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Climate Before Competition: Adopting a Restraint Strategy for US Arctic Policy

By Siddhanth Ravi

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A region that is withstanding the worst effects of anthropogenic climate change is the Arctic Circle, warming four times faster than the rest of the planet, as per the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) 2025 Arctic Report Card (ARC).[1] As a resource-rich and geopolitically-significant global commons, the Arctic presents a useful case study in how the United States enacts climate policy on the international stage. Current U.S. Arctic policy misdiagnoses the region's environmental problems, and there is a mismatch between the nature of the threat in the Arctic and the tools used to address it. U.S. policymakers have recognized the causal chain linking climate change to geopolitical competition. Rising temperatures accelerate ice melt, which increases access to previously trapped resources and shipping routes, thereby heightening strategic interest and potential geopolitical rivalry. However, policy responses overwhelmingly target the final stage of this chain, great power competition, rather than the initial driver, which is climate change. To avoid costly and ineffective security dilemmas, the United States should pivot its Arctic policy away from securitization to restraint-based governance rooted in Arctic exceptionalism and adequately address climate change as the root cause of regional instability.

Current Arctic policy's misdiagnosis produces three costs that suggest pivoting from military competition to institutional leadership: a security dilemma with climate change as a built-in accelerant, overextension, and misallocation of resources in a new frontier, and an incorrect prioritization of prestige competition over vital interests. Moreover, accelerated securitization of the Arctic further erodes its longstanding status as a zone of exceptional cooperation. By failing to mitigate the underlying environmental transformations that generate

Siddhanth Ravi is a graduate of Fordham University who majored in History and Political Science with a minor in Environmental Studies. He plans to pursue a career in public policy, particularly as it intersects with foreign policy and law. His research interests include South Asian history and politics and U.S. immigration history.

instability in the first place, current policy risks creating a securitized Arctic that produces no 'winners' with climate change's universal effects. Conversely, the Arctic should be treated as a global commons—admittedly to a certain extent considering a limited number of states have direct access to the region—where shared environmental vulnerability leads to cooperation rather than competition. Allowing further militarization undermines the cooperative governance needed to address climate change, impeding any future institutional restoration of Arctic exceptionalism.

The United States should adopt a restraint-oriented Arctic strategy focusing on multilateral climate governance. This paper proposes four recommendations on how Arctic strategy should be ameliorated: enhancing scientific diplomacy efforts with both geopolitical allies and competitors, ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) to increase American credibility in Arctic governance, expanding the Arctic Council's mandate to include 'collective climate security,' and adopting 'climate security' within the National Security Council's (NSC) and Department of Defense's (DoD) larger institutional definitions of 'national security.' These recommendations reflect how pursuing restraint does not mean accepting passivity while rivals may continue to securitize, but rather a disciplined prioritization of interests (i.e., climate change mitigation versus geopolitical posturing). Moreover, it demonstrates an underlying shift in international politics toward multipolarity and away from a unipolar system led by the United States. Prioritizing multilateral governance in the region is key to countering recent securitization developments, and thus any future steps toward a nonsecuritized Arctic must implicitly acknowledge this changing system.

From Arctic Exceptionalism to Arctic Securitization

The Origins of Arctic Exceptionalism

Since purchasing Alaska from the Russian Empire in 1867, the United States has been classified as an Arctic state. Contemporary U.S. Arctic policy has typically centered on three pillars: addressing environmental concerns, promoting international cooperation, and protecting national security interests, each to varying degrees.[2] Starting under the Nixon administration in December 1971 with National Security Decision Memorandum 144, these pillars have remained the framework through which administrations pursue Arctic strategy.[3] Subsequent updates to this policy directive framework were issued by each administration. Although partisan differences persist—Democratic administrations have generally emphasized stewardship, research, and cooperation while Republican administrations have more often prioritized national security and resource extraction—institutional continuity has, by and large, remained the norm.

Congressionally, policy is driven by the Arctic Research and Policy Act of 1984, which established a formal federal framework for coordinating Arctic research and policy through the U.S. Arctic Research Commission and the Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee (IARPC).[4] Both organizations coordinate national Arctic policy and scientific research in accordance with executive directives.[5] As a collaborative effort across 18 federal agencies, departments, and offices across the U.S. federal government, these research organizations are required to produce and execute an Arctic Research Plan every five years to "address emerging research questions about the dynamic, changing Arctic."[6] The most recent comprehensive updates to American Arctic policy came with the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR), first released in 2013 under the Obama administration and then updated in 2022 by the Biden administration. The 2022 update "sets an affirmative U.S. agenda for the Arctic" until 2032, directly tackling the climate crisis and envisions a "peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative" Arctic.[7] It represents the most climate-forward and cooperative iteration of U.S. Arctic strategy on record, dedicating pillars to climate change, sustainable development, and environmental conservation, and security to deter international threats to the Arctic region. As for international affairs, the United States formally became involved in intergovernmental cooperation in the Arctic through the Ottawa Declaration in 1996.[8] This was a non-legally binding executive agreement to establish the Arctic Council as a high-level forum between eight member states: Canada,

Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States, with additional permanent representation for six organizations representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples.[9] There are also thirteen non-Arctic states, thirteen intergovernmental and interparliamentary organizations, and twelve non-governmental organizations that have been granted observer status.[10] Notably, the Council's mandate "explicitly excludes military security," instead prioritizing environmental protection and scientific collaboration.[11] This institutional design helped solidify the norm of Arctic exceptionalism, reinforcing the idea that the region should be governed through cooperation as a zone of peace rather than geopolitical competition.

Although initiated by a non-binding agreement, the Council has coordinated legally binding agreements between member states, such as the 2011 Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic, the 2013 Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic, and the 2017 Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation, showcasing a commitment to internal cooperation.[12] A bulk of the Council's work is done through six Working Groups and one standalone Expert Group to execute certain sustainability and environmental mandates by producing scientific assessments, monitoring ecological change, and coordinating policy recommendations across member states.[13]

The Securitization of Arctic Policy

As climate change accelerates and the region—and its resources—becomes more accessible, U.S. Arctic policy has increasingly shifted away from cooperation and toward securitization. Securitization is defined as a process of framing certain policy issues as matters of national security to justify military or defense resources being used to meet specific aims. In terms of U.S. engagement in the Arctic, this takes the form of building up military infrastructure and surveillance systems to monitor and counter rivals. Naturally, such developments did not entirely result from actions taken by the United States. For example, in 2007, Russian explorers planted a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed directly under the North Pole, which attracted global media attention and criticism from other Arctic nations.[14] Though largely symbolic, it was interpreted in the media as renewed efforts at territorial expansion in the region and aroused concerns regarding sovereignty claims and future governance of the Arctic.[15] The subsequent 2008 Ilulissat Declaration reflected a further commitment to viewing the Arctic through a territorial lens. Through the declaration, the Arctic Five (A5), the five littoral Arctic states, reaffirmed that disputes in the region would be managed through existing international law like UNCLOS—not the creation of a new 'Arctic treaty'—reflecting how governance of the Arctic was increasingly being understood through territorial jurisdiction and state interests.[16]

In terms of the United States, securitization efforts escalated drastically under the first Trump administration. In a 2019 speech titled "Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus" given at the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that "the region has become an arena for power and for competition," and that the "eight Arctic states must adapt to this new future."[17] Such comments framed the Arctic in terms of its commercial and resource potential for the United States as "strategic engagement" with Russia and China.[18] In his speech, Pompeo also notably mentioned how the United States did not seek an Arctic "fraught with militarization and competing territorial claims," advocating to "fortify…America's security and diplomatic presence."[19] Despite mentioning efforts to strengthen American environmental stewardship in the Arctic, Pompeo also refused to sign a joint declaration at the ministerial meeting regarding the inclusion of the term 'climate change,' marking the first time a final joint declaration failed to be adopted.[20]

Pompeo's rhetoric was institutionalized with the 2019 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy Report to Congress which centered on maintaining the rules-based order to deter and defend potential geopolitical aggression, highlighting a shift in U.S. policy toward securitization and economic exploitation of newly accessible resources.[21] Such policy has echoed into the second Trump administration as well. For example, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025 includes

nearly $9 billion to build a series of heavy, medium, and light Arctic Security Cutters (ASCs), used by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) to patrol Arctic waters, enforce maritime law, and project American presence in the region.[22] In October 2025, President Trump also authorized the construction of a new fleet of ASCs, building on a tri-lateral Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICE) Pact with Canada and Finland from July 2024, with four planned to be built in Finnish shipyards and up to seven in American ones.[23] Finally, and most prominently, rhetoric regarding the United States annexing Greenland for national security purposes and the use of tariffs to extort Denmark into selling the land to the United States represents the logical extension of securitization.[24] Though the administration has since toned down its expansionist rhetoric in the region, the 'Greenland Crisis' demonstrates the extent to which a policy framework that has prioritized competition over cooperation in the region can be exploited.[25]

Russia, China, and the Erosion of Cooperation

The United States pursuing a securitization strategy is merely a response to actions taken by geopolitical rivals. Although Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 Murmansk speech was foundational in viewing the Arctic as a "zone of peace," Russia under Putin has instead prioritized militarization. It boasts the world's largest and only nuclear icebreaker fleet of around 40, compared to the United States's much smaller fleet of three, with only one—the Polar Star—being a truly heavy icebreaker.[26] Russian priorities in the region are focused on exploiting Arctic energy and natural resource reserves, managing the Northern Sea Route, and securing Russian economic interests and sovereignty through its military posturing.[27] As of 2023, Russia holds the Arctic as a top priority region, second only to its "near abroad" region (i.e., former Soviet states), based on the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept document.[28]

The Arctic is also facing spillover effects from the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, resulting in a weakened Arctic Council.[29] Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the other seven Arctic states immediately condemned Russia and paused all cooperation with the nation, halting hundreds of projects and effectively paralyzing the forum for the short-term.[30] Although chairmanship was successfully transitioned to Norway in 2023, relations between Russia and the Council are still strained so long as the war continues, and could remain as such after depending on the nature of peace settlements.[31] Finland and Sweden's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 2023 also brings seven of the eight Arctic states to a security posture against U.S. rivals.[32] Such developments have led to greater distrust of Russia, with any change in Moscow's Arctic policy being seen as a security concern instead of legitimate state behavior. A general worsening relationship between Russia and the West has caused Arctic governance to deteriorate, further eroding the Arctic's exceptional status and deepened existing securitization efforts.[33]

China has also been classified as a near-Arctic state since 2018, through an Arctic policy white paper, as it seeks to ensure it has a stake in shaping the future of the region.[34] Beijing argues that climate change in the Arctic has repercussions that affect the entire globe, and so Chinese involvement in the region mostly focuses on environmental research. The white paper also introduced the concept of a "Polar Silk Road" (PSR) as an Arctic extension of China's Belt and Road Initiative.[35] As one of thirteen Arctic Council observer states, China desires to cooperate with any Arctic states on developing transportation routes in opening waterways to enable Chinese engagement in the region.[36] The PSR has been integral in Sino-Russian relations, with Russia securing investment and technology for the region and China gaining energy supplies and the ability to develop alternative shipping lanes that could potentially supplement (or rival) more traditional routes like the Suez Canal.[37]

Apart from commercial and scientific engagement, the 2024 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy document examines how Chinese military forces "have… demonstrated the capability and intent to operate in and around the Arctic region through exercises alongside the Russian Navy over the past several years."[38] These joint exercises demonstrate their "growing alignment in the region," and the United States, rightfully, views this as cause for concern.[39]

The 2022 NSAR also dedicates substantial attention to countering Russia's military modernization in the Arctic and characterizes China as seeking to expand its influence through "economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military activities" with Russia, demonstrating an understanding of the region as a site of potential geopolitical conflict.[40]

As a result of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, the DoD has advocated a "monitor-and-respond" approach. This involves placing rival deterrence at the forefront by enhancing Joint Force capabilities in the Arctic, engaging with allies and partners (including state and local authorities, Alaskan native tribes, and the international community), and exercising a securitized presence.[41] The DoD argues that this approach will ensure the United States has "a tailored response to national security threats alongside its interagency and international partners" through "robust intelligence collection capabilities, security cooperation with…allies, and the deterrent value of DoD's ability to deploy the Joint Force globally."[42] The DoD advances that the United States's desired end state for the region is stability and safeguarding national interests, implicitly sidelining environmental protection and centering competition with Russia and China as a top priority. While complete militarization of the region is not the current reality and most securitization is geopolitical posturing, the trajectory is clear that securitizing the region will continue unless policy is significantly altered, especially as climate change only continues to accelerate. U.S. Arctic strategy must be reoriented toward Arctic exceptionalism, as opposed to furthering great power competition.

The Strategic Costs of Arctic Securitization

Having demonstrated how Arctic securitization is growing, we now diagnose why this trajectory is structurally flawed. Policymakers understand the causal chain, that climate change melts ice and opens access to resources and waterways, enabling geopolitical competition. However, policy intervention is consistently at the last step or prioritizes securitization ahead of stewardship. Even the 2022 NSAR, the most climate-forward rendition of Arctic policy, maintains 'security' as the first pillar. Additionally, references to the effects of climate change in the 2024 DoD Arctic strategy document are made in regard to increased geopolitical competition and the consequences a changing environment can have on DoD operations, not how operations must be altered to address such concerns.[43] This is not to say that securing the Arctic region and countering potential rivalry is unimportant or that Arctic policy should focus solely on mitigating climate change, especially if rivals do not agree to follow similar frameworks. Although treating solely the symptoms is problematic, so too is ignoring the geopolitical and environmental realities of the region entirely.

A securitized Arctic has its own costs that suggest that U.S. Arctic policy should pivot from competition to institutional leadership. First, Arctic securitization generates a security dilemma that has its own built-in accelerant. The United States responding to Russian and Chinese Arctic infrastructure with increased icebreaker investments with multilateral pacts, for example, will be met with similar developments by rivals. Yet unlike a traditional security spiral, the Arctic dilemma intensifies as environmental degradation increases access to the region itself. The more policy centers on geopolitical rivalry over climate mitigation, the longer the climate issue remains unaddressed. This only contributes to further securitization of the region as increased melting continuously expands the region's strategic value. Securitization, thus, cannot lead to regional stability because the source of instability continuously intensifies unchecked. In this manner, climate change functions as more than a conventional "threat multiplier." The term was popularized in April 2007 by a Center for Naval Analyses' Military Advisory Board report, which argued that climate change magnifies existing political instability, resource scarcity, and social conflicts, and has guided U.S. climate policy domestically and internationally for decades.[44] In the Arctic context, however, climate change also acts as a structural accelerant within an already escalating security dilemma. Thus, securitization and climate change generate a positive feedback loop that is self-reinforcing if left unchecked.

Second, increased securitization of the Arctic on the

part of the United States risks overextension of conflict into a region that is a functionally new operational theater. Any resources or funding dedicated to the expansion of military infrastructure are resources unavailable to high-priority commitments elsewhere, but also for adequate investment in the Arctic. Pursuing sustained military primacy in the Arctic would require significant long-term investment in infrastructure such as icebreakers, ports, logistics networks, surveillance systems, and cold-weather operational capabilities in one of the most geographically demanding regions on the planet. Even if ice unfortunately continues to melt, new waterways will require substantial infrastructure development to be navigable. Thus, the current U.S. approach of securitization risks overextending military, financial, and logistical resources in a challenging environment.

Third, and closely related to the previous cost, pursuing Arctic securitization further represents a conflation of actual vital interests in the region with geopolitical competition done solely in the name of prestige. The 2024 DoD document points to an understanding of U.S. Arctic policy in this manner with their "monitor-and-respond" approach. The approach places rival actions as integral to how the United States will act in the Arctic. Under this logic, the United States risks treating the Arctic as a theater that requires competitive involvement simply because geopolitical rivals are increasingly active there, rather than dominance in the region being itself essential to American security. The Greenland annexation rhetoric from the Trump administration also relies on the very assumption that the Arctic Circle is a competitive territorial space to be acquired and controlled rather than a global commons to be governed collectively. Thus, competition becomes self-justifying under the current securitization-oriented Arctic strategy.

These costs demonstrate that a securitized Arctic produces no meaningful winners. Even if securitization succeeded on its own terms, a state could win the Arctic geopolitically through such strategies and still ultimately lose. Military dominance does not halt permafrost degradation, slow glacier loss, or reverse the warming cycle that made the region strategically significant in the first place. Environmental developments affect all players, albeit to differing degrees, and centering securitization in a region facing the worst effects of climate change will only further undermine the cooperative governance structures necessary to mitigate these changes. Fundamentally, such policy is rooted in a conception of security that is not conducive to countering a non-state, non-military threat like climate change. It is a territorial response to a fundamentally non-territorial problem. This is rooted in a militarized and state-centric conception of security that prioritizes geopolitical posturing over the shared environmental conditions generating instability. Instead, climate change itself should be understood as the central security threat requiring a collective response, not the actions of rival states. The idea of 'collective climate security' reframes the central question as "How does the U.S. lead governance of a shared space facing a shared threat?" and not "How does the U.S. out-compete rivals in the Arctic?" This allows for a more restraint-oriented Arctic strategy centered on institutional legitimacy, burden-sharing, and multilateral governance rather than security-oriented competition.

Policy Recommendations

U.S. Arctic strategy must shift from military competition toward institutional governance, especially since securitization is proving to be a failed policy. Restoring Arctic exceptionalism requires treating climate change—not rival states—as the region's central organizing security challenge. A restraint-oriented Arctic strategy should therefore prioritize multilateral institutions, legal legitimacy, and cooperative scientific governance over expanded military competition. The following policy recommendations are structured as a policy pathway that would lead to a desecuritized Arctic and Arctic policy that places climate change as the central threat facing the region, not rival competition.

Scientific Diplomacy as the Foundation for Cooperation

The most immediately actionable recommendation is to not only increase and enhance scientific diplomacy efforts but ensure that the knowledge gained from the collaboration is directly translated into binding policy. The United States should significantly increase investment in Arctic scientific diplomacy by expanding joint research initiatives with all Arctic states, including geopolitical rivals where feasible. Rather than treating scientific collaboration as advisory or symbolic, the United States should use it to establish durable systems of shared environmental monitoring that lead to continuous coordination among Arctic governments. Scientific knowledge is non-rivalrous as sharing environmental data does not directly diminish a state's position in relation to one another the way sharing military intelligence or resource survey data would. Here, cooperation requires states to understand that the current threat cannot be solved alone, aligning with the principle of 'collective climate security.' Coordinated monitoring networks and jointly validated models create mutual dependence and trust among states, unlike military agreements that require trust as a precondition. Relying on each other's data in pursuit of a shared goal creates practical incentives to maintaining cooperation.

Current international structures, like the Arctic Council's Working Groups, the International Arctic Science Committee, the Sustaining Arctic Observing Network, and various satellite and oceanographic monitoring programs, in juncture with domestic organizations like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), provide a significant degree of Arctic scientific collaboration. There is also past historical precedence for joint scientific research expeditions, like the 2017 Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation within the Arctic Council, the Russian–American Long-term Census of the Arctic from 2004 to 2015, and the more global Multidisciplinary Drifting Observatory for the Study of Arctic Climate (MOSAiC) from 2019 to 2020.[45] Systems like these generate extensive environmental data on sea ice extent, permafrost conditions, atmospheric change, and ocean temperature. They also already coordinate with other scientific organizations and governing bodies to spread and disseminate their work. Moreover, they demonstrate how diplomatic scientific engagement can occur with rivals as well, a fact that Cold War-era diplomacy can also attest to.

However, such systems remain advisory in nature and lack mechanisms that translate scientific findings into binding policy action. Thus, the United States must work through organizations like the IASC to formalize data-sharing agreements between national and international Arctic research programs and translate the research into policy. This necessitates expanding jointly funded satellite monitoring systems, coordinated oceanographic buoy networks, and standardized climate modeling platforms across Arctic research agencies. These systems would increase interdependence among Arctic states by embedding them within shared environmental data infrastructures. Within the Arctic Council, these outputs would feed directly into the existing Working Groups, ensuring that shared scientific capacity produces shared governance obligations rather than shared concern without consequence. Essentially, instead of creating new scientific bodies, the objective here is to strengthen the link between science and policy within existing organizations.

Ratifying UNCLOS and Restoring Legal Legitimacy

Enhancing scientific diplomacy efforts sets the political conditions necessary for the next recommendations. States integrated into shared climate monitoring institutions develop a practical stake in preserving not only the institutions themselves, but the cooperative principle on which they are built. Scientific diplomacy has historically generated broader collaboration, as the Antarctic treaty can attest to, demonstrating that shared empirical work can lay the foundation for durable governance frameworks even across geopolitical rivals. Thus, the United States must formally ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to establish the legal legitimacy necessary to lead international Arctic governance under a collective climate security framework. If the U.S. seeks to reframe Arctic governance around shared environmental vulnerability rather than military competition, it must first be party to the primary legal framework already governing the

region. Although Washington already observes most UNCLOS provisions as customary law, remaining outside the treaty undermines the United States's ability to advocate for rules-based cooperation in a region increasingly shaped by maritime disputes. The current free-rider posture is the same logic that collective climate security must displace.

Adopted in 1982 and in force since 1994, UNCLOS provides the comprehensive international legal framework for defining maritime boundaries, resource rights, and navigational freedoms that governs the Arctic in the absence of any region-specific treaty.[46] The Arctic Five—the five states with littoral claims to the region—rely heavily on UNCLOS to manage competing territorial interests and the region's expanding waterways, ever since the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration that placed UNCLOS as the governing legal framework for Arctic disputes.[47] Full U.S. membership would provide stronger and more region-specific legal tools to limit geopolitical competition rather than military ones. For example, it would allow the United States to formally submit extended continental shelf claims through the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, which is critical since Russia and other Arctic states like Canada already do.[48] Ratification would not expand jurisdictional ambition but bind it within shared legal constraints. As a work-around, the United States often unilaterally asserts extended claims, but this is contradictory to a collective climate security framework. Making such claims deliberately outside existing shared institutions encourages other Arctic states to treat governance as a contest of power and not a process of cooperation and stewardship. The Ilulissat Declaration even saw the United States endorse a governance architecture built on a treaty it has never officially ratified, demonstrating not only its willingness to bypass international law for individual state interest, but also how it approaches such legally gray areas in international affairs.

To make ratification politically viable, a future administration should frame UNCLOS as both a climate governance measure and a national security priority. Although Senate opposition remains a major obstacle, ratification would provide the legal foundation necessary for broader institutional reform. To begin the ratification process, an administration could request formal hearing from the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where military officials, maritime lawyers, and Arctic policy experts can publicly demonstrate how non-ratification weakens U.S. influence in regional governance. Moreover, to reduce opposition to UNCLOS on ideological aversion to multilateralism, a pro-Arctic administration should frame ratification as protecting American strategic interests and increasing our influence in a cooperative zone. Additionally, the U.S. military has by and large supported UNCLOS, including the Navy, Coast Guard, and Joint Chiefs of Staff, a fact that can help demonstrate ratification as bolstering American sovereignty, not reducing it.[49] Senate opposition also coalesces around the idea that joining such cooperative frameworks reduces American sovereignty by placing a governing body or document above the U.S. Constitution and its law. However, public endorsement from senior Navy and Coast Guard leaders could be especially persuasive on this front because military officials have repeatedly argued that treaty membership would strengthen freedom of navigation operations and reinforce U.S. maritime claims.

Ultimately, UNCLOS ratification would mark a monumental step in the United States's role in international affairs. Doing so would signal to the international audience that U.S. policy in the Arctic is organized around cooperation and institutional legitimacy rather than rival competition. More importantly, it provides the legal and diplomatic foundation necessary for Arctic security to be reframed as a shared climate challenge requiring coordinated governance, scientific collaboration, and mutual restraint among Arctic states.

Expanding the Arctic Council's Climate Governance Mandate

Legal legitimacy alone, however, cannot produce cooperative governance without an institution capable of actualizing it. The United States should champion reforms to the Arctic Council to adopt 'collective climate security' as the Council's institutional mandate. This would allow the Council's scientific work to be actualized into actionable coordinated policy. The decision to exclude the region from

managing military security was the correct instinct in terms of insulating the Arctic from conflict and serving as the foundation for its exceptionalism, but it is clear that even without such a mandate, geopolitical competition is rising and the Council has no real power to intervene. This is because the underlying conception of security at hand remains state-centric and centered on managing rivalry. Adding a 'collective climate security' element to the mandate, as opposed to a more traditional form of security, redefines what the Council seeks to protect the Arctic against—that is, from rivalry between states to climate change. This actively preserves it as a site of global cooperation, and goes further than incorporating environmentalism, while also not outright militarizing the Council as its architects feared.

Such changes would inevitably take time and would eventually require some sort of international treaty for proper stability. In the meantime, the United States could first push for an Arctic Council ministerial statement declaring that climate change constitutes a shared security challenge. Making this change has direct policy outcomes. Currently, scientific research findings from any of the Council's Working Groups, particularly the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme and the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna, lead to policy recommendations that may or may not be acted upon. The Council has no real authority to dictate climate governance as a result. A reformed mandate under collective climate security would close this gap by authorizing the Council to treat climate research as a trigger for states to commit to policy changes. One way that this can be more effectively undertaken is through the creation of a specific Working Group dedicated to Climate Security. This group can help consolidate findings from existing scientific bodies and joint-research efforts, establish region-wide climate risk benchmarks, and coordinate member-state responses before environmental conflict transforms into geopolitical conflict. Concretely, this could mean establishing measurable thresholds—rates of sea ice loss, permafrost degradation benchmarks, and temperature anomalies per state—whose breach obligates policy responses from member states rather than merely prompting additional study. This reframes the Council's Working Groups from monitoring bodies into the empirical backbone of a genuine governance system.

It might make more sense to institutionalize these changes via some sort of treaty, instead of the current non-binding executive agreement that gives the Council its authority, to properly execute the vision for this region. However, the current design also points to why this route is difficult. The Arctic Council possesses no independent programming budget, with projects and initiatives funded voluntarily by member states, and its recommendations and guidelines remain largely non-binding. All enforcement mechanisms require states to self-regulate, or delegate to the appropriate international bodies (like UNCLOS). While this institutional flexibility historically supported cooperation by lowering the barriers to participation, it also leaves the Council vulnerable to geopolitical disruption and dependent on continued political goodwill among Arctic states. This is a vulnerability that was exposed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as the forum was effectively paused as projects were put on hold for the time being. However, this structure is precisely why a future treaty is difficult to imagine. The Council runs exclusively on consensus rule, so Russia's continued estrangement due to the war makes any substantial reformulation of the institutional body difficult. A durable Arctic treaty cannot be realistically be constructed without Russian participation, given that Russia has the largest Arctic population—roughly 2.5 million people—and controls a significant share of the region's coastline, infrastructure, and navigational routes.[50] Moreover, the Arctic Five proclaimed that there was "no need to develop a new comprehensive international legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean" via the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008. [51] Evidently, the possibility of creating an Arctic Circle/Ocean Treaty seems slim, so the near-term should focus on structures that do not require full Council consensus (like the Working Group or U.S.-led ministerial statement). Even if doing so would give the Council legal permanence, insulate its cooperative commitments from electoral and diplomatic volatility, and signal a qualitatively different level of U.S. commitment, it is clear that pursuing this recommendation via treaty is premature.

Arctic states could still craft a preliminary framework for how such a binding arrangement would look.

This would signal a demonstrated commitment to preserve Arctic exceptionalism even amidst a rupture. To work around Russian non-cooperation, the seven remaining states could pursue a parallel working arrangement that leaves room for Russia to join once the war is over. The future of the Arctic obviously will include Russia in some manner so states must prepare for its eventual return—and hopefully a postwar environment exists where Russia can engage in the Arctic diplomatically—but the short-term design must also be durable on its own. Essentially, this revamped design must expand the Council's climate governance role rooted in restraint as a driving factor to ensure cooperation is the main focus, not conflict. A joint declaration, much like the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration that limited a future Arctic treaty, could easily carry enough force to do this. The goal is to prevent military competition from becoming the region's organizing principle, so reforming the current institutional body should be the focus while Arctic exceptionalism retains some normative force.

Adopting Climate Security Within Domestic Frameworks

The previous three recommendations provide distinct elements of de-securitizing the Arctic, specifically legal, institutional, and diplomatic channels that should be used in a restraint-oriented Arctic strategy. However, none of them can be properly sustained without a corresponding shift within the United States government for how security threats are defined. Climate change is rarely understood as the primary threat facing a region. The 2022 NSAR, for example, lists 'Security' as a separate pillar, implying that climate threats are distinct from geopolitical ones. Institutional definitions of national security effectively govern how budgets are allocated, how planning priorities are set, and how threats are ranked relative to one another. As long as climate change occupies a secondary, operational role in these frameworks, the structural misdiagnosis this paper identifies will persist regardless of progress on UNCLOS, the Arctic Council, or scientific diplomacy.

The United States should formally adopt climate security within the National Security Council's and DoD's institutional definitions of national security via executive order and NSC directive. Concretely, this would mean revising the NSC's organizing framework to designate climate change as a primary security threat category, not a threat multiplier subordinate to state-based rivalries. Within the DoD, it would require updating the National Defense Strategy to treat climate-driven instability as a first-order planning consideration rather than a separate and contextual factor that shapes how the DoD assesses threats. An executive order directing both bodies to conduct this definitional revision is among the most immediately actionable steps available to a future administration, requiring no Senate ratification and no multilateral negotiation.

There is prior precedent for this under the Biden administration. Arguably being the most climate-forward president in recent history, President Biden signed various executive orders that established climate considerations across federal agencies and directed the NSC to produce a climate security assessment, most notably Executive Order 14008, "Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad" (January 27, 2021), to embed climate considerations across federal agencies.[52] In the same vein, a future administration could require climate risk assessments in NSC or DoD decision-making procedures. This would not just mean looking at how potentially adverse climate would affect security operations, but how institutional resources could be used to mitigate and deter these climate-specific threats in a manner that it is not counter-productive. A directive that calls for the incorporation of these considerations into future National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy documents could also be beneficial in advancing this goal.

Unfortunately, all climate efforts by the Biden administration were promptly overturned under the Trump administration.[53] Thus, for proper codification of climate security into national security frameworks to prevent future executives from reversing these developments, a more durable fix would be to revise foundational documents via legislation. A pro-Arctic administration could potentially lobby for a renewed Arctic legislative package that formally integrates climate security into federal Arctic strategy, national defense planning, and interagency coordination

requirements. Admittedly, this would not be as easy as internal executive changes and would take immense political capital. However, they must still be pursued alongside advocating for legislative reform, with climate-forward steps taken by the executive helping build the case for new Arctic Circle legislation.

This recommendation is ultimately the capstone of the framework proposed in this paper because it addresses the source of the misdiagnosis rather than its symptoms. Accordingly, it is the most ambitious as it requires an institutional shift in how the United States understands 'security.' Scientific diplomacy, UNCLOS ratification, and Arctic Council reform all operationalize collective climate security externally and can also be operationalized in some manner without definitional changes. Adopting climate security within the DoD and NSC institutionalizes it domestically, while arguably a lofty goal, ensures that the United States will approach future Arctic governance, and climate-driven instability more broadly, with a security architecture capable of recognizing the actual nature of the threat it faces. This is not to say that the other recommendations will not be adequately operationalized without these changes, but taking steps to update these definitions can ensure that future climate-forward actions cannot be reversed.

Restraint & Deterrence

A central counterargument to this paper is that the United States's increasing securitization of the region is not being done to pursue dominance, but to counter renewed Russian revisionism and military expansion in the region. Russia's modernization of its Arctic military infrastructure, expansion of icebreaker capabilities, prioritization of the Northern Sea Route, and collaboration with China suggest that the Arctic is already an arena of strategic competition. From this perspective, U.S. policy is not producing securitization but reacting to it. Moreover, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further undermined trust in multilateral governance structures, raising doubts about whether cooperative frameworks such as the Arctic Council can realistically constrain state behavior in high-stakes geopolitical environments.

These concerns are not unfounded, but they misidentify the choices of the United States. A restraint-oriented framework is not incompatible with deterrence. Instead, it separates necessary defensive capabilities from governing a shared environmental risk. Pursuing restraint is not passivity, but active and disciplined prioritization of certain goals over others, in this case the climate threat over resource extraction and regional dominance. Pursuing restraint in Arctic policy does not wholly eliminate geopolitical competition, but it does prevent competition from becoming the organizing principle of Arctic governance. The United States retains substantial capacity to respond to direct threats in the Arctic through NATO coordination, maritime domain awareness systems, strategic deterrence capabilities, and selective investments in Arctic infrastructure. A restraint-oriented approach does not require abandoning these capabilities, nor does it imply accepting unchecked Russian influence in the region. Even amid tensions with Russia, selective cooperation in scientific and environmental domains has historically persisted, including during the Cold War. This suggests that diplomacy often triumphs competition if there is mutual gain, but also that not every rival action requires the United States to pursue a domainwide strategic response. Letting Russian action dictate American policy in the Arctic does not serve American interests in the region. Securitization from either party accelerates the loss of a cooperative and exceptional framework that the United States benefits from. A restraint-based strategy recognizes that preserving cooperative governance structures is itself a core long-term strategic interest of the United States.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Arctic from an isolated, exceptional region to one of growing geopolitical significance reflects how climate change is reshaping international politics and U.S. foreign policy of the 21st century. As rising temperatures melt Arctic ice and increase access to waterways and resources, the region is slowly becoming governed by the same logic that dictates great power rivalry elsewhere. This paper argued that securitizing the Arctic is the wrong choice and represents a misdiagnosis of the threat the region faces. Securitization targets the final stage of the causal chain of regional instability, geopolitical

competition, rather than its driver, climate change. The costs of this misdiagnosis are structural: a self-reinforcing security dilemma, overextension into a demanding new operational theater, and the conflation of prestige competition with vital interests. A restraint-oriented Arctic strategy, rooted in collective climate security, offers a more durable and cost-effective alternative that addresses the root cause rather than the symptoms.

In this manner, Arctic policy can serve as a model for how the United States approaches other contested global commons, such as space, cyberspace and AI, and the deep seabed. As a region that is facing the worst effects of the climate crisis, the Arctic demonstrates that cooperative governance is better than geopolitical competition when it comes to managing a shared threat, a lesson that can be carried forward into similarly structured domains. Securitization as policy only leads to entrenchment and unnecessary posturing, and policymakers should use the Arctic as a case study to enact restraint in similar regions. Viewing the Arctic from a territorial lens obscures its role as a global commons, and so pursuing a more restraint-minded policy sets a precedent for future situations where the United States must decide between securitization and militarization versus international cooperation and institutional burden-sharing.

The recommendations advanced by this paper— increasing scientific diplomacy, ratifying UNCLOS, expanding the Arctic Council mandate, and domestic adoption of climate security— are not just technocratic fixes for a significant policy issue. The changing dynamic in the Arctic and the United States's response to these developments are indicative of a growing multipolar world and how Washington seeks to respond to this new world order. If the United States desires to be a world leader even amidst such shifting conditions, then it should exercise its leadership with restraint and through international forums rather than competitive, unilateral dominance. Restoring Arctic exceptionalism, thus, represents a recognition that in a world of shared vulnerabilities and other forms of geopolitical exploitation, governance must precede rivalry. Washington possesses the tools, capacity, and interest needed to succeed in today's burgeoning multipolar system, but the question remains whether it uses them for cooperation or competition.

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