

MASTER THESIS | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Managing Interests: the Arctic Council after Ukraine

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Advanced International Studies (M.A.I.S.)

Wien | Vienna, 2026

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt |
Degree programme code as it appears
on the student record sheet:

UA 992 940

Universitätslehrgang lt. Studienblatt |
Degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Internationale Studien | International Studies

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Priv.Do. Robert Schuett, Ph.D.



**diplomatische
akademie wien**

Vienna School of International Studies
École des Hautes Études Internationales de Vienne

Abstract

This thesis addresses the question of why the eight Arctic states decided to sustain the Arctic Council during the Norwegian chairship (2023–2025), despite most of its functional work being suspended following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. When Norway assumed the chairship in May 2023, it pursued a policy aimed at partially restoring the Council's functional work, which resulted primarily in the resumption of digital meetings of technical working groups. Drawing on academic literature, strategic policy documents, and two anonymised expert interviews, the thesis argues that the Council's sustainment reflects the strategic interests of its member states and is best explained through a realist framework.

Using a modified structural realist approach building on the work of Krasner and Rosato, it conceptualises the Arctic Council as a vehicle for advancing member states' strategic interests. By enabling states to assert and safeguard their special role in Arctic governance, the Council has been sustained without being fully restored to its pre-war function. The analysis further shows that concerns over China's efforts to expand its presence in the Arctic constitute a significant incentive for sustaining the institution. The thesis contributes to a more explicit theorisation of Arctic geopolitics by highlighting the role of state interests, power considerations, and evolving geopolitical relations between the West, Russia, and China. It also offers avenues for further research on international institutions from a realist perspective that emphasises self-interested, power-maximising states operating in an anarchic international system.

Diese Arbeit untersucht, warum die acht Arktisstaaten den Arktischen Rat während des norwegischen Vorsitzes (2023–2025) aufrechterhielten, obwohl ein Großteil seiner operativen Arbeit infolge der russischen Völlinvasion der Ukraine ausgesetzt wurde. Zur Erklärung dieser Entwicklung nutzt die Arbeit einen modifizierten strukturell-realistischen Ansatz nach Krasner und Rosato, der den Arktischen Rat als Instrument zur Förderung staatlicher Interessen und Machtpositionen versteht. Die Mitgliedstaaten haben die Organisation aufrechterhalten, um ihre besondere Rolle in der Governance der Arktis zu sichern, ohne den Rat vollständig in seinen Vorkriegszustand zurückzuführen. Insbesondere zeigt die Arbeit, dass das Interesse, chinesischen Bestrebungen nach einer stärkeren Präsenz in der Arktis entgegenzuwirken, einen wichtigen Grund für den Fortbestand des Rates darstellt. Damit leistet die Arbeit einen Beitrag zu einer stärker geopolitisch ausgerichteten Analyse der Arktis, die staatliche Interessen, Machtüberlegungen sowie die Beziehungen zwischen dem Westen, Russland und China berücksichtigt.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Priv.Do. Robert Schuett, Ph.D., for his guidance, support and encouragement throughout this process. Your feedback has been very important in sharpening the argument of this thesis. Thank you also to Serafima Andreeva and Svein Rottem for sharing their expertise and helping to carve out the angle of the thesis.

I am also immensely grateful to my family and friends for their support and encouragement throughout my studies. Especially, I would like to thank Øivind Pran Kristensen for his comments on an earlier draft of this thesis.

Lastly, thank you to the interviewees who trusted me with their input, and for providing invaluable insights for the process.

Henning Undheim, Vienna, June 2026

Disclosure of Artificial Intelligence assistance

The author discloses the use of Artificial Intelligence tools (Google NotebookLM, Claude and ChatGPT) during the preparation and writing of this master's thesis. The use of these tools was strictly limited to supporting the writing process and improving linguistic clarity. No data, or primary analysis was generated by AI. The core ideas, critical arguments, data interpretation, and intellectual substance of this work belong entirely and fully to the author. The author remains fully accountable for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the entire thesis.

On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

Henning Undheim

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1. Introduction

“High North¹, low tension” has long been the Norwegian mantra for Arctic geopolitics. Despite promises of vast natural resources, possibilities of new, revolutionary shipping routes and the presence of both the United States and Russia, the region has long remained an arena of exceptional peaceful cooperation. In 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev announced the idea of an Arctic “zone of peace” in his famous Murmansk speech (1987, p. 6). This speech inspired a process that led to the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996 (Gricius & Fitz, 2022, p. 2), and the start of a period where the “High North, low tension”-mantra seemed to be a reality. Through the Arctic Council, the eight Arctic states; Russia, the United States, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and the Kingdom of Denmark, alongside six Permanent Participants (PPs) representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples, developed a framework for non-binding governance of the region. This cooperation has resulted in legally binding documents on search and rescue, oil spill preparedness, and scientific cooperation, negotiated under the auspices of the Council (Dyck, 2024, p. 2).

However, after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Council was launched into uncertainty. In March, the seven Western Arctic states announced a pause in all cooperation and activity in the Arctic Council. In their statement, the governments noted that the pause would continue “*pending consideration of the necessary modalities that can allow us to continue the Council’s important work in view of the current circumstances*” (Governments of Canada, Finland, Iceland, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the United States, 2022a). Work in subsidiary bodies without Russian participation was continued from June 2022 (Governments of Canada, Finland, Iceland, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the United States, 2022b), yet by the time Norway assumed the chairship in May 2023, Arctic Council activity was still severely limited (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 68).

A core aim of the Norwegian chairship was the survival of the Arctic Council (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, p. 3). During its two-year chairship from 2023 to 2025, Norway had to balance the clear Russian demands for further activity and cooperation with the position of the Western Arctic states, articulated through the two 2022 joint statements. Despite the difficult situation, activities continued to expand during the two-year period, and in May 2025 the reigns were handed over to the Kingdom of Denmark with a careful sense of optimism by the states, with several statements calling for continued development and enhancement of the Council’s work (Finland, 2025; Norway, 2025; Russian Federation, 2025; Sweden, 2025; United States, 2025).

¹ High North refers to the European Arctic, including the north of the Nordics and the north-western part of Russia, whereas the Arctic refers to the circumpolar Arctic region north of the Arctic Circle (Østhagen, 2023, p. 6)

In a world where great power rivalries are on the rise and with a sharpening of geopolitical tensions in the Arctic, as materialised by Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO, the Arctic Council has survived as an instrument for regional cooperation. This development was not a given, and speculations during 2022 questioned the viability of a circumpolar Arctic forum after the war in Ukraine (Koivurova, 2022). Alternative constellations, like an Arctic 7 (A7) consisting of the seven Arctic NATO states or a closer collaboration between Russia and China were floated in public and in academic literature (Gricius & Fitz, 2022; Koivurova, 2022). However, all member states have emphasised their commitment to keeping the Arctic Council as the pre-eminent forum for circumpolar governance (Arctic Council, 2025b, p. 2). As cooperation endures, the question of what value the Arctic states put into the Council, and why they have attempted to sustain it arises. Therefore, this thesis will attempt to answer the research question: *why did the Arctic states want to sustain the Arctic Council during the Norwegian chairship of 2023-2025?*

The research question relies on realist assumptions of international organisations as instruments of realising state interests. Therefore, it focuses on answering the role the Arctic Council has played in the member states' strategic interests in a time of great geopolitical upheaval. The Arctic Council stands out as an organisation that survived, while many other fora for cooperation, also in the Arctic, suspended Russian participation² (Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023, p. 7; Zhuravel & Timoshenko, 2023, p. 106). To answer the question, the thesis will first introduce the current state of the literature on Arctic geopolitics, before presenting its theoretical framework and methodology. Through primary and secondary literature, as well as anonymised interviews with central stakeholders, the thesis then goes on to present and analyse the strategic interests of the Arctic states and the role the Arctic Council plays in them, before presenting the developments within the organisation in the 2023-2025 period. Drawing upon the strategic interests of the states and the careful developments towards increased activity in the Council in 2023-2025, the analysis will deal with why the states acted in the way they did, and what interests the Arctic Council serves for them, before concluding that power considerations, Arctic identity and balancing against an emerging Chinese great power have incentivised the states to sustain the Council despite not fully restoring the cooperation.

2. Literature review

This chapter reviews the existing literature on Arctic geopolitics and the Arctic Council in order to situate the thesis within broader debates in international relations and contemporary history. It presents key scholarly and policy-oriented works on regional governance, with particular

² See f.ex. the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Council of Europe.

attention to how the Arctic Council has been understood as an institutional framework for cooperation among its member states. Given the significant geopolitical rupture created by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the chapter also considers how recent literature has begun to reassess earlier assumptions about cooperation, exceptionalism and conflict in the Arctic region. By outlining the main strands of this scholarship and their evolution over time, the literature review provides the analytical foundation for the research question and arguments developed in the chapters that follow, as well as situating the thesis within the literature. By looking at institutional cooperation in the Arctic through a realist lens, assuming self-interested, power-maximising states in an anarchic international system, the thesis will contribute to a broader and more explicit theorisation of Arctic cooperation.

2.1. Arctic exceptionalism

Prior to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, literature on the Arctic mainly revolved around the central argument of 'Arctic exceptionalism', describing the region as a region detached from normal, geopolitical conflicts (Gricius & Fitz, 2022; K  pyl   & Mikkola, 2015; Young, 2010). As highlighted by Conde Perez and Wood-Donnelly in the Preface to their book on Arctic governance, the origins of peaceful and cooperative governance of the circumpolar north have long roots, especially when taking into account Indigenous management of the region for millennia (2025, p. xxxiv-xxxvi). However, most literature highlight the speech of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987 as the start of a period of Arctic cooperation highly shaped by the notion of Arctic exceptionalism (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023; Dyck, 2024; Gricius & Fitz, 2022; Morrison & Bennett, 2024; Vishwakarma, 2025). K  pyl   and Mikkola describes Arctic exceptionalism as a concept of "a unique region detached from global political dynamics" characterised as an "apolitical space of regional governance, functional cooperation, and peaceful co-existence" (2015, p. 5). The Arctic is understood as a region where geopolitical tensions and rivalries are overcome for the benefit of cooperation on common challenges, especially highlighting marine management, environmental protection, climate research, and search and rescue (SAR).

As a ruling narrative, Arctic exceptionalism started showing cracks already after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. After this upheaval in Western-Russian relations, with following Western sanctions aimed, among other, at Russian Arctic infrastructure development, K  pyl   and Mikkola pointed to the flaws of the argument that the region is untouched by external developments (2015, p. 18). They argued that the conflict in Ukraine showed that external crises could affect the climate of cooperation in the Arctic, although not the Council directly. However, despite some criticism, the Arctic exceptionalism narrative persevered in literature, with some authors

even pointing to the resilience of a consensus-based organisation like the Arctic Council surviving a geopolitical rift like the 2014 conflict in Ukraine (Dyck, 2024, p. 3).

2.2. A return to geopolitical tensions?

With the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the following pause in most Arctic Council activities, however, the ability of external events to affect regional geopolitics became impossible to ignore. The war marked a rupture, not only for Arctic geopolitics, but also for literature on the Arctic Council (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, 2025; Conley, Arts, Glaser, Berzina, et al., 2024; Dyck, 2024; Goltsov, 2024; Gricius & Fitz, 2022; Hilde et al., 2024; Morrison & Bennett, 2024; Østhaugen, 2023; Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023; Vishwakarma, 2025). The initial period after the invasion was characterised by an abandonment of Arctic exceptionalism, and a search for new explanations and predictions on the future of regional governance. After the statements by the seven Western Arctic states first pausing all Council work, then relaunching projects without Russian participation, some scholars speculated in the potential for a new constellation, an Arctic 7 (A7) (Gricius & Fitz, 2022; Koivurova, 2022). Koivurova goes the furthest, arguing that, despite the statement on a partial resumption of activities, the Arctic Council was on a trajectory of disbandment in favour of an A7 constellation (2022). This narrative was also frequent in local media (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, p. 5).

During the October 2022 Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, the public narrative started to change towards a confirmation of the survival of the Council as a forum for all eight Arctic states (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, pp. 6–7), and this narrative has also come to dominate the literature (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023; Andreeva & Rottem, 2025; Dyck, 2024; Hilde et al., 2024; Vishwakarma, 2025). These authors start to argue that the member states have shown signs of a commitment to keep the Arctic Council alive, although how sustainable the status quo is on the long term is still quite uncertain.

2.3. Why the Arctic Council survived 2022

There are several explanations for why the Arctic Council survived this initial period leading up to Norway's assumption of the chairship in May 2023. Andreeva and Rottem, providing some of the most in-depth research on the Arctic Council after 2022, present some early strategic, interest-based explanations for the initial survival of the Council in 2022. They highlight the legal flexibility of the institution, the role it plays in Arctic states' own domestic-political strategies for the region, as well as foreign policy interests (2023). These foreign policy interests, they argue, include the ability of the Arctic states to be in control of the developments in regional governance,

mitigating the potential for non-Arctic powers' incursion into the region (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, p. 12).

Other scholars have pointed towards the core tasks of the Council and how they serve more material domestic interests when explaining its survival. Dyck, for example, argues that the crucial role Arctic Council cooperation plays in science and climate change research has necessitated further cooperation (2024, pp. 6-7). For states to tackle the threat of climate change to their polar regions, they need to cooperate on climate research. Seen in conjunction with Russia's importance for data collection, as it covers approximately half the region, the survival of the Arctic Council is seen as essential for this research. In Dyck's view, such science diplomacy does not only serve national interests in that it helps protect fragile regions from climate change, it also opened up an avenue for science diplomacy to rebuild trust among Arctic states, allowing for cooperation around common challenges again (2024, p. 8).

These explanations help us understand how the consensus-based, loosely institutionalised Council managed to survive the year following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, still under a Russian Chairmanship³. Through legal flexibility and material state interests at play, the authors explain why the Council survived the first phase after the war.

2.4. Potential for conflict in the Arctic

Another central question after the war in Ukraine has also been the effects of it on Arctic security overall, and whether this has impacted the Council. Within this debate, it is possible to identify two different narratives, each with its implications for the Arctic Council.

Some authors point towards the spillovers of the Ukraine war on Arctic security. Goltsov and Vishwakarma both argue that the war increased tensions between Russia and the West, and that it has exacerbated the many potential sources of conflict, leading to a more confrontational and tense security situation in the Arctic (2024; 2025). They point towards melting sea ice opening new opportunities for petroleum, minerals, and new shipping lines as potential conflict areas. Vishwakarma argues that we might even see a 'Scramble for the Arctic' resulting in military conflict, while still concluding that territorial and maritime borders are mostly solved in the region (2025, p. 354). However, whereas Vishwakarma is slightly optimistic for the possibility of overcoming a degradation of relations in the region through the Arctic Council, Goltsov renders it incapable of solving any of the new challenges he has identified (2024, p. 77). The view purported by Goltsov

³ The rotating position was known as Chairmanship up until Norway took over in 2023, changing the title to the more gender-neutral chairship.

and Vishwakarma, although sometimes differing, represents an overall pessimistic view on the state of Arctic security after 2022. Such pessimism spills over on the predictions for the Arctic Council as well, which is left little room in a world raged by the geopolitical dangers they identify.

Whereas these authors leave little room for cooperation in the new geopolitics of the Arctic, most recent contributions highlight a continued stability in the region despite heightened tensions (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023; Dyck, 2024; Gricius & Fitz, 2022; Hilde et al., 2024; Morrison & Bennett, 2024). These authors offer a more optimistic assessment that moves beyond Arctic exceptionalism while avoiding an overestimation of the effects of out-of-region shocks on the regional security framework. Within this view there are also differences, but the overall argument highlights the abandonment of exceptionalism for an explanation accepting that exogenous events affect the political realities of the Arctic, while still having limited effects on the strategic security framework. Morrison & Bennett argue that despite the war showing the ability of crises further south to affect regional geopolitics, the special circumstances of northern latitudes still “muffle” tensions, keeping the Arctic stable (2024, p. 13). The most optimistic explanation even argues that outside of the NATO memberships of Sweden and Finland and the pause in the Council, there are no real changes in the circumpolar security framework (Hilde et al., 2024).

However, most contributions acknowledge that the Arctic is also overall affected by the war in Ukraine, and that it has caused an increase in tensions between the Arctic states (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, 2025; Morrison & Bennett, 2024). Nonetheless, these authors still argue against the pessimistic view presented by Goltsov and Vishwakarma, in that the Arctic is and will remain stable due to the lack of real potential for conflict. The sparsely populated region with a harsh climate in which the geoeconomic interests of resources and shipping will remain difficult to benefit from for decades keeps the Arctic a stable, yet tense region. As the perceptions of the feasibility of Arctic resource extraction changes, so might also the Arctic security framework.

2.5. Explaining continued state support for the Arctic Council after 2023

As highlighted above, the question of why the Arctic Council survived the geopolitical rupture caused by the war in Ukraine has been widely debated in the literature. Existing explanations range from the importance of scientific cooperation and science diplomacy to the legal, political, and strategic flexibility of the institution (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023; Dyck, 2024). At the same time, much of the literature also agrees that the Arctic has become a more tense geopolitical environment following 2022 (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, 2025; Conley, Arts, Glaser, Berzina, et al., 2024; Dyck, 2024; Goltsov, 2024; Gricius & Fitz, 2022; Morrison & Bennett, 2024; Østhagen, 2023; Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023; Vishwakarma, 2025). Within this debate, scholars tend to

diverge between a more pessimistic view, which frames Arctic geopolitics as moving towards a new Cold War characterised by securitisation and resource competition, and a more optimistic view that highlights the continued lack of immediate conflict potential as a source of stability in the Arctic security framework, and thus also for the survival of the Council.

While this body of literature has provided important insights into the institutional resilience of the Arctic Council, it has largely focused on explaining why the organisation continued to exist, rather than how and why Arctic states have actively supported its development in a transformed geopolitical context. In particular, less attention has been paid to how Arctic states have reconciled increased geopolitical tensions and shifting security perceptions with continued political support for the Council as a multilateral forum. This gap is especially visible regarding the actions of the most strategically consequential actors, notably the United States and the Russian Federation, whose continued engagement with the Arctic Council challenges both pessimistic accounts of inevitable securitisation and more optimistic assumptions of straightforward institutional continuity.

Although Andreeva and Rottem point to strategic interests when analysing Norway's commitment to preserving the Arctic Council, the motivations behind the sustained support of all Arctic states, despite diverging security outlooks and heightened tensions, remain underexplored in a framework that accepts meaningful changes to the regional security environment. This thesis, therefore, builds on scholarship emphasising the continued relevance of Arctic multilateral cooperation, while also incorporating more critical perspectives that highlight shifts in Arctic states' strategic calculations following the war in Ukraine. By examining the development of the Council during Norway's chairship, the thesis seeks to explain why its member states have chosen not only to preserve, but also to actively sustain and adapt it in the aftermath of the 2022 geopolitical rupture.

3. Theoretical framework

This thesis relies on realist assumptions about how states act within international organisations. Traditionally, literature on Arctic exceptionalism has tended to analyse the Arctic Council through a liberal institutionalist lens, emphasising norms, institutional ties, and functional cooperation as explanations for the region's stability. Following the pause in the Council's work after 2022, explicit theoretical assumptions have become less frequent, yet some analyses continue to implicitly rely on liberal expectations about cooperation (Dyck, 2024). This chapter argues that realism serves as a necessary corrective to liberal interpretations by foregrounding state interests, security considerations, and strategic calculation in Arctic governance. Rather than viewing Arctic stability as evidence of norm-driven harmony, this thesis interprets cooperation as an outcome consistent with realist expectations of state interests.

The argument is based on the theoretical frameworks developed by Stephen Krasner (1982) and Sebastian Rosato (2012), forming a modified structural realist explanation of state cooperation within international organisations. While the liberal Arctic exceptionalism-framework continues to enjoy broad empirical support regarding outcomes, namely that the Arctic remains a comparatively stable and peaceful region (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025; Hilde et al., 2024; Østhagen, 2023), this thesis seeks to reinterpret these outcomes through realist assumptions. Within this framework, states are understood as the primary actors in international politics, shaping foreign policy according to the national interest (Krasner, 1982, pp. 185–186). International organisations are therefore not treated as ends in themselves, but as instruments through which states pursue strategic objectives (Krasner, 1982, p. 189). The core argument of this thesis is that stable and peaceful relations in the Arctic, as well as the support for a multilateral forum among the eight Arctic states, are not exceptional deviations from power politics, but rather the result of strategic cooperation designed to secure national interests and security through the Arctic Council.

The thesis builds upon the modified structural realist perspective, drawing primarily on Krasner's assumptions regarding interest-driven cooperation, while incorporating Rosato's account of international organisations as instruments of power balancing. This chapter will first present the interest-driven explanations for states cooperating within an international organisation like the Arctic Council, before moving on to the external perspective, discussing how power- and security considerations vis-à-vis external powers can help explain interest-driven cooperation.

3.1. Interest-driven cooperation

Stephen Krasner's modified structural orientation towards international regimes prescribes that states seeking to maximise their interests and power will form regimes in order to coordinate state action within specific policy-areas they see themselves benefiting from (1982, p. 191). Importantly, regimes emerge not because cooperation reflects shared norms, but because coordination enables states to achieve outcomes that would be unattainable or more costly through individual action alone. International regimes can thus represent rational institutional arrangements created and sustained by self-interested states operating under conditions of anarchy (Krasner, 1982, p. 192).

Within this view, the Arctic Council is seen as an organisation formed and sustained by the Arctic states to coordinate their policies in a way that realises national interests not possible to realise individually. The Council serves some clear national interests that are not attainable without cooperation, such as marine management, environmental protection and climate research

throughout the Arctic. Additionally, the Council can be seen as a way for Arctic states to secure their own management of the region (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, p. 12).

Pointing to the benefits Arctic states receive on environmental protection, climate research and more, this aligns well with liberal-institutional arguments for the benefits of cooperation (Dyck, 2024; Young, 2010). However, what separates the modified structural view presented by Krasner, and liberal-institutional explanations, lie in the underlying emphasis of security and sovereignty as core national interests. Policy areas cannot, within a realist lens, be compartmentalised into specific areas where the state benefits. The institutional cooperation must benefit the state interest overall, and this realist view would be far more sceptical of cooperation between NATO states and Russia solely based on climate data sharing or common management of fishing stocks. In the realist view, the Council also has to serve state security interests. The decision to sustain the Council, therefore, will have to be explained by looking at the national interest of states beyond the core tasks of the organisation.

Krasner's framework leads to some observable expectations on the functioning of the Arctic Council that seems to hold empirically. If the Council functions as a realist regime, one expects limited institutional autonomy, continued state control over decision-making, consensus-based procedures, and the avoidance of issues that could threaten core security interests. On all these points, the Council fits the expectations. Legally, it isn't an international organisation, but a political forum for the states to use to discuss common issues (Koivurova, 2022). The Ottawa Declaration puts few limits on the states' abilities to shape the Council's work, except for one clear exemption: the prohibition of dealing "with matters of military security" (Arctic Council, 1996). Thus, the Council is a loosely organised, state-centred discussion forum based on consensus, which is barred from discussing sensitive military-security topics, a description well in line with the expectations for interest-driven international cooperation. Basing itself on this understanding of international cooperation, the thesis assumes that cooperation only persists during periods of geopolitical tension when that institution continues to serve the strategic interests of its member states. The Council's endurance, therefore, must be seen in connection with the strategic interests the Arctic states see served through their membership.

3.2. External strategic interests

While Krasner's approach explains why states cooperate internally within regimes, Sebastian Rosato's theory helps explain how international organisations may also serve external strategic purposes. Rosato argues that states may use international organisations as instruments to increase their collective power relative to external competitors (2012). In this view, institutions can function

as mechanisms through which states pool their power to deter or defend themselves against a powerful enemy.

Rosato uses his theory to argue a structural-realist justification for the creation of the European Union as a response to the common threat of the Soviet Union (2012, p. 2). He argues that the creation of the EU served two main goals: balancing Europe against the Soviet Union, and balancing the two most powerful European states, France and Germany, against each other (2012, p. 2). The logic behind the argument is that states have an incentive to cooperate if their competitor is so overwhelming in power relative to them, that relying on one strong ally, in the European case Germany and/or France, would not be sufficient to prevent the potential hegemon from forcibly changing the balance of power (Rosato, 2012, p. 25). In this case, centralising power to manage the competition with the competitor is necessary, and the internal balance-of-power decides whether the institution becomes dominated by one power, or more evenly distributed. When evenly distributed, the main way for the states to secure effective competition with the overwhelming power will be ceding some sovereignty, to avoid being caught in gridlock (Rosato, 2012, p. 28).

The Arctic Council, of course, is not a supranational institution, and there is no obvious overwhelming external threat similar to what the Soviet Union was for European countries in the 1950's. However, the logic behind Rosato's theory will also inform the analysis of this thesis. Rosato provides a lens through which we can analyse the Arctic states' decision to cooperate within a balance-of-power framework. The lack of an overwhelming competing power would not render his theory unapplicable, it would merely explain why the Council is not a supranational institution. His balance-of-power framework could help explain the role non-Arctic states play in the strategic outlook of the Arctic states, who have been wary of their influence in the region, such as the claim of China that the Arctic Ocean is a 'global commons' (Conley, Arts, Glaser, Berzina, et al., 2024, p. 6). The interest in keeping regional governance in the hands of the Arctic states is also clearly expressed in the strategic and policy documents of all the states (Global Affairs Canada, 2024; Government of Iceland, 2021; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2020; *Redegørelse om samarbejdet i Arktis*, 2023; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023; The White House, 2022).

Therefore, Rosato's theory will form the basis of an argument adapting his analysis of the European Union into an Arctic context. The Arctic states, having expressed concerns of non-Arctic interests in the region, will in this framework have an incentive to pool their power, understood in

terms of both soft and economical power, together to ensure continued control over regional governance. This gives the Council an external balancing function in the interest-based foreign policies of Arctic states. Rosato, together with Krasner, provide a layered realist framework for analysing Arctic state interests in sustaining the Arctic Council. This thesis will draw upon their contributions when analysing and discussing the interests of the Arctic states in sustaining circumpolar cooperation.

4. Methodology

In order to analyse Arctic state interests and answer the research question, this thesis will combine document analysis of primary sources and academic literature with anonymised interviews. By drawing on these three main types of data state interests and behaviour will be described and analysed, before being discussed within the theoretical framework to respond to the research question. This chapter will explain the purpose of the data analysed, selection of data, as well as potential limitations connected thereto and how these will be mitigated.

First, the thesis utilises academic literature on Arctic geopolitics and the Council. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the resulting rupture in Arctic cooperation, scholarly attention to the region has increased. This literature provides the analytical and contextual foundation for understanding developments in Arctic governance. The main part of the literature stems from after the full-scale invasion, in order to provide an up-to-date assessment of Arctic geopolitics. Using both English- and Norwegian-language literature, the selection seeks to draw on different perspectives, including works from Arctic researchers and researchers established in non-Arctic institutions.

Second, the thesis analyses open-source official documents, including national Arctic strategies, official statements and meeting summaries. The selection was made with the aim of collecting the most up-to-date articulated Arctic foreign and security policy of each state. For most states (Canada, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden), this means one Arctic strategy document. Of these, the Canadian, Norwegian and Finnish strategies have been updated after the war in Ukraine. For Denmark, the most up-to-date policy is gathered through the written statement on Arctic cooperation provided by the Foreign Minister to the Danish Parliament in 2023 and 2025. And lastly, for the United States and Russia, the analysis relies on several documents to capture the breadth of the two largest Arctic powers' strategic outlook on the region. The US strategic documents consist of a White House, whole-of-government Arctic strategy (National Strategy for the Arctic Region), as well as a specialised Department of Defence Arctic strategy. The Russian Arctic policy is

defined through a foundational document and a strategy with implementation points. The thesis additionally draws upon the Concepts of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.

These sources are used to examine how Arctic states articulated their interests and justified their actions during the Norwegian chairship. The thesis also draws upon Arctic Council documents and documents produced by the Secretariat during the period of study. Due to the suspension of regular Arctic Council activities and the political boycott of Russia, however, the handover meeting in May 2025 remains the only official Arctic Council meeting during the Norwegian chairship. As a result, publicly available documents from within the Council is limited.

To address this limitation, the thesis thirdly draws on anonymised interviews with two Arctic stakeholders who are familiar with the political processes and discussions surrounding the Council during the period under study. The interviews were conducted in February 2026. The decision to anonymise interview data follows the wishes of the interviewees and common practice in previous Arctic Council research (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, 2025), and is intended to facilitate a more open discussion of politically sensitive issues and informal processes that are not captured in official documents. The interviews were conducted specifically for this research, and the interviewees were informed and consented to contributing to the study. For referencing throughout this thesis, the interviews have been chronologically numbered.

Together, these sources provide a basis for analysing the policy decisions and strategic considerations of Arctic states during Norway's chairship. Nevertheless, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the thesis examines a period that is close in time and marked by ongoing geopolitical uncertainty. This creates three related challenges: (1) a limited body of theoretically grounded academic literature; (2) continued political sensitivity surrounding Arctic cooperation, which may affect both official documents and interview responses; and (3) a rapidly evolving geopolitical context, which may influence both the data and the interpretation of findings.

Second, the thesis relies in part on translations of Russian-language sources that are not available in official English versions. Although important to understand Russian perspectives and assessments, this introduces the risk of linguistic inaccuracies or bias. Sources from the other Arctic states, however, are generally available in English, official English translations or Scandinavian languages.

These challenges are addressed through multiple data sources and a deliberate effort to include perspectives from different academic, political, and national backgrounds. This approach is

intended to strengthen the analysis while remaining attentive to the limitations inherent in studying an ongoing and politically sensitive process.

5. Strategic interests of the Arctic states

“Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States condemn Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and note the grave impediments to international cooperation, including in the Arctic, that Russia’s actions have caused” (2022a). This is how the seven Western Arctic states open their statement pausing all Council activities on March 3rd, 2022. The statement marks a profound change in the Arctic geopolitical environment and illustrates the swift changes in strategic outlook among the Western states. As highlighted by Dyck, Arctic cooperation had not only survived, but even thrived, during previous geopolitical crises. The Council continued its work and even agreed on the binding Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement in 2018, only four years after the annexation of Crimea (Dyck, 2024, p. 3). After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, the Western Arctic states, soon-to-be all NATO allies, saw it necessary to launch their foremost instrument for regional cooperation into uncertainty.

Following the joint statement, the A7 began to take shape as a political entity in regional discourse, unified in their wish to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and isolate it politically, also in the Arctic. The A7’s strategic coordination became functional in June 2022, when they announced a limited resumption of Arctic Council work (Governments of Canada, Finland, Iceland, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the United States, 2022b). This allowed for the continuation of those of the nearly 130 projects that did not require Russian involvement, an attempt at preserving the Council’s practical and technical work while maintaining Russia’s isolation (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, p. 5).

The deepening of relations among the A7 in the Arctic Council mirrored the changes happening in Arctic geopolitics overall. As Finland and Sweden joined NATO shortly after the war broke out, the circumpolar north transformed into a bipolar region, with Russia on one side, and seven NATO allies on the other, aiming to isolate Russia as much as possible. Russia has responded to this marginalisation with narratives that delegitimise decisions made without its participation, warning that the exclusion of it and its territory, accounting for half of the Arctic, renders regional environmental and economic governance impossible (Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023, p. 4).

Despite speculation on the A7 format deepening, the Arctic Council was not abandoned in 2022. While the A7 are now all NATO allies and security-militarily aligned, they remain driven by distinct national interests, ranging from climate data gaps to sovereignty protections, that motivated them to keep the Council on life support rather than seeking an alternative governing

structure. Russia, despite its isolation, has also chosen to stay involved in the Council's activities. The following chapter explores how these individual interests have taken shape and how they interact with the Council. Primarily based on Arctic strategies and policies, the chapter will present and discuss the strategic interests of the eight Arctic states. A central question will be how the Arctic Council fits within these interests. The chapter will first present the Nordic states, before discussing Norway's special position as the chair of the Council, working simultaneously with securing its own interests in the Arctic while also being responsible for the work of the organisation. Then, the chapter will present Canada, as one of the Council's hardliners in the question of cooperation with Russia, before moving on to the United States and Russia, as the most powerful and decisive voices in Arctic governance.

5.1. Nordic states

The Nordic states, Finland, Iceland, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, are five small, European Arctic states. Although often aligned in foreign policy, the Nordics is still a somewhat fragmented region, with only three of the five being members of the EU, a different constellation of three being NATO members at the onset of the war in Ukraine, and with different outlooks also on the Arctic (Stavridis, 2017, p. 251). However, as the smallest Arctic states, they share many core interests in the development of the region. In this section, the common Nordic interest for sovereignty, security and influence will be discussed, before a short look at the more specific interests of each state.

For the Nordic states, situated along Russia's western periphery, the war in Ukraine served as a stark reminder of their proximity to Russia and the security challenges it entails. Russia had not only demonstrated a willingness to use military force against a neighbouring state, but had over years systematically rebuilt its military presence in the Arctic (Vishwakarma, 2025, p. 353), with major installations such as the Northern Fleet positioned in close proximity to the Norwegian and Finnish borders. For Finland, Norway and Sweden, Russia poses the biggest security threat, and all see Russian military activity in the High North as a possible territorial threat (Stavridis, 2017, pp. 253–254). This has led to military buildups in the High North, as well as a strong emphasis on NATO deterrence capabilities in the north, especially after Finland and Sweden's entry into NATO (Stavridis, 2017, p. 253). For Norway in particular, the question of Svalbard, an Arctic archipelago with permanent Russian presence, is a source of conflict with Russia, who challenge Norway's claim of sovereignty over the archipelago's waters (Østhagen, 2023, p. 12).

For Denmark and Iceland, the security threat Russia poses is mainly a maritime one. Any potential Russian naval movements out of the Murmansk region into the North Atlantic would

necessarily pass through their territorial waters (Morrison & Bennett, 2024, p. 9). Iceland was, during the Cold War, even described as the US' "unsinkable aircraft carrier" (Stavridis, 2017, p. 251). Greenland, sovereign Danish territory, also saw concentrated American military presence during the Cold War (Stavridis, 2017, p. 252). Icelandic and Danish fears, therefore, are more directed towards the consequences of a full-scale war between Russia and the US, placing them in the middle of the North Atlantic theatre, whereas Finland, Norway and Sweden rather feel a threat of ground invasions. For Denmark, Iceland and Norway, the main security strategy towards Russia since the outbreak of the Cold War has been their NATO memberships.

After the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden saw a need to strengthen their security with the same deterrent. Faced with an increasingly assertive and unpredictable neighbour, they sought the hard security guarantees that only collective defence could credibly provide, joining NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively (Hilde et al., 2024, p. 2). From 2024, onwards, the backbone of Nordic security strategies has been the deterrence of a NATO membership, and by extension the Nordics' transatlantic relationships with the United States and Canada.

Yet, as small states, the Nordics face an enduring security challenge. A vastly overwhelming enemy on their eastern doorstep, and their main security guarantor all the way across the Atlantic, the Nordics have a clear interest in keeping the region stable and peaceful. Institutional frameworks that constrain great-power behaviour through rules and norms rather than through force serve as an additional defensive line against the dominating powers of the Arctic (Hilde et al., 2024, p. 3). Multilateral organisations and agreements grounded in international law serve small-state interests precisely because they impose costs on unilateral action and elevate the principle of sovereign equality in ways that bilateral arrangements cannot (Hilde et al., 2024, p. 3).

The Arctic Council has historically embodied this logic, offering a forum in which the Nordic states could shape regional governance and hold larger powers to shared standards of conduct. All Nordic states emphasise the role the Council plays in securing regional governance based on international law (Government of Iceland, 2021, p. 20; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025, p. 5; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025, p. 10; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2020, p. 5). In addition to the hard security guarantees of NATO-membership, international cooperation in general, and the Arctic Council in particular, help ensure Nordic security, sovereignty and influence in the region.

The Nordic states also share a set of significant economic interests in the Arctic that are partly shaped by a geographic fortune unavailable to other regional actors. The European Arctic,

moderated by the warming influence of the Gulf Stream, is considerably more accessible than its Russian or North American counterparts (Conde Perez & Wood-Donnelly, 2025, p. 571). Its ports remain largely ice-free year-round, its landmasses are inhabited and developed, and its exclusive economic zones has long supported commercial fishing that forms a cornerstone of Norwegian and Icelandic economies. This provides Nordic Arctic states with economic opportunities in business and research that is more difficult and costly in the colder and sparsely populated North American and Siberian Arctic.

Underpinning all of this is a robust Nordic interest in Arctic research and scientific cooperation. The relative accessibility of the European Arctic has made it a globally important site for climate science, ecology, and geophysical research, with institutions in cities such as Swedish Kiruna, Icelandic Akureyri, Norwegian Tromsø or Svalbard serving as important hubs (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025; Conley, Arts, Berzina, & Glaser, 2024). This scientific engagement also gives Nordic states advantages in multilateral negotiations, giving them a form of soft influence over how Arctic challenges are defined and governed at the international level. Additionally, it serves as a way for the states to attract foreign high-skilled labour to its strategically important northern regions.

With several aligning interests, the Nordic states also have differing outlooks that affect their stances on the Arctic Council. **The Kingdom of Denmark**, consisting of Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, entered the political crisis of 2022 with quite tense internal relations (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 73). The question of Greenlandic autonomy or even independence had been a thorn in the Copenhagen-Nuuk relationship for years (Stavridis, 2017, p. 252), and was only exacerbated by the struggle to agree on the position of Arctic ambassador to represent the Kingdom in the Council (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 73). The difficulty of unifying policies on the Arctic might also affect the official Danish Arctic policy. The Kingdom of Denmark is the only Nordic state without a valid Arctic strategy, with the previous one expiring in 2020 (*Redegørelse om samarbejdet i Arktis*, 2023, p. 1). Compared to its Nordic neighbours, the Kingdom also remains far more vague in its main expression of its Arctic policy, the Foreign Minister's Arctic statements. Here, he twice confirms that the Kingdom still sees a need for international cooperation in the region and the crucial role of the Arctic Council (*Arktisk redegørelse*, 2025, p. 2; *Redegørelse om samarbejdet i Arktis*, 2023, p. 2). However, the Foreign Minister does not commit to anything regarding future development save to "assess" further modalities in collaboration with its allies (*Arktisk redegørelse*, 2025, p. 2).

Iceland is one of the founding members of the Council, but its only Arctic territory is a small island with a population of roughly 100 people 80 kilometres off its northern coast (Britannica Editors, 2008). As the smallest and least populous of the Arctic states, Iceland has a special interest in retaining its regional status and relevance. In its Arctic strategy, the Icelandic government emphasises Iceland's Arctic status excessively, emphasising that the region can be understood in different ways, not only the areas north of the Arctic circle, making Iceland, in its own definition, the only fully Arctic state (Government of Iceland, 2021, p. 9). The government especially highlights the importance of the Arctic waters within its exclusive economic zone, yet Iceland's status as an Arctic Ocean littoral state is not always respected. When the Arctic coastal states came together in Ilulissat, Greenland, in 2008 to confirm their own "unique position" in governing the Arctic Ocean, Iceland was not invited (Young, 2010, p. 170). Therefore, a core aim of Iceland's policy is to assert and safeguard its Arctic status.

Sweden, alongside Iceland, is one of the two Nordic countries who have not updated their Arctic strategy after 2022. Their strategy from 2020, however, lays out the Swedish interests in the region in a pre-war setting, although recognising the already then increasing tensions in Europe and the Arctic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2020, p. 5). Without a direct border to Russia and no coastline to the Arctic Ocean, Sweden has, at least before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, been in a more stable security position than neighbours Finland and Norway. Therefore, the strategy highlights the Swedish interest in expanding cooperation with non-Arctic states in the Swedish Arctic, while ensuring that such cooperation has to be in the Swedish interest, following international law, and underpinning the responsibility of the Arctic states to manage the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2020, pp. 19, 24).

Finland, on the other hand, shares a long land-border with Russia, from 2023 onwards also NATO's longest border to Russia, and has long been weary of Russian intentions (Stavridis, 2017, p. 254). As the perhaps most vulnerable Nordic state in security terms, Finland's strategy reflects the two main strands of the Nordic security strategy: NATO deterrence of Russia and international cooperation to keep the region stable. The strategy commits Finland to support the Arctic Council as a circumpolar forum for eight Arctic states, but with the six other NATO-members as Finland's main reference group (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025, pp. 17–18). Finland also expresses scepticism towards China's growing cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, and frames it as a development with "implications for security in Finland" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025, p. 9).

Balancing security concerns, an interest in stabilising international cooperation and sustainable economic development, the Nordics balance Arctic policies aimed at increasing their influence in the region, while deterring Russia and keeping the security guarantee of NATO membership. All Nordic Arctic strategies emphasise the states' "responsibility" to manage the region, illustrating a view on regional governance emphasising their special rights in the region. The responsibility to manage the Arctic both implies special economic and resource-exploitation rights, such as fisheries management, shipping and maritime industries as well as research and scientific presence. It also implies their rights as small states to be included in the decisions about the region, such as through an emphasis of sovereign equality in the Council. In this way, Nordic states are able to attend to their security interests while maximising their influence in the Council, carving out a balancing strategy between the great powers dominating the Arctic.

5.2. Norway – balancing national interest with chairship coordination

Among the Nordic states, Norway's position and strategic manoeuvring during the 2023-2025 chairship stands out. As the chairperson, Norway got the difficult task of ensuring the Council's survival and operational capacity amidst the political boycott of one of its members. This section will focus on how Norway balanced its own national interests with the responsibility of being the central figure in the Council's way forward after the geopolitical rupture of 2022.

Like its Nordic neighbours, Norway's core interests in the Arctic are securing sovereignty, security and influence. The first point in the Norwegian Arctic strategy aims to secure "Norwegian freedom of action and influence in the High North", including protecting Norwegian interests from foreign interference, ensuring security and stability through multilateral cooperation, and securing the Norwegian "responsibility to manage" the Arctic region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025, p. 10). The Arctic Council has played, and continues to play, an important role in the Norwegian strategy to further these interests. The Council not only provides a framework for communication with Russia, it also provides a framework to interact with non-Arctic states on the terms of the Arctic states. Norway's position is that non-Arctic activity in the High North only be allowed when in alignment with Norwegian security interests, which explicitly means a restrictive attitude to Chinese presence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025, p. 17).

Russia represents the main challenge to Norwegian security interests, given the war in Ukraine and the two countries' shared land- and maritime borders. To manage this potential security threat, Norway's longstanding policy towards Russia in the High North has focused on stabilisation and

low tensions, also through institutional contact through the Arctic Council (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, pp. 74–75). This balancing strategy has been important to protect Norwegian security interests while keeping the relationship with Russia pragmatic and predictable. After the war in Ukraine, most arenas for communication between Norwegian and Russian authorities have been suspended or put on pause, increasing the Arctic Council’s role as a forum for institutional communication (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 75). Therefore, the Norwegian interest in keeping the Council functional and with continued Russian participation has deep roots in the longstanding balancing policy towards Russia. This imperative has, if anything, been strengthened by the war in Ukraine. Norwegian authorities, for example, has sustained bilateral cooperation with Russia on specific issues such as search-and-rescue and fisheries management in the Barents Sea (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 75), while stating in the 2025 strategy that Norway still has a need for “contact with Russian civil and military authorities” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025, p. 15).

The Arctic Council, therefore, serves an important role in Norway’s overall strategy for securing a “High North, low tension” scenario. Additionally, Norwegian interest in sustaining the Council also rests on the special status of the Northern Norwegian city of Tromsø, which hosts the organisation’s secretariat, as well as several Working Group secretariats and a broader polar research community (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, pp. 73–74). These presences not only provide important domestic political advantages of promoting international presence and economic activity in the High North, but they also support another central Norwegian security aim: vibrant local communities in the High North. Following the aim of securing Norwegian influence, the next two points of the Arctic strategy emphasise a “total defence” and “good and safe communities” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025). Norwegian security is strengthened, according to the strategy, by having vibrant and resilient local communities all over Norway’s Arctic, serving as a first line of defence as well as hosts for military installations and bases near the border region to Russia. This way, keeping an international Arctic hub in Tromsø serves security interests by making the region a competitive and attractive region for people to live and work.

When Norway assumed the chairship of the Council, therefore, it was in a special position. Coming from a region that had traditionally been served well by it and having several special interests in sustaining it to serve Norwegian security interests vis-à-vis Russia, Norway was in a position where ensuring the continued relevance of the Council had firm roots in Norwegian national interest. However, the Russian attack on Ukraine also challenged Norwegian security, and being at the forefront of an effort to keep a channel for communication with Russia open, was not

politically easy. Interviews have confirmed that the proactive and ambitious chairship, which aimed to renew cooperation where possible, had to be cleared at the highest political levels. This underlines that a small state like Norway, with a longstanding emphasis on multilateral work as a stabilising factor to its increasingly unpredictable neighbour in the east, saw its interests served best by taking on a possibly controversial role in pushing for progress in the Council.

5.3. Canada

Whereas Norway's historical approach to the Arctic Council has been described as going "from lukewarm to active proponent" (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 68), Canada's position could perhaps be described as the opposite. Following Gorbachev's speech on a peaceful Arctic, Canada was the main proponent for a regional international institution for environmental and science cooperation, and the founding document for the Arctic Council was in the end signed in Ottawa (Dyck, 2024, p. 2). Canada was a proponent for both the extensive environmental cooperation, as well as Indigenous involvement and co-decision making power in the Council, and has contributed heavily to the institution we know today (Dyck, 2024, p. 2). However, as the Council has developed, Canada has also followed what it calls a "principled stance against Russia", including boycotting meetings in Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Käpylä & Mikkola, 2015, p. 15). Canada, as the then Chair, even proposed setting Council cooperation on hold due to the Russian actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Koivurova, 2022). Although a staunch supporter of the Council, Canada has held its 'principled stance', also when it has negatively affected the work of the AC. This reflects the complex and sometimes counterintuitive Arctic policy of the second largest Arctic state.

Canada is a large country with vast Arctic territory, including the longest coastline of the world, of which 65% is Arctic Ocean coastline (Stavridis, 2017, p. 249). A core aim of Canadian policy is to ensure sovereignty over its vast Arctic territory. The cold, sparsely populated Arctic territory is hard to monitor, giving rise to sovereignty concerns similar to those expressed by Russia and the United States in Alaska. However, Canada is still in a fortunate position where its only neighbour is its closest ally. Answering a question of what Canada would do in case of an attack across the Arctic Ocean, the Canadian Chief of Defence jokingly responded "Well, Jim, I suspect my first duty would be search and rescue to save the invaders" (Stavridis, 2017, p. 249), highlighting the favourable geographical position of Canada. Therefore, Canadian sovereignty concerns have focused on the Northwest Passage, which serves its economic interests more than it revolves around security concerns (Goltsov, 2024, p. 66). Canada sees the Northwest Passage as its internal waters and claims full control over shipping passing through it. The United States and the EU, on

the other hand, claim the Passage to be an international strait, granting international actors more freedom of action in this potential new trade route (Stavridis, 2017, p. 251).

Despite a favourable security environment concerning its territory, Canada has long held what Stavridis describes as a “proprietary” approach to its Arctic territory (2017, p. 250). Canada has invested heavily in its operational surveillance and has held restrictive attitudes to foreign presence in its Arctic territory, including NATO (Hilde et al., 2024, p. 4). The fear is that increased allied presence would “undermine their stewardship” (Stavridis, 2017, p. 250). This is connected to Canada’s long-standing emphasis on asserting its sovereignty in the Arctic (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 17).

The fear of foreign interference in its Arctic region has especially been clear in relation to China. Canada has warned against Chinese scientific presence that could be considered dual-purpose, and been critical of Chinese involvement in Arctic governance (Dyck, 2024, p. 6). In its Arctic Foreign Policy document, the government also express concern about Chinese regional ambitions in general, and the increasing cooperation with Russia in particular. Canada sees the increasing cooperation between the two powers as a Russian departure from a policy of limiting the role of non-Arctic states in regional affairs (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 7). This is framed as a strategic threat to Canadian interests.

Canadian concerns for foreign interference have not hindered it from being a supporter of multilateral cooperation in the Arctic. However, Canada emphasises cooperation with other Arctic states, framed also, as by the Nordic states, as a “responsibility to manage” the region together (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 11). However, Canada goes further than the Nordic states. Throughout its Arctic Foreign Policy document, including in its own chapter, Canada talks about the strategic threat by increasing challenges to *Arctic states’ primacy*. The policy document states that a fundamental principle of Canada’s Arctic policy is “that the Arctic should be governed by the Arctic states in collaboration with Arctic and northern Indigenous Peoples” (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 15). With this term, which cannot be found in any other strategy document studied here, Canada asserts a regional structure that awards Arctic states with, as the Nordic states called it, a special status. The concept of primacy, however, signals a firmer stance than the Nordic concept of a special status, in that it asserts clearly that Arctic states are the primary actors, and that non-Arctic actors can only expect to be involved in regional governance as secondary actors.

For Canada, the Arctic Council remains the pre-eminent forum for international Arctic cooperation, and one that aligns well with its principle of Arctic states’ primacy. The Council also serves other central Canadian interests, such as ensuring Indigenous Peoples’ influence and co-

decision making, an issue Canada has been a champion of since the inception of the Ottawa Declaration. Therefore, the 2024 Arctic Foreign Policy repeatedly asserts Canada's commitment to the sustainment of the Arctic Council (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, pp. 11, 35). It additionally states that "Canada will not allow Russia's actions to undermine the integrity or functionality of this important body" and that Canada will continue supporting the Council financially, as "[t]his support is critically important as the council continues to increase its activities" (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 35). However, the government is clear on its commitment to keep holding Russia accountable and to continue its "principled stance". The policy also states that "[i]t is for Russia to create the conditions that will enable a return to political engagement and cooperation by ending its war in Ukraine and acting in accordance with international law" (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 30).

This provides Canada with a challenge. It sees its fundamental principle of Arctic states' primacy well served by the Council, an organisation that also suits Canada's interests and sensitivities to sovereignty well. However, without an end to the war in Ukraine, Canada is faced with the question of whether it is possible to ensure Arctic states' primacy without dealing with Russia directly.

5.4. The United States

With the purchase of Alaska in 1867, the United States became an Arctic state (Stavridis, 2017, p. 255). The purchase served mainly strategic-military interests, securing the US access to the Bering Strait and the Arctic Ocean (Conde Perez & Wood-Donnelly, 2025, p. 259). Especially during the Cold War, Alaska was an important arena for power projection vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. The main aim of its Arctic policy was deterrence and military security, protecting the homeland from the threats of the Soviets, as well as Communist China (Conde Perez & Wood-Donnelly, 2025, p. 264). However, as the Cold War started to thaw, so did the exclusive role of military security in US Arctic strategic thinking. Starting under the Reagan and Clinton administrations, but finally confirmed by the George W. Bush administration in 2009, the US began to see a need for a comprehensive security approach (Conde Perez & Wood-Donnelly, 2025, p. 264). The move indicates a reorientation acknowledging different security threats to the US, and especially to Alaska, such as environmental, economic and social security threats. The comprehensive approach to Arctic security has shaped US policy in a time where the region and the threats it facing has seen constant change due to climate change and renewed geopolitical tensions with both Russia and China.

Despite broadening its strategic outlook and concept of security, state security, sovereignty and territorial integrity, including in its maritime territory, remains of vital importance to the United States. Its Arctic region borders Russia in the Bering Strait and the Bering Sea, and due to the worsening of relations between Russia and NATO after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Alaska has regained an important military position in US security policy (Østhagen, 2023, p. 11). American fears have also centred on China's presence in the Arctic and its cooperation with Russia, as the two have conducted naval exercises off the Alaskan coast in recent years (Morrison & Bennett, 2024, p. 11; Østhagen, 2023, p. 11). This has naturally led to a build-up of US military capabilities in its Arctic, including situating one of the world's highest concentrations of F-35 fighter jets in Alaska (Morrison & Bennett, 2024, p. 10). Due to its sparsely populated area, vast distances, and cold and harsh weather conditions, coupled with a non-effective American ice breaker fleet (*Strategic Competition in the Arctic*, 2023, p. 2), Alaska remains a strategic vulnerability for the US, forcing a heightened attention to, and investment in, Arctic security.

In addition to its own North Pacific Arctic territory, the United States also play a decisive role in the security structure of the European Arctic. As the driving force in NATO, America serves as the ultimate security guarantor for Nordic NATO allies (Østhagen, 2023, p. 11). The entry into NATO of Sweden and Finland also completed the European Arctic security structure, giving the alliance a broader Arctic mandate, and the US an increased responsibility for circumpolar security and deterrence. This relationship to the European Arctic also serves American national interest by securing the US military access to the waterways the Russian Northern fleet would use in a confrontation with the US. The Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap, encompassing the territorial waters of these three NATO allies, are central to monitoring Russian naval, especially submarine, movements (Morrison & Bennett, 2024, p. 10; Østhagen, 2023, p. 10). The 2018 reactivation of the US Second Fleet, with the North Atlantic and European Arctic as its area of responsibility, is seen as an acknowledgement of the need for US naval presence in the High North (Østhagen, 2023, p. 10).

Despite a security policy heavily focused on deterring and containing Russian Arctic ambitions, the US often frames China as its main strategic challenge in the region (Morrison & Bennett, 2024, p. 12), as evidenced by its position as the first described strategic challenge in the Department of Defence (DoD) Arctic strategy (2024, p. 3). The suspicion of China in Arctic affairs started with the first Trump presidency, when then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned of Chinese aggressive policies leading to the transformation of the Arctic Ocean into "a new South China Sea" (Conde Perez & Wood-Donnelly, 2025, p. 311). The hostile approach to Chinese Arctic ambitions

has continued also during the Biden era, where both the White House and DoD strategy documents emphasise China as a strategic competitor (2022; 2024).

The scepticism towards Chinese Arctic ambitions also finds an outlet in American views on regional governance. Following the sentiment of its Nordic and Canadian allies, US strategy emphasises its “authority and responsibility for the stewardship and protection” of the Arctic, as well as the “primary responsibility” of all Arctic states to address the challenges of the region (The White House, 2022, pp. 5, 14). It also places security-related importance to these principles, as the DoD strategy includes a commitment to support the overall US efforts to “maintain the Arctic Council as the principal multilateral forum for the Arctic” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024, p. 12). The wording in its strategy documents, alongside its clear and expressed hostility towards Chinese efforts to take part in regional governance, signals an American support of the Canadian ‘Arctic states’ primacy’ concept, although not utilising the same term. US interests emphasise the eight Arctic states as the primary actors of the region’s governance, actively rejecting Chinese claims of the Arctic as a global commons.

The American embrace of the primary responsibility of the eight Arctic states has also influenced its strategic positioning in relation to the relationship to Russia in regional affairs. Whereas the United States, like its allies, condemn the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the threats it poses to US security and the international rules-based order (The White House, 2022, p. 6), its strategic documents showcase a considerably more pragmatic tone than many of its allies. While acknowledging that political or diplomatic cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, as of 2022, is “virtually impossible”, the US “recognizes that it may be possible for some cooperation to resume under certain conditions” over the coming decade (The White House, 2022, p. 14). Although this is likely not an unthinkable possibility in other Arctic NATO capitals either, the extraordinary is that the United States confirms it explicitly in its strategy document. The position is also confirmed through action, as the US has been clear in rejecting calls for alternative Arctic governance structures, like an A7 (Dyck, 2024, p. 3).

The American position has a strong basis in US strategic interests. The expansion of NATO in the region means that the US now leads one of two defined blocs in the Arctic. This not only clarifies the strategic structure of the region, but also gives the US, as the primary security guarantor of half the Arctic region, an increased interest in stability and pragmatic cooperation with Russia. The Arctic Council serves as a stabilising factor for the US and its allies, keeping a pragmatic dialogue with Russia that can prevent misunderstandings and mistakes from escalating into conflict (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, p. 12). The Council provides the Americans with an

opportunity to effectively manage the NATO-Russia relationship in the Arctic, while keeping China out of the region.

5.5. Russian Federation

With his call for an Arctic zone of peace, then-leader of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev laid the foundations for the international governance of the region. In his speech, Gorbachev called for extensive demilitarisation efforts in the European Arctic, including an offer to remove ballistic missile-equipped submarines from its Baltic fleet (1987, p. 6). On this basis the Arctic Council was established in 1996, but the hopes for a comprehensive, demilitarised regional cooperation structure was too much to swallow for the West, especially the United States (Dyck, 2024, p. 2). Nevertheless, the Soviet initiative led to a regional governance structure that placed Russia on an equal footing with the United States and its allies, and remained a structure Russia supported and actively participated in.

While the new Arctic Council gave new opportunities for cooperation, the Arctic remained important for Russian security interests. With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the 2004 NATO-entry of the Baltic states, the Northern fleet gained immense strategic importance as Russia's main access point to the world oceans (Hilde et al., 2024, p. 2). Like the North American Arctic, the Russian Arctic coastline is sparsely populated, and for the most part difficult to navigate due to ice and cold weather. Russia, therefore, also has sensitivities to sovereignty and territorial integrity, and ensuring these are still described as the primary national interest of the Russian Federation in the Arctic (President of the Russian Federation, 2023a, p. 3). As relations to the West soured after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, President Putin re-emphasised the role of the Arctic in the Russian security framework by creating a northern strategic command, encompassing the Northern fleet (Conde Perez & Wood-Donnelly, 2025, p. 284).

From then on, Russia continued building up and modernising its military presence in the Arctic, a process that was exacerbated by the entry into NATO of Sweden and Finland. With war in the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea surrounded by NATO-allies, the Northern fleet became the primary source of naval power projection in Europe and the North Atlantic (Hilde et al., 2024, p. 2). Russia increasingly sees its Arctic territories as a core part of Russian deterrence, power projection and great power status, signalled as well by the elevation of the Arctic to the second-most important region in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, second only to the "Near Abroad" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023, p. 24).

Despite this military buildup, and the gradually increasing confrontational relationship with the West, the European Arctic has remained unproblematic compared to other maritime regions

where Russia and NATO meet (Hilde et al., 2024, p. 2). Whereas the actions by foreign states to “obstruct” and “discredit” Russian interests in the Arctic are framed as the primary *challenges* to national security, the primary *threats* are defined in socioeconomic terms, such as population decline, lack of infrastructure, and environmental challenges (President of the Russian Federation, 2023a, pp. 4–5). As the source of a large part of Russian gas reserves and the coastline of the Northern Sea Route, the Russian Arctic is of immense economic importance, while still a socio-economically underdeveloped region. Therefore, the Russian Federation has a clear interest in keeping the region stable and peaceful, in order to further its own economic interests and attract foreign investments (Hilde et al., 2024, p. 2).

Russia’s need for foreign investment to build infrastructure in its Arctic region was a vulnerability the West utilised in 2014, when the post-Crimea sanctions targeted northern infrastructure investments (Goltsov, 2024, p. 70). In this environment, Russia looked towards China as a new investor, and the PRC has quickly turned into Russia’s most important and strategic trade partner (Conley, Arts, Glaser, Berzina, et al., 2024, p. 1). China has invested in Russia’s important energy sector, infrastructure for the Northern Sea Route, as well as become an important export market for Russian Arctic liquified natural gas (LNG) after the European market cut its imports after the full-scale invasion (Conley, Arts, Glaser, Berzina, et al., 2024, pp. 2–3). Additionally, the relationship has also taken on a military character, with cooperation on Arctic dual-use space technology (Conley, Arts, Berzina, & Glaser, 2024), scientific cooperation with heavy links to each country’s defence industries (Conley, Arts, Glaser, & Berzina, 2024), as well as increasing civil-military cooperation, such as naval exercises and coast guard cooperation (Conley, Arts, Berzina, Glaser, et al., 2024). The ‘pivot to Asia’ is also underlined in Russian strategic documents, where the 2023 updated version of the strategy contains a reference to a “multivector foreign policy” for the Arctic with the aim of preserving “mutually beneficial cooperation” (President of the Russian Federation, 2023b, p. 17). The Russian Senior Arctic Official (SAO) also made this clear in his remarks upon the end of Norway’s chairship, where he quoted President Putin that “we are prepared to collaborate not only with the Arctic states but with everyone who like-mindedly share responsibility for ensuring a stable and sustainable future and is capable of adopting balanced decisions” (Russian Federation, 2025, p. 2). Given the role China is already playing in the Russian Arctic, the government is, with these statements, signalling a willingness to deepen cooperation with China.

This move towards China has also been interpreted as an important policy change by Russia, who has, on the basis of ensuring sovereignty over its Arctic region, its minerals and hydrocarbons and the Northern Sea Route, followed a restrictive policy against any political or economic interference in its Arctic regions (Conley, Arts, Berzina, & Glaser, 2024, p. 1). The Canadian Arctic

strategy even highlights this policy shift, and frames it as a strategic challenge against Canada and the rules-based liberal world order (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 7). The policy shift leaves the question of how strong the new Arctic strategic alignment with China really is. Chinese investments and common military exercises are in Moscow justified as necessary, given the disappearance of Western investments and heightened military competition in the Arctic. However, Russia still holds the position that the Arctic states have a “special responsibility” for the governance of the region (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023, p. 24). Russian interests lie in utilising the strengthened strategic alignment with China to support the economic development of its Arctic region, but wider cooperation on regional governance would likely be misaligned with Russian sovereignty considerations for its northern territory.

After the announcement of the pause in Council activities, Russia was isolated in Arctic regional governance. This new reality challenged traditional foreign policy outlooks on the Arctic in general, and the Arctic Council in particular. The organisation had served Russian interests well, and had not only provided stability, peaceful interactions with Western states and an equal seat at the table with the United States, it also served Russian economic interests. Multilateral cooperation has been seen as opening up for international investments in the Russian Arctic, as well as contributed to the development of the Northern Sea Route (Andreeva & Rottem, 2023, p. 12). The Council obviously lost its role in securing these interests as the work was ground to a halt, sparking discussions in Russia about the benefit of continued membership. Russian decision-makers have clearly stated that any decisions made by the A7 without them are illegitimate, and have criticised the West for the collapse of Arctic scientific and economic cooperation, which negatively affects, according to Russian authorities, the West more than it hurts Russia (Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023, p. 6). However, calls for exiting the Council and/or intensifying relations with non-Arctic states like China and India have received little support, both in political and academic circles (Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023, p. 11). The Council still provides Russia legitimacy as an Arctic power. Opening new cooperation arenas with powers it cannot influence or control to a considerable degree, like China, is not without risk. In this light, Zhuravel & Timoshenko, in an article closely aligned with the official Kremlin narrative about the war in Ukraine, suggest closer cooperation with EAEU countries, while not advocating nor even mentioning cooperation with China in Arctic governance (2023, p. 114).

The Russian debate after the pause highlights well the strategic dilemma Russia is facing. Traditionally a strict protector of its sovereignty, connecting its Arctic identity to its great-power ambitions, it is left with no good options. Being sidelined and isolated in the Arctic Council is challenging Russian economic interests as well as its self-image as a leading Arctic power, whereas

opening for new, competing regional governance structures entails risking its sovereign control of its Arctic region. China's position that the region should be a 'global commons' directly contradicts the Russian standpoint of claiming the entire Northern Sea Route as "inland maritime waters" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023, p. 24). Giving the A7 free reigns in governing their half of the Arctic could also pose strategic challenges to Russia, as well as produce a situation where non-Arctic states with regional interests, such as China, India, or Japan, would have to choose between competing structures (Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023, p. 10).

In this scenario, most Russian decision-makers and academics have favoured a wait-and-see approach without drastic changes to Arctic governance structures (Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023, p. 10). However, Russia is in an uncomfortable position and has a clear interest in keeping its options open. Therefore, the government has deliberately chosen an ambiguous position to allow for manoeuvring over time. In the 2023 updated Arctic strategy documents, references to the Arctic Council has been removed (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 75). Yet, other references to maintaining the Council as the "leading regional association" (President of the Russian Federation, 2023a, p. 10), and calls for the "active participation [...] in the activities of the Arctic Council" remain (President of the Russian Federation, 2023b, p. 17). This ambiguity leaves Russia with options should the Western states take the Council in a direction that further damages Russian interests, as well as serving as leverage in negotiations in the organisation itself for further resumption of activities. While increased Chinese activities in the Russian Arctic is uncomfortable for Moscow, Russian authorities know that its Western counterparts also see this cooperation as a strategic threat to them.

6. Norway's chairship 2023-2025

When Norway assumed the chairship on May 11th, 2023, they took over an organisation bathed in uncertainty. There were no political dialogue, no diplomatic dialogue, and its technical Working Groups still were not meeting nor working on projects with Russian participation. However, interviewees have shared that the transition from Russia to Norway was still marked by relief and a careful optimism. The Council had survived its last year under the Russian Chairmanship, and the Arctic states had successfully transferred the chairship to Norway. Now, the process of guiding the Council through the new geopolitical situation could start.

The central challenge Norway faced as Chair was the expectation of some sort of 'neutrality' as the Council's coordinator. On one side, Russia had made clear that it deemed decisions made without them in the Council illegitimate (Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023, p. 4). On the other, the A7 states had drawn a firm political line in their 2022 joint statements, and any Norwegian move

perceived as rehabilitating Russia's position in the Council risked fracturing the Western alignment that underpinned Norway's own security interests. Norway's response to this dilemma was an ambitious, yet cautious approach. In the chairship programme, the ambition was to promote the Council's "stability and constructive cooperation", a formulation signalling a willingness to move forward on cooperation, while not promising anything specifically (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, p. 4). Morten Høglund, appointed as Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials, struck a similar tone, emphasising that they "hope to get as much of the important work of the Arctic Council going again, and [that] Norway will do its utmost to make sure that will happen as soon as practically possible" (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2023). This cautious but proactive posture defined the entire chairship.

This chapter will follow the developments in the Arctic Council through Norway's chairship term, from May 11th, 2023, until May 12th, 2025. Drawing upon official Arctic Council documents, statements by member state and Indigenous Peoples' officials, and anonymised interviews, the chapter will outline the political development of the Arctic Council, the decisions made and the debates taking place on its further development. The chapter will first address the initial period of the chairship and Norway's ambitions for its term, before moving on to the process of gradually resuming more circumpolar cooperation in the Council. The chapter will then look at the main outcomes of the chairship period, before discussing the final and concluding meeting held in Tromsø in May 2025, marking the end of the two-year chairship.

6.1. Assuming the chairship

Norway assumed the chairship based on the 2023 Salekhard statement, adopted by all eight Arctic states and the Permanent Participants at the conclusion of the Russian Chairmanship. The document, only one page long, shows clear signs of the difficult political situation, and mainly affirms the Council's historic role, approves its budget, and establishes that the Norwegian chairship will conduct its work based on the Council work plan adopted in Iceland in 2021 (Arctic Council, 2023). The limited political content of the statement, which was adopted by the Senior Arctic Officials and not the Foreign Ministers for the first time in the Council's history, reflects the limited contact between the states at the time. However, the fact that the states managed to agree on a statement, however short, was seen as a great victory for the resilience of the Council and provided the organisation with a careful optimism heading into the Norwegian chairship (interview 1; interview 2).

In their attempt at translating this optimism into a strategic plan for the two years, Norway chose to focus on the core functions of the Council (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

This would not only help the organisation move back into operation but would also showcase the benefit and usefulness of the Council for national policy and interests. Norway's focus areas were: the oceans; climate and environment; sustainable economic development; and people in the north (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

To accompany an ambitious work plan, the chairship settled on a strategy focused on transparency and functionalism. As the coordinating force, the chairship had to be able to talk to everyone. Therefore, it became an important principle that communication between the chairship and the states were open and transparent, making it clear that Russia received the same information as Norway's allies received (interview 1; interview 2). To make it possible to find solutions, Norway focused on making the Council function, making sure it served the interests of its members. Put together, the aim of the chairship was to rebuild a basic level of trust lost at the onset of the full-scale invasion. This trust would be necessary to be able to move the Council towards a 'reopening'. These efforts quickly focused on the Working Groups (WGs). The WGs are responsible for most of the technical and scientific cooperation in the Council, and for many of the projects and results that support scientific, environmental, and social interests within the states. A reopening of their work would be a substantial leap towards reestablishing a functional Council, that could still be seen as realistic in the given geopolitical circumstances.

6.2. Gradual resumption of activities

The chairship started a broad effort of gathering input and viewpoints to lay the foundation for a potential resumption of activities. In June 2023, the chairship met with the Secretariats and Chairs of the six Working Groups, as well as with the Council's Observers (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2024a). Interviews confirm that the chairship quickly upon taking over focused their efforts on resuming WG activities. The meetings in June, in combination with close contact with all eight Arctic states and six Permanent Participants, made it clear that there was also broad support for an 'opening' of Council activities, but with still present disagreements on how, and how fast (interview 1; interview 2).

Especially important in this phase was the contact with the Permanent Participants. Respondents have indicated that the process around the March 2022 pause and the following partial resumption in Summer were heavily state-centred, and the Council's Indigenous Peoples' organisations had been largely left out of the discussions. For the chairship, rebuilding trust and support for further reopening of the Council from the PPs was central to safeguard one of the unique features of its multilateral work, a feature also highlighted in all Arctic states' strategy or policy documents as a feature to preserve (Global Affairs Canada, 2024; Government of Iceland,

2021; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2020; President of the Russian Federation, 2023a; *Redegørelse om samarbejdet i Arktis*, 2023; The White House, 2022).

After having secured Arctic states', PPs' and other stakeholders' support, the chairship managed to secure consensus on modalities for digital WG meetings on August 29th, 2023 (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2024a). The agreement did not mean an immediate resumption of WG work but meant that the states agreed on how to move forward. The process was, however, slowed down by political opposition in certain Arctic states. Interviewees share that the processes around WG resumption was complicated by the overall difficult geopolitical situation, as even decisions about the technical cooperation in the Council's Working Groups had to be lifted to the political level in capitals. This led to conditionality, where the gradual roll-out of digital WGs had strings attached that slowed down the process (interview 1).

In February 2024, six months after the initial consensus on the modalities of digital meetings, the WGs finally started resuming their work in a gradual process (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2025). Through interviews it has been indicated that the main actors slowing down this process were the United States and Canada. Although it was evident that the Council agreed on the need to roll out WG activities again, it seems political processes in capitals played a decisive role in slowing down the process. To get out of this gridlock the Norwegian Foreign Minister reportedly had to intervene to convince the last holdouts (interview 2). The Norwegian chairship has been described as on the offensive, pushing hard for developments. However, they also received pushback, and after the resumption of digital WG activities, the message from one Arctic state was clear: no more (interview 1; interview 2).

The chairship was also pushing in other areas. As part of their efforts to rebuild trust and close cooperation with the PPs, the chairship hosted several in-person meetings of all PPs in Norway. The first ones, in Girkonjárga/Kirkenes in September 2023 and in Romsa/Tromsø in January 2024 included the physical participation of all PPs, including the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2024, 2025; interview 1). This was important, as it allowed for all Indigenous Peoples' organisations to meet despite the political boycott of Russia that had hampered cross-border Indigenous cooperation. It also signalled another step towards ensuring the Arctic Council as a functioning circumpolar forum. However, after the January 2024 meeting, RAIPON would not participate physically anymore (interview 1; interview 2).

By mid-2024, the chairship had achieved a resumption of Working Group digital meetings and twice gathered all PPs physically. These were small, but important steps towards a more functional organisation, and led to a description of 2024 as a year of hope for the Council's future (interview 1). This also led to expectations of further progress and a search for new opportunities to further enhance the functionality of the Council (interview 2). In September 2024, Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials Morten Høglund travelled to Canada (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2025). This is the only visit to an Arctic state by Høglund highlighted in Arctic Council Annual reports, and highlighted by Høglund himself as a useful format to “discuss new possibilities for Arctic Council projects” (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2024b). Given Canada's pushback during the process of WG resumption, the visit could be seen in connection to the efforts to push the reopening of the Council further.

However, despite having discussed “lessons learned working under the guidelines for virtual meetings” and Høglund being hopeful that “[his] perspectives on the way forward for the Norwegian chairship and Arctic Council as a whole will benefit from this visit” (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2024b), the rest of the Norwegian chairship did not see any substantial movements on the modalities of working together with all eight Arctic states, in Working Groups or elsewhere.

6.3. Chairship initiatives

Whereas the process around Working Groups was the main aim and focus of the chairship, they also worked in other areas to restore functionality. One way the chairship did this was through their chairship initiatives. The initiatives were projects and activities launched by the chairship itself, circumventing the need for agreement among the Council members. The initiatives were still open for all members to contribute to and was in interviews described as a way to bring the Council together in different formats and at different times, allowing for common work around common interests, without having common meetings.

The first of the two main initiatives was launched already in October 2023, and focused on wildfires in the Arctic (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2024a). The Wildland Fires Initiative sought to combat the growing problem of wildfires across the circumpolar north, a problem affecting all member states and Indigenous Peoples. They also launched a chairship Youth Committee in June 2024, working on shaping a youth conference in January 2025 (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2025). These initiatives followed the announced priorities of the Norwegian chairship, while also opening for input and involvement of all Arctic states. These initiatives were important to showcase that the Council was operational and functional despite the lack of political contact, and serving

interests shared by most Arctic states, environmental protection and youth inclusion, the initiatives entailed benefits for the states involved.

6.4. The 14th Meeting of the Arctic Council

On May 12th, 2025, Norway handed over the chairship to the Kingdom of Denmark (Arctic Council, 2025a). They handed over an organisation more stable and functional, with resumed technical cooperation and several initiatives and projects completed. However, the process had been slow, and the institutional progress was still limited to virtual meetings of Working Groups. When the Council met, again on the SAO level and not ministerial, they negotiated and adopted the Romssa/Tromsø Statement.

The statement is a remarkable stride from the 2023 one-page Salekhard Statement, consisting of six pages of substantial commitments, confirmations and instructions for the organisation. The Arctic states and the PPs affirm their commitment to strengthen peace, stability and security in the region, and commit to strengthen the Arctic Council's capacity (Arctic Council, 2025b). The document includes several references to a strengthened Arctic Council, and the states reaffirm their "collective ambition and responsibility to ensure that the Arctic Council is fully enabled to execute its mandate in a rapidly changing Arctic" (Arctic Council, 2025b). This showcases the consensus among the states that the Council has a future, and that it will have to continue expanding its work again to fulfil its role. Importantly, interviews have highlighted that the statement was a result of a negotiation process among the eight Arctic states and the PPs, showcasing a glimpse of the "Arctic spirit of cooperation" lost since 2022.

From the statements delivered at the meeting, Norway's role as chair was also highlighted by both states and PPs. SAOC Høglund was praised for his role in pushing the Council forward. The incoming Danish chairship thanked Norway for their "professionalism and determination" (Kingdom of Denmark, 2025), Canada expressed that Norway were "exactly the right state, with the right people, to have in the Chair" (2025), and Norway were also thanked for its "huge work" (Russian Federation, 2025), and "tireless efforts" (United States, 2025). Among the Permanent Participants, Norway was applauded for their "unique balancing act" (Saami Council, 2025), and Høglund personally was thanked for having "listened and positively responded to [...] advice on how to strategize to resume and continue the work" (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2025). The statements reflect that, despite pushes and pushbacks and difficult political processes, the Council gathered around the direction and process set forth by Norway. They also showcase a willingness to continue moving forward.

The statement of Russia stands out. Whereas most Arctic states express a careful optimism for further developments in the Council, Russia expresses the highest impatience with further movement. Quoting President Putin that Russia “[is] prepared to collaborate not only with the Arctic States but with everyone who like-mindedly share responsibility for ensuring a stable and sustainable future and is capable of adopting balanced decisions”, while stating that the upcoming Danish chairship will be “truly decisive for the Council’s future prospects”, Russian SAO Korchunov indicates an expectation for further developments in the organisation, and ambiguously signals a willingness to look at alternatives, should these expectations not be met (Russian Federation, 2025).

7. Analysis

The preceding chapter has followed the trajectory of the Arctic Council during Norway’s chairship; how Working Groups resumed working under virtual modalities, how the chairship worked with stakeholders, especially the PPs, to rebuild trust and transparency, and the careful optimistic endnote at the 14th Meeting of the Arctic Council in Tromsø in May 2025. The central question that remains is why the Arctic states acted in the way they did. Why did they decide to sustain the Council, working to gradually resume circumpolar cooperation, why did Norway push for this development, while the United States and Canada pushed back? Why did Russia decide to remain active in the Council, and what does its ambiguous signalling reveal about Russian intentions for the Arctic Council in the future? These questions will be addressed in this chapter.

Drawing upon the developments in the Council and the state interests identified in Chapter 5, this chapter will answer the research question of why the Arctic states decided to sustain the Council during the Norwegian chairship. First, the chapter will discuss the different positions the states held during the Norwegian chairship, and the role geography and geopolitics play in these positions, before discussing whether the Council represents interest-based cooperation in line with Krasner’s modified structural realist framework. Lastly, the chapter will discuss whether the Council can be seen as an instrument of external balancing in line with Rosato’s framework for cooperation as a balance-of-power phenomenon.

7.1. State positions

Through the developments in the Council identified in Chapter 6, we can see the contours of three distinct positions forming among the member states. The Nordics, headed by the Norwegian chairship, are the most outspoken proponents for limited pragmatic cooperation, whereas the United States and Canada seem to hold more hesitant positions regarding opening for more cooperation with Russia. Lastly, Russia is showcasing a non-confrontational, yet impatient stance

towards further developments, tolerating, for the time being, their isolation by the others. Although each member state follows their own distinct foreign policies, these three positions can help to understand the way interests, geography, and power shape Arctic governance.

For the Nordic states, their interests as small states for multilateral cooperation, as well as their proximity to Russia, give incentives to keep a pragmatic dialogue going. The Nordic positions are shaped by a need to both balance against and deter Russia. On the one side, a balancing strategy is intended to ensure security by balancing great powers against each other, ensuring a certain level of stability, thus avoiding conflict (German & Kakachia, 2022, p. 16). As small states situated between Russia and the US, a balancing strategy is aimed at keeping the Arctic region peaceful and stable, avoiding a conflict between the two powers erupting on or near the Nordic states' territories. On the other side, however, the Nordic states also need to deter Russian aggression, a security policy imperative that grew in importance after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Balancing these two security policy imperatives are visible in the Nordic states' policies, especially in the post-2022 strategies highlighting both a need to increase allied cooperation on Arctic security, while also emphasising the need for Russia in the Arctic Council and the need for a circumpolar multilateral organisation protecting their interests and influence in the region (*Arktisk redegørelse*, 2025; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025).

The Norwegian chairship became a vocal proponent of keeping the Council functional and seems to have received support for this position also from its Nordic neighbours. A dual policy of increasing NATO cooperation in the region, thereby increasing Nordic states' deterrence towards Russia, while pushing for pragmatic cooperation allows the states to follow a two-track foreign and security policy. A more confrontational Arctic has a high likelihood of affecting Nordic security interests and overall influence in the region, and maintaining and sustaining a basic level of pragmatic cooperation in the Council can therefore be seen as a vital security interests for the small states of the European Arctic.

For the North American Arctic, however, the imminent military threat of Russia is less obvious. Of course, the United States and Canada still have an interest in keeping the region peaceful and stable, yet the threat of military conflict spreading to their Arctic territories is less than that of the Nordics. A return to a Cold War scenario between East and West, however, is a threat especially the Americans are worried about (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 71). Russia's aggression against Ukraine is less easily compartmentalised into an Arctic setting. As a global superpower, Russia's attack is seen as an overall challenge of the US-led liberal world order, and policies

towards Russia therefore must be seen in this broader perspective. This lessens the incentive for pragmatic cooperation only in the Arctic, while the overall policy is isolation. For Canada and the United States, the geopolitical outlook is less threatening than for the Nordics, and their policies towards cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, therefore, is seen more as a part of an overall policy towards Russia than a policy aimed specifically on the region (interview 1).

In both countries' strategies, the need to maintain the Council is highlighted (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 11; The White House, 2022, p. 3), yet their practice during the Norwegian chair-ship seem to have been less pragmatic than its Nordic allies. This would indicate two things; (1) the US and Canada's policies towards the Council are shaped not exclusively by their Arctic strategies, but also by overall strategies vis-à-vis Russia, as also highlighted in interviews, and (2) assuming they are not acting against the intentions of their strategies, the slow and limited advancement of cooperation in the Council must be considered enough by Ottawa and Washington to sustain the institution. Whereas the Nordic states might be pushing for pragmatic cooperation due to their exposed geographical position and underlying worry of a Russian exit, the North American position could indicate a higher confidence in Russia's willingness to stay in the Council, allowing them to follow their overall policy of isolating Russia globally without compromising their interest in sustaining the circumpolar multilateral forum.

In finding their positions in the Arctic Council, the European and North American NATO allies are thus influenced by the perceived threat of Russia geopolitically. However, as highlighted by the position of the US and Canada, the perceived likelihood of Russia leaving the Council or otherwise taking steps detrimental to Arctic multilateral cooperation could also influence their positions. The Nordic states, as small actors, are more dependent on Russia's engagement in the Council for their interests than the US and Canada are, which could therefore influence their willingness to expand cooperation.

For Russia, the calculus is different. Unlike the Western Arctic states, Russia is not weighing how much cooperation with the other side to allow, it is weighing whether remaining in a forum where it is systematically sidelined still serves its interests. As established in Chapter 5, the Council has historically served Russia well, confirming its status as an Arctic great power with an equal seat at the table as the United States. The war in Ukraine is not signalling a wish to step away from this position, but rather a step towards re-establishing Russia's great power status globally. Therefore, leaving the Council would serve a crucial blow for the Russian self-perception and the way it seeks to project itself abroad, while simultaneously risking that the A7 consolidate a governance structure that excludes Russian interests. At the same time, the current situation is not cost-free for

Moscow. Being isolated in the Council undermines the great-power image membership is supposed to reinforce, and as signalled in both its strategy documents and at Tromsø, Russia's patience is conditional (President of the Russian Federation, 2023a; Russian Federation, 2025). Russia has therefore adopted a position of deliberate ambiguity, staying in the Council and pushing for renewed cooperation, while simultaneously developing alternative relationships that could serve as leverage or fallback options. This makes Russia a reluctant, but for now committed, participant. Russia is not satisfied with the status quo, but calculating that sustained, if constrained, membership serves its Arctic interests better than any available alternative for the time being.

7.2. Interest-driven cooperation?

We have seen how we can classify the positions of the eight Arctic states into three main positions, and how these are affected by their geopolitical outlooks. To fully understand why the member states have, to varying degrees and from different starting points, supported the sustenance of the Council, we will now look at the reasons for cooperating through Krasner's modified structural realist framework. To explain why the states have sustained the organisation, while simultaneously stripping it of most of its functional powers, we must look at whether the Council enables the states to ensure interests not possible to do alone. First, the subchapter will discuss the different theoretical perspectives on the Arctic Council's survival. Then, it will discuss how modified structural realism can explain the decisions to sustain the Council by looking at its functions and how it serves domestic political interests, before moving on to the role of identity and legitimacy as Arctic nations.

In his article, Krasner states that the basic precondition within a modified structural realist approach to regimes is that they only form "under restrictive conditions characterized by the failure of individual decision making to secure desired outcomes. The basic causal variables that lead to the creation of regimes are power and interest. The basic actors are states" (1982, p. 205). In his view, regimes can be formed by power-maximising states in an anarchic international system, but it will be limited to those situations in which individual action alone will not secure the desired outcome (1982, p. 192). This means a rejection both of the classic structural realist position that regimes have "little or no impact" (1982, p. 190), but also a rejection of the liberal-institutional view that regimes are a "pervasive phenomenon of all political system" (1982, p. 192). By outcome, the modified structural view would explain the Arctic Council the best.

Firstly, we have seen all eight Arctic states confirming their commitment to the Council, in strategy documents and in statements in the Council itself (Arctic Council, 2025b), contradicting the structural realist approach. Had the Council only been a sum of the interests of the eight Arctic

states, with no real impact on policy outcomes, the geopolitical rift and consequential divergence of interests between the West and Russia would be expected to lead to the breakdown of the Council. Secondly, if regimes are pervasive and have a direct impact on not only outcomes, but also on state behaviour and interests, the states would not have initiated a pause in the functional work of the regime. What we have seen is a deliberate decision by the member states to sustain a regime with severely limited functional responsibilities and powers, indicating that the states see the Arctic Council as a regime that can further certain interests they cannot achieve alone or in different constellations.

To test the feasibility of the modified structural view, we then must look at the relationship between state interests, the regime, and policy outcomes. What interests could the Council serve that the states would not be able to secure on their own? The main function of the Council is to work on issues such as climate, environment, research and science, as well as human health and safety (Dyck, 2024, p. 1). These are policy areas which are important to the states, highlighted in strategies and policy documents, and examples of policy areas it is much more difficult to achieve desired outcomes in alone. Data collection, effective cooperation around search and rescue in remote and harsh climate conditions, and coordination on cross-border environmental issues form the reasoning for Arctic cooperation. However, if the interests of securing knowledge about and operational capacity in the Arctic were central to the states' interests, we would not have expected the pause and following limited and slow resumption of WGs, which conduct the main work in these areas. Faced with the new geopolitical situation, the functional responsibilities of the Council alone were not the decisive interests in sustaining it.

Returning to Krasner's argument, therefore, we must consider whether there are other outcomes provided by the Council that states would not be able to secure on their own, and that they have shown themselves unwilling to compromise on despite the war in Ukraine. One point that arises among the states is a less material, yet important, aspect of Arctic cooperation. Six of the eight states explicitly define themselves as Arctic nations or countries (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 5; Government of Iceland, 2021, p. 9; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025, p. 6; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025, p. 4; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2020, p. 5; The White House, 2022, p. 5), indicating a wider meaning than their territories north of the Arctic circle. An Arctic identity is important for all eight states' self-image and is connected to their claims for a special responsibility for the governance of the region. However, who are considered Arctic and not is not necessarily a given. As previously mentioned, Iceland barely have any Arctic territory, yet claims to be the "only Arctic State that can be deemed to lie entirely within the Arctic" (2021, p. 1), and

it is not obvious that the future of the region should be decided in capitals such as Washington DC, Copenhagen or Ottawa, far away from the Arctic circle. The Council, therefore, becomes a legitimising force confirming each members' Arctic identity, both towards each other and towards other states. The emphasis on the Council as the "pre-eminent forum for circumpolar cooperation", as for example expressed in the Romssa/Tromsø Statement, highlights the importance the Council plays in defining regional governance (2025b).

Classical realist thinking does not leave much room for identity and norms in the development of national interest. However, with the clear connection between the identity as an Arctic state, the central defining power of the Council, and the power over regional governance that follows, the argument that identity has played a role in the Arctic states' decisions to sustain the Council could hold. It is not only an interest in realising its own self-perception, but rather an interest in having one's power and influence over the region confirmed by the rest of the international system. For this, the Arctic Council is still the main, and perhaps even only, institution that can provide this legitimacy. This would also explain why the states would have an interest in keeping the organisation even when it was not conducting its main work and providing the states the policy outcomes they sought when establishing it; by merely existing, the Council served to secure and enforce the Arctic states' claim to influence over a region with increasing importance in geopolitical and geo-economic terms.

7.3. External power balancing

The interest in sustaining the Council as a legitimising institution for Arctic statehood points, however, beyond the internal dynamics of the eight member states. If the Council confirms and enforces Arctic states' claim to regional governance, it does so precisely by drawing a boundary between those who belong and those who do not. The emphasis on "Arctic states' primacy" or the responsibility of the states to manage the region in all eight states' strategic documents highlight that this boundary between who's in and who's out is important for them (Global Affairs Canada, 2024; Government of Iceland, 2021; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2020; President of the Russian Federation, 2023a; *Redegørelse om samarbejdet i Arktis*, 2023; The White House, 2022). How can this strong emphasis on the common status of the eight Arctic states be explained? Krasner's modified structural realism does, with the introduction of some traditionally more constructivist arguments on identity, help to explain the interest in staying in an identity-confirming organisation, with several material interests served through this identity. However, when looking at the relationship towards

other, non-Arctic states, Sebastian Rosato's work on balance-of-power reasons for international institutions can provide valuable insights.

Rosato's work is focused on explaining the Europeans' decisions to establish a supranational organisation like the EU. He explains it as a balance-of-power consideration for the Europeans to be able to compete with an overwhelmingly powerful Soviet Union (2012, p. 2). Despite the Arctic Council not fitting these descriptions (it is definitely not supranational, there is no clear and apparent competitor, the United States and Russia are big powers who would usually not need to come together to be able to balance against or compete with any other power), Rosato's way of thinking of international institutions as instruments for power balancing in a world seen through a classical realist lens can help us understand the reasonings for the strong emphasis on Arctic states' role and responsibility for regional management. The logic of Rosato's argument is that states will come together in an institutional framework when they are faced with a competitor that is superior or overwhelming in power relative to theirs (2012, p. 23). Further, he argues that the bigger the relative power difference, the more likely the states are to make binding institutional frameworks limiting sovereignty (2012, p. 35), either through integration, like the European Union, or unification, like the Soviet dominance of the Warsaw Pact.

To test Rosato's theory on the Council, we first have to identify the state that serves as the Arctic states' competitor. Second, we must evaluate the competitor with Rosato's predictions for institutional character, before lastly evaluating whether this could help explain the decision by the states to sustain the Council as a balancing instrument against external, non-Arctic competitors.

Looking at the strategic documents, the easiest response to who the competitors of the Arctic states are, is simply non-Arctic states. By their emphasis on Arctic states' primacy, responsibility to manage and govern the region or their special authority over the stewardship of the region, the clearest line the states carve up is that towards the non-specified non-Arctic states (Global Affairs Canada, 2024; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025; The White House, 2022). In this light, the competitors could be defined as broadly as the rest of the international community, framing the Council as an exclusive club meant to keep everyone else out. This framing became clear when the states were admitting several new observers⁴ in 2013. The Norwegian Foreign Minister then stated that "it's better that they want to join our club than that they start another club" (Andreeva & Rottem, 2025, p. 76, *author's translation*). However, from Rosato's perspective, the rest

⁴ Observers in the Arctic Council are able to participate in the works of the Working Groups, but have limited to no political or diplomatic influence on the workings of the Council (Arctic Council Secretariat, 2026).

of the world is hardly a coordinated and unified enough group to provide a common strategic challenge for the Arctic states.

Therefore, the background to the Foreign Minister's answer about the Arctic 'club' is important. His answer was given within a context that heavily focused on whether China, specifically, would be accepted as an observer to the Council (NRK, 2013). China has been, and still is, singled out as a strategic challenger to Arctic governance by many member states (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 14; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025, p. 9; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway & Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, 2025, p. 17; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, 2020, p. 23; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024, p. 3). Even Russia, which has opened up for larger Chinese involvement in its Arctic region after the Ukraine war, has remained hesitant towards too much Chinese involvement (Morrison & Bennett, 2024, p. 15). China has called itself a "near-Arctic state", called for a "global commons" approach to the Arctic Ocean, and declared its ambition to become a "polar great power" by 2030 (Conley, Arts, Berzina, & Glaser, 2024, p. 2). These are stark challenges of the 'special responsibility' and 'stewardship' the Arctic states claim over the region. China, as an emerging great power, is a strategic challenger to the basis of Arctic regional governance, and a power that is capable of disturbing the balance of power in the region (Morrison & Bennett, 2024, p. 11).

However, an important distinction from Rosato's theory here relies on the form of power being utilised in the balance. Rosato mainly operates with defensive alliances against military threats, but in the case of the Arctic Council, it is obvious that even China cannot challenge the United States and Russia together, militarily. At the same time, however, the Council is not a defensive organisation where the members cooperate militarily, but rather a diplomatic cooperation around a core assumption that the Arctic is to be governed by the Arctic states. The challenge China poses is a diplomatic threat, a challenging interpretation of how the region should be governed diplomatically, and where economic and diplomatic power are the main avenues to potentially force through changes in governance. In such a light, it becomes more plausible that an emerging great power like China can challenge the Arctic states individually by economic or diplomatic coercion, although not militarily. In this view, China can be defined as a superior power capable of challenging each of the member states individually, but not as a collective. By cooperating diplomatically in the Arctic Council, the states protect themselves from potentially being coerced to open the region for more Chinese influence. Therefore, China can be said to follow Rosato's description of a superior power as a competitor that can only be challenged by a great power (2012, p. 24).

Rosato goes on to predict that states competing with a superior, but not an overwhelming competitor, such as the Soviet Union were for the Europeans, will form “decentralised coalitions” (2012, p. 25). He goes on: “Because each of them can, by definition, put up a good fight against the superior power on its own, a straightforward agreement to act together is enough to make their powerful adversary think twice about attacking them” (2012, p. 25). Rethinking the Chinese threat as something different than a military threat, this would mean that the Arctic states have an incentive to pool their diplomatic power, despite members such as the United States and Russia both being able to put up a ‘diplomatic fight’ over regional governance with China on their own, to avoid challenges against the status quo from being seriously pushed. Because the threat is limited, the states only form a decentralised coalition where “coalitional disunity is prevalent” (2012, p. 25), a description that very well fits the situation in the Arctic Council after 2022.

Here we can see the outline of an explanation for the sustainment of the Council in a limited format. China presents a clear diplomatic challenge to the status quo of regional governance. At the same time, the threat is seen as limited due to the strong diplomatic position of the eight Arctic states together. However, should the Council be disbanded or lose its pre-eminent position in regional governance, each state risks China utilising its power to get a diplomatic foothold in the region. The West would fear an even closer Sino-Russian relationship, which could involve military activities in the Arctic Ocean (Conley, Arts, Berzina, Glaser, et al., 2024). Russia would fear a consolidated A7, which could put China, but also other Arctic partners such as India in a position where they might see themselves benefiting more from partnerships with the A7, for example utilising the Northwest Passage instead of the Northern Sea Route (Sukhankin & Lackenbauer, 2023, p. 10). Seeing the Council through a balance-of-power lens would mean that the decision to keep it alive and with limited functionality makes sense to safeguard the region from an external challenger.

8. Conclusion

In May 2025, the Arctic states and the Permanent Participants reiterated “that the mandate of the Arctic Council is more relevant now than ever before” (Arctic Council, 2025b). Following an unprecedented challenge to regional cooperation, the eight Arctic states have shown themselves willing to sustain the organisation at a limited working level. This thesis has set out to answer why Arctic states decided to sustain the Arctic Council during the 2023-2025 Norwegian chairship. Drawing on a modified structural realist approach, combining the contributions of Krasner and Rosato and adapting them to the specific Arctic context, the thesis has shown that liberal expectations of cooperation have not materialised in the case of the Arctic Council, but likewise that structural realist assumptions that cooperation is unlikely between strategic competitors like Russia and

the United States also have not. The Arctic is not an exceptional region sheltered from the geopolitical ruptures on the global stage, but cooperation has nevertheless been sustained due to its strategic relevance for the Arctic states' interests.

The thesis has identified, based on state interests and their behaviour during the Norwegian chairship, three distinct positions within the Council. The small Nordic states, situated in between the greater Arctic powers, have actively worked to sustain pragmatic cooperation in the region to ensure stability and their own influence over the region. The United States and Canada, influenced by a safe distance from the Russian military threat in the north, have emphasised their global political strategy of isolating Russia, being wary of opening the door for Russia again too quickly. However, based on an interest in keeping the exclusive role of the eight Arctic states over regional governance, they have supported the Norwegian chairship's efforts to further expand the activities of the Council. Lastly, Russia, seeking to assert itself as an Arctic great power on an equal footing with the United States has sought to preserve its Arctic status and identity through the Council. At the same time, it has built leverage for a return to business as usual by increasing its economic, scientific and security-based cooperation with China.

Despite these diverging positions, the thesis has identified a common thread: all eight Arctic states have shown themselves willing to sustain an organisation that was no longer fulfilling its core mandate, revealing that the Council's strategic value runs deeper than its functional outputs. Whereas the war in Ukraine has eroded the trust between the West and Russia to the degree that normal, functional cooperation in the Council is impossible, the eight Arctic states stand united in their view of their own special role and responsibility for regional governance. The Council gives its member states a confirmation of their Arctic status, of their special privileges in the governance of a world ocean, and assurances that as the planet warms, the potential for resource extraction and globally significant trade routes will be governed by an exclusive Arctic 'club' of eight countries, rather than a global, multilateral process led by an emerging China.

It is here that the answer to the research question lies. Because the Council serves all eight member states' interests in confirming Arctic identity, legitimacy, and collective balancing against Chinese interference in regional governance, the states have chosen to sustain it, even without returning it to its pre-war functional capacity.

The findings of this thesis contribute both to the theoretical understanding of the Arctic Council and of international institutions more broadly, as well as the practical question on the future of Arctic international governance. The thesis has argued that a modified structural realist framework, traditionally focused on military power, can be extended to account for the role of identity and

legitimacy in driving state behaviour. Arctic identity, this thesis has shown, represents direct material interests, shaping who governs the Arctic Ocean, its shipping routes, and its resources. In doing so, the thesis bridges structural realist and constructivist explanations without abandoning the interest-based logic at realism's core. This has broader implications for how scholars of international relations think about the survival of international institutions under geopolitical stress. The conventional expectation, from structural realist and liberal perspectives, is that institutions either collapse when great power interests diverge or survive because they continue to deliver functional outputs. The Arctic Council does neither. It has survived precisely because its strategic value is greater than its functional output and has been sustained by a combination of identity-based interests and collective external balancing against China. This suggests that the toolkit for analysing institutional survival under geopolitical pressure needs to be broader than either theoretical tradition currently allows, and that the interaction between identity, legitimacy, and balance-of-power logic deserves greater attention in the IR literature on international regimes.

The findings of this thesis also carry practical implications for the future of the Arctic Council. If China continues to assert its ambitions as a 'near-Arctic state' and 'polar great power', the eight Arctic states share a common interest in maintaining the Council as the pre-eminent forum for regional governance, one that keeps decision-making in Arctic capitals rather than opening it to a broader international process. This shared interest has proven resilient enough to survive even the geopolitical rupture of 2022, suggesting that the Council's foundations are more durable than its functional difficulties might indicate. However, that durability is not unconditional. It rests on all eight states continuing to see the Council as the most effective vehicle for asserting their Arctic influence, and for Russia, that calculation remains deliberately ambiguous. As the war in Ukraine continues, the West faces a difficult balance: continuing the isolation of Russia risks pushing Moscow further towards China, potentially undermining the very coalition the Council represents. The organisation's future, this thesis suggests, is dependent on all eight states continuing to see membership as serving their interests better than any alternative.

The questions raised by these findings, particularly around Russia's long-term calculations and the durability of the anti-China coalition, also point to the limitations of what a single thesis can resolve. Firstly, the thesis has relied on two anonymised interviews as data, especially for the inner workings of the Council during the period of study. With a broader interview basis or as more documents are released from archives, findings on state positions could be revisited in further research shedding clearer light on the debates and discussions taking place within the Council. Secondly, the theoretical framework of this thesis, while providing useful new insights into the study of the Arctic Council, also raises new questions that would deserve attention in further

research. The original use of Krasner's and Rosato's theories adapted with contributions traditionally associated with constructivism would require further research to test its validity and usefulness outside of the Arctic context. Additionally, as highlighted in the literature review, an explicitly theoretical discussion on the Arctic Council has been scarce in the literature. Although this thesis argues that structural realist and liberal explanations are insufficient on their own, more theoretical analyses from different theoretical perspectives would contribute to understanding the Arctic Council's survival and sustainment better. One interesting avenue could be the role of the Permanent Participants, functioning almost as state actors in the Council, who in a state-centric realist perspective is given little attention. However, research on their role in the Council during this crucial time in its history could provide interesting insights into how non-state actors influence international institutions under geopolitical stress.

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