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Russian Information Operations: The Kremlin's Competitive Narratives and Arctic Influence Objectives

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Abstract: Although the Arctic states share many common interests in the circumpolar region, resurgent strategic competition globally and the war in Ukraine have reinforced how Russia and the other seven Arctic states are not like-minded and are competing for international legitimacy. This article examines how Russia wages its perpetual adversarial competition in the information environment via state-funded media channels and proxy websites. These tools reinforce Russian strategies to *legitimize* its position as the major Arctic power and to frame its military investments as *defensive* in nature against potential North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) aggression. First, we frame Russia's core Arctic goals, using its strategic plans unveiled in 2020 as the official framework guiding national action. Second, we describe Russian propaganda and disinformation ecosystem, with particular emphasis on two major state-funded media outlets and various proxy sites. Third, we provide an analysis of various themes in Russia's anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives and how these align with that country's strategic interests—including varied approaches that disseminate individual messages that appear contradictory but are mutually reinforcing in seeking to discredit others and legitimize Russian actions.

Keywords: Russia; Arctic; disinformation; misinformation; information domain; strategic narratives.

Introduction

Although the Arctic states share many common interests in the circumpolar region, resurgent strategic competition globally and the war in Ukraine have reinforced how Russia and the other seven Arctic states are not like-minded and are engaged in competition for international legitimacy. Some Western analysts suggest that Russian international behaviour since the 2014 Crimean crisis portends similar revisionist designs for the Arctic region (sometimes drawing a distinction between the European and North American sub-regions), while others emphasize vested Russian national interests in preserving the regional *status quo*.¹ Similarly, Russian media discourse spans a range of opinion, from hard “conflict” frames that emphasize NATO aggression to those promoting “Arctic exceptionalism” with the region as a “zone of peace.”² Official Russian messaging associated with increased investments in Arctic military capabilities also signifies both competition with NATO adversaries and dual-use applications to address “soft security” needs.³ In all cases, prescribed language and delivery of official Russian narratives remains consistent and competitive.

Most Arctic states assess a relatively low risk of armed conflict in the Arctic compared to

other regions, with forms of interstate competition likely to occur below the threshold of armed conflict—including the information domain.⁴ After all, hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns have become central pillars of Russia's evolving approach to waging twenty-first century conflict.⁵ While conventional Russian military action against other Arctic states (all of which are NATO members or have applied to join the alliance) remains highly unlikely given the probability that such aggression would escalate into a general war that Russia could not win, Russia could seek to exploit divisions amongst and within the other Arctic states through concerted disinformation campaigns designed to polarize populations and exacerbate tensions.⁶ Divergent Norwegian and European Union positions on fishing rights and quotes with respect to the waters around Svalbard is a case in point.⁷

In this article, we observe how Russian efforts to frame Arctic positions in ways that are favourable to its interests appear to be occurring in an overt manner using Russian state media channels and proxy sites. Our approach and findings are consistent with Russia's strategies to *legitimize* its position as the major Arctic power and to frame its military investments as *defensive* in nature against potential NATO aggression. Instead of offering evidence of a clandestine, high-level Russian strategy to influence Arctic debates through a concerted misinformation campaign, we analyze how Russia wages its perpetual adversarial competition in the information environment via state-funded media and proxy websites.

First, we frame Russia's core Arctic goals, using its strategic plans unveiled in 2020 as the official framework guiding national action. Second, we describe Russian propaganda and disinformation ecosystem, with particular emphasis on two major state-funded media outlets and various proxy sites. Third, we provide an analysis of various themes in Russia's anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives and how these align with that country's strategic interests—including varied approaches that disseminate individual messages that appear contradictory but are mutually reinforcing in seeking to discredit others and legitimize Russian actions. For example, Russia would benefit from efforts to hinder or undermine enhanced NATO involvement in the Arctic or North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) modernization efforts. Accordingly, misinformation efforts may seek to reinforce the narrative that increased Western military investments in the Arctic will unduly antagonize Russia and lead to unprovoked escalation. Russian narratives may simultaneously downplay Russia's strategic interests in the region, and instead accuse other Arctic states and NATO of "militarizing" the region. Accordingly, narratives that either promote pro-Russian narratives or foment anti-US and anti-NATO narratives are commonplace in Russia's Arctic information space. The conclusions highlight that effective counter-messaging must be coordinated and aligned with strategic objectives to marginalize hostile information operations and develop opportunities for proactive information use—two goals that should now drive Western thinking and purpose.

While empirical studies such as this one can inform the growing literature on Russian information operations, we recognize that the current Russian propaganda campaign against Ukraine and the West falls within the conflict continuum, whereas this

study remains focused on explaining information operations in the Arctic competitive continuum context.⁸ Furthermore, Russia consistently manages regional affairs separately, meaning that behavior and narratives in Ukraine are not inherently associated with the Arctic and elsewhere. Accordingly, more research is needed to properly understand the effects of current Russian propaganda and how the Kremlin may reform information operations strategies as a result. Furthermore, the Ukraine crisis reveals Western biases and incomplete understandings of Russian narratives and behaviors. Ultimately, this article provides insights into competitive Russian information use, seeking to support Western deterrence. Remembering that deterrence is meant to avoid conflict, lines of efforts pursuant to this competitive activity endure as the most prevalent diplomatic and defense priority against adversaries, sometimes in the form of strategic communication (e.g., info ops) and other times operationalized (e.g., sanctions, forward presence). As the Circumpolar North shifts into a more competitive environment, the use of information will represent a leading support role to signal Russian national interests and intent for the Arctic—and require effective responses from our alliance of like-minded Arctic states.

Russia's Arctic Goals

Russia has laid out a comprehensive strategic plan for the Arctic region in a series of documents released since March 2020.⁹ While most of the challenges identified in the strategy are domestic in nature, these core documents provide guidance and content for internal actors to develop and deliver consistent narratives.¹⁰ First, they articulate a whole-of-government approach to Arctic development, promoting economic, social, political, and security priorities and objectives. It begins with a statement of Arctic exceptionalism from a Russian national perspective, emphasizing specific characteristics that demand “special approaches to its socio-economic development” in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) and to “ensure national security in the Arctic.”¹¹ This lays the foundation for Russia to build its case for why the AZRF is important for socio-economic development and national security, with a deliberate emphasis on oil and gas resources (both terrestrial and on the continental shelf), expectations of heightened demand for the Northern Sea Route (NSR) “as a transport corridor of global importance,” climate change effects on the environment and security, the presence of Indigenous peoples, and Russia’s positioning of strategic deterrent forces in the region.¹²

The external-facing dimensions of Russia’s strategy articulate core objectives to foster international cooperation, as well as those intended to bolster defense, security, and border protection. Specific language promises to implement “multi-vector foreign policy activities aimed at preserving the Arctic as a territory of peace, stability, and mutually beneficial cooperation.” External priorities also include asserting control over foreign activities in the NSR by operationalizing the position that these are “internal-like waters;” reducing the impact of foreign sanctions; securing international recognition for its extended continental shelf; and limiting the role of NATO in the Arctic and in the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap. Within the Russian Arctic, the strategy commits to “improve the

composition and structure of Armed Forces” and maintain an appropriate level of combat readiness “in compliance with the actual and forecast military dangers and threats faced by the Russian Federation in the Arctic.”¹³ While military considerations do not dominate the 2020 strategy, political scientist Sergey Sukhankin emphasizes that they still “constitute one of the central pillars of Russia’s overarching approach to the High North and will be the main recipients of financial outlays from the federal center.”¹⁴

In 2019, veteran analyst Pavel Baev of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) observed that Russia’s two-track Arctic policy pursues “poorly compatible tracks of expanding military activities and committing to international cooperation.” He notes specific hallmarks of Russian narratives, which “grossly overestimate” the volume and value of natural resources (particularly hydrocarbons) on the country’s continental shelf, describe the “appetites of international oil companies ... as insatiable,” and depict competition for resources and access to maritime transportation routes as key drivers of escalating global tension. Despite small volumes of international traffic along the NSR (Sevmorput), Russian narratives predict meteoric growth in this sector. Baev observes that “the most dramatic of all exaggerations, however, is about the intensity of external military threats to Russia’s interests in the Arctic.”¹⁵

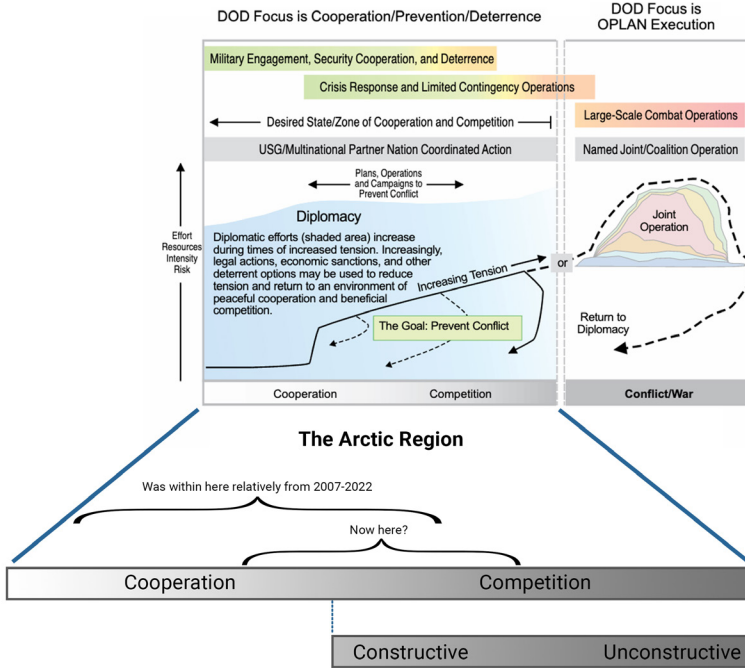
Baev’s nuanced critique also explains why Moscow’s “oscillating” commitment to circumpolar cooperation “should not be taken for a mere camouflage for Russia’s military buildup in the High North,” given the benefits to stakeholders such as Gazprom and Rosneft if regional relationships are insulated from resurgent strategic competition between Russia and NATO (and punishing sanctions that limit cooperation with Western energy companies). Furthermore, Russian investments to promote the NSR as a major international transportation artery benefit from geopolitical certainty in the region.¹⁶ Russia’s strategic documents thus reflect two-track messaging promoting both international cooperation and the perceived need for robust national defenses. Breaching the threshold of armed conflict as an aggressor in the region would not serve its economic or wider foreign policy interests. Legitimizing its interests and discrediting its competitors in the information domain, however, could advance them.

Russia and Competition in the Information Domain

The Arctic is an emergent region of the world in terms of growing access, burgeoning international interest, and potential Great Power Competition (GPC). Over the last decade, the eight Arctic states and other actors have worked diligently to define the Arctic in their own terms within what is militarily known in notional operational plan phases as the “phase 0-shaping phase.” Defense-related shaping activities include “long-term persistent and preventive military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence efforts to assure friends, build partner capacity and capability, and promote regional stability.”¹⁷ At the higher levels, joint planning exists in two modes: contingency and crisis.¹⁸ Phase 0, being the furthest from conflict, indicates regional circumstances involving cooperation

and competition which limits efforts to contingency planning and relies on foreseeable and creative scenario development for guidance (see figure 1). Presently, this is the case for the Arctic—a region in which states seek to promote their national interests for the purpose of establishing favorable norms or defining the region in their preferred terms.¹⁹ Russian narratives propagated in media, policy, and political discourses are designed to serve these strategic goals.²⁰

Figure 1: The Conflict Continuum adapted to illustrate the Arctic



Russia’s Arctic narratives should be understood and analyzed as part of a grand *legitimizing strategy*. In anticipation of its two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council which began in May 2021, Russia seized opportunities to promote its Arctic narratives, influence agenda setting, and attract attention to the region on its terms (which is a key national priority).²¹ Like all of the Arctic states, it seeks to define the region in its preferred terms by publishing the definitions, conditions, and circumstances that facilitate Russia’s national interests as a norm- and condition-establishing venture.²² For example, one goal is to get other Arctic stakeholders to internalize and repeat the language and narratives that Russia is promoting, particularly Russia’s self-perception as the largest, strongest, most developed—and most legitimate—Arctic player.²³ Another is to advance Russia’s goals of questioning democratic institutions and of weakening the international credibility and cohesion of the US and its allies and partners. “Because some pillars of this ecosystem generate their own momentum,” the United States Department of State explains, “as opposed to waiting for specific orders from the Kremlin on every occasion, they can be responsive

to distinct policy goals or developing situations, and then pivot back to their status quo of generally pouring scorn on Russia's perceived adversaries."²⁴

The State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) defines Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem as "the collection of official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify narratives." It identifies five main pillars:

- 1) official government communications;
- 2) state-funded global messaging;
- 3) the cultivation of proxy sources;
- 4) the weaponization of social media; and
- 5) cyber-enabled disinformation.²⁵

For our analysis, we turn to known disinformation and misinformation sources tied to Russia, focusing on the second and third pillars and on specific sources targeting English-language audiences. As entities in the second pillar, Russian state-funded outlets RT and Sputnik play an important role in disseminating Kremlin narratives to foreign audiences, working in concert with other elements in the ecosystem to create or propagate disinformation or narratives under the guise of conventional international media outlets.²⁶ These news outlets also "interact with other pillars within the ecosystem by amplifying content from Kremlin and Kremlin-aligned proxy sites (some of which are connected to Russian intelligence), weaponizing social media, and promoting cyber-enabled disinformation." Proxy sites serve as "an unofficial mouthpiece promoting disinformation and propaganda," sometimes with "direct links to the Russian state, some are enmeshed in Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem, and others are more loosely connected via the narratives they promote. The connections are intentionally murky."²⁷

Figure 2: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem.



Source: US Department of State Global Engagement Center (GEC)

As an emerging region of increasing strategic importance, the competition involving the Arctic information domain is occurring in the open and in a manner designed to encourage public consumption of narratives. Based on open access media scrapes of RT, Sputnik, and known proxy sites identified by the GEC, we show how Russian propaganda from 2016 to 2020 communicated Arctic-related pro-Russian/anti-Western narratives in mainstream media and regional outlets using both traditional news and social media.²⁸ Internationally, such information-related efforts remain a critical part of establishing defensible positions for actions by the Kremlin and of seeking to undermine the narratives espoused by the other Arctic states.

Themes in Russia's Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem

Pro-Russian messaging suggests Russian superiority over the West, seeks to legitimize Russia as the largest Arctic rightsholder, and establishes the requirement for Russia to defend its Arctic territory against the US and NATO as strategic competitors. The state does so by promoting Kremlin statements and its Arctic Development Doctrine, touting Russia's icebreaking and construction programs in the North (including the refurbishing and modernizing of military infrastructure and air-defense systems), and claiming the superiority of Russian weapon systems in the Arctic region.²⁹ Furthermore, Russia trumpets its extensive energy resources in the Russian Arctic—and suggests that these are a primary driver of the Americans' covetous interest in the region. In terms of the NSR, Russian official messaging suggests that the country promotes control over waters and stability in the region to ensure conflict-free operation of the route as a Russian economic artery. Finally, Russian narratives also highlight the country's adherence to international law, respect for sovereignty, openness to dialogue, and readiness to discuss common issues. Even in the wake of Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it has maintained consistent—albeit convenient—justifications regarding its official positions.

Anti-Western messaging by Russia and its proxies alleges that the US and NATO threaten Russia in the Arctic and deny its right to exploit sovereign resources. Framing NATO as an aggressor (and US-NATO military exercises as provocative, directed at Russia) and suggesting that Western countries are readying for confrontation serve as a justification for Russia to bolster its “defensive” military capabilities in the region. Accordingly, narratives cast Russia as a peaceful target of Western intimidation and aggression with sovereign rights that NATO refuses to recognize. Russian news media often frame the other Arctic states as competitors for Arctic territory and resources. Illustrative of this trend, a March 2020 RT story justifies how “Russia has been heavily investing in the exploration and development of the Arctic in recent years as other regional players—Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the US—are also looking to lay their claim in the area, due to its rich natural resources and strategic geographical position.”³⁰ They also accuse the US of an aggressive, global disinformation campaign that sets up an imaginary Russian threat to the Arctic to serve the US military-industrial complex. Counterintuitively (but fitting with the idea that individual narratives can be contradictory within the information ecosystem as long as they serve

general strategic goals), Russian stories often emphasize the supposed weakness of Western states in the Arctic, whether limited US icebreaking capability, or NATO's alleged inability to build anything significant north of the Arctic Circle, or the quality, scale, and outcomes of NORAD military exercises.³¹ These narrative arcs are intended to demonstrate Russia's regional superiority—while simultaneously reinforcing the message that Russia must build and show strength in the region to remain secure.

Theme 1: US and NATO Are Destabilizing Forces in the Arctic

While Western narratives often highlight Russia's military buildup in the Arctic, Russian narratives emphasize the opposite. For example, a February 2020 story in *Global Research* proclaiming the Far North as “World War III's Newest Battlefield” cast the NATO Exercise Cold Response 2020 as an escalatory move “staged above the Arctic Circle, far from any previous traditional NATO battlefield, ... [which] raises to a new level the possibility of a great-power conflict that might end in a nuclear exchange and mutual annihilation.”³² Two years earlier, other proxy site stories depicted Exercise Trident Juncture in a similar light, “marking a new milestone in the rapid military escalation between the West and Russia”—allegedly because NATO was “increasingly frustrated with Moscow's persistent presence in the Arctic, as this region is extremely rich in hydrocarbons and Washington is reluctant to surrender it to Moscow. Therefore, this recent demonstration of Western military might was nothing more than a blatant attempt to scare Russia into submission.”³³

In keeping with broader Russian Arctic narratives about American objectives in the Arctic, Russian narratives often depict the US as a “sabre-rattler” that has “turned [its] menacingly mercenary gaze on the Arctic.”³⁴ In so doing, stories not only position the US as the disrupter of regional peace but also a catalyst for insecurity amongst its allies. For example, the US presence in Greenland is depicted as dangerous both because it facilitates Washington's dangerous ratcheting up of regional tensions and because it supports the US's ability to “project power” into the Arctic.³⁵ Proxy site narratives also warn that this American presence invites Russian retaliation against Greenland in the event of a major power conflict. By extension, Russian narratives insist that Greenland should make its own decisions as to whether it needs other nations' military bases on its territory, bases which “only make it a target in the event of an armed conflict that doesn't concern Nuuk.”³⁶ In this respect, Russian sources use implication and coercion tactics to threaten smaller Arctic states.

Common Russian security narratives aimed at Sweden and Finland insist that NATO is luring Finland and Sweden into joining the organization and that doing so would provoke a strong Russian response. This narrative assumes NATO aggression against Russia and targets traditional pride in neutrality in these countries.³⁷ Along these lines, analysts have identified forged documents and false claims about the supposed dangers of joining NATO, broadcast by Russian outlets and amplified on social media.³⁸ Lange-Ionatamishvili et al. explain that this narrative seeks to imprint the idea that Sweden and Finland will be pulled into NATO conflicts, not in defense of themselves but because of NATO's broader plan to

start a war with Russia. Membership means that the alliance will dictate to Sweden, which would have no independent decision-making power in its foreign policy and—ultimately—the decision to make war. As such, because Scandinavia is being used as a bridgehead to attack Russia, Russia will be forced to act in self-defense and attack Sweden.³⁹ This narrative is supported by official Russian statements, like Russian Ambassador Viktor Tatarinstev’s 2015 warning that a NATO-aligned Sweden will face “counter measures.” He emphasized that Russia “will have to resort to a response of the military kind and re-orientate our troops and missiles... the country that joins NATO needs to be aware of the risks it is exposing itself to.”⁴⁰ With Finland and Sweden having applied for full NATO membership in 2022, Russia has already expressed intense displeasure and concern which, as the Arctic region shifts into a more competitive mode, are likely to manifest in more intense information operations involving Finland and Sweden as NATO members.⁴¹

Reminiscent of Soviet support to the Western peace movement during the Cold War, some Russian proxy sites also seek to amplify marginal pacifist arguments that seek to discredit NATO and its partners.⁴² For example, *Geopolitica.ru* applauds Iceland’s pacifist government and states that it “should be welcomed by those who seek to limit the peripheral area of Atlanticist hegemony.” That site continues to say: “if the pacifist position of the Left-Green Movement could gain more followers among the population and help sway the other political parties toward neutrality it is likely that Iceland could become the ‘Switzerland of the North’ and function as a Nordic buffer zone between ‘Western Atlanticism’ and ‘Eurasian Continentalism.’”⁴³ By extension, Russian state media pays relatively little attention to the strategic considerations surrounding NATO’s Icelandic presence. Nevertheless, *Sputnik* ran an article in 2016 which misleadingly claimed that “there is a strong movement to withdraw from NATO in Iceland,” and an entire story dedicated to the decision by Iceland’s Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir not to meet with then-US Vice President Mike Pence during his 2019 visit to the island—citing “prior commitments.”⁴⁴ Russian media connects this snub to the recent arrival of a US B-2 Spirit stealth bomber at Keflavik in Iceland ahead of regional military exercises.⁴⁵

The threat posed by US “militarization” of the Arctic is often interwoven and linked to notions of colonial subservience.⁴⁶ For example, US military activity is typically framed as something done *to* Greenland against Greenlandic interests, with Denmark building its relationship with NATO “at islanders’ expense.”⁴⁷ An American/NATO presence on the world’s largest island is also portrayed as a false choice imposed by colonial governments. Russian proxy sites suggest that Greenlanders should “not have to choose between the West or the East but could freely define its own national interests and do the right thing as interpreted in Nuuk—and Moscow—rather than in the capitals of the NATO member states.”⁴⁸ We expect Russia to continue strategic messaging about “the United States and NATO as destabilizing forces in the Arctic.” Such themes are typical of the Kremlin manufacturing and leveraging peripheral security-related issues in support of justification for authoritarian behaviors. As of February 24, 2022, however, these fabricated concerns by Moscow are rather moot.

Theme 2: Arctic States Are Pawns of the US

A common, related theme in Russian narratives is that the US uses its smaller allies as pawns in its global strategy. A 2017 NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (STRATCOM COE) report identified this narrative in Iceland and some of the smaller Baltic alliance members.⁴⁹ The crux of this theme is that the US manipulates small nations to host military bases and that they lose their own neutrality in the process. Examples of this can be found in RT and Sputnik, which have run articles highlighting the US plan to secretly store nuclear weapons in Iceland in the 1950s.⁵⁰ This plan was formed “unbeknownst to Icelanders.”⁵¹

The STRATCOM COE report also notes that this narrative could be understood in various ways. First, it might show that small European countries should not be taken seriously and are not credible partners in the international community because they are dependent and easily manipulated. Second, if the message that the smaller countries are being used as pawns is systematically repeated, then they might refuse to let themselves be used in this manner. This would be an example of reflexive control—the method of conveying to an opponent specifically prepared information in order to put them in a position where they make a predetermined decision “voluntarily.” This is a recognised Soviet technique with deep roots in Russian military strategy that is experiencing a renaissance in modern hybrid warfare.⁵²

In any case, Russian narratives often suggest that US-led NATO activities or postures designed for “war against Russia” draw Arctic states into “unprofitable competition.”⁵³ As a June 2020 *NewsFront* story stated, “according to experts [unspecified], the US uses a system of incentives to drag Norway into an unfavorable confrontation with Russia, pursuing its own interests to undermine the situation in the Arctic region.”⁵⁴ These narratives seek to drive a wedge between allies, alleging a divergence in interests. They also serve as a vehicle to drive home threats to states that align against Russia. For example, a 2018 Strategic Culture Foundation story alleged that “the Norwegian government’s decision to extend and expand the [US] Marines’ presence [in northern Norway] is part of NATO’s vigorous war preparations, making Norway a state on the front lines and the prime target for the Russian military.”⁵⁵ In short, the narrative suggests that US-led NATO, not Russia, is undermining the “high north, low tension” logic promoted by the Nordic countries that sought to foster cooperation and downplay the risk of conflict.⁵⁶

Theme 3: The Idea of a Russian Threat is Ridiculous

According to Russian media, all fears of Russia’s military actions should be considered paranoid.⁵⁷ This is a common narrative used to dismiss American and NATO concerns over Russian militarization and, likewise, call into question the value of NATO involvement in the Arctic region. A clear example is Russian responses to frequent Swedish sightings of submarines in their territorial waters, which the Russian Embassy in Sweden dismiss in various Facebook posts as disinformation and as evidence of Swedish hostility

toward Russia.⁵⁸ In 2017, RT reported that there had never been a “bogeyman Russian submarine” in the waters and implied that Sweden foolishly squandered “hefty amounts of money” looking for it.⁵⁹ Russian narratives also focus on Swedish troop deployments close to the Russian border, questioning Sweden’s deployments to the strategically vital island of Gotland and the rebuilding of the Swedish military after Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine. The message is similar to that pushed out across the circumpolar world: why deploy military assets to the Arctic when Russia does not pose a threat? The Russian media suggests, by extension, that the only answer is that the US and NATO are preparing for an offensive against Russia.⁶⁰

Russian proxy sites also characterize any concerns about Russian militarization as a symptom of “Russophobia” and calls for citizens to look at developments “objectively”—meaning through a pro-Russian lens.⁶¹ These talking point magnifiers frequently thrive on citing Russian officials who are experts at delivering sophisticated versions of logical fallacies in the highly competitive international arena. They also often cite Russian officials and Western academics depicting Russia as a stable proponent of peace and security in the Arctic while lamenting alleged Western disrespect and bias that victimizes Moscow. A News Front story from October 2019 is illustrative:

The NATO’s conduct of military maneuvers in the Arctic directed against Russia only undermines stability in the Arctic, said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in a comment to the Norwegian *Aftenposten*. In addition, the escalation of tension is provoked by European countries, which, to please Washington, join the US anti-Russian sanctions. However, a meeting between Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg in the framework of the Arctic Summit of Dialogue summit in St. Petersburg contributed to the normalization of bilateral relations. And on October 25, the Russian delegation will take part in the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of East Finnmark by the Soviet troops ... [from] the Nazi invaders. Events will be held in the Norwegian Kirkenes. Such trends are becoming an excellent example for European countries, which are still promoting Russophobia to the detriment of themselves and for the sake of American interests.⁶²

The prolific use of history in Russian narratives is not just for contextual flavor, given how history forms a powerful part of Russian culture and politics. When Russian authorities invoke history in an official capacity, it should be taken as a serious aspect of the stated or implied position.

Theme 4: NATO and the US Are Poor Houseguests

A common theme in Russian messaging is to highlight misbehaviour of US/NATO forces deployed abroad. RT offered a clear example of this approach when describing NATO’s 2018 Trident Juncture exercise as a “debacle” in which “Iceland was drunk dry

by US troops.”⁶³ It also reported that US troops had sent Reykjavik’s bars into “state of emergency” after drinking all their beer and that many soldiers “needed medical help after overindulging in local alcoholic beverages.”⁶⁴

Russian narratives also highlight military-source pollution from NATO forces in the Arctic. US Cold War-era bases in Greenland have long been a politically sensitive topic. For example, Russian state news agency Sputnik has run nine stories since 2010 dedicated to the environmental damage done to Greenland by the Americans’ Camp Century and other Cold War-era military activity.⁶⁵ One article from 2017 described these “toxic remnants of ... US military bases” as having damaged “some of the world’s most pristine areas” while continuing to “sow seeds of discord in the Danish Realm.”⁶⁶ A related piece from the previous year connects that damage to Greenland’s colonial status highlighting that as “an autonomous, though not fully independent nation ... [Greenland] is tired of being America’s junkyard.”⁶⁷ Articles in the *Strategic Culture Foundation* assert that Greenlanders are tired of their island being used as a “garbage dump,” and that further American activity would exacerbate the “Pentagon’s trash-laden presence.”⁶⁸ Russian proxy sites also point to NATO forces as a source of environmental degradation in Iceland, allegedly that the Americans had left the Keflavik area an “environmentally-destructive wasted dump just as it does in so many other locations.”⁶⁹

Theme 5: US Colonialism and Interference in Internal Arctic State Affairs

Russian state-funded media and proxy sites also adopt a common trope accusing the US of colonialism and interference in the internal affairs of other Arctic states. This seeks to delegitimize the American presence and those Arctic states or citizens who support it. Russian coverage of the Faroe Islands and Greenland serves as a prime example. As these two semi-autonomous jurisdictions have increased in strategic importance for the US, Washington has moved to expand the breadth of its diplomatic relations.⁷⁰ Russian narratives point to this increasingly direct relationship as a subversion of Danish rights. For example, Russian proxy site Geopolitica points to the establishment of a consulates on Greenland and the Faroe Islands as direct lines of communications that “bypass Denmark.”⁷¹ According to state news site Sputnik, these steps toward “direct cooperation” have “riled up many Danish politicians who see it as undue and unacceptable interference.”⁷² RT provides a similar narrative, citing Danish MPs who see these moves as an attempt to “undermine” Denmark’s ties with the islands and have called the American “agenda” in the country “unacceptable.”⁷³ Russian misinformation sites align with and go further than the state media narrative, suggesting that Greenlandic and Faroese independence is something that Washington could *encourage* to enhance its control over Denmark, playing a game of “divide and conquer” using “soft-power” coercion to eventually “occupy” Greenland and the Faroe Islands.⁷⁴

Russian government proxy sites regularly highlight Greenland’s colonial status and Denmark’s alleged disrespect for Greenlanders.⁷⁵ This narrative predates former US President Donald Trump’s efforts to buy Greenland in August 2019, which provided a perfect

framework for Russian efforts to portray Greenlanders as the object of colonial forces. The offer inspired a surge of attention in Russian proxy and state news websites. Much of the Russian material was fact-based, often quoting Danish official rejections—such as Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen’s insistence that Washington cannot merely “buy and sell other countries and populations.”⁷⁶ Other material engaged in disinformation, such as speculating that NATO forces have been preventing Greenland from ever achieving true autonomy or independence.⁷⁷

Economic messages are a subordinate part of the colonial narrative. Because Greenland is not economically self-sufficient it is difficult to argue that its relationship with Denmark is economically damaging. Unlike the situation of the Faroe Islands’ fishing industry, closer relations with Russia offers no obvious benefits.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, messaging in Russian state media and proxy sites emphasizes the benefits of independence by pointing to the increased control Greenland would gain over its resource and harvesting industries.⁷⁹ Where Russia does enter the narrative in Russian news or proxy sites, it is as a benevolent contrast to the US. In the aftermath of Trump’s purchase offer for Greenland, NewsFront cited Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov’s statement that Moscow did not engage in “international shopping of that kind” and “would like to stay away from that”—painting Russia as an anti-colonial power.⁸⁰ By contrast, Russian state media frequently highlights American and NATO countries’ history of imperialism, lumping Western countries into a common colonial box.⁸¹

Theme 6: Participation by Arctic States in US/EU Sanctions Damages their Own Arctic Economic Interests

Beginning in 2014, European and North American states imposed a broad range of economic sanctions against Russian individuals and entities owing to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. These include an export ban of energy technology goods related to Arctic, deep water, and shale exploration/production in Russia. These Western sanctions have prompted large capital outflows from Russia and have had a significant effect on the Russian economy, weighing heavily on investor confidence. Russia is highly resentful of these actions and seeks to have the sanctions lifted.

One Russian narrative strategy seeking to undermine support for sanctions in the other Arctic states suggests that the sanctions are actually hurting those states more than Russia. For example, NewsFront alleged in February 2016 that “Finland and Norway plan to unfreeze trade and economic relations with Russia despite the sanctions imposed on it because of Crimea. Both countries are increasingly less willing to comply with the sanctions that are actually affecting their economic interests.” While Finland and Norway emphasized during meetings with Russian officials that they were not prepared to remove sanctions, the story suggested that “many experts do not believe this” and that this “gesture on the part of some Western countries signals a change of attitude toward Russia” and was “a sign of devaluing the meaning of the sanctions.”⁸²

Russian narratives surrounding expanded Western sanctions imposed in the wake of its further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have consistently reiterated that Europe is particularly vulnerable because of its reliance on Russian oil and gas. Accordingly, Russian media ties the rising cost of living and elevated energy costs across the continent to “illegitimate” Western sanctions, echoing official Kremlin messaging that insists increasing prices are having “devastating consequences” on the global economy.⁸³ By contrast, Russian official messaging continues to maintain that its economy has been “resilient” and well managed.⁸⁴ Narratives describing the economic sanctions against Russia as having little effect and, ultimately, backfiring on those that imposed them, are often crafted by taking numbers and statistics out of context. The message of this narrative is to suggest that the sanctions are useless and, in the long run, will destroy the sanctioning countries’ own economies while Russia has no difficulty in finding other economic partners outside of Europe. These are highly dubious claims with little grounding in empirical reality.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Russia’s Arctic narratives should be analyzed as part of a grand *legitimizing strategy*. Like all of the Arctic states, it seeks to define the region in its preferred terms. It does so by publishing the definitions, conditions, and circumstances that facilitate Russia’s national interests as a norm- and condition-establishing venture.⁸⁶ The goal is to get other Arctic stakeholders to internalize and repeat the language and narratives that Russia is promoting, particularly Russia’s self-perception as the largest, strongest, most developed—and most legitimate—Arctic player. While we have uncovered no evidence that these disinformation and misinformation efforts have had a significant impact on Western public, political, and expert opinion on Arctic affairs, we argue that discerning specific narratives promoted in Russian state-funded media and proxy sources yields insights into how it seeks to justify its place and behaviour as a state actor in the Arctic region. With no regional partners to turn to for help after launching its brutal further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the burden of upholding Moscow’s claim to be the most legitimate Arctic power falls entirely on Russia. As it becomes increasingly isolated from the West in the Arctic and globally, Russia risks its strategic talking points becoming «пустые слова», or a narrative of “empty words.”

As Richard Stengel notes in *Information Wars*, the asymmetry of disinformation is its key attraction, with the sowing of confusion representing both a *method* and an *objective*.⁸⁷ This is true of Russia’s behaviour in the information domain in the Arctic. Even individual narratives that are contradictory when read alongside other narratives serve Russia’s political goals to spread confusion and encourage disunity amongst competitors and within individual countries.⁸⁸ Effective counter-messaging amongst NATO allies and partners in the Arctic must be coordinated and aligned with our strategic objectives—and should not attempt to mirror Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem. Instead, carefully calibrated strategic communications should emphasize how NATO is a defensive alliance, whose purpose is to protect our member states.⁸⁹ A collective allied presence in the region represents a measured and proportionate response to Russia’s growing military

presence in its Western Arctic and its provocations.⁹⁰ Audiences must also be reminded that a fundamental precondition for the Arctic states to realize their common goal of stability and predictability is that all states respect sovereignty, international law, and established rules. This is the case in the Arctic as elsewhere.

Military strategic planning phase 0 (shaping) focuses on influencing affairs during peacetime. Since February 24, 2022, however, the situation has changed. Management of circumpolar Arctic issues that benefited from interstate cooperation through forums like the Arctic Council has now assumed competitive characteristics. The information domain will be part of this degrading shift, necessitating preparations for phase 1 (deter) and phase 2 (seize initiative). We expect that Russia will escalate its narrative in terms of stated positions and interests by operationalizing intent. Previously passive and/or seemingly semi-benign statements may become hardened positions. In these phases, information will be used to assess resolve, create confusion, invoke reactions, and seek to dictate momentum. The West must be careful to use official statements and mass media consistently, preserving healthy democratic debate without providing Russia the legitimacy that it seeks.

Proactivity remains the foundation of robust narratives, meaning the Kremlin understands the significance of seizing the messaging initiative as well as the difficulties and messiness of trying to respond or defend against dis/misinformation. Russia has done this for many years, ensuring that its Arctic national strategies and developed narratives are highly aligned, synchronized, and delivered. Alternatively, isolated and reactive messaging is easily dismissed. As the shift to the new phases occur, the West will need to be more diligent and committed to articulating stronger positions on its terms. As allies and partners work to navigate through the exhausting rhetoric and deter from increased dangers, the West must effectively compete in all aspects of the information environment. The like-minded Arctic states maintain a profound advantage in their shared responsibilities, values, and principles, while Russia is increasingly isolated. In this context, the Western allies must take proactive measures to neutralize Russian information warfare and support efforts to secure Western Arctic interests.

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CONTENTS

Russia's Grand Strategy toward the West

Thomas Graham.....1

The Domestic Foundations of Russian Foreign Policy

Peter Rutland.....16

Lessons From Syria: What We Can Learn About the Russian Way of War

Nikolas K. Gvosdev.....32

'Terrorist Recruiters' Versus 'Terrorist Slayers': Weaponizing Syria in Russian Information Warfare

Eszter Szenes and Mark W. Perry.....47

The Aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Appeasement of Russia and the War in Ukraine

Lasha Tchantouridzé.....77

The Russo-Chinese 'Strategic Partnership' Enters a New and Dynamic Phase

Lyle Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev.....95

Not Your Father's Disinformation: Emerging Technology, Social Media Advances, and the Growth of Smart Disinformation

Mary Manjikian.....130

Bosnia and Russia: The Implications for European Security and US Interests

Nadina Ronc.....148

Russian Information Operations: The Kremlin's Competitive Narratives and Arctic Influence Objectives

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Troy Bouffard, and Adam Lajeunesse.....161

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Vision of Ukrainian Nationhood

Jessica Pisano.....187

Borderland No More? Shifting Security Dynamics in Ukraine

Angela Kachuyevski.....199

STUDENT RESEARCH

The Yugoslavia Civil War and the Allies in World War II

Caleb M. Reilly.....211

Evaluating the Value of US Diplomacy Through Strategic Ambiguity

Ethan Owens.....225

