NATO's Quest for Ontological Security: Securitizing Russia in the Arctic

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Abstract

The article examines how NATO has strategically and symbolically addressed disruptions to its ontological security due to Russia's military build-up in the Arctic and its aggressions in Ukraine. Based on an engagement between ontological security and securitization perspectives, the article argues that NATO's intentional and unconscious securitization acts towards Russia have addressed its material threats and ontological anxieties. Demonstrating the intersection of the material and psychological aspects of securitization, it highlights how NATO has engaged in a security-oriented role in the Arctic and constructed Russia as an abject/other to reaffirm its "self" as a united, reliable, and values-driven collective defense alliance. This dual approach has reflected NATO's reflexivity in balancing strategic and ontological needs to respond to evolving security dynamics. Analyzing NATO's Summit Declarations, Strategic Concepts, and press releases on the Arctic and Russia, coupled with interviews with NATO officials, the article reveals three major themes the Alliance has used to securitize Russia as a threat: to the "Euro-Atlantic stability", "the Arctic peace", and "international law and values".

Keywords: Alliance anxieties, abject other, Russian aggression, strategic narratives, securitization of subjectivity

Introduction

The rising geopolitical competition has transformed the Arctic, once identified as a peace zone, into a space of potential conflict among major actors, notably Russia and NATO. The advent of new maritime routes and the accessibility of previously unexplored natural resources have increased rivalry for control over strategic assets, weakening the established frameworks of regional stability, better known as "Arctic exceptionalism" (Gjørv and Kara 2019). This shift has challenged NATO's sense of continuity and predictability regarding the region stemming from multilateral agreements and cooperative security routines with Russia.

Russia's ongoing military build-up in the Arctic, aggressive actions in Ukraine, and increasing alliance with China have undermined NATO's routines and basic trust structures and provoked its ontological security, which refers to the actors' ongoing need for a solid sense of self to cope with anxieties and uncertainties created through ruptures in routinized practices (Mitzen 2006a, 2006b; Steele 2008).

The Arctic's shift into a contested space has compromised NATO's "self" rooted in its foundational purpose as a united, reliable, and values-driven collective defense alliance and its "identity" as a promoter of stable borders. Based on Browning and Joenniemi (2017), emphasizing the distinction between self and identity has been crucial for understanding the adaptability and reflexivity of NATO to address external pressures in times of ontological insecurity. To alleviate its anxieties regarding the evolving dynamics in the Arctic, NATO has reevaluated the nature of its relationship with Russia and its Arctic strategy. It has readjusted its post-Cold War "cooperative security" focus to a more security-oriented role to enhance its deterrence capacities by conducting large military exercises, increasing defense spending, and encouraging Finnish and Swedish membership, namely deterrence-by-denial (Wieslander, Adamson and Lehto 2023). Such an identity shift has reflected the Alliance's reflexivity and adaptability to preserve a consistent self rather than simple strategic defense needs for NATO.

To reaffirm its collective self, NATO has also used securitization as a discursive and practical tool to present the Arctic as a potential ground for conflict with Russia. Drawing on its autobiographic narratives embedded in shared myths, selected tragedies, and glories, NATO has identified Russia as an "abject", namely other/enemy, to transform its existential anxieties into manageable concrete threats (Kinnvall 2004; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023). The emphasis on intersubjectiveness that enables the conceptualization of anxiety as a relational and interpersonal phenomenon (Mitzen 2006a; Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020) is crucial to understanding the transformation of political issues intersubjectively into security issues.

From an ontological security perspective coupled with the securitization approach, this article examines why Russia's engagement in the Arctic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has endangered the Alliance's ontological security, leading to its symbolic and strategic engagement in the region. The ontological security perspective offers valuable insights to examine how NATO has unconsciously identified the Arctic as more than short-term security concerns or a mere location for physical defense but as a symbolic significance to reaffirm its unity, stability, and strategic posture. On the other hand, the securitization perspective provides a useful framework for examining how NATO, seeking to address material threats, has intentionally securitized Russia in the Arctic through speech acts and strategic measures.

Combining these two theoretical approaches speaks to the literature critically examining the interplay between securitization and ontological security perspectives (Kinnvall 2004; Croft 2012; Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Floyd 2024; Gellwitzki and Price 2024; Ku and Finch 2024). This article contributes to the recent research highlighting how securitization has strategically been used to address material threats and unconsciously support actors'

need for stable "self" and routinized relationships (Floyd 2024; Gellwitzki and Price 2024). Underlining the interaction between these material and identity-driven functions, Gellwitzki and Price (2024), for instance, examine the potential of successful securitization in addressing the psychological needs of the actors by channeling anxieties into a concrete object (fear). Assuming fear to be dynamic, flowing, and accumulative, thus liquid, they hold that liquid fear can function both as an unconscious and intentional securitization tool used by securitizing actors to fulfill material and ontological needs. Investigating the differences and similarities between societal security and ontological security, Floyd (2024) argues that securitization is not necessarily bad and can provide ontological security in some circumstances. Browning and Joenniemi (2017) highlight how using securitization to attain ontological security runs the risk of fixing rigid identities, thus limiting the reflexivity and adaptability required for practical solutions. The article addresses this criticism by offering that the distinction between the self and identity effectively prevents the fixation of identity in a rigid structure, enabling NATO to sustain its collective sense of self while adjusting its various identity roles.

Moreover, the dual approach advances both perspectives by offering a holistic understanding of how NATO aligns its strategic, practical actions in the Arctic with its existential concerns about its self. In other words, while the ontological security perspective draws attention to the underlying psychological and self-based concerns that drive NATO's actions in the Arctic, the securitization perspective concentrates on how NATO, in practice, constructs security threats and validates its responses in the region. Integrating psychological-driven security concerns with material policy solutions, this dual perspective helps better explain how securitization helps NATO to preserve Alliance unity for more assertive policies, such as resource allocation for Arctic security, military posture, and regional surveillance.

This article also contributes to the ontological security literature by extending the level of analysis beyond state actors to international organizations. Engaging in a state-level analysis, studies on the ontological security of India, Russia, the United States of America (US), Indonesia, Turkey, and Japan have examined several aspects of the ontological security-foreign policy relations and the routinized conflictual relations between states (Zarakol 2010; Chacko 2013; Edenborg 2017; Akchurina and Della-Sala 2018; Hansen 2018; Nguitragool 2020; Kazharski and Kubová 2021; Purayil and Purayil 2021; Adısönmez and Onursal 2022; Gustafsson 2022; Kayhan-Pusane and Ilgıt 2022). In addition to the growing research on the state-level analysis, the ontological security concerns of international organizations, particularly the European Union (EU), have been addressed (Della-Sala 2017, 2018; Alkopher 2018; Kinnvall, Manners and Mitzen 2018; Ejdus 2022).

Despite the ongoing studies on international organizations' ontological security, NATO has remained an understudied topic in the literature. This article examines NATO's quest for a coherent "self" and its corresponding response to adapt to a changing geostrategic environment in the Arctic. As NATO's concerns and search for ontological security determine its actions that shape international politics, gaining an understanding of NATO's self-perception and its

reaction to rising security concerns in the Arctic is essential not only to understanding its historical antagonistic relationship with Russia and the future direction of the Euro-Atlantic security but also the Alliance's efficacy and durability in the international system.

This paper examines NATO's speech acts within its broader autobiographic narratives that contextualize and support the securitization process. It considers speech acts performed within contexts shaped by narratives that reflect shared values, collective memory, and historical experience, namely well-established stories the audience is familiar with.

To reveal the speech acts embedded in such broader narratives, the article has obtained its data by examining NATO's official documents, statements, annual reports of the General Secretariat, and secondary sources, focusing on the period since 2014 when the Russian annexation of Crimea has increased the uncertainty and unpredictability for the Alliance. Despite the diverse interests and conflicting foreign policy priorities of member states, NATO Strategic Concepts and Summit Declarations, representing the common will and consensus within the Alliance, have provided valuable insights into revealing NATO's self, identity, strategic objectives, worldview, and narratives vis-à-vis Russia. The article has gained depth by clarifying these insights in interviews conducted by four NATO officials in February 2024. The analysis of the data retrieved from these resources has revealed that NATO's securitization constructed Russia as an abject/other-enemy based on three major themes: Russia "poses a threat to peace in the Euro-Atlantic region", "presents a threat in the Arctic", and "violates international law and the values of the rule-based order".

The article presents the findings in three sections. The first section covers the core concepts of ontological security and securitization perspectives. The second section examines the changing structure of the Arctic region that NATO has perceived as a challenge to its self and thus readjusted its identity into a more security-oriented role. The third section explores the speech acts embedded in broader narratives that NATO has used to securitize Russia to ensure its ontological security.

Main Insights of the Ontological Security and Securitization Perspectives

Scholars of International Relations have embraced the ontological security that emphasizes actors' innate desire for a coherent and logical sense of who they are (Giddens 1991; Laing 1960). Going beyond the traditional notion of state security that is concerned with safeguarding a state's territory, Mitzen (2006a; 2006b) and Steele (2008) have identified security as "being" rather than "physical survival" and emphasized how states strive to preserve a strong and consistent sense of identity in a complicated and ever-changing international system. Recent studies have begun to problematize key terms in the ontological security perspective, including concepts of self, identity, anxiety, and critical situations that are considered to play crucial roles in affecting how a state perceives itself and acts in a way that opts for stability or change (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020; Krickel-Choi 2022; Deacon 2023).

In the ontological security literature, clinging to routines or maintaining consistency in biographical narratives and foreign policy decisions emerge as predominant patterns regarding actors' preference for stability over change. Criticizing such an approach due to a lack of separation between identity and self or between neurotic and normal anxiety, Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020) and Krickel-Choi (2022) have argued that rather than putting over-emphasis on actors' need to maintain the status quo and preserve their identity, specific divisions are required to explain the issue of change and agency better. Browning and Joenniemi (2017) have also insisted on an analytical separation of self and identity.

Regarding ontological security, the self is the fundamental nature of an actor across time, acting as a point of reference for comprehending and managing the outside world. It is conceived as the essential sense of existence, the inner compass that maintains adaptability in the face of external change (Krickel-Choi 2022). Unlike the self, which is thought to have internal consistency, identity is perceived as more contextual and flexible, reflecting the different roles and characteristics that actors take on or have been assigned depending on the situation (Krickel-Choi 2022). Building on Laing (1960) and Giddens (1991), Krickel-Choi (2022: 2) has conceptualized the self in terms of "personhood; that is, as referring to a person who relies on the framework to affirm their reality, manage anxiety and develop identities". Considering identity as just one dimension of ontological security, Krickel-Choi (2022) has highlighted that ontological security cannot be reduced to identity issues. Endorsing such an approach, Browning and Joenniemi (2017) have also considered ontological security as more about an actor's capacity to deal with anxiety and change rather than identity.

According to the ontological security perspective, anxiety emerges with the destabilization of routines and connections actors trust (Mitzen 2006a; Rumelili 2015; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017; Berenskoetter 2020; Ejdus 2020). Considering disruptions in foreign policy routines as triggering anxiety, some scholars find ontological security impossible to meet (Mitzen 2006a). In contrast, others assume that it is possible, for instance, through the securitization of others or by adjusting narratives (Krickel-Choi 2022) or by shame management (Steele 2005) or recourse to humor (Brassett, Browning and O'Dwyer 2021). This article holds that NATO seeks to reaffirm its ontological security by securitizing Russia and readjusting its identity and biographic narratives.

From an ontological security perspective, narratives briefly refer to actors' stories about themselves (Steele 2008). Relying on positive self-image, narratives establish a state's perception of its function and objective in the global order and suggest acceptable strategies (Subotic 2015). Serving as a link to explain a state's past, present, and future actions, narratives form a meaningful whole, give meaning to context, and promote cognitive stability by ensuring the predictability and consistency of the outside world (Kinnvall 2004; Berenskoetter 2014; Della-Sala 2018). In ontological security terms, to eliminate uncertainty and the ensuing anxiety, an actor is expected to adopt new or revised narratives to reassure the ontological security of the self. Accordingly, NATO has responded to Russia's ambitious actions in the Arctic and Ukraine by presenting these issues as existential dangers to the Alliance's self,

identity, and core values rather than just material/physical threats. This process has prompted NATO to readjust its narratives to frame Russia as an other/enemy while promoting its "self" as built upon the defense of its core values -collective defense, democracy, global human rights norms, and liberal economic values intimately related to its ontological security.

Developed by Copenhagen School pioneers in the 1980s, the securitization perspective presents a subject as an urgent existential threat to a certain referent object, thus creating an extraordinary situation outside the conventional political framework (Waever 1995; Buzan et al. 1998). This approach relies on a securitizing actor presenting a problem as a threat through speech acts and ensuring that the target audience accepts this threat as presented. According to the Copenhagen School, securitizing actors are individuals or groups with positions of authority that legitimize the fulfillment of measures or actions (Buzan et al. 1998). It emphasizes the special role that political elites, intelligence services, armed forces, bureaucrats, government organizations, and interest groups play in defining and implementing security (Waever 1995; Buzan et al. 1998).

While the traditional securitization approach of the Copenhagen School focuses on the shift from the political to the security sphere through the concepts of securitizing actors, referent objects, target audiences, and extraordinary measures, contemporary literature addresses it with a broader and critical perspective. Instead of limiting securitizing actors to states and elites, the Paris School extends it to include technocratic and professional actors (Bigo 2020). It shows that security is shaped not only by discourses but also by the everyday practices of these actors (Balzacq et al. 2010). Defining security as more than just a protection mechanism, the Welsh School emphasizes securing people's rights and freedoms through emancipation. The Welsh School demonstrates how securitization processes can contribute to systemic inequalities and limit individual freedoms by adopting a human-centric approach that transcends conventional state-centric and survival-oriented frameworks. Apart from the common perspective of these three schools in challenging established traditional perceptions of security socially and intentionally and addressing preferences with political implications (Browning and McDonald 2011), this article highlights the unconscious use of securitization to channel anxieties.

Revealing the emotional dimension of securitized subjectivity, Browning and Joenniemi (2012) evaluated securitization as an ontological security-seeking strategy. Explaining this connection precisely through the Lacanian concept of the unconscious, the ontological security perspective emphasizes that the "other" exists in our minds through our imagination. It highlights that individuals are connected through emotional intersubjectivity, which leads to the co-construction of self and other/enemy (Kristeva 1991). From an ontological security perspective, the enemy/other refers to the unconscious, rejected part of the self, in other words, "abject", which becomes an essential component of collective identity formation when the familiar "stranger" is abruptly perceived as a threat in times of uncertainty (Kinnvall 2004). From this perspective, such a transformation results in the intersubjective securitization of subjectivity as a defense mechanism against the abject. As an ontological security tactic, securitization constructs the self by creating fear objects (the other) to turn existential fears into manageable concrete threats (Croft 2012). The ontological security perspective considers this

process as being reinforced through myths rooted in chosen traumas and glories, which reflect shared ancestral events and provide comforting narratives to the self to manage ontological insecurity and existential anxiety (Volkan 1997; Kinnvall 2004).

These various perspectives highlight the different political consequences of securitization strategies, demonstrating how securitization is a political process that significantly affects trust among actors, societal unity, political systems, and foreign policy orientation. For instance, the Copenhagen School concentrates on the political elites' consolidation of power and evasion of democratic accountability, while the Paris School emphasizes normalizing security practices' monitoring and control. Moreover, Gellwitzki and Price (2024) pay attention to the unintended emotional consequences of fear on actors by utilizing the term "liquid fear", which they argue to decrease trust among actors, to polarize society, and to increase the level of insecurity among the population. Based on the ontological security perspective's emphasis on the role of shared threats in drawing a distinct line between the "in-group" and "others" and inspiring collective action, this paper holds that securitization can trigger populism, xenophobia, or aggressive foreign policy. Notably, negative and discriminatory narratives toward others may impede reconciliatory efforts to normalize relations, triggering cycles of instability for actors that strive for ontological security.

Drawing from these theoretical insights that move beyond the intentional aspect of the Copenhagen School's understanding of securitization through the ontological security's concept of unconscious, the paper turns to the Arctic context, which has become a focal point of NATO's existential concerns.

The Arctic Context that Triggers NATO's Ontological Insecurity

Since its foundation, NATO has been committed to collective defense, liberal democracy, and a stable, rules-based international order (NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2024). Maintaining this "self", namely, its fundamental sense of continuity, predictability, and purpose within the global system, is essential to its ontological security. Thus, NATO adjusts its identity, reflecting the particular roles and operational methods the Alliance undertakes to conform to the changing geopolitical and regional circumstances. For instance, undertaking a regional stabilizer role, NATO recalibrated its identity in accordance with the cooperative security framework that characterized the Arctic in the years following the Cold War. NATO prioritized "cooperation" in its relations with Russia. Through platforms like the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) in 1991 and the Arctic Council in 1996, it promoted a biographical narrative of trust, partnership, and multilateralism in the Arctic.

The Arctic Council provided a crucial platform for the eight Arctic states to develop collaboration through various initiatives, including naval exercises between the US and Russia in the Barents Sea, Ilulissat Declaration in 2008, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable in 2010, coupled with agreements on maritime search and rescue in 2011 or maritime oil pollution response in 2013 (Byers 2017; Lambach 2020). By upholding routines that strengthened

NATO's identity as a stabilizing agent and a cooperative partner, these practices promoted the Alliance's ontological security. In its official documents, NATO often promoted Russia as a partner in creating peace and stability in Europe (Sperling and Webber 2017; Sloan 2020). For instance, in its 2010 Strategic Concept, NATO (2010) expressed its commitment to enhancing ties with Russia based on mutual interests, such as missile defense, counter-terrorism, and advancing global security. Such narratives grounded NATO's Arctic involvement in a common goal of stability, even with a former enemy like Russia.

However, this regional cooperation known as the "Arctic exceptionalism" has been disrupted by two significant developments: Russia's militarization of the Arctic and its aggression in Ukraine, posing a threat to NATO's ontological security. As for the former, climate change has substantially influenced Russian interest in the Arctic. Easier access to natural resources and abundant mineral reserves, the emergence of new shipping routes, including the Northern Sea Route and the Northeast and Northwest Passages, and the melting of ice have amplified the geopolitical value of the region (Gulledge et al. 2012; Bjola 2013; Keil 2014). The emergence of such economic opportunities has attracted the interest of various actors in this region, including states, international organizations, and major oil companies such as Shell, Cairn Energy, Exxon, and Rosneft that seek to exploit the area's abundant natural resources (Blunden 2009; Bjola 2013). Moreover, the possibility of new trade routes being used for military purposes has increased the risk-prone structure of the region.

Acknowledging that the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is critical for global shipping because of its cost and time efficiency, Russia has substantially stepped up its presence in the region (Council on Foreign Relations 2014). Emerging as one of the most prominent regional players, Russia has requested to expand its exclusive economic zone to encompass the Lomonosov Ridge and Mendeleev Ridge in the Arctic by claiming sovereignty over these areas in its 2001 Maritime Doctrine (Parnemo 2019). Russia has also extended the size and frequency of military exercises to preserve its interests in the Arctic. It established the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command and increased military spending to enhance its operational capabilities (Klimenko 2016). Furthermore, as highlighted by Rob Bauer, the Chair of the NATO Military Committee (Edvardsen 2023), and another NATO official (personal interview, February 2024), Russia has reactivated Soviet-era military bases, constructed new ones, modernized its second-strike nuclear capabilities on the Kola Peninsula, and furthered its military capacities in the region by strengthening its air defense systems and anti-ship missiles. Russia's growing assertiveness and expanding presence in the Arctic has distorted NATO's routines and trust and transformed the region, once essential to NATO's self-image as a reliable collective defense alliance, into a source of ontological instability.

The second development that has increased NATO's ontological anxieties has been Russia's growing aggression in the international system, particularly its involvement in the Ukrainian crisis. After Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014 and its military intervention in Ukraine in 2022, NATO began to perceive Russia as a threat not only to its objective of ensuring the security of its members (in a traditional sense of security) but also to its values.

Russia's actions in Ukraine and the Arctic have clearly and concretely demonstrated its objections to the existing international order, dominated by Western values (Sloan 2022; Flockhart 2024). Threats to the global rule-based international order that ensure predictability and prevent uncertainty by uniting diverse interests of states under a common set of values caused a sense of anxiety within the Alliance that transcended mere fear. Defined as "a state of uncertainty and insecurity" by Cupać (2020) and "feeling of inner turmoil in the face of uncertainty" by Ejdus (2020), anxiety has made NATO feel uncertain about Russia's future actions and the potential consequences thereof, creating doubt about NATO's self-perception, more importantly, its place in the global rule-based international order.

Presenting Russia's annexation of Crimea as a profound betrayal of the trust established between the two over the last 20 years through the Rome Declaration, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the Basic Document of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, NATO (2014a; 2014b; 2021), has suspended cooperation with Russia on both civilian and military levels. Instead, it has shifted to securitizing it as a danger to the Alliance's security (NATO 2021; 2022b; 2023c). The primary NATO documents, including summits of heads of government and strategic concepts adopted as of 2014, have revealed that the securitization of Russia has become NATO's new routine (Sperling and Webber 2017). Within the framework of this new routine, NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow pointed out in 2014, "Clearly, the Russians have declared NATO as an adversary, so we have to begin to view Russia no longer as a partner but as more of an adversary than a partner" (Burns 2014). Such explanations illustrate how the Alliance has engaged in securitization of subjectivity to frame Russia as an abject to NATO. As explained below, NATO's securitization has been built upon three major themes.

NATO's Securitization of Russia to Preserve the Ontological Security of Its "Self"

Russia Threatens Peace in the Euro-Atlantic Area

One of the significant speech acts that NATO has repeatedly used to securitize Russia has been the claim that Russian revisionist and destabilizing actions have been posing a grave threat to Euro-Atlantic security (NATO 2019; 2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2022g; 2023c). NATO has presented Russia's annexation of Crimea as a principal challenge to its vision of a peaceful and united Europe and identified Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as a potential sign of a further attack, particularly on its Eastern and Baltic members (NATO 2014b; 2023c). Specifically, Russian actions such as provocative military activities along NATO borders, frequent breaches of NATO Allied airspace, its extensive modernization of strategic forces, its nuclear rhetoric, and its large-scale military exercises have been framed as a serious threat to the stability and security of its members (NATO 2016; 2018b; 2021; personal interview, February 2024). NATO (2021) has also presented Russia's diversification and modernization of its nuclear arsenal together with short- and intermediate-range missile systems as strategic attempts to intimidate

and coerce NATO. By identifying Russia as the abject/other, such speech acts rooted in the broader narrative of the Alliance as a defender of global peace and stability have aimed to stabilize and reaffirm NATO's self rather than merely reflect its physical security anxieties.

NATO (2023c) has also claimed that Russian unlawful, hostile, and aggressive actions threaten the international economy, the well-being of billions of people worldwide, nuclear safety, the environment, food security, and energy. NATO (2021; personal interview, February 2024) has also blamed Russia for undermining Euro-Atlantic stability through hybrid activities, including election meddling, extensive disinformation campaigns, and malevolent cyber activities. NATO (2023c) has added political and economic coercion and unlawful and disruptive actions of the Russian intelligence service as further evidence of Russia's engaging in hybrid actions against NATO member states. Such a comprehensive securitization of Russia has been extended to Russia's activities in the Arctic region, which has been portrayed as vulnerable to Russian aggressiveness.

Russia Poses a Threat in the Arctic

The Arctic has emerged as a strategic and symbolic space for NATO's securitization of Russia. Highlighting the escalating tension in the Arctic region due to the economic opportunities arising from climate change, NATO (2022g) has presented Russia as an authoritarian regime contributing to this tension through its potential use of military aggression or intimidation to advance its interests. Identifying Russia as an offensive force that can use military power regardless of international law, NATO has claimed that Russia can also act aggressively in the Arctic. The Chair of NATO's Military Committee, Rob Bauer, has explicitly expressed concern about the need to ensure that the strategically important Arctic region remains free and open to international shipping:

> "The increased competition and militarization in the Arctic region, especially by Russia and China, is concerning. The melting ice in the Arctic is creating new sea routes that would facilitate the movement of large vessels and shorten navigation times. We cannot be naive and ignore the potentially nefarious intentions of some actors in the region. We must remain vigilant and prepare for the unexpected" (NATO 2023d).

In its recent Strategic Concept, NATO (2022a) has described Russia's newly developed military capacities, aggressive attitude, and provocative behavior in the High North as a strategic challenge for the entire Alliance. More specifically, NATO has presented Russia's escalating activities and militarization steps in the Arctic, such as the deployment of submarines, launching a new naval strategy committed to the protection of Arctic waters, and introducing hypersonic Zircon missile systems into its Northern Fleet as concrete evidence of Russian potential threat to the security and stability in the Alliance (NATO 2019; 2022g; personal interview, February 2024). NATO has also identified Russia's threats to violate the demarcation agreement with Norway, which regulates the shared maritime border in the Arctic

Ocean and the Barents Sea, as a direct danger that Russia poses to Alliance members through the Arctic (NATO 2022f).

In addition to Russia's growing military capacities and provocative behavior, NATO has identified the intensification of Russia-China collaboration in the Arctic as an additional threat (Edvardsen 2023; NATO 2022g; 2022h). To confront the perceived threat from this collaboration, NATO (2018a; 2020b; 2022e; 2023c; personal interview, February 2024) has promoted the consolidation of its reliable relationship with traditional and like-minded partners such as the EU. To bolster stability in the Baltic Sea and strengthen its voice in the region, NATO has also insisted on the membership of Finland and Sweden, which have significant air capabilities, large armies, advanced defense industries, high-level talent, well-organized defense forces, and strong democratic institutions that can help patrol and monitor the Barents Sea or the North (NATO 2022d; 2022g; 2022i; 2022j; 2023a). By calling these countries closest partners, NATO (2023c) has pointed to their reliable and peaceful identity that shares common values with NATO, such as protecting peace, freedom, and prosperity.

Such speech acts have been reinforced by the narratives that have revoked and reproduced Cold War-era anxieties of member states. By highlighting that the shortest route for Russian bombers and missiles to reach North America goes through the North Pole, NATO has reminded a major dangerous issue reminiscent of the Cold War period (NATO 2022h; 2022j). Highlighting that the Arctic region remained a frequent theatre for military forces throughout the Cold War, Rob Bauer (Edvardsen 2023; NATO 2023b) has expressed that: "We must prepare for the fact that conflict can present itself at any moment and in any domain, including the Arctic. The Russian threat can also come from the High North". Such narratives that have recognized the Arctic's strategic significance during the Cold War have reflected deep-rooted ontological anxieties of member states about Russia.

Russia Violates International Law and Values

Another vital speech act used for NATO's securitization of subjectivity has been the claim that Russia has been weakening the international order by breaking accepted moral and ethical norms and international law that NATO strongly respects (personal interview, February 2024). Such a speech act has been grounded in the broader narrative that NATO is a moral actor upholding common values such as the rule of law, individual liberty, human rights, and democracy, as well as respecting the goals and objectives of the United Nations Charter (NATO 2014b; 2016; 2021; 2022e). In its Brussels Summit Communiqué (NATO 2018b), NATO has promoted itself as leading by example in defending human rights and democracy. Such a framing has constructed Russia as the opposite of what NATO represents in terms of values.

Based on a narrative of moral superiority, NATO (2022b; 2023c) has presented Russia's use of armed force against civilians, deprivation of fundamental human services to Ukrainians, conflict-related sexual violence, and forced displacement of children as further evidence of

its violations of international humanitarian law. NATO (2022e; personal interview February 2024) has also blamed Russia for bearing full responsibility for the humanitarian catastrophe disproportionately affecting women and children in Ukraine. With this focus on the poor human rights credentials of Russia and its violation of international law, NATO has framed Russia not only as a potential military threat but also a civilizational threat eroding the rule-based international order and its whole set of underpinning values that NATO seeks to defend relentlessly in ontological security terms.

Articulating such a positive self and negative other representation, NATO has constructed Russia as a potential threat in the Arctic and called for stronger regional engagement as a logical policy priority. Concerned over the spillover effects of Russia's increasing military activities in the Arctic, NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, stated that NATO must prioritize its military build-up and presence in the Arctic (NATO 2022h). As will be explained below, in several summit declarations, NATO (2016; 2018b; 2021; 2022d) has underlined the importance of adopting strategic measures such as enhancing its deterrence and defense capacity to respond to the deteriorating security environment and ensure stability and security in the entire Euro-Atlantic area.

NATO's Growing Presence in the Arctic through Exceptional Measures

As stated, NATO's anxieties in the Arctic have been more about eroding trust vis-a-vis Russia than a lack of capabilities (Flockhart 2021). NATO has opted to address its trust issues through military means to ensure that its identity as a regional stabilizer will serve its collective self as a reliable defense organization. NATO's shift to a more security-oriented role reflects its flexibility and adaptability in changing geopolitical conditions. NATO has implemented this role by emphasizing a more proactive Arctic strategy.

To facilitate its growing military presence in the region, NATO has initially proposed a unified collaborative Arctic strategy instead of the country-specific approach historically employed by member states to ensure collective preparation for potential crises among member states. NATO (2020a) has also highlighted the need to increase situational awareness throughout the Arctic in its NATO 2030 report. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau expressed that Russia's decision to invade a peaceful country and undermine a rules-based order has shifted their perspective on the Arctic (NATO 2022h). These statements were followed by a breakdown of the existing cooperation initiatives, such as Russia's exclusion from the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable and the cessation of military cooperation, including the Arctic Chiefs of Defense Conference and "Northern Eagle" naval exercise (Byers 2017; Depledge 2020; Koivurova and Shibata 2023). Moreover, in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, Arctic Council members voted for a temporary suspension of the Council itself (Cole 2022).

Following the establishment of a unified stance amongst Arctic-minded leaders, NATO undertook a more proactive role in regional security and incorporated broader deterrence and defense strategies rather than relying solely on the Arctic Council (NATO 2018a; 2020a).

Accordingly, NATO has undertaken concrete policy measures such as large and ambitious military exercises in the Arctic, including Trident Juncture and Cold Response. Moreover, after years of dragging their feet to fulfill the commitment to allocate 2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense, many member states have increased their defense spending (Gronholt-Pedersen and Fouche 2022). Canada, for example, has committed to increasing its military spending by approximately 10 billion dollars, which includes upgrading the early warning radar system with North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and acquiring new surveillance planes capable of detecting submarines. Norway has decided to double its satellites by 2024 to monitor the Arctic (Gronholt-Pedersen and Fouche 2022).

Furthermore, NATO has established a considerable infrastructure, particularly in the Nordic countries. The British-led Joint Expeditionary Force formed in 2014 has significantly emphasized the development of Arctic military competencies in collaboration with Nordic forces. More recently, the establishment of NATO Multi-Corps Land Component Command in Finland, Nordic Air Force, NATO Commander Task Force Baltic in Germany, and NATO Centre of Excellence for Cold Weather Operations in Norway reflects a notable increase in NATO's cohesion, capability, and communication in the region (Duffy et al. 2024).

NATO (2022c; 2022g; 2023c; personal interview, February 2024) has presented these actions as part of its commitment to enhance regional cooperation in the Arctic and respond to Russia's assertive actions. When asked about the possible military involvement of NATO in the Arctic, Stoltenberg (NATO 2018a) and the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Bauer (NATO 2023d), emphasized the Alliance's persistent dedication to collective defense in the region, which is one of the fundamental characteristics of NATO's regional stabilizer identity. This narrative aligns with NATO's self-image as a collective defense alliance that provides regional stability for its members. By adapting regional stabilizer identity through active roles and military capabilities as exceptional measures and using contextualized speech acts towards its abject/other, Russia, NATO has aimed to reaffirm its sense of self and ontological security disrupted by evolving security dynamics in the Arctic.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed NATO's symbolic and strategic involvement in the Arctic through an engagement between the ontological security and the securitization perspectives. Using ontological security, it has shown how Russia's increasing aggression in the Arctic and its invasion of Ukraine have disrupted NATO's routinized relationship with Russia as a partner, distorted the global rule-based international order, and raised its anxieties in the Arctic. Employing the securitization perspective with a particular focus on the securitization of subjectivity, it has highlighted how NATO has responded discursively and practically to the increasing uncertainty that has become the primary threat to NATO's self in its external environment. An engagement between the ontological security and securitization perspectives has offered valuable insights into understanding how an actor whose self has been undermined

has transferred a specific subject from the domain of everyday politics to emergency politics to securitize it.

One of the article's key findings has revealed how NATO's articulation of a positive self and negative other representation, namely securitization of subjectivity, has relied on speech acts embedded within narratives that promoted its self as a reliable and security-seeking actor respecting rule-based order, while severely framing Russia as an unreliable and offensive actor that undermines established institutions and violates international law. This finding speaks to the central premises of the ontological security perspective, arguing that self-narratives help actors construct a sense of stability, safety, and confidence for the continuity of their existential integrity. Consistent with the idea of securitization of subjectivity, it also illustrates how securitization plays a crucial part in turning existential anxieties into manageable threats and demonstrating how the "other" becomes essential to reinforcing the "self".

A related finding of the article has revealed that NATO has framed its present Arctic strategy as an extension of its long-standing rivalry with Russia by drawing on Cold War-era narratives. The article has shown how NATO has often reminded the region's sensitive and volatile role during the Cold War when drawing attention to Russia's current military posture in the Arctic. It has highlighted how NATO has appealed to the collective memories of the past and threat perceptions to create unity among the Alliance vis-a-vis Russia and increase the deterrence capabilities of the Alliance. This finding reflects the role biographical narratives, strategically selected from past glories and traumas, play in contextualizing actors' actions and justifying their policy choices.

Another finding of the article is about the purpose behind securitization narratives or what securitization serves. Drawing on NATO's official documents and personal interviews with NATO officials, the article has revealed that NATO's narratives, based on the construction of Russia as a threat to the Alliance, have allowed it to reformulate its identity from cooperation into deterrence and adopt concrete policy measures to address both strategic threats and ontological anxieties. Highlighting that the basis of NATO's readjusted identity has been grounded within its self, the article has shown how the distinction between self and identity has been critical in explaining NATO's reflexivity and adaptability to respond to evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic.

Lastly, this article has evaluated NATO's ontological security quest as a relational concept, an intersubjectively constructed process in interaction with Russia. It has identified the securitization of subjectivity as a key factor in this process, allowing NATO to adjust its flexible identity to reaffirm its self and turn anxieties into tangible threats. To better understand how these intersubjective processes impact Arctic dynamics, future studies might evaluate Russia's quest for ontological security in the Arctic. Moreover, while this article has treated NATO as a unitary actor in its securitization process and Arctic activism, future studies based on Ku and Finch's (2024) ontological agency concept might assess how dynamic actors (member states) shape the success or failure of NATO's securitization process.

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