



'Great Power Competition' and the Arctic: Origin and Evolution in Media, Governmental and Research Institutes Discourses

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to further understanding of the emergence and use of the great power competition (GPC) narrative in the Arctic. Using data gathered between 2010 and 2021 by Factiva, the first part of the analysis identifies the emergence and evolving uses of the GPC term, finding that media outlets played a pivotal role in relaying and keeping this narrative alive in public discourse even after its use subsided in governmental discourse. The analysis then moves to track the GPC discourse with reference to the Arctic specifically; it finds that while it emerged later than the general narrative and originated in the media, usage in this context did not peak concurrently with its use in discussion of global geopolitics or with potentially relevant current events. The second part of the analysis examines how media outlets, government documents, and research institutes understand GPC in the Arctic. We found that the great power competition narrative helped to resurrect discourses of Arctic fear and risk after their waning in the first half of the 2010s. The nature of GPC in the Arctic took familiar contours, being for the most part tied to fears, most conspicuously raised in the early 2000s, regarding resource exploitation, shipping lanes, and militarization. Data is largely from the United States, but contains English sources from American allies, as well as Russia and China.

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions of an emerging competition between great powers have intensified in recent years. References to a “great power competition” (GPC) have multiplied in descriptions of the geopolitical dynamics and international environment confronting states today. As the managing editor of the Atlantic Council Uri Friedman (2019) points out, “this grand narrative about global affairs,” taken for granted by both governmental and non-governmental actors, has now achieved the status of an axiom.

The emergent debates have sought to assess the degree to which we are, indeed, observing a great power competition scenario in the Arctic region and, if we are, the specific issues, resources, or claims integral to it. For some, the Arctic is at the centre of great power competition, and tensions between the United States, Russia, and China are central to any discussion of the dynamics of Arctic geopolitics (Conley & Melino, 2019; Huebert, 2019; Sørensen, 2019). In the same vein, specific parts of the region have been posited as encapsulating strategic zones of confrontation, such as the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom–Norway Gap (Pincus, 2020), the Bering Strait (Tice, 2020), or specific Arctic sub-regions (Greaves, 2019).

Of course, this notion of great power competition in the Arctic does not enjoy unanimous support. Jing and Huff (2020) explore the potential for great power collaboration, while Kopra (2020, p. 35) prefers to refer to great power responsibilities in relation to the necessity of implementing climate change mitigation to tackle the “most imminent security risk in the region.” For Tunsjø (2020, p. 139), “the stakes in a changing Arctic are not high enough to warrant a great-power conflict”; core Russian and Chinese interests, he emphasizes, lie elsewhere, closer to home (Europe for the former, East Asia for the latter). As such, great power competition is referred to as the “great hype.” Arctic scholars defending the concept of Arctic exceptionalism are also present in this camp, advocating that global geopolitical developments do not always translate into Arctic reality, especially global conflicts and competition (see, for example, Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017; Käpylä & Mikkola, 2018).

Moreover, Overfield and Tallis (2020) highlight that while the GPC assessment is frequently associated with enemies or rivals, allies can often compete among themselves and have diverging interests. They prefer to refer to “great power relations” to take into consideration the continuum of conflict, cooperation, and competition. For Wyne (2020), China and Russia are presented as rivals without an emphasis on the different strategies and interests underpinning their foreign policies. Geographical context is also absent: competition between the United States, China, and Russia is presented as uniform across regions and issues.

While we consider such criticism relevant, this article will investigate the origin of the GPC narrative in English language documents and the ways it has achieved a hegemonic status, as pointed out by Friedman (2019). We do not intend here to analyse the degree to which the narrative of great power competition is relevant in the Arctic region; rather, we will analyse this competition as a discursive construction describing geopolitical relations with its initial origins beyond the region itself. We will then investigate when the great power competition narrative was first applied to the Arctic region, those responsible for advocating it, and how the emergence of this narrative was argued to be justified by its proponents. As such, this article will contribute to the literature analysing the ways in which different actors popularize discourses about the Arctic region, whether they are scientists (Wood-Donnelly & Bartels, 2022), media outlets (Pincus & Ali, 2016) or states (Wilson Rowe, 2013; Busch, 2023). Of course, analysing the potential for conflicts, rivalries, and tensions in the Arctic region is nothing new, especially in the era of climate change. Narratives of impending competition and conflict have been particularly popular at specific times; at the end of the 2000s, for example, it was observed that significant media coverage and political attention casting the Arctic in competitive terms followed developments such as Russia planting its flag on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean in July 2007. The Arctic region was typically presented in the media as a poorly regulated space; this was coupled with predictions of increased military activities, resource extraction, and expanded shipping lanes (Dodds, 2010; Landriault, 2016). This period was followed, however, by another period marked more by coverage of regional accord and the signing of agreements. The narrative of competition and conflict was thus quietened in media reporting in the first half of the 2010s (Landriault, 2020; 87–98).

Since there has been no study of coverage produced during the latter half of the 2010s, this article will provide research on the emergence of the Arctic GPC narrative in the late 2010s. The focus will be on studying which actor (government, media, research institute) proactively advocated this narrative and the evolution of its use in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

The article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical and methodological perspectives of the study are presented. The article then empirically details how the account of great power competition emerged as a global narrative, and how this perception was adjusted to fit Arctic geopolitics. We then analyse which actors (media outlets, governments or research institutes) led this re-emergence. Finally, we discuss our findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is founded on the idea that the media plays a crucial role in the process of disseminating narratives such as the GPC, and that narratives of this kind bring with them specific perceptions about international relations, conflict, and cooperation. This dissemination has tangible consequences, in so far as these narratives legitimize specific decisions and encourage the expectation of potential futures; dominant narratives interpret the world and provide assessments of threats, enemies and conflict resolution (Nielsen & Christensen, 2019, p. 6). Narrative can also popularize certain regionally specific understandings; Keskitalo (2007), for example, found that the conceptions of the Arctic were greatly influenced by North American rather than Nordic understandings. In the Arctic context, this could play into the strengthening of narratives, relayed by rivals such as Russia, that present Arctic states as pawns for the United States (Lackenbauer et al., 2022).

Furthermore, strategic assessments can be promoted and relayed by different actors. The longevity of a narrative depends on the willingness of these actors to perpetuate these perceptions rather than their alternatives. Landriault (2016) offers examples related to media outlets; Greaves (2016) offers examples related to Indigenous discourses. In the narrative of GPC, the agency of other states (which are not considered great powers) is diminished and presented as irrelevant. This study explores the coverage of GPC in three different actors: media, governmental documents, and research institutions.

Wood-Donnelly and Bartels (2022) illustrate that technical reports can influence ideas that may be considered fundamental in specific policy networks. Evidence presented by these authors details how certain conceptualizations of the region can impact the perceived potential for cooperation as seen by different actors, while the emergence of discourses giving credence to the ubiquity of conflict can prompt decision-makers and stakeholders to see the Arctic as a place of danger and threat. For Wilson-Rowe (2013), media and popular discourses about Arctic conflicts promote the understanding that the region is a “latent space of danger and conflict” (p. 233).

METHODOLOGY

The database Factiva, offering comprehensive coverage of 200 countries and territories, was used to conduct this study; this database contains approximately 33,000 sources from media outlets, governmental institutions, and civil society organizations. The timeline initially selected cast a broad net, extending from 1 January, 2010 to 31 December, 2021. This decision was taken to pinpoint the narrative’s emergence. Very few references were observed between 2010 and 2016; most of the references started in 2017, and consequently data reporting below focuses on 2017–2021. As the narrative started to emerge during the Trump administration, we included the year 2021 to assess if its dissemination evolved with the election of a different administration. The full list of sources used is available in Appendix 1.

Searches were conducted in different phases. Initially, the keywords “great power competition” were input to capture when and how this specific term came to emerge. Then, the keywords “great power competition” and “Arctic” were used to situate when, how, and by whom the great power competition narrative was articulated in the Arctic region. Three different sets of sources were surveyed for these keywords.

First, government sources were compiled using the “Congressional Documents and Publications,” “Department of Defense Documents,” “White House Press Releases and Documents,” and the “State Department Press Releases and Documents” sources in the Factiva database. Only U.S. government sources were selected. Second, the 20 English-language media outlets that made most frequent mention of great power competition were collated to track media attention given to this narrative. The third set of documents encompassed think tanks and research institutes publishing documents in English. Although the media and research institutes documents were all published in English, they do not all come from the United States or the United Kingdom. Documents from India, Canada, China, Russia, Australia, and Singapore were also part of the sample. A Western perspective was predominantly analysed in this study, however, as most sources come from Western countries or their allies.

The documents collected were manually coded to detect key themes present alongside the great power competition narrative. Documents were coded based on whether great power competition was a key theme or mentioned only in passing. Themes related to specific sources of conflict could not be pre-determined, being emergent. While this coding was straightforward in most cases, since the source of conflict was clearly delineated in the text, this was less true in others. The number of icebreakers held by Russia and the United States were often mentioned, for example, but while the issue of icebreakers was raised several times throughout the texts, this was only coded as a source of conflict when Russia’s possession of more icebreakers than the United States was clearly linked to a threat to the United States or the world. The coding was performed in the effort to assess the rationale developed to justify the belief that great power competition was operating, both globally and in the Arctic region. Further, researchers coded both for countries mentioned as being part of this competition and for the nationality of the outlet promoting this description. The main objective behind these methodological decisions is to identify trends and patterns of use for the great power competition narrative, both in general and, especially, its application in an Arctic context. By focusing on governmental and media documents, the objective is to understand which comes first – is media attention purely reactive to governmental initiative? Or is the contrary true? For the Arctic region, effort is also made to better understand how the region came to be incorporated in the great power competition narrative.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION

Almost completely absent from documents forming part of public discourse until 2017, mentions of great power competition emerged in the first months of 2018 and steadily gained in popularity between 2018 and 2020, first in governmental documents and then in media outlets (see Figure 1).

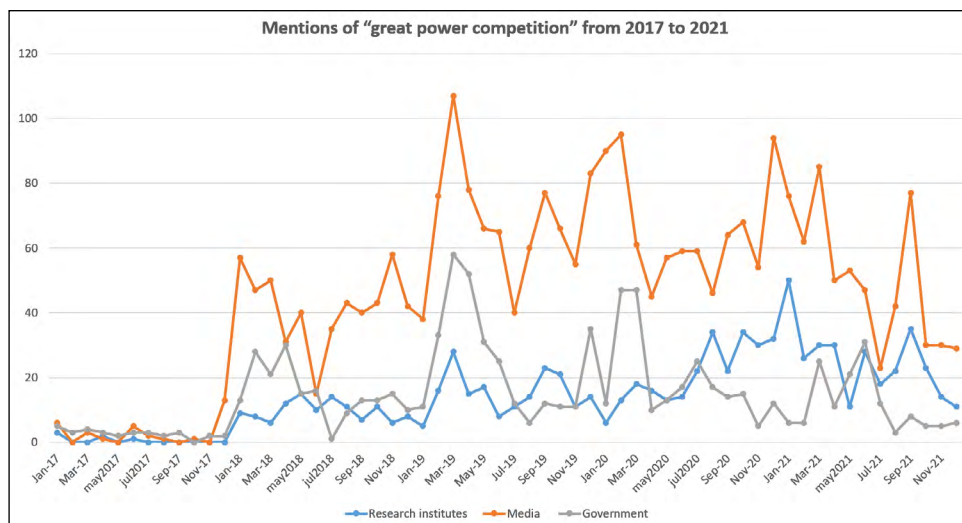


Figure 1 Mentions of “great power competition” from 2017 to 2021.

The use of the term in media outlets began in December 2017 after the publication of the U.S. government’s National Security Strategy of 2017. GPC was only mentioned once in the 2017 document. More allusions were needed to solidify usage in public discourse. In the media, the use of this term really took off in January and February of 2018 in reaction to the release of

governmental strategies including the unveiling of the National Defense Strategy (mid-January 2018; the term was not used in the document itself) and the Nuclear Posture Review (early February, which alludes to the “return of great power competition”). Although the National Defense Strategy does not explicitly include the term “great power competition,” the document states that inter-state competition is the primary concern of U.S. national security. Further, it affirms that the new principal challenge to the United States takes the form of “long-term, strategic competition by ... revisionist powers” (DoD, 2018, p. 2). In turn, Russian posturing and claims of new nuclear capabilities in March 2018 were explained through the prism of GPC. Hence, the term was first introduced by U.S. governmental agencies before being adopted by media outlets and taking on a life of its own, remaining a dominant expression when reporting on geopolitical developments concerning the United States, Russia, and China.

Looking back at [Figure 1](#), it is striking to observe how quickly media outlets will adopt a term once it is part of governmental language: it continued to be popular for three years before subsiding, hinting at the narrative’s longevity and influence. While this media attention mostly originated from Western media outlets such as Reuters, the Associated Press, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*, outlets in Russia (*Sputnik*) and China (*South China Morning Post*, *China Daily*) also ended up in the top 10 list for number of mentions. The term was thus embraced outside of the Western world alone. The timing was also similar in Russian and Chinese outlets. For example, a ten-fold increase in the number of mentions of GPC was observed in *Sputnik* and *China Daily* in the years 2017 to 2018. It remained on this high plateau in 2019 and 2020 before mentions decreased in 2021. Research institutes refrained from employing this term at first: a phase of expansion can only be discerned between late 2020 and early 2021, well after the popularization of the narrative in governmental and media discourses.

Moments of increased interest are clearly discernible from [Figure 1](#), with February to May 2019 and December 2019 to March 2020 constituting periods of peak attention in both media and government. These peaks can be explained by specific events unfolding during these times. From February to May 2019, no official governmental policy document was published promoting the term; governmental and military officials and congressional representatives, however, were presenting GPC as an incontestable geopolitical assessment at different venues, especially as part of budgetary talks. At the same time, the GPC lens was dominant in media outlets when reporting on the Munich Security Conference (February 2019) or the release of French President Macron’s “manifesto for Europe” (March 2019). In both cases, opinion texts alluded to GPC without referring to elected representatives mentioning the term. For example, Roger Cohen in the *New York Times* referred to “great power competition in the age of the strongman” (Cohen, February 18, 2019) while Constance Stelzenmüller mentioned Europe as a strategic prize in a great power competition between the United States, Russia and China (Stelzenmüller, March 13, 2019).

This last item also dominated coverage during the other peak (December 2019–March 2020). The GPC narrative was perceived as useful for key governmental decision-makers to both justify their funding and to advocate for more financial resources. For media outlets, GPC was employed to describe different developments with connections to the United States, whether the country’s withdrawal agreement with the Taliban, its military drawdown in Africa, NATO meetings, or the participation of Huawei in 5G deployment. All cases were presented as instances of diverging interests vis-à-vis Russian and Chinese strategic interests.

It is important to note that the GPC narrative continued to be dominant in media and research institutes after it lost currency in governmental circles. Returning to [Figure 1](#), the number of mentions of GPC in government documents significantly decreased after March 2020. The popularity of the term in media articles remained high, increasing until March 2021 before returning to lower levels. The same pattern can be detected for research institutes, where GPC references actually increased as the number of mentions in government decreased from March 2020 to December 2021. In other words, the term took on a life of its own once launched in political circles, finding an impressive longevity. If media outlets and research institutes do not create these concepts, they tend to adopt and use them even after they are dropped in the messaging of decision-makers. This is especially true for research institutes, since their function is not to cover day-to-day developments but, rather, to produce analysis, often reflecting on past developments.

Having documented how the GPC narrative was disseminated at the global level, we now consider whether the same pattern can be observed in discussions of the Arctic region.

The Arctic GPC narrative, we find, followed its global counterpart by a few months, beginning in March 2018, and was solely and sporadically confined to media outlets. Only later was the term consistently linked to the Arctic region in official documents; more repeated use of the narrative only began in governmental sources in February and March 2019 (see Figure 2). Interest in research institutes surged much later, becoming more frequent only during the second half of 2019.

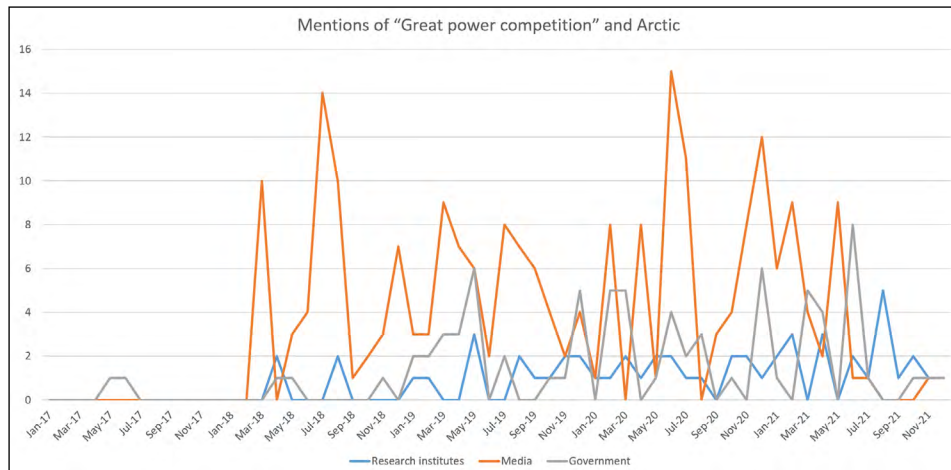


Figure 2 Mentions of “great power competition” and “Arctic”.

Overall, it is worth noticing that the number of mentions remained modest throughout the period studied in all types of sources analysed. When we compare Figures 1 and 2, we see that the peaks for references to Arctic GPC and global GPC do not correspond. Media use also preceded the release of governmental strategies by the U.S. government using the GPC narrative about the Arctic region. GPC has remained present since March 2018 in media outlets, albeit in an inconsistent fashion, month-to-month.

Strategic documents by the U.S. government on Arctic GPC were first issued in 2019. The first, published by the U.S. Navy in January 2019, neither mentioned GPC nor received substantial media coverage. Nonetheless, the use of the term in governmental and congressional circles increased after the publication of the strategy, and was relayed by members of research institutes and departmental agencies alike at congressional hearings. But the term was mostly employed by military officials, including Navy, Air Force and NATO military officials, between January and March of 2019. Congressional records and White House documents indicate that elected representatives did not incorporate the term into their messaging at this point; in fact, only one of the fourteen mentions of GPC from governmental or congressional documents came from an elected representative: all others emanated from either military officials or research institutes (researchers testifying in front of Congress for the latter).

The first half of 2019 saw a popularization of the term and its subsequent solidification in popular discourses in relation to the Arctic. The unveiling of the Department of Defense’s Arctic strategy (June 2019), in which GPC was explicitly mentioned, represented a key moment. The document characterized the Arctic as a “potential avenue for expanded great power competition and aggression spanning between two key regions of ongoing competition”: the Indo-Pacific and Europe and the U.S. Homeland (U.S. DoD, 2019, p. 5).

The DoD statement both marked the normalization of the term in governmental statements and signified a broadening of stakeholders incorporating it in their geostrategic evaluations. From July 2019 to June 2020, military officials continued to lead on disseminating the narrative. Arctic GPC was, however, now frequently evoked by senior officials in civilian agencies (State Department, Coast Guard) and elected representatives (notably Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska) in congressional hearings. This pattern continued after the release of the U.S. Air Force Arctic statement in July 2020, in which GPC was then mentioned three times. By then, GPC was dominant and shared in most decision-making milieus. GPC was mentioned seven times in the Homeland Security Arctic statement (January 2021) and twelve in the U.S. Army Arctic statement (March 2021).

These statements were published at a time when use of the term in the media was significant, suggesting a degree of mutual reinforcement. But it is notable that attention, either in media outlets or governmental documents, did not correspond with developments that might have been associated with GPC. For example, the disclosure of President Donald Trump's ambition for the United States to purchase Greenland (August 2019) only registered two mentions of GPC. Similarly, American and British joint maritime operations in the Barents Sea near the Russian Arctic in May 2020 barely registered on the media radar and did not spur references to Arctic GPC, even though the operation indicated competition between the United States and Russia.

We are prompted to consider, then, how GPC was portrayed in the Arctic region. Which threats were referenced, and how were they described?

THE NATURE OF ARCTIC GREAT POWER COMPETITION

Above, we analysed the patterns both of the general use of GPC and the pattern related to the Arctic. In this third part of the analysis, we will look at how great power competition was connected to the Arctic region in the various types of documents and we will compare how the media, governments, and research institutes have addressed the possibility of an Arctic great power competition.

MEDIA OUTLETS

Data for media coverage spanned 2018 to 2021 inclusively and 87 articles; no mentions were found before 2017. 47 of these have a primary focus on the Arctic and great power competition (as opposed to those with a secondary focus, which were generally about GPC and briefly mentioned the Arctic, or were about the Arctic and briefly mentioned GPC).

While the number of articles changed slightly over time (there were 25 in 2018, 32 in 2019, 14 in 2020 and 16 in 2021), the nature of the coverage – that is, the sources and themes identified – was more or less consistent. In all years, the vast majority of media discussions surrounding the Arctic and GPC came from U.S. sources, though a handful of references are also found in British media outlets, as well as English-language Russian and Chinese media (*Sputnik* and the *South China Morning Post*). Of the 87 stories, 57 came from sources in the United States, 14 from British sources, 9 from Russian sources (all *Sputnik*), 4 from Chinese sources (all the *South China Morning Post*, based in Hong Kong), 2 from Australian sources, and one from a Canadian source. Because of this overall bias towards the United States, much of the data presents an American perspective; still more of it presents what might be broadly termed a Western perspective, given the number of sources that came from U.S. allies rather than from Russia and China.

The great powers most often mentioned are the United States, Russia, and China. Of 87 articles, 83 mention the United States as being involved in GPC. In 2018, those that do not were published by British outlets focusing specifically on the relationship between Britain and Russia. In 2020, articles that move the focus away from the United States come from an Australian outlet focusing more generally on Russia and China. Thus, both U.S. outlets and those from China and Russia position the United States as involved in GPC; stories that do not tend to centre their countries of origin in the discussion, in relation to China and Russia. In 70 articles, Russia is positioned as involved in GPC, while 44 mention China in relation to GPC. In both cases, this is largely because of the way in which outlets in the United States discuss the topic: some of these sources do not discuss the United States as engaging in GPC with any other specific country, meaning the United States is the only country mentioned in a GPC context while, in other cases, the focus is on the country's relationship with either Russia or China, such that the latter two split the focus between them while the United States is always at the centre. Unsurprisingly, sources in the United States predominantly use a U.S. foreign policy perspective to address GPC. In several cases, the GPC narrative is delivered by quoting a U.S. official, as in this passage from a CNN article quoting Navy Rear Admiral James Pitts: "We are well aware that we are in a great power competition environment and the Arctic is one piece of that" (Sciutto & Cohen, 2018).

Chinese and Russian outlets also generally position their respective country (either alone or together) as involved in the discussion around GPC, but not as being in conflict with the United States. For example, discussing comments made by a U.S. Air Force Deputy Chief of

Staff, *Sputnik* describes a “supposed growing Russian threat to the Arctic” (Tsukanov, 2021) and reframes its own activities as a plan “to develop its Arctic resources, to create a new Arctic trade route between Asia and Europe, and to improve security.” This is in stark contrast with a CNN article that states “it is clear that great power competition is heating up in the Arctic, and Russia views [the Arctic Trefoil military base] as a key asset in that struggle” (Ullah & Pleitgen, 2021). Similarly, in an article on the NATO 2030 report, the *South China Morning Post* describes how the report’s assessment of China “reflects a hawkish shift in Europe on China” based on the country’s “technological advancement and slow progress on opening up to foreign companies” as well as “its geopolitical influence in the developing world” (Lau, 2020). Thus, while articles written from an American perspective tend to position the United States as needing to counter Russian and Chinese threats in or to the Arctic, Russia and China downplay the threat they pose, positioning their own development as non-threatening and fair, and associating statements about GPC with the United States, rather than domestic ambitions. This counter-narrative presents the threat as the emergence of the GPC by the United States, a creation of American governmental institutions to promote confrontation.

Threats in the Arctic, as with other topics in the data, and as hinted at in the examples above, usually come from a U.S. perspective. In approximately half of the articles, militarization of the Arctic or military exercises in the Arctic are discussed as the major threat, and this view typically positions Russia as the problem, usually because it is expanding military infrastructure, conducting more military drills in the Arctic, or upgrading its military there. Articles addressing military exercises conducted by Western powers near the Russian Arctic also referred to this threat and drew parallels with previous eras of confrontation. For the *Daily Express*, these military drills “appear to display a new era of drills that date back to the Cold War” (Carey, 2018). In many cases, however, and even in cases where militarization is not mentioned, the threat is positioned as originating first with melting Arctic ice, opening up the region to a competition leading, in turn, to militarization.

This narrative is related to the other key risks in the region – the expansion of shipping lanes and related issues, and the battle over resources (mostly oil). The latter is presented in classic geopolitical terms, with states scrambling to secure oil and gas resources in a zero-sum game dynamic. The threat regarding the opening of shipping lanes is more complex. On this point, it is worth noting that the concerns with shipping lanes are regularly linked to Russian control of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and Russia’s material superiority in the region. For example, the launch of a slew of new icebreakers by Russia was described as alarming, with Russia “working hard to capitalize on ice melting” in a “free-for-all” Arctic competition environment (Postmedia News, 2019). At other times, the issue is more vaguely described, claiming conflict over shipping lanes but not explaining the cause or how such a conflict might unfold.

Two other issues, although less discussed, were present. First, the issue of competing claims was raised with reference to China’s declaration of itself as a “near-Arctic” state. Second, investment in the region (especially by China) is of concern, indicating growing Chinese influence in the region. In both cases, the emergence of China in the region is at the centre of the threat assessment. Importantly, these descriptions, coming from a predominantly American perspective, are unlikely to consider the United States itself as the source of regional tension. Chinese media outlets present an entirely different perspective.

Finally, by 2021 especially, the Russian state-directed *Sputnik* assigns the blame for any tension to the United States. While *Sputnik* did not focus on the Arctic and GPC in earlier articles, this changed in 2021, with commentary placing blame more clearly on the United States for being hypocritical and for viewing Russia too much as a competitor. In China’s case, there is also an article that places blame on the United States for being provocative and hegemonic. Occasionally, these views make an appearance in Western articles, such as a *Business Insider* article pointing to Russian fears of being squeezed by the United States and NATO (Woody, 2020).

Importantly, both Russian and Chinese outlets continue to acknowledge militarization, shipping issues, and resource competition. Thus, while the origins of threats to, or in, the Arctic are agreed upon, the states blamed for instigating conflict, now or in the future, are more varied.

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

From 2018 to 2021, 51 government documents were found to be relevant, and only 12 of these could be said to have a primary focus on the Arctic and GPC. This is at least partially explained by the length of some documents, which focus on a wide variety of topics, and because some (as with the media articles) only discuss one of the subjects of this article. In 2018, the number of documents referencing GPC in the Arctic was very limited – two. This jumped to 19 in 2019, then 21 in 2020, before it decreased to nine in 2021. All of these documents come from the United States, and mostly fall under the heading of congressional documents and publications, although 10 come from the Department of Defense and one from the State Department. Once again, then, this perspective is very (in this case, entirely) American.

As with the media articles, the United States is the most-mentioned country in relation to GPC in the Arctic; in instances where no other countries are directly mentioned, it appears alone in this role. Russia is mentioned in 34 documents, while China is mentioned 29 times. Occasionally, further reference is made to U.S. allies (mostly Arctic or NATO allies in Europe). Unlike the media articles, the sources for government documents are all from the United States, and so no other views on the issue are visible here. Future research might consider views from other parties, especially Russia and China, in the relevant languages.

U.S. government documents locate the threat of GPC in the Arctic in more varied issues than the media. This is likely owed both to the fact that many government documents contain nuanced or complex expert opinion, and that many are significantly longer than the media pieces, giving them more space for detailed explanation. While government documents also list militarization as the most significant concern (in line with media articles), they discuss this in slightly different terms. Russian militarization of the Arctic is still of concern, including more specific elements like the repaving of runways and Russia's inclusion of special forces operatives in its search and rescue teams. However, there is also more discussion of Chinese militarization, including the country's construction of icebreakers and concerns that, in the future, the Arctic could see tensions similar to those in the South China Sea if China becomes more involved in the region.

Beyond militarization, these documents focus on more varied issues: a lack of preparedness on the part of the United States in the Arctic, conflict over shipping and resources, and foreign investments (from a U.S. perspective) are all listed as concerns. Conflict over resources and shipping, including Russian control of the NSR, are essentially no different from those expressed in the media, though in some cases these contain more details. The discussion concerning a lack of readiness on the part of the United States, an issue which had extremely limited coverage in the media, is more common in these government documents. Importantly, this issue was not counted simply because of the asymmetrical capacities listed in the documents – it was quite common, for example, to note that Russia has significantly more icebreakers than the United States. But nor were these kinds of passing factual statements counted in the analysis as indicating concerns over the United States lacking the capacity to counter Russia in the Arctic. These were counted when the document focused substantially on a lack of preparedness increasing the risk (for the United States or the world) of conflict in the Arctic (for reference, see [House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, 2021](#)).

It is possible that these concerns were more visible here as specific actors were making arguments for budgetary reasons, and thus focused on presenting detailed (perhaps extreme) arguments in favour of securing funds for national defence, similar to the strategy noted in the discussion of the GPC narrative generally. Interventions requesting more funding were attempted while presenting Russia and China as threats. The oft-mentioned icebreaker gap points in the direction of positing increased shipping, and Russia's enhanced maritime presence and capabilities in the region, as a threat.

Finally, China overall was discussed more than Russia in these documents, even though China is not an Arctic state. This was most notable in terms of the country's investments, both in its own Arctic capabilities and, more importantly, its investments in Arctic nations. This co-occurred with increased concern about Chinese diplomatic and scientific ventures in the region. The register of threats is different as shipping and natural resources are not explicitly listed. Essentially, China is described as “cosying up” to U.S. allies in the Arctic, and there are concerns that this will lead to situations of dependency like elsewhere in the world; no specific situation

is mentioned, but this seems likely to be a reference to Chinese investment in Africa or through the Belt and Road Initiative. More frequent references are also made to “competing claims,” which is generally related to China’s claim to be a “near-Arctic” state, and to increased Sino-Russian cooperation: the China/Russia Arctic cooperation is presented as the Trojan horse allowing China to more easily exert influence and justify its Arctic presence.

RESEARCH INSTITUTES

From 2018 to 2021, 34 research institute documents were found to be relevant; only three of these mentioned the Arctic as a primary component of GPC. Search results returned a diverse array of sources, which shifted over the years. Of the documents, three were released in 2018, eight in 2019, nine in 2020, and fourteen in 2021. The three released in 2018 were all from foreignaffairs.co.nz. In 2019, the range of sources diversified, with foreignaffairs.co.nz publishing four, the Heritage Foundation three, and the Macdonald-Laurier Institute for Public Policy one. In 2020, most documents came through the Heritage Foundation (seven of nine), one from the Daily Signal and one from the Atlantic Council. In 2021, seven of the documents were from the Heritage Foundation, four from foreignaffairs.co.nz, one from the Atlantic Council, one from the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, and one from the Libertarian Institute. Notably, foreignaffairs.co.nz, while based in New Zealand, aggregates documents from a number of sources, and thus does not count as a source itself. Its most common sub-source was Dan Sullivan, a U.S. senator from Alaska. A handful of other sources are also American (the Department of State, the Army, the House of Representatives), two are European (British Parliamentary News, the EU), and one is Chinese (China State Council Information Office). Many of these sources, including the Heritage Foundation, the Daily Signal (part of the Heritage Foundation), the Libertarian Institute, and the Atlantic Council, are American, and thus we again find primarily an American view. The majority of these also have a conservative leaning.

As with media articles and government documents, the United States is mentioned in the vast majority of cases: 31 of 34. Unsurprisingly, those that do not mention the United States are from the UK, EU, and Canada. Russia is mentioned in 20 cases, while China is mentioned 17 times. Europe as a whole, NATO, or sometimes particular European countries such as Denmark, are mentioned a handful of times, alongside Canada. The single document from a Chinese source mentions the United States and Russia in relation to GPC in the Arctic, but not China itself. This echoes the other sections: the United States is the most-mentioned, followed by Russia, then China, then a handful of European and North American U.S. allies.

Because many of the documents considered GPC in the Arctic a secondary issue, and documents that consider the issue secondary are less likely to focus on the nature of the threats to the region, a smaller number of threats overall was listed. Unsurprisingly, the most-mentioned threat is militarization. This is generally assumed to be Russian (which is the assumption for media and government documents as well), but Chinese militarization is occasionally mentioned, once again including references to how the Arctic could become like the South China Sea. Again, China is described as a threat referring to behaviours in other regions, not to Chinese actions in the Arctic itself. In one instance, from the Libertarian Institute, the United States is the party blamed for militarization and “baiting” Russia in the Arctic (Freeman, 2021). We also see a return of similar issues to those in other sections but, owing to the lower number of data points overall, the numbers do not tell a clear story: lack of U.S. preparedness in the Arctic, shipping conflicts, and competing claims (which, again, are generally a reference to China’s claim to be “near-Arctic”), although visible, are not substantially more than references to resources, investment, and the dangers of Chinese diplomacy in the region. Everything that is not militarisation hovers between two and four mentions.

DISCUSSION

In this study, the perceptions of change occurring in the coverage of the Arctic region were tracked to understand how GPC narratives emerged and evolved. Based on this, the study observes that the idea of a great power competition reactivated discourses of Arctic competition and conflict after their decline in public attention during the first half of the 2010s. The discourse emerged in U.S. governmental circles, and was popularized in media outlets, both in the United States and abroad; to follow Keskitalo (2007), this understanding of geopolitical relations spread and

gained momentum over others. Overall, the great power competition narrative in the Arctic region included three powers: the United States, Russia and China, with other countries being denied agency for the most part.

The GPC narrative emerged in U.S. government documents before it became popular in media outlets; policy documents gave the initial spark and cemented the narrative, helping to establish its longevity. Media outlets were quick to popularize ideas related to this change while also continuing to refer to these perceptions for longer than the initial documents; the concept lingered in media outlets well after governmental discourses turned from it. It highlights the central role of the media in disseminating conflict-centred narratives: they are not just reacting or reporting language used by governmental decision-makers but actively promoting one specific set of understandings about geopolitical relations. The Arctic region came to be understood as a space of active rather than latent conflict, with great powers jockeying for position and pursuing their interests as part of a zero-sum game (Wilson-Rowe, 2013). Media outlets playing a proactive role disseminating narratives about Arctic competition reinforce previous findings presented by Landriault (2016) for the Canadian context. This proactive role was not present for the GPC narrative as a whole, with GPC starting in governmental discourses before being popularized in media outlets.

The popularisation of GPC in the Arctic region was unrelated to Arctic developments that could have rightly justified calling Arctic interstate relations competitive (freedom of navigation operations, Greenland sovereignty, etc.). The mentions involving Russia and the United States were able to apply GPC to the Arctic region and anchored the term within specific regional geopolitical developments (natural resources, shipping and militarization in the circumpolar North). Here, these developments were often cast in conflictual terms without much reliance on evidence or statistics: the images of the Arctic as a treasure trove of resources or a future maritime highway were presented uncritically to fit the GPC narrative. On this note, these discourses share striking similarity with perceptions ubiquitous in media coverage during the 2000s: the great power competition in the Arctic reactivated representations commonly found when public attention for the Arctic was greater (Landriault, 2020, pp. 34–57).

We found different results when the Chinese state was mentioned in these documents. Here, the GPC narrative was deployed in broader terms, referring often to Chinese geopolitical interests and behaviours in other regions rather than being Arctic-specific. Our observations help draw attention to the lack of acknowledgment of how Russian and Chinese strategies and geographic contexts differ. While China is mentioned less frequently than Russia, this is certainly not because it is seen as something other than a participant in GPC; it is, rather, mentioned less in relation to the Arctic, especially in media outlets and research institutes – the connection is more difficult to establish, and extrapolating the motivations of Chinese behaviours in the Arctic from mentions of the country's agenda in other regions is not the soundest method. In other words, publications suggesting that significant change arose as a result of GPC do not refer to specific, tangible, material events illustrating this emerging competition in the Arctic region. This may in part be tied to the fact that concerns about China are related less to concrete information than they are to suppositions. What if the Arctic becomes like the South China Sea? What if China's declaration that it is a "near-Arctic" state leads to increased friction in the region or to a prominent role for China in Arctic governance? What if China's investments in the region render U.S. allies vulnerable?

Here, global discourses and realities did not accord with region-specific realities: the existence of GPC at the global level does not necessarily mean that the Arctic is characterized by the same geopolitical stresses. The promotion of this narrative and its use in assessments of Arctic geopolitics did not leave much room for either pragmatic cooperation or for small or middle power Arctic actors (six Arctic states out eight) to play a role. The way the GPC narrative is employed in the analysis of the Arctic region suffers from several flaws, the most important being that it failed to acknowledge the complexity of rivalry and cooperation in the Arctic (Wilson Rowe, 2020). By focusing solely on the United States-Russia-China triad, disputes between Norway and the European Union about Svalbard, or the Canada-United States dispute over the Beaufort Sea or the Northwest Passage, are not addressed at all (Busch, 2023).

Additionally, it is worth noting that, in line with Overfield and Tallis, a significant number of articles speak only broadly of competition: in many cases, the United States is the only openly-

named participant in GPC and, in other cases, Russia and China are mentioned as examples, sometimes even as among a number of other states (and thus not as the only states engaged in GPC, although the only ones engaged in the Arctic). However, when Russia and China are mentioned, this is generally as enemies of, or threats to, the United States, while other Arctic nations that could be presented as more friendly competitors are not described as such. Countries like Canada and Denmark, for example, are more often viewed as allies in the competition (though not as great powers) and, in some other cases, as potential pawns (usually owing to Chinese investments). Overall, the great power competition narrative reactivated ideas current about Arctic competition and conflict in the 2000s and early 2010s. Concerns about shipping, natural resources and militarization, common in the late 2000s, were front and centre in how the great power competition narrative was connected to the Arctic region.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The 2017–2021 timeline was used to focus on the re-emergence and the evolution of a discourse relating to great power competition. Comparing year-to-year coverage allowed us to distinguish between seasonal or fleeting coverage and long-term patterns. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, brought important developments, with significant impacts on the Arctic region. Early indications suggest that the use of the great power competition narrative in relation to the Arctic region has decreased since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The invasion saw the idea of competition replaced by one of open confrontation, requiring a different language and alternative narratives. It would be relevant to analyse this phenomenon further in order to capture the narratives dominating the production of media reporting, government documents, and papers from research institutes. The state of geopolitical discourse in the Arctic will follow the trajectory of events unfolding since February 2022: that is, the evolution of relations between Russia and the West will greatly influence whether narratives concerning the Arctic will be dominated by notions of cooperation or confrontation.

APPENDIX 1 – LIST OF SOURCES USED FOR THE EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

LIST OF MEDIA OUTLETS FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION

US Fed News

Financial Times

Reuters

Sputnik News Service

Washington Post

New York Times

[InsideDefense.com](https://www.insidedefense.com)

Associated Press

South China Morning Post

Dow Jones Newswires

Wall Street Journal

Business Insider

The Australian,

The Straits Times

Inside the Navy

CNN

The Times

ENP Newswire

LIST OF MEDIA OUTLETS FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION

Reuters
Financial Times
Business insider
US Fed news
Sputnik News Services
Dow Jones Newswires
CNN
Inside the Navy
InsideDefense.com
Daily Mail
South China Morning Post
The New York Times
The Telegraph
Washington Post
National Defense
The Times
Postmedia Breaking News
Wall Street Journal
Express
news.com.au

LIST OF RESEARCH INSTITUTES FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION

The Heritage Foundation
Atlantic Council
Heritage Foundation - The Daily Signal
CE Think Tank Newswire
International Institute for Strategic Studies
Observer Research Foundation
Council on Foreign Relations

LIST OF RESEARCH INSTITUTES FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND THE ARCTIC

The Heritage Foundation
Atlantic Council
Heritage Foundation - The Daily Signal
CE Think Tank Newswire
International Institute for Strategic Studies
Observer Research Foundation
Council on Foreign Affairs

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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