CHAPTER THREE

NARRATING ARCTIC GEOPOLITICS AND GOVERNANCE: THE EMPLOTMENT AND UNRAVELLING OF EXCEPTIONALISM

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INTRODUCTION

As an ocean largely enclosed by the Earth's northernmost landmasses, the Arctic has historically been extremely difficult to inhabit, navigate and exploit due to its perennial sea ice cover (Barry and Hall-McKim 2018). Yet, while nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century plans for Arctic imperial conquest, scientific exploration and economic exploitation were not motivated by modern notions of sovereignty, they became increasingly entangled with possession claims and expansionism (McCannon 2012). These projects varied markedly by state, ranging from British efforts to force imperial sea routes through ice (Williams 2009) and Russian attempts to integrate the Arctic as an internal frontier (McCannon 1998), to Norwegian scientific strategies of adaptation coupled with jurisdictional regional aspirations (Bravo 2018) and Canadian pursuit of territorial administrative control (Lackenbauer 2020). This conjunction of discovery and dominion has clear parallels with earlier imperial sea-route projects in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, even if the Arctic's ice made them less immediately practicable. The Arctic subsequently emerged as a key theatre for wartime logistics and military operations during the Second World War. This was particularly consequential for the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Germany, for whom Arctic routes, airfields and ports became vital to the movement of military forces as well as convoy operations (Boyd 2024). After the onset of the Cold War, the region became a 'frozen' strategic buffer zone between the United States and the Soviet Union as part of

their global confrontation and central to their nuclear war plans (Bocking and Roberts 2023). It was not until the post-Cold War period—within the context of a geopolitical paradigm change—that questions about multilateral regional governance and cooperation in the Arctic gained traction (Young 1998). This delay reflected the Arctic's status as a region of permanent human habitation and overlapping sovereign jurisdictions, which stood in marked contrast to Antarctica's earlier treatment as an uninhabited, demilitarised space governed through the international treaty regime. The predicted environmental impacts of climate change on the Arctic also produced future-oriented, material state discourses. Russia, Denmark/Greenland and Canada, for example, foregrounded the extension of continental shelves and the prospect of natural resource extraction, while Russia and Canada additionally emphasised the opening of new sea lanes.

Since the Cold War, Arctic geopolitical and governance trajectories have commonly been interpreted through a dialectic interaction between conflict and cooperation (Dittmer et al. 2011; Østhagen 2024). This dynamic has been theorised from both a neorealist perspective—focusing on the international system and national security imperatives—and a liberal institutionalist one, which privileges intergovernmental collaboration and the role of regional institutions. Such approaches echo official narratives of the eight Arctic states—Russia, Canada, the United States, Denmark on behalf of Greenland, Norway, Iceland, Finland and Sweden—which portray, often in linear terms, the Arctic as a strategic frontier during the Cold War, a 'zone of peace' in the post-Cold War era and a site of renewed, if managed, Great Power rivalry in the present.

In this chapter, I explore how such chronopolitical narratives based on the ordering and mobilisation of time to legitimise political claims and interventions have been framed, articulated and instrumentalised (Esposito and Becker 2023; Klinke 2012). The purpose is to explain how 'temporal sovereignty', or the authority to define historical transitions, has shaped and recast the region since the Cold War (Davis 2008). I chart how the Arctic states initially mobilised narratives about past experiences and future expectations for a dual purpose: first, to advance their own national interests in the Arctic—including jurisdictional claims, environmental protection, natural resource extraction and security policies—and second, to strive for hegemony through a collective commitment to a governance regime based on the Law of the Sea and institutionalised in the Arctic Council as the main regional intergovernmental body (Kankaanpää and Young 2012; Ingimundarson 2014; Steinberg and Dodds 2015). This framework left no room for alternative imaginaries—such as those embodied

in the Antarctic Treaty—on global commons, demilitarisation or prohibition of mineral exploitation. It was also firmly wedded to the logic of sovereign authority, even though Arctic states have, to varying degrees, recognised some forms of Indigenous self-governance.

Referring to Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) theory about historical time as being layered and asynchronous, I show that Arctic temporalities are not sequential but coexist, intersect and unfold in tension, reflecting different state interests and political agendas. This understanding also illuminates what Paul Ricœur termed narrative disruptions and reconfigurations, when dominant paradigms are no longer viable, requiring revisions or alternatives (Ricœur 1984: 36–45; Ricœur 1980). Within an Arctic context, the emplotment of a stable and peaceful post-Cold War narrative of exceptionalism—which was forged in the 1990s and reinforced in the 2000s—was kept nominally, if artificially, intact during 'a narrative lag' (Ricœur 1988: 72–73, 246) from the mid-2010s onward, before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine unravelled it. At that time, future expectations had diverged too much from experiences, allowing political legacies and trajectories to reassert and manifest themselves. I argue that the transition from a conflictual Cold War logic to a cooperative post-Cold War framework in the Arctic obscured unresolved tensions between Western states and Russia, which ultimately led to narrative entropy. The result is that Arctic exceptionalism, which was intended to break from the past and offer future promise, has itself become part of what Antonio Gramsci termed an 'interregnum'. It is a historical moment in which a moribund political order is no longer able to offer stable predictions or anticipatory guidance (Gramsci 1971: 276; Cox 1981; see also Bizos et al., Chapter 2 in Part I), as Cold War, neo-imperial and neo-colonial temporalities reassert themselves through ruptures such as Russia's war on Ukraine and US territorial designs on Greenland.

TEMPORAL TRANSITIONS: NEGOTIATING COLD WAR LEGACIES AND POST-COLD WAR FUTURES

Koselleck's idea of 'crisis time' (2004: 255–260) captures how the Cold War Arctic existed within a suspended temporality—a time of military alertness and deferred political, social and economic trajectories. Governance was subordinated to Soviet-American bipolar deterrence and the prospects of a nuclear conflict. Yet colonial temporalities were also present during this period. Indigenous Arctic peoples—such as the Inuit, Sámi, Yupik and Nenets—were excluded from decisions about land and maritime use or about economic and

military projects, which affected them directly (Pika 1999). The militarisation of the Arctic included forced relocation of Indigenous populations in Greenland—a Danish colony until the early 1950s when it became a constituent part of the Kingdom of Denmark—from areas near a US base, causing major economic, cultural and social disruptions (Petersen 2011: 91–92). In the Soviet Union, the Arctic was a closed-off space with severe restrictions on human mobility; many Indigenous territories were expropriated for military installations, mining and oil and gas projects (Rowe 2009: 2–3, 131, 151; Dodds 2020: 261). While some material conditions improved, it came at the cost of autonomous rights, cultural practices and traditional livelihoods, such as hunting (Pika 1999). Indeed, the Soviet Union, Canada, the United States, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden constructed narratives that projected themselves as 'modern sovereign actors' in the Arctic, while assigning Indigenous—in a colonial language—'delayed' or 'dependent' status and depicting them as outside the exercise of sovereign modernity (Chakrabarty 2000: 8–9). A temporal framework was thus used to withhold political legitimacy.

Despite the dominant narrative of competitive bipolarity, some space remained for cooperation in the Arctic during the Cold War. Limited science collaboration in the fields of polar research and the preservation of polar bears was initiated between the Western and Soviet blocs in the 1950s and 1970s (Rowe 2009). The most important intervention was the 'Murmansk Initiative'—launched in a 1987 speech by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev—in which he pleaded for regional cooperation in the Arctic as well as for making it a 'zone of peace' (Gorbachev 1987). While Gorbachev did not explicitly refer to other ocean regions, his speech can be read in relation to earlier Cold War efforts to limit militarisation, including the Antarctic Treaty regime, the largely unrealised Indian Ocean 'zone of peace' initiative and nuclear-weapon-free zones established in Latin America and in the South Pacific (see also Seabra, Chapter 5, Part I).

This intervention provided the backdrop for a new post-Cold War cooperation narrative in the Arctic by bundling together disparate elements such as military restraint, peaceful resolution of disputes, resource exploitation, environmental protection, science cooperation and the economic potential of new shipping lanes (Devyatkin 2023). To be sure, the historical context of Gorbachev's initiative is often overlooked: that it was rooted in a period of transition in which old Soviet ideas, such as the creation of nuclear-free zones, were mixed with new ones at a time when the outcome of a Cold War thaw remained uncertain (Ingimundarson 2024). Yet it spurred a number of Arctic intergovernmental projects in the 1990s, whose main goal was to improve Russian-Western relations (Dodds 2020; Rowe 2009).

These initiatives focused on regional institution-building and were primarily driven by the five 'rim' or 'coastal' states making stakeholder claims in the Arctic Ocean: Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark (on behalf of Greenland) and Norway. The Council of the Baltic Sea States was established in 1992, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in 1993 and the Arctic Council in 1996 (Kankaanpää and Young 2012). Made up of the five Arctic coastal states—together with the three other Arctic states, Iceland, Sweden and Finland—the Arctic Council also included 'permanent participants' from Indigenous groups and, later, extra-regional observers from states and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations (Arctic Council 2025). It was, however, not an international organisation based on a treaty but an 'intergovernmental forum' without decision-making authority. Focusing on environmental protection, sustainable development and scientific cooperation, it had no authority over maritime boundary disputes or the exploitation of natural resources. The United States further diluted its foundational document—the Ottawa Declaration—by excluding military issues from its mandate. This separation of environmental cooperation from military and security issues was common in sector-specific ocean governance elsewhere, particularly in the Indian and Pacific Oceans; by contrast, the Arctic Council brought governance of the entire ocean space into a single forum and institutionalised Indigenous participation. Some scholars, such as Oran R. Young, defended such a loose, though strictly hierarchical structure, arguing that making the Arctic Council a formal intergovernmental organisation might have sidelined its most innovative features, such as the distinctive role accorded to Indigenous representatives who have speaking, if not voting, rights (Kankaanpää and Young 2012). Still, while their standing is higher than that of the observers, their interests were subordinated to those of 'mother' states, such as Denmark and Russia.

The commitment of the Arctic states (the 'Arctic Eight') to the UN Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS), which entered into force in 1994, ensured that this legal framework would play a central role in Arctic governance by establishing maritime zones and defining seabed claims within 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) as well as potential extensions of continental shelves up to 350 miles. UNCLOS has enabled similarly expansive jurisdictional seascapes in parts of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, particularly for 'large ocean states' whose EEZs—and, in some cases, extended continental shelves—reach far offshore (see Marggraff, Chapter 8, in Part II). The Arctic states—especially, the Arctic Five—used the Law of the Sea to establish a dominant position in the Arctic based on sovereign EEZ rights, which they viewed as a continuation of their

historical presence through earlier polar exploration rooted in scientific, imperial and nationalist agendas. They also succeeded in making the Arctic Council the central intergovernmental forum in the Arctic (Ingimundarson 2014; Exner-Pirot and Murray 2017). Observer states, such as Britain, France, China and Japan—as well as intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, such as the Nordic Council of Ministers and the World Wildlife Fund—are explicitly required to 'recognize Arctic States' sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic' (Arctic Council 2025).

By referring to the Law of the Sea and the Arctic Council, the Arctic Five and Eight further sought to assert 'ontological sovereignty' over the Arctic by seeking legitimisation of norms around authority, space and resources (Wood-Donnelly 2025). They managed, for example, to prevent proposals—put forward by non-governmental organisations and transnational bodies such as the European Parliament in the late 2000s—to negotiate an Arctic Treaty, like the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, in which the region would be turned into a scientific preserve and sanctuary (European Parliament 2008). To the Arctic Eight, such a treaty would infringe on sovereign claims in the Arctic region and undermine the authority of the Arctic Council (Magnússon 2015). Hence, they also rejected the notion of an Arctic 'commons', or treating the region—especially spaces beyond national jurisdiction—as a shared domain managed co-operatively or as part of 'a common heritage of mankind', rather than as an area carved up solely for state interests. Outside the Arctic, the commons idea is more often narrowed in practice rather than rejected outright, as governance beyond national jurisdiction in the Indian and Pacific Oceans has tended to evolve through sectoral regimes that prioritise access, allocation and control. On the initiative of the United States, the Arctic Five were instrumental in the conclusion of a Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement in 2018, which was justified as a precautionary measure against future unregulated fishing in an Arctic area outside the EEZ of Arctic states. Yet it also restricted access and decision-making to a select group—the Arctic Five plus China, Japan, South Korea, Iceland and the European Union (EU)—excluding broader international and Indigenous participation (Molenaar 2016). In short, Arctic governance shifted from Cold War militarisation and Indigenous exclusion toward post–Cold War cooperation, while remaining firmly structured around state sovereignty and governance frameworks that privileged Arctic states' control over resources, authority and decision-making.

Similar dynamics could be seen in other ocean regions where the end of the Cold War likewise enabled expanded cooperation and new governance arrangements without displacing a sovereign-driven maritime order. In the Indian and Pacific

Oceans, coastal states—such as India, Australia and South Africa—and island states, including Mauritius, Fiji and the Solomon Islands, exercise jurisdiction over expansive EEZs and, in some cases, extended continental shelves that project far into open-ocean space (Chan 2018; Marggraff 2025). These practices similarly dilute commons-based governance of areas beyond national jurisdiction, even though governance in these regions remains institutionally fragmented without a centralized authority like the Arctic Council. Moreover, no pre-emptive agreement—like that covering the Arctic Ocean, governing future-oriented access to areas—has been made in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Instead, states have relied on reactive, sectoral regimes built around pre-existing uses through regional fisheries bodies, such as the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (Gjerde, Wright and Durussel 2021).

FRAMING AN EXCEPTIONALIST ARCTIC NARRATIVE

In the 1990s, the construction of a reified narrative of Arctic cooperation, which cast the region as 'stable' and 'peaceful', was underpinned by the Arctic states' regional dominance and reinforced by the Arctic Council's non-military mandate. Koselleck's concept of 'shifting expectations', wherein historical actors reorient their horizons of possibility to respond to geopolitical changes, illuminates this transition in Arctic imaginaries (Koselleck 2004: 255–256). However, the new narrative failed to garner significant global attention, as the Arctic remained a geopolitical sideshow in the aftermath of the Cold War. Thus, despite participating in Arctic institution-building, the Russian government—under President Boris Yeltsin—viewed the region as a financial liability rather than a source of economic riches or geopolitical value and paid scant attention to its environmental degradation or social problems (Sergunin 2021: 117). Russia's priorities centred instead on consolidating political power, responding to economic crises, fighting separatist movements and redefining its post-Soviet international role.

The Arctic did not figure prominently in the foreign policy agendas of either the United States or Western European states, which were preoccupied with integrating Eastern European states into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the EU, as well as with the wars in the former Yugoslavia. There was, to be sure, a genuine Western interest in reaping the benefits of the 'peace dividend' by collaborating with Russia. Yet the 1990s were as much about Cold War legacies, such as NATO's eastward expansion and military interventions

in Bosnia and Kosovo, which sowed discord between the West and Russia, as they were about a peaceful post-Cold War future. Indeed, Western focus on environmental initiatives in the Arctic partly stemmed from past efforts to clean up Soviet-era nuclear waste, particularly from the Northern Fleet, Russia's principal Arctic naval formation (Sawhill 2000).

When the debate over climate change became more prominent in the early 2000s, conditions in the Arctic captured global interest. The Arctic was already warming at more than twice the global average, with rapidly declining sea ice extent and thawing permafrost. This interest was, however, not only sparked by environmental concerns—such as loss of sea ice—but also by perceived economic opportunities tied to the opening of new shipping lanes, which would shorten transit times between Asia and Europe and to natural resource extraction. Such discourses promised 'future returns'—for example, through the commercial use of the Northern Sea Route or hydrocarbon development in Greenland and Arctic offshore areas. Yet they interacted uneasily with competing environmental and societal discourses, stressing the frailty of the Arctic's ecosystems, the impact of economic activity on global warming and disruptions of Indigenous peoples' modes of subsistence (Heininen and Nicol 2007). This tension over expectations destabilised the dominant Arctic narrative, resulting in the adoption of a postponement strategy that delayed concrete action while maintaining the rhetoric of collaboration.

Thus, the George W. Bush administration—preoccupied with military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq following the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001—believed that the time to invest geopolitically and economically in the Arctic had not arrived. Exercising 'temporal sovereignty'—what Kathleen Davis (2008: 4–7, 66–72) defines as a political technology for controlling time—it established a deferred 'scientific timeline'. It wanted to determine on its own when to channel resources into the Arctic in the 2030s or 2040s, based on when the effects of climate change would be sufficiently pronounced (Interviews with US defence officials 2009). As was the case during the Cold War, strategic patience was called for in a region marked by unrealised future potentials. Focusing on environmental issues, the United States opted for a low geopolitical profile in the Arctic, which it maintained until after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. In contrast, Russian President Vladimir Putin departed from Yeltsin's disinterest in the Arctic in the 2000s, making it part of his political agenda to recentralise power at home and to elevate Russia's historical role as a Great Power (Lynch 2016; Grajewski 2017: 143, 155–156). Russia did not deny that climate change was occurring in the Arctic, but in

a throwback to a Soviet past, its policy prioritised economic exploitation, not environmental preservation (Grajewski 2017; Pay and Calvo 2020). It was about consolidating territorial claims in offshore Arctic areas and about boosting the region's contribution to the Russian economy (Schneider 2018; Sergunin 2021). Rejecting Yeltsin's oscillation between integrating with the West and balancing it, Putin also embarked on a confrontational geopolitical course. His 2007 Munich speech—in which he sharply criticised US unilateralism and NATO expansion—confirmed this shift from post-Cold War cooperation (Stent 2014; Sakwa 2017).

In the Arctic, this was symbolised by the theatrical Russian act in the summer of 2007, of planting a titanium flag on the Lomonosov Ridge beneath the North Pole, suggesting ownership of an area also partly claimed by Denmark and Canada. The flag-planting was likely intended as much for domestic political consumption as for international posturing, to highlight Russia's scientific prowess with a feat even compared to the US moon landing (Parfitt 2007). It spurred, however, inflated global media accounts of a 'Scramble for the Arctic' and predictions of Great Power rivalry, raising the spectre of an imperialist revival symbolised by the Scramble for Africa during the nineteenth century (Borgerson 2008; Borgerson 2009; Sale and Potapov 2010), when various European nations made competing claims to African territory during the 'new imperialism' period from the 1880s to the First World War. Such a portrayal of Arctic geopolitical tensions did not suit the interests of the Arctic states, which continued to favour the existing regional political and legal framework. It explains why the Arctic Five issued the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008, in which they committed themselves to the Law of the Sea and the 'orderly settlement' of overlapping claims in the Arctic Ocean (Arctic Ocean Conference 2008). The unresolved maritime claims between the Arctic Five centred at that time on the extended continental shelf, with Canada, Denmark and Russia all asserting rights to the North Pole region, Canada and the United States contesting maritime boundaries in the Beaufort Sea, and Denmark and Canada disagreeing over the small Hans Island in the Nares Strait. Yet, in all cases, there was no urgency to settle these disputes because they were about future material opportunities.

The Ilulissat Declaration provided the backdrop for the framing of the region as 'exceptionalist'—or outside the framework of Great Power rivalries elsewhere (Exner-Pirot and Murray 2017; Devyatkin 2023). It also suggested a direct link to Gorbachev's 'zone of peace' idea and a continuous, linear post-Cold War temporality (Gorbachev 1987). This reconfirmation of a cooperative Arctic narrative could not mask the contentious relationship between Russia and the West in other geopolitical arenas. The tension between what Koselleck termed

'space of experience'—or sedimented past structures that accumulate rather than disappear—and the 'horizon of expectation', or a projected future, was not resolved (Koselleck 2004: 255–256, 260). Time remained continuous and did not transition to a new 'historical' era because the expectations of peace and stability never diverged from experiences shaped by a conflictual military logic (Koselleck 2004: 260, 276). Still, what prevented the area from becoming a source of confrontation was temporal in nature. Reflecting future-oriented discourses on the Arctic, it would take decades before sea routes—such as the Northern Sea Route or a transpolar route—would become navigable year-round, and the region's harsh terrain would remain a major obstacle to natural resource extraction (Schneider 2018). Moreover, the hegemony of the Arctic states in the region—based on the Law of the Sea and the Arctic Council—could be undermined if cooperation broke down.

The international legal framework aligned with the objectives of all the Arctic states. Apart from establishing a 200-mile EEZ, UNCLOS authorised coastal states, such as Canada and Russia, which were keen on controlling the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route, respectively, to enforce environmental laws in ice-covered areas within their EEZs to prevent marine pollution from vessels. The United States, which contested Russian and Canadian claims that these straits constituted internal waters rather than international ones, could point to the treaty's permission of freedom of navigation on the high seas (US Department of State 1992; Oliver 2021). Finally, coastal states could make claims for outer limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 miles. Although the United States has not ratified UNCLOS, it recognises it as customary international law (US Department of State 1992). Broader geopolitical interests also spoke in favour of reinforcing the cooperation narrative on the Arctic. The Obama administration, which had to grapple with the consequences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan when it came to power in 2009, wanted to 'reset' relations with Russia during its first term in office. This meant that Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008—which led to its recognition of the secessionist Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states—would not stand in the way of détente between the two sides.

While the Ilulissat Declaration temporarily curbed the emergence of a conflict narrative in the Arctic, it led to internal divisions within the Arctic Council. The other three Arctic states—Iceland, Finland and Sweden, as well as Arctic Indigenous communities—criticised the Arctic Five for excluding them from their deliberations (Ingimundarson 2014; Steinberg and Dodds 2015; interviews with Arctic Council officials 2016). They feared that the establishment of a

distinct Arctic Five venue could undercut the Arctic Council as the primary Arctic institutional framework (Kankaanpää and Young 2012; Exner-Pirot and Murray 2017). These concerns were, however, partly allayed when the authority of the Arctic Council was reasserted through the conclusion of two internationally binding intergovernmental agreements on Search and Rescue (SAR) in 2011 and on Marine Oil Spill Preparedness and Response in 2013, which was followed by a third one on scientific cooperation in 2017. The admission in 2013 of six Asian countries as observers in the Arctic Council, including China, Japan and India also reconfirmed its international legitimacy (Ingimundarson 2014; Steinberg and Dodds 2015).

A NARRATIVE LAG: CLINGING TO A COOPERATION FRAMEWORK AMID GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS

Arctic exceptionalism was severely tested by the 2014 Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea. The imposition of Western economic sanctions against Russia, which also targeted oil and gas interests in the Arctic, resulted in retaliatory measures, including a refusal to approve the European Commission's application for observer status in the Arctic Council (Interviews with Arctic Council officials 2016). The worsening relations between the West and Russia raised questions about further spill-over effects in the Arctic. After a prolonged absence from the region, NATO began to refocus military attention there (Foggo and Fritz 2018). Moreover, the ambiguous Western description of Russia as 'neither friend nor foe' (Schmitt [1932] 2007), stemming from the 2000s, lost traction. Russia became increasingly portrayed as a 'revisionist' power bent on violating, in Western jargon, the post-Cold War 'rules-based' order (Rahbek-Clemmensen 2017). The argument was made that the bolstering of Russian maritime power—in addition to the refurbishing of former Soviet bases in the Arctic Circle—could pose risks to Western security interests (Foggo and Fritz 2018). It led to the resuscitation and reframing of a Cold War discourse on 'deterrence', 'collective defence' and the 'GIUK gap' (Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom gap) directed at Russia in the North Atlantic and the Arctic. The West also responded to Russian aggression by suspending military cooperation between NATO and Russia. It was followed by Russia's withdrawal from the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, which had been established in 2010 to promote collaboration among militaries in the Arctic. Despite increased tensions, Russia continued to support UNCLOS and participate in the Arctic Council (Staun 2017). There was no breakdown in communications between Western states and Russia in the fields of civil security, maritime safety and search and rescue in the Arctic. Yet bilateral relations became marked by a deepening sense of distrust.

What further unsettled the exceptionalist Arctic narrative was the US decision to shift away from the War on Terror and reorient towards a new paradigm of Great Power rivalry framed as 'strategic competition' between states (US Department of Defence 2018). The projection of a new existential threat required the construction of a future to justify a Cold War-style military deterrence. In contrast to George W. Bush's strategy of a time-bound non-intervention in the Arctic, the first Trump administration exercised 'temporal sovereignty' by defining the region in terms of potential conflict (Davis 2008; Ricœur 1988: 246). As outlined in its National Defence Strategy, it identified every global domain—air, land, sea, space and cyberspace, including the Arctic—as geopolitically contested (US Department of Defence 2018: 3). And in a Cold War throwback, the United States began to take active measures to counter Russian submarine capabilities to exploit strategic routes from the Arctic into the North Atlantic (Foggo and Fritz 2018).

China's presence in the Arctic was added to this antagonistic picture because of its interest in investing in natural resource extraction and commercial and infrastructure initiatives abroad—notably, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its offshoot, the Polar Silk Road—which were seen as instruments for projecting political and economic power globally. The US Arctic policy was, at that time, less about the existing Arctic than its future place in a rivalry between the United States and China. Thus, it situated China—a non-Arctic state with marginal military presence in the region and with only an observer status in the Arctic Council—under the same framework as Russia, which was by far the largest Arctic state, with one-fifth of its landmass being north of the Arctic Circle (Pay and Calvo 2020). This anti-China dimension was highlighted by US President Trump's surprising—and unsuccessful—neo-colonial offer to buy Greenland in 2019 (Sorenen 2019). It was partly motivated by rivalry with China, whose investments in Greenland's mining sector was seen as an unsettling development in a territory where the United States maintained a long-standing military presence. The United States also reaffirmed publicly its rejection of Russian and Canadian sovereignty claims over the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage (Oliver 2021). Yet, despite its harsh geopolitical rhetoric—coupled with climate change denial—the Trump administration did not take any concrete steps to subvert the two pillars of the Arctic order established by the Arctic Eight: UNCLOS and the Arctic Council. When the Biden administration assumed power in 2021, it toned down the criticism of Russia and China in the Arctic, while sticking to the national security metanarrative of 'strategic competition'. To be sure, it maintained the sanctions regime against Russia and refused to

accept Russia's proposal to resume a military dialogue among the Arctic states. Nonetheless, reflecting a 'narrative lag', it persisted in the ritual reaffirmation of a US commitment to the status quo in the Arctic (Associated Press 2021).

NARRATIVE RUPTURES: FROM THE UKRAINE WAR TO THE TRUMPIAN REASCENDANCY

While the exceptionalist emplotment had been deeply fractured in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the case for preserving it discursively had not changed: a confrontation between Russia and the West in the Arctic did not serve the strategic, legal or economic interests of either side. However, it proved impossible to stick to this line after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A narrative reconfiguration (Ricœur 1988) was unavoidable, even if the institutional framework underpinning Arctic governance did not collapse. This required not only a revision of policy options but also a shift in political imagination: a reassessment of what kind of space the Arctic was, and what kinds of futures were possible or foreclosed. The seven Western Arctic states immediately 'paused' their participation in the Arctic Council to protest Russia's invasion but hedged their action by describing the forum as still having 'enduring value' for circumpolar cooperation (US Department of State 2022a). What they feared was that the institutionalisation of an 'Arctic Seven' collaboration at the expense of Russia risked jeopardising the Arctic Council's existence (Koivurova and Shibata 2023; Interfax 2024). That this scenario was plausible was confirmed by Russia's decision to terminate its membership in two Northern subregional organisations that were created in the 1990s: the Council of Baltic Sea States and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. After Russia formally threatened to withdraw from the Arctic Council, the Western states agreed to resume collaboration in its permanent scientific working groups—which engage with environmental and social issues in the Arctic—in a distant format (US Department of State 2022b). Yet no in-person Arctic Council meetings have taken place since the outbreak of the Ukraine War, which underscores how dangerously fragmented the Arctic Eight cooperation has become.

Russia has contemplated political alternatives, as evidenced by its outreach to other states, suggesting that it does not see itself as bound by a single institutional framework in the Arctic. A case in point is Russia's announcement that it intended to develop an Arctic scientific station on the Svalbard (Spitsbergen) Archipelago in cooperation with BRICS partners Brazil, India, China and South Africa (Edvardsen 2023). Yet it is doubtful that Brazil and South Africa, which have no

Arctic research presence and whose polar capacity and policy attention is limited to Antarctica, will be prepared to invest in a costly Svalbard presence (Nilsen 2023). Russia could also try to delegitimise the Arctic Council by forming a full-scale rival regional organisation with friendly states (Interview with a high-ranking Icelandic official 2023). Such a schism among the Arctic states could do irreparable harm not only to Western–Russian relations in the region but also to the interests of its inhabitants. Indigenous groups, who were critical of the 'Arctic Seven' for excluding them from their unofficial meetings after Russia's military action, have pressed for continued Arctic Council collaboration, pointing out that the social, economic, environmental and health needs of their communities have little to do with the Ukraine war, in particular, or geopolitical rivalries, in general (Bloom 2022).

The fragile geopolitical condition in the Arctic can thus be characterised as an interregnum: the order, previously rationalised by a post-Cold War cooperation narrative, is—paraphrasing Gramsci (1971: 276)—dying, with a great variety of morbid symptoms appearing, while a new one cannot be born (Cox 1981). The hegemony of the Arctic states is, indeed, in crisis. This is a stage that Koselleck termed 'saddle time' (G. *Sattelzeit*), a transitional period when past and future become untethered (Koselleck 1972: XV; Koselleck 2004: 255–275). Apart from the dysfunctional state of the Arctic Council, other soft law Arctic bodies created in the 1990s to deal with Russia's integration into Western institutions have ceased to function as originally intended. Compounding the geopolitical disarray was Trump's return to the US presidency in 2025 (Levy and Ulmer 2025). It has not only led to growing estrangement between the United States and Europe over military and trade issues but has also sent mixed signals about US–Russian relations. Besides threatening the sovereignty of Canada, Trump has engaged in expansionist rhetoric about the annexation of Greenland for 'national security' reasons, although usurping its vast mineral wealth is no less important an impetus (Holland 2025; Financial Times 2026). Such rhetoric has also been echoed in techno-dystopian plans by Silicon Valley venture capitalists, such as Peter Thiel, to create AI-powered research stations and experimental 'smart' or 'freedom cities' in Greenland with minimal regulation, raising fears of digital neo-colonialism and environmental exploitation (Schreckinger 2021; Holland 2025).

Trump's challenge to the liberal international order has introduced a whole new dimension into the US-European relationship and Arctic geopolitics. This is clearly on display within the Western alliance. On the one hand, all seven Western Arctic states are now part of NATO—following the recent entry of Finland and Sweden—and nominally sticking together *vis-à-vis* a belligerent Russia; on the

other, the United States has made territorial threats against fellow NATO and Arctic states, Denmark and Canada, and weakened its commitment to the defence of Europe. Western cohesion would also be significantly undermined in case of an American–Russian rapprochement, which in the Arctic could revolve around joint ventures on natural resource exploitation or imperialistic attempts to carve up the region. Indeed, Arctic exceptionalism has recently been radically recast in this way as part of a potential normalisation discourse, involving the United States and Russia (Raspotnik, Chuffart and Devyatkin 2025). In other words, two temporalities seem to be working at cross-purposes here: while the current order has not been dismantled—and Cold War alliances remain formally intact—older geopolitical paradigms, such as those linked with the 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century, have re-emerged. Such a scenario can be interpreted in Koselleckian terms as a 'temporal regression': a reoccupation of the future by tropes of the past. The Arctic becomes a space of temporal dislocation, where expectations reinscribe experiences instead of suppressing them.

CONCLUSION

The Arctic exceptionalism narrative operated, in practice, as a form of manufactured temporal sovereignty designed to assert control over the future and redefine the past. The teleological emplotment—covering the whole period from the end of the Cold War to the Ukraine War—papered over implications of counter-narratives that destabilised it: the shift from a focus on institution-building and the environment in the 1990s to that of great-power strains and plans for natural resource utilisation in the 2000s and, later, to militarised geopolitics in the 2010s. The semantic framing also represented a flawed attempt to decouple Arctic developments from a broader narrative: the increasingly contentious Western–Russian relationship rooted in Cold War legacies. These included NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and conflicts over the geopolitical orientation of post-Soviet states; Western wars against Iraq and Serbia over Kosovo; and Russian wars against Ukraine, as well as Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In other words, the peaceful 'horizon' was always contingent and unstable, with conflictual 'experiential structures' in the past and present being able to converge and reassert themselves.

Despite such entangled temporalities, the endurance of the exceptionalist narrative can be largely ascribed to geopolitical expediency and restraint. The Law of the Sea aligned with the political, economic and military interests of the Arctic Five, while, simultaneously, allowing them to articulate a peaceful

commitment to international law. Similarly, by maintaining control of the Arctic Council, the Arctic Eight were able to preserve regional hegemony and act as gatekeepers against non-Arctic states, using sovereign concerns to subvert initiatives aimed at creating an Arctic commons or internationalising the region—like Antarctica—under a regime of demilitarisation, scientific cooperation and suspended sovereignty. Thus, a depoliticised forum focused on environmental issues—lacking executive or enforcement powers and established at a time when there was minimal international interest in the Arctic—was able to attain international legitimacy as the region's main body. This trajectory places Arctic governance alongside ocean regions where cooperation has been organised through sovereignty and sectoral regulation, rather than through the suspension of state authority seen in Antarctica or the absence of region-wide institutions in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. More generally, the Arctic shows how narratives and temporal framings can reorder political expectations, allowing governance arrangements to persist despite unresolved tensions over authority, exclusion and control.

Following the tensions generated by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the US adoption of the doctrine of 'strategic competition', another rationale for retaining a narrative that had become unviable had to do with the interaction between time and place (US Department of Defence 2018; Davis 2008). The remilitarisation of the Arctic by Russia and NATO states not only reflects Cold War continuities and legacies—or a potential return to a reconfigured nineteenth-century order based on spheres of influence. It also highlights imagined economic futures that have been further amplified by Trump's resource-oriented neo-colonial threat against Arctic Indigenous communities in Greenland, which collapses the distinction between past and future. It is these temporal struggles that currently define Arctic geopolitics and governance as well as their ideological underpinnings.

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