctic is intersubjectively produced, and that therefore geography is not static, but rather its perception changes based on the political situation at the time.³¹ In short, how is space imagined politically and how is the world made and unmade through political discourses and practices.

Some critical geopolitical scholars have looked at the Arctic.³² Take for example, Heininen (2018), who discusses two competing discourses that surround the Arctic in Russia: first, the Arctic as a zone of peace and second, as a race for resources and growing geopolitical competition.³³ Dittmer et al (2011) has also contributed by adding the important idea that what counts as Arctic security or sovereignty depends on different geographic understandings of the Arctic.³⁴ While not overtly critically geopolitical, Kinossian (2016) provides an interesting nugget to consider – that part of what makes Russian policy on the Arctic so interesting is the succession of different government regimes.³⁵

However, while Arctic discourse does provide some hints as to what matters and Dittmer and Kinossian’s contributions are notable, what these scholars have not focused on as much is specifically *which analytics dimensions* – whether it be domestic, international, environmental or a combination of the three – are Russia and the United States conceptualising the Arctic as a zone of conflict.

Theory and methods

In order to explain why geographic change is not fatalistic and why the reimagining of the Arctic is important to understand, I turn to critical geopolitics. Unlike the second half of its name, critical geopolitics differs from geopolitics in key and important ways. While geopolitics emphasises how geographical elements

such as location, size, topography, climate, natural resource distribution and the location of the ocean and land influence state power, critical geopolitics asserts that 'space is essentially narrated and thus highly contextual and dependent on social constructions, discourses, and moldable identities'.³⁶ In short, geographic changes have an effect on power relations, but it is the way that actors reimagine Arctic territory that shapes their foreign policy. The implication from critical geopolitics then is to explain which social constructions, discourses and identities change the way a space is perceived.³⁷

Critical geopolitical theory has implications for the study of the Arctic. Knecht and Keil (2013) discuss three of these implications, the first of which is that spatiality is not fixed but it is a major element in making foreign policy decisions.³⁸ As the Arctic changes due to the melting of the polar ice caps and other unknown geographic changes (as of yet) due to climate change, Arctic states must continually reimagine both their borders to the north as well as their perceptions of areas that were previously not accessible. This constant adjustment means that these perceptions are greatly negotiable and political in the ways they are conceived. The second implication is that because geopolitical narratives are negotiable, subject to change and given ongoing regional transformation in the Arctic, we can expect a reorientation of how the Arctic is perceived in a way that justifies foreign policy goals. Therefore, the overall foreign policy will likely subsume the Arctic into whatever broader foreign policy goal previously existed. The third implication is that different levels of governance will produce space in different ways – states are only one actor in this puzzle. Because this paper focuses on Russia and the United States, other actors that may spatialise the Arctic differently were not included. However, this does not mean that they are not important. Future research could and should consider the role of indigenous peoples, non-governmental organisations and multinational corporations in future works. However, they lie outside the scope of this research.

In this paper, I aim to explain which analytic dimensions play a role in how Russia and the United States conceptualise the Arctic as a zone of conflict. What dimensions matter when space is narrated and what social constructions and narratives change the way in which states are conceptualising the Arctic? To explain this, I posit three potential dimensions that may or may not work in concert with one another. While domestic politics as a dimension aims to think about the social constructions and narratives that exist that change how the Arctic is perceived, the changing world order refocuses the lens on a relational level. In short, how does the way a state sees itself on the world stage – whether acting as a revanchist power against a perceived hegemonic order or attempting to regain hegemony – impact its narratives of space?

Table 1: Analytic Dimensions

	Domestic Politics	Evolving World Order	Environment
Russia	Role of domestic unrest and distraction from domestic problems	Resurgent Russia acting as a revanchist power	Environmental Changes
The United States	The Trump Administration	US attempting to regain hegemony and contain Russia	Environmental Changes

Russia

The first possible dimension is that Russia is conceptualising the Arctic as a zone of conflict because it acts as a distraction from domestic problems and social unrest. In other words, Russia's social construction of the Arctic is dependent on how it must reform itself in response to domestic pressures. Focusing on an external threat helps to invoke patriotism and benefits those currently in power, who want to maintain the status quo. Adopting a diversionary use of force is not a novel concept. DeRouen (2000) addresses this in his study that analyses American presidential use of force as a distraction from social domestic issues.³⁹ For Russia specifically, analysts and scholars agree and propose that this diversionary use of force explains Russian foreign policy decisions – particularly considering the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁴⁰ If this analytic dimension holds, then we would expect to see drastic domestic problems in Russia that are causing social unrest, which then provoke the Russian government to adopt a diversionary foreign policy.

The second possible dimension is a changing world order. Weakening American power and influence on the world stage has resulted in Russia seeing an opportunity to regain its past influence and power. A Russian shift in standpoint about the Arctic actually originates from how elites are constructing and re-imagining the region. If this holds true, we would expect to see other signs that Russia is behaving like a revanchist power, such as grabbing territory or acting in other ways that go against the international system and law.

Critical geopolitics tells us that solely geographic changes don't matter; to test this assertion, I include one alternative dimension that explores solely environmental considerations. In other words, this dimension posits that the changing environment structure in the Arctic due to climate change is what lies at the heart of Russia's imagining of the Arctic as a zone of conflict. If true, then we would expect vast environmental changes to go alongside a conceptualisation of conflict but not when there is no conceptualisation of conflict. However, I hypothesise that while the environment will likely explain how states (Russia) imagine the Arctic, it will act as a macro driver for states to think about

reimagining the region and will change perceptions. Thus, it is not by default that a changing natural environment will lead to conflict, but rather that it will indicate change.

The United States

For the United States, the first analytic dimension is the nature of domestic politics, particularly the accession of Donald Trump to the American presidency. Because of this drastic shift in political power, the way that the United States spoke about and acted on the Arctic changed drastically. If this is accurate, we will expect to see significant language in American Arctic policy documents from 2016 onward that note geopolitical competition and conflictual language in opposition to earlier documents. The second analytic dimension for the United States is the changing world order/evolving historical context. Similarly to my first case, weakening American power and influence on the world stage has resulted in the United States acting in ways to protect their hegemony and attempting to contain Russia as a strategic competitor. If this were to hold true, we would expect to see other examples of the US containing Russia. The third dimension is the same as the Russian case as well – the changing environment. Because I am taking a critical geopolitical approach, I argue that solely geographic changes do not matter but how elites structure geography does. Thus, when I analyse this dimension, I will do so alongside the Russian case rather than separately using the same logic outlined above.

In order to determine the plausibility of these explanations, I conduct process tracing on two cases: The United States and Russia post 2016 to the present. I have periodised that the Arctic has become a zone of military competition between the US and Russia from 2016 to the present. What makes this period distinct from its prior period is multi-faceted. One reason is the consequences of the annexation of Crimea, which spilled over from solely a Eurasian to a global matter, changing the way in which the US and Russia interacted with one another on the world stage. Moreover, 2016 marked a changing moment for the US as well with the election of Donald Trump as president, ushering in a much different type of American foreign politics that tended to take a more aggressive Arctic strategic stance. In the tradition of critical scholars, I do not aim to create a problem-solving or universalist theory, but rather look more closely at the construction of threats and in doing so, challenge – however minimally – the acceptance of the existing and hegemonic world order, the dominant thought processes within it and the way in which power is constructed.

The United States and Russia have been imagining the Arctic as a zone of potential conflict since 2016. In line with my dimensions, we expect to see a significant shift in rhetoric in policy documents with the election of Donald Trump and other instances of America attempting to contain Russia as well as protect

their hegemony. In the case of Russia, we would expect to see domestic problems in Russia that are causing social unrest along with rhetoric geared towards a domestic audience that encourages a more patriotic and outwardly aggressive tilt towards other Arctic states as a distraction as well as other signs that Russia is behaving like a revanchist power. For example, if Russia is acting in ways that flout international law or expresses deep dissatisfaction with the status quo, this would help to explain this reimagining. These social constructions thus change the way in which the US is conceptualising the Arctic as space. While one of my potential dimensions is the changing environment, in keeping with a critical geopolitical approach, I do not expect solely changing geographies to be the result of this changing conceptualisation. Instead, I see it as a potential macro driver that presupposes change in reimagining a region.

I propose that Russia and the United States socially construct the Arctic as a zone of conflict due to a possible combination of the analytic dimensions of domestic politics and evolving historical context but not environmental change. I hope to add to critical geopolitical approaches by acknowledging that while space is narrated and thus relies on social constructions, global warming and climate change in the Arctic do provoke a realignment of those social constructions. However, rather than being fatalistic and claiming that geographic change would always result in a conceptualisation of conflict – it is contingent on how other factors in politics invoke a more securitised understanding of the Arctic. Thus, I argue that a changing natural environment as a result of climate change acts as a macro driver for states to reimagine change in the Arctic, but that it does not necessarily invoke conflict – but rather simply change.

Empirical analysis

Russian conceptualisation of the Arctic since 2016

While the Arctic was once thought of as a zone of peace, this conceptualisation has changed since 2016, beginning in many cases in 2014. With worsening US-Russia relations, any theatres that were once considered peaceful are becoming more competitive in nature. The Arctic is no exception. Certainly, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 caused many other Arctic states to grow wary about Russian intentions in the High North. This wariness was matched by the first mention in Russia's military doctrine in 2014 that addressed protecting Russian national interests in the Arctic as well as increased defense spending to pay for modernisation costs for the Russian Navy and Northern Fleet.⁴¹ That same year, Russia announced the creation of the Northern Fleet – United Strategic Command – a new strategic command centre solely for the Arctic. In 2015, the Russian military launched an unannounced military exercise in the Arctic involving more than 45,000 Russian troops. Further, there has been a threefold increase

in air incursions alongside the reopening of 50 previously closed Soviet bases. Beyond these air incursions, there has also been a growing nuclearisation of the Arctic, including more nuclear weapons and submarines.⁴² While some scholars note that the Arctic has previously been separate from great power competition, this is no longer the case. In April 2015, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov did not attend an Arctic Security Forces Roundtable meeting after Canadian officials refused to participate in a meeting of the Arctic Council's Task for Action on Black Carbon and Methane as a result of the Crimean annexation. While the Arctic has always been important to Russia, in 2015, Russia also announced the creation of a federal Arctic Commission, reflecting a manifestation of a long-term policy of modernization.⁴³ Two years later, Russia also released an updated Arctic Naval Strategy that revived the Russian Navy, expressed clear Arctic ambitions and the importance of its Northern Fleet. This document suggested that there were efforts by other states to limit Russian access to maritime resources, weaken Russian control over the Northern Sea Route and that there were threats of territorial claims on maritime and coastal zone.⁴⁴ In 2019, China and Russia established the Sino-Russian Arctic Research Center as a place to conduct research in the Arctic on establishing safe routes through the NSR. In 2020, Russia released the 'Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2035'.⁴⁵ While this document in many cases reflected the previously released *Basic Principles* document in 2008, there are some notable changes. *Basic Principles 2035* introduces the concept of ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity as a top national interest to the document. In practice, this is likely not a new approach, but it does indicate a continuous interest in painting the region as a zone of potential conflict. What does make it evident that Russia is conceptualising the region as one of conflict is its military posture, highlighted by the reopening of 50 Soviet-era military bases and training of Russian Special Forces for the Arctic.⁴⁶

Russian domestic politics since 2016

Since 2016, Russia's position on the world stage as well as its domestic politics has drastically changed. This is due to a few different reasons, the first of which is current president Vladimir Putin's leadership and his central control of the Russian state. Putin's central control has meant that there is very little opposition to his presidency within the government. There are some opposition politicians such as Alexei Navalny, but they have little to no power in changing policy direction or presenting any real threat to Putin's presidency and control. In 2018, country-wide protests erupted in Russia against proposed pension reform. The Russian Parliament, the Duma, proposed raising the retirement age – a proposition that was not accepted well by the general Russian public. Thousands of

Russians protested throughout the country from July to November 2018. While these protests were ultimately not successful in preventing the passing of the pension reform proposal, they illustrated growing social unrest in Russia, and they are not the only examples. In 2019, 64 people were killed in a shopping mall blaze in Kemerovo, Siberia.⁴⁷ This blaze resulted in thousands of Russians protesting throughout the country against cost-cutting measures, corruption and alleged negligence. One-year prior in 2018, twenty students had to be hospitalised after inhaling toxic fumes from a local landfill in Volokolamsk, again resulting in protests. What makes these examples so notable is that they illustrate the growing social unrest between the informal civil society and the authorities, which is growing across Russia.⁴⁸ As noted above, the unrest is provoked by a number of different issues including corruption, poor landfill management and waste disposal, and the demolition of private property.

To deal with many of these domestic problems as well as their subsequent social unrest, the Russian government has turned to using nationalist rhetoric and diversionary foreign policy to distract Russians from these problems. This is nothing new. During the Russo-Georgia War in 2008 as well as at the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, Putin's nationalism earned him increased public support.⁴⁹ (Aiken 2014). Similarly, in 2014, the Russian government introduced a disinformation campaign that told citizens that the Ukrainian Euromaidan protests were a result of fascism and violence spurred on by American meddling. In short, the Russian government is attempting to shape power and discourse about the Arctic. This same tactic, Cohen argues, is present for most Russian leaders, who 'use foreign policy as a tool to buttress domestic support and to foster a perception that Russia is surrounded by enemies at a time when its democratic legitimacy is deteriorating'.⁵⁰ The rhetoric tends to encourage a more patriotic worldview while also increasing anti-American sentiment as part of a strategy to distract the Russian populace from domestic issues.⁵¹ Gotz (2018) argues that the motivating force behind these tactics is the imperative of regime survival.⁵² Focusing on an external threat helps to invoke patriotism and benefits those currently in power, who want to maintain the status quo. Russia has many of the trademarks we expect to see that explain why Russia is imagining the Arctic as a zone of conflict including both growing social unrest as well as rhetoric geared towards a domestic audience that encourages a focus on conflict outside the state. Further, we can state definitively that, at least in some part, domestic politics has some role in shaping how Russia reimagines the Arctic as a zone of conflict.

Russian perception of the world order since 2016

According to many observers at least since 2016, Russia has been engaging in revanchist behaviour such as annexing Crimea and flouting international law as

well as expressing deep dissatisfaction with the status quo.⁵³ While some scholars point to Russian bitterness over loss of territory and prestige, others observe that the lack of complete international condemnation of the Crimean annexation has led to increased Russian aggressiveness.⁵⁴ According to Putin, this aggressiveness and revanchism comes from the historic right of Russia to be viewed as a great power with recognition and a sphere of influence.⁵⁵ Russian state officials from Putin to Lavrov have also criticised the post-Cold War arrangements, stating that it is highly dissatisfied with the existing US-led international order. Alongside this rhetoric, Russia is also challenging the status quo in ways that include challenging Ukraine's sovereignty by annexing Crimea in 2014. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea is merely the latest in a string of other behaviour that illustrates dissatisfaction with the current world order. In 2008, Russia went to war with Georgia and now has political power over the de-facto state, South Ossetia, that lies geographically within Georgia. Russia has also interfered in other states including Moldova, by maintaining political control over another de-facto state, Transnistria, and exerted economic pressure on states such as Moldova, Ukraine and Lithuania. Ultimately, what all of these activities illustrate is a deep and abiding dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War settlement, specifically that Russia is considered, in the eyes of some observers, a regional power rather than a global one.⁵⁶ The other way that Russia is acting like a revanchist power is by exploiting weaknesses in the current system, such as planting disinformation and engaging in vast campaigns to affect elections in the United States and France. Moreover, Russia is also working in concert with other authoritarian regimes such as Belarus, Iran, Syria, Venezuela and China to build a new coalition of countries to challenge the Western post-Cold War status quo.⁵⁷

While Russia has been playing into a role of a revanchist power, American hegemony and unipolarity has come under pressure in a new way since the election of President Trump and the retreat of the US from various multilateral organisations such as the Human Rights Council and the World Health Organisation. America's retreat from the world stage has not only upended many norms about international organisations, it also impacted alliances like NATO. Weakening American power and influence on the world stage has resulted in Russia seeing an opportunity to regain its past influence and power – all of which is visible in looking at Russian actions. It is clear that the primary movers, at least in some part, behind Russia's reimagining of the Arctic come from the changing international context that Russia finds itself in and the way in which it responds.

The United States conceptualisation of the Arctic since 2016

The Arctic, whether Alaska or the region as a whole, has never been of much interest to American policymakers. Nonetheless, Alaska has been a part of the

territory of the United States since its purchase in 1867 from Imperial Russia and thus, it has been an Arctic Nation. The first Arctic strategy was created during the Clinton Administration in 1994. However, it was not made public and thus its impact was insignificant. The Bush Administration did publish strategies – the National Security Presidential Direction NSPD-66, the Homeland Security Presidential Direction HSPD-25 and the Arctic Region Policy – in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, bringing the question of national security to Alaska. In keeping with many of the themes that continue to concern American policymakers, these documents highlighted environmental degradation, the Arctic Council, climate change and oil and gas resources.⁵⁸ While the policies recommended the US sign on to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea – to date, Congress has yet to ratify it. The continued inattention to the Arctic can likely be explained by the political climate of the United States. During the years of the Cold War, the United States was primarily focused on containing the spread of communism and influence of the Soviet Union. Given that the Arctic was not one of the main theatres of conflict compared to Latin and South America, South Asia and Africa, the Arctic did not rate highly enough for any real strategy or approach to emerge. In the wake of 9/11, the United States again switched approaches to engage in the War on Terror, which brought its focus to the Middle East. The time spent both in Iraq and Afghanistan precluded any development of an Arctic policy. During the Obama Administration, the United States did release a series of policies alongside their armed services; however, the focus was again on perceived Russian aggression and Chinese expansion. By mid-2018, Arctic policy began to emerge in no small way thanks to Russia's growing military presence in the Arctic and the release of China's 'Polar Silk Road' plan.⁵⁹

From 2016 onwards, the way that the Arctic was conceptualised in American discourse began to shift.⁶⁰ In the 2016 Department of Defense Arctic strategy document, notably the policy argues that there are friction points and takes a whole section to focus on Russia. The defense policy outlines Russian aspirations for the Arctic, suggesting that the Department of Homeland Security needs to improve detection and tracking capabilities to strengthen deterrence in the wake of Russian actions in the United Kingdom, Georgia and Moldova. Two years later, the Navy announced it would reestablish the second fleet – which was the primary Naval fleet used for countering Soviet naval forces in the North Atlantic during the Cold War. When asked why there was a concern for a new force, the then-Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson cited Russia as the primary driver.⁶¹ In 2018, the United States also urged Denmark to finance construction of airports in Greenland instead of China to counter Chinese attempts to build presence and influence.⁶² In 2019, the Coast Guard also released its first Arctic Strategic Outlook document since 2013. Notably, the

policy suggested there was a resurgence of nation state competition, making the Arctic a strategically competitive and potentially conflictual.⁶³ Russia and China were explicitly named as national priorities, particularly in how both states represented challenges to the rules-based order. Later in 2019, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave an aggressive speech to the Arctic Council warning that the Arctic had become a region of global power competition, pointing at Russia and China as two important threats.⁶⁴ The Department of Defense came out with another Arctic Strategy in 2019 as well, citing that the security region was increasingly uncertain with problematic strategic trends that could result in degraded security in the region. Similarly to its past document, the DoD cited China and Russia as two important competitors that posed risks to its national interests.

For a number of different reasons, 2020 marked an important year for US policy in the Arctic. Not only did four parts of the US national security community release Arctic policies including the Air Force, the Navy, the Army and the Department of Homeland Security, but the US also invested 12 million USD in Greenland to counter Russian and Chinese influence operations.⁶⁵ According to the US State Department, the US sees the Arctic as a new strategic theatre for competition. In all of the policies from the national security community, there were a few notable themes. The first important theme was that due to increased access to the Arctic, more competition amongst states was either ongoing or soon to begin. In short, the Arctic's capacity as a strategic buffer was eroding. Second, while immediate risk for traditional military conflict remains quite low, an overarching threat of competition is rising, and the changing nature of conflict means that there is the potential for hybrid warfare. Third, Russia is the main competition to the United States and as it begins its chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 2021, there is a potential that it could leverage its leadership to advance its goals in the region. In sum, as time has passed, the Arctic has become more important to the United States and based on the documents, the Arctic is beginning to be seen as a zone of conflict.

United States domestic politics since 2016

Since the election of Donald Trump to the White House in 2016, much of American domestic politics has been characterised by chaos, aggressive foreign policy stances and anti-Chinese rhetoric. In short, leadership matters in the United States because of the importance of the presidential system. Perhaps the easiest way to show how the Trump administration had a drastic impact on how the United States conceptualised the Arctic comes from looking at Obama-era documentation of the Arctic. In 2013, the Obama Administration released its first Arctic policy – the 2013 *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*.⁶⁶ Notably, the

document begins by calling the Arctic region peaceful, stable and free of conflict. There is no policy or framework that addresses geopolitical competition in the Arctic, nor does it focus on Russia or China as threats. Instead, the document discusses responding to climate change. Even during the US chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2015-2017), documents from the Obama era suggest that the US focused on climate change, international cooperation and safeguarding peace.⁶⁷ Even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the United States still cooperated with Russia in the Arctic under the Obama administration. In 2015, for example, the United States, Russia and other Arctic nations signed an agreement to bar their fishing fleets from the Central Arctic Ocean and also established the Arctic Coast Guard Forum to strengthen multilateral cooperation.⁶⁸ Beyond multilateral cooperation, in early 2016, the Obama administration also released three documents focusing on the implementation of a national strategy for the Arctic.⁶⁹ Even with increased US and Russia competition in the rest of the world, these documents do little to paint the Arctic as a zone of conflict. Instead, the documents focus on climate change monitoring, conservation of ecosystems, cooperation for Search and Rescue (SAR) and coordinating across and within governments. Based on looking at Arctic policy documents from the Obama administration, it appears that they treated the Arctic as a zone of exception – one where ordinary politics did not interfere in Arctic affairs.

This is in contrast to actions taken during the Trump administration, which focus on painting a picture of the Arctic as an oil and gas reserve and elevated strategic competition with China and Russia in the Arctic.⁷⁰ Further, when other security or geopolitical tussles occurred, the Trump administration was very quick to extrapolate to tensions and relationships in the Arctic. In short, leadership and presidential views drastically change how the United States acts and puts forward policy. Looking at specific changes in Arctic policy clearly illustrates this because the Trump and Obama administrations took such drastically different approaches to the Arctic region. Thus, we can state that changes in US presidential leadership – particularly from Obama to Trump – had a drastic impact on shifting the perception and imagining of the Arctic from an American perspective.

The United States perception of the world order since 2016

Similar to how Russia has changed its perception of the Arctic due to its perception of a weakening US-led hegemonic order, the United States has also changed its perception of the world since 2016. However, they exist on the opposite side of the coin to Russia. Weakening American power and influence on the world stage has resulted in the United States acting in ways that were perceived as protecting hegemony and influence and attempting to contain Russia and China as strategic competitors. According to some scholars, the United States is in

a permanent decline as evidenced by the rise of Russia and China who both have autocratic projects that rival the US-led system, the behaviour of developing countries that are seeking non-Western sources of support and the growth of illiberal transnational networks that exert pressure against liberal norms.⁷¹ Other scholars point to how the Trump administration undermined its own hegemony by questioning and weakening US security alliances, the trade order and climate agreements.⁷² The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic was a further crisis that challenged US hegemony, not only in terms of response to the pandemic, but also its lack of leadership during the crisis.

In the face of this decline, the United States has begun to act in ways to preserve that hegemony. One instance was discussed earlier in this paper – the case of Greenland. In recent years, China has expressed interest in investing in Arctic states in order to establish itself more fully in the Arctic region as a ‘near-Arctic’ state. One manner in which China attempted this was to invest in the construction of international airports in Greenland.⁷³ In 2018, the United States was successful in convincing Denmark to counter Chinese offers for aid, and thus this is a clear example of the United States attempting to preserve its hegemony and influence in the world. In 2020, the United States also invested 12 million USD in Greenland in response to growing concerns about Russian military and Chinese influence buildup in the Arctic. Here again is clear evidence that the US feels the need to rebuff influence in an attempt to maintain cultural influence and hegemony.⁷⁴

Yet another example from within US policy documents that illustrates this weakening of US influence and hegemony is strategic multilayer assessment (SMA) white paper on Russian Strategic Intentions.⁷⁵ The White Paper suggests that the US is not equipped to counter Russia’s political warfare and that Russia is beating the United States in a race for global influence. Thus, this paper fits into the American mindset that the world order is changing, and that the US must act in ways to protect its hegemony and influence. While Pyatkov suggests that the US must strengthen alliances, Lamoreaux suggests the United States must take steps to strengthen liberalism across Europe to counter Russian and Chinese hybrid warfare.⁷⁶ Expanding the scope of American responses to this changing world order to the Arctic region, many of the same issues outlined in this document are present including instances of Russian and Chinese hybrid warfare. In short, this document shows that elites in the United States are conscious of a growing perception on the world stage that American influence is falling and that measures are needed to counter this. Thus, it is clear that a changing perception of the world order has a major impact on how the US conceptualises the Arctic as part of a broader attempt to regain or at least maintain hegemony and influence.

Environmental change – Russia and the United States

Looking at both cases of Russia and the United States, it is clear that since 2016 there have been distinct changes in the Arctic environment. However, I argue that these environmental changes are not responsible for changes in political discourse or construction of geographies. First, the Arctic has been experiencing environmental changes consistently over time since the 1990s as global warming and climate change have had steady and detrimental impacts on the region. Second, in keeping with a critical geopolitical lens, geography itself does not determine changes in how states imagine the space – the way elites interpret that geography does. I propose that it is not that the changing environment does not matter, but instead that it acts like a macro driver for states to rethink their policies and imagining of the Arctic. Here, I want to make a distinction that climate change – the changing environment – should be thought of a newly developing critical geopolitical dimension (i.e., a macro-driver) because the rapid change will mean that states will be forced to constantly reimagine space.

While there is certainly environmental change in the Arctic since 2016, the Arctic has been experiencing environmental changes consistently with the advent of global warming and climate change. In the 1990s, for example. When Gorbachev made his speech calling for a zone of peace in the Arctic in 1987, it came 18 months after the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant – which was already changing Arctic geography.⁷⁷ This speech acted as a catalyst for environmental action in the Arctic. Perhaps the most influential result was the publication of the State of the Arctic Environment Report (1997) which outlined serious environmental change already underway.⁷⁸ The report discussed the increase in persistent organic pollutants (POPs), radioactive contamination, heavy metal contamination and severe local and regional problems associated with the development of oil and gas. This report was the first of many that encouraged action on environmental policy in the Arctic inspiring cooperation amongst different Arctic states.⁷⁹ Although the type of environmental change had more to do with pollution rather than the melting of polar ice caps in the 1990s, the nature of this dimension had to do more with environmental change rather than strictly change that related to the one aspect of melting sea ice. Regardless, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s third assessment report published in 2001 brought significant attention to the effects of global warming on Arctic sea and land ice, including discussions about sea level rise and melting permafrost tied to increased carbon and methane emissions.⁸⁰ While the IPCC's 3rd Report was published in 2001, change was already happening in the Arctic in the late 1990s.⁸¹ In this case, we can clearly see how the geography was already changing in the 1990s.

Since 2016, there is no question that the Arctic's environment has radically changed. Scientists claim that the Arctic is warming at a rate nearly twice the global average with reductions in Arctic sea ice and permafrost is becoming increasingly visible.⁸² With global warming increasing in pace, the Arctic is host to a number of both primary and secondary effects including sea ice reduction, sea level rise, coastal erosion, accelerated warming of the ocean, increased acidity of the ocean, increasing vulnerability of some Arctic marine mammals, changing food supply patterns, amongst many other negative impacts. The National Snow & Ice Data Center has also reported that changes in the Arctic climate could and probably will affect climate in the rest of the world.⁸³

Considering how the Arctic environment has changed radically since 2016, it matters to also ask how both Russia and the US are perceiving that environmental change and explore some social constructions related to how both states were seeing the region. For example, during the Trump administration, the United States attempted to remove references about climate change on an Arctic Council policy document because the administration at the time did not want to subscribe to policy options that took climate change into account.⁸⁴ In short, the United States under Trump was refusing to mention climate change whatsoever in policy documents.⁸⁵ Beyond this single incident, the Trump administration promoted a deregulation policy for fossil fuel producers in Alaska, promoting the business needs of oil and gas producers above addressing environmental change. While this was the norm during the Trump administration, it changed quite drastically when Biden took office in 2021. In an Executive Order passed in January 2021, Biden announced not only a temporary moratorium on oil and gas leasing in Alaska but announced new plans to focus on climate change and framing environmental change as negative in the Arctic.⁸⁶ Specifically in the Arctic recently, the Biden administration released reports on national security risks posed by climate change – specifically noting the Arctic as a critical region.⁸⁷ While there has been a sizeable shift in how the US perceives environmental change in the Arctic as a potential narrative driving its actions there, discourse surrounding environmental change in the Arctic is largely instrumental and utilised in order to justify domestic or international constructions of space.

In contrast, Russia's perception of environmental change in the Arctic is quite different. In Russia's 2020 Arctic Strategy, perceptions of environmental change in the region focused largely on the potential for economic growth in extractive industries. While there is importance placed on the environment in the policy document, the focus is primarily on development – both military and economic – for the region.⁸⁸ Thus, discourse around environmental change in the Arctic for Russia surrounds how climate change is expanding possibilities for mining, energy and other land projects. Despite this more positive take on en-

vironmental change, more than 40% of northern Russian buildings are built on permafrost – which is melting. This will result in buildings crumbling, technical system failures and other construction problems.⁸⁹ This contradiction between the positives and negatives of climate change presents an interesting challenge for how Russia will continue to socially construct the Arctic when it faces such internal dissent.

This finding that the environment is not directly determinate of how states imagine space keeps with a critical geopolitical lens. However, that does not mean that the environment doesn't matter at all in changing policies and imaginings of the Arctic. Instead, the changing environment as a result of climate change acts like a macro driver for states to rethink their imagining of the Arctic. In other words, the constant change will mean that states will have to reimagine space at a much faster pace than before, which may result in different orientations of the Arctic. Thus, while space is essentially narrated, changes in the environment do provoke a realignment of those narratives. Critical geopolitics then must consider these exogenous changes as potential points of shifts in discourses and practices. Importantly, that change does not necessitate a shift towards a conceptualisation of conflict. Instead, it is merely a push for states to change their perception of the region. Thus, it represents a key opportunity for states to instead change that imagining of the Arctic to something such as cooperation.

Conclusion

Throughout this research I have made the claim that it matters to ask the question 'which analytic dimensions play a role in how the United States and Russia are conceptualising the Arctic as a zone of conflict?' because it helps us to better understand the behind-the-scenes factors that play a role in decision-making as well as the social constructions that matter. Taking a critical geopolitical lens to imagining of the Arctic is useful because it helps us to focus more clearly on potential explanations for change that go beyond a changing geographic landscape. If we believe that geographic space is created through discourse and practices, then understanding what those are can help to think further about their implications. It is this theoretical lens that allows us to see how important a role domestic politics and the changing international order play in Russia and the United States' conceptualisation of the Arctic. These cases can also explain which social constructions operationalise this conceptualisation of the Arctic as a zone of conflict. In other words, what implications come out of these social constructions? In the Russian case, for example, it appears that domestic politics does not present opportunities for conceptualising the Arctic as a region different from conflict due to the stability of President Putin's leadership and Russia's history of using foreign issues as distractions from domestic problems. This social con-

struction that the Russian state apparatus uses is quite stable. However, there are opportunities in looking at the changing world order for other states or organisations to replace the weakening US hegemonic order such as the European Union. Thus, the American social construction of how it sees itself in relation to other countries (i.e. declining hegemon) has implications for not only Russia and American actions in the Arctic, but other powers. For the United States, the importance of the president and domestic politics illustrates that in conceptualising the Arctic, there are opportunities within the United States political system to encourage specific policy options to the US president. Therefore, one might be able to think more seriously about the nature of temporality in social constructions. For states that have quickly changing political systems like the United States, the way that space is imagined might change quickly, whereas in political systems like Russia that have largely stable ruling regimes, such change may not occur at the same pace. Importantly, however, the changing US-Russia relationship and how both states socially construct themselves in both relation to the other state as well as the international system writ large is evidently important in looking at the Arctic, particularly in connection to the environment. I have argued above that while geography itself is not decisive when thinking about how states imagine space, changes in the environment that come from climate change are worth examining. Given the shift in discourse around environmental change between the Trump and Biden administrations as well as the more nuanced Russian discourse on environmental change – it suggests that clearly environmental changes can act as a driver of changes in discourse. As climate change grows in importance in how states realign themselves on the world stage, critical geopolitics may wish to examine the nature to which climate change plays a role in either changing social constructions, the question of temporality in these imaginings and the political discourse that is used to justify changing constructions and approaches to areas like the Arctic. Future scholars could look more closely with a critical lens or using a sociological approach to securitisation to better understand the emergence, stickiness and evolution of how and why security gets involved in Arctic discourse.



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