The Arctic in Transition
Great Power Competition at the End of the Post-Cold War Order

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Abstract

This study uses defensive realism, offensive realism and power transition theory (PTT) in order to examine the great powers’ grand strategies in the Arctic region, aiming to recontextualise the security theatre in the Arctic as a reflection of the return of great power politics and the end of Arctic exceptionalism, and to examine the explanatory power of the different strands of realism on the great power behaviour identified in their Arctic strategies. The study is conducted using qualitative content analysis and utilises Jacob Westberg’s theorisation of grand strategies through the categories of context, ends, means and ways as analytical framework, to which the theoretical framework is applied. The result shows that realism is a suitable theory for predicting great power behaviour in the Arctic, where PTT provides the strongest explanatory power; that the dichotomy between hard and soft security is eroding; and that the strategies were highly context-dependent, thus rendering generalisable results difficult to discern.

*Keywords:* the Arctic, great power behaviour, offensive realism, defensive realism, power transitions theory, grand strategy, qualitative content analysis, Arctic exceptionalism.
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1. Introduction

The post-Cold War era is definitively over, and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next (the White House 2022b).

Three decades ago, many experts in the West believed we had reached the end of history and that great power conflict had been relegated to the dustbin of the past. That illusion has now been shattered: the United States-led world order characterised by stabilisation and disarmament is coming to an end. Instead, the world in 2023 is one of increasing geopolitical tensions, characterised by increased military spending, the return of international conflict, and increasingly aggressive rhetoric from world leaders. The imminent world order is not characterised by one great power rivalry, like during the Cold War, but two, as Russia and China rise to challenge the United States (US).

The return of great power rivalry has caused the Arctic to reemerge as an arena for strategic competition. It serves as a vital region for military deterrence purposes and its environment is rapidly transforming as a result of climate change. In turn, the changing environment provides new economic opportunities as melting sea ice opens up new transportation routes such as the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route (NSR). As technology advances, there are now possibilities to prospect the Arctic seabed for minerals and access offshore natural gas. Additionally, the geopolitical environment has changed, as the North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has added Finland to its list of members and is set to add Sweden, making all Arctic nations except Russia members of the military alliance. The presence of the dominant power and both challengers following China’s declaration that it is a “near-Arctic state” in 2018 renders the Arctic a useful region for examining great power behaviour, especially since the lack of substantial international governance creates a setting similar to an anarchic international system.

Moreover, the Arctic holds a specific scholarly interest, as academic consensus perceiving the region as exempt from the state behaviour observed in the rest of the world prevailed up until the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Ever since Mikhail Gorbachev’s famous Murmansk Initiative speech in 1987, where he
claimed that the Soviet Union no longer wished to view the Arctic as a battlefield, even if only in terms of military posturing, the scholarly debate on the region has been characterised by the idea of “Arctic exceptionalism” (Burke 2022:114). The term is based on the assumption that the regional characteristics of the Arctic – in terms of geography, governance history, prospective climate change, et cetera – are so exceptional that it is impossible to interpret the Arctic from a conventional point of view (Exner-Pirot 2020:313; Bloom et al 2023). The Arctic has long been praised as a region in which global political tensions successfully have been mediated by peaceful cooperation and collaboration. However, the invasion of Ukraine brought Arctic exceptionalism to an abrupt end (Bloom et al 2023).

This thesis aims to investigate the US, China, and Russia’s respective grand strategies (hereafter only referred to as “strategies”) in the Arctic as the post-Cold War era and Arctic exceptionalism are coming to an end, with the ambition to give a comprehensive overview of the strategies in the present international context. It presupposes that the end of the post-Cold War era has caused great powers to actively use the Arctic as an arena for power competition and that this should be evident in their strategies. The most suitable theoretical framework for this project is realism, as the Arctic theatre is characterised by circumstances usually associated with realist assumptions, in terms of anarchic structure, resource competition, national security concerns, military alliances and strategic partnerships, as well as militarisation. In order to gain a well-rounded account of the great powers’ Arctic behaviour, this thesis employs three different theoretical strands within the realist paradigm: defensive realism, offensive realism and power transition theory (PTT). These will be used to explain why the great power strategies have been shaped the way they are. Furthermore, the three different strands will be juxtaposed against each other, with the ambition to test which one has the greatest explanatory power in relation to the strategies, and by extension has most correctly predicted the great powers’ behaviour. This will be done by mapping the great powers’ strategies in relation to the Arctic and applying defensive realism, offensive realism and PTT to discern which theoretical strand most accurately predicted the behaviour found. The study will be carried out through a nested comparative study, which utilises qualitative content analysis for treating the empirical
material in form of official policy documents and elite statements, supplemented by secondary sources.

1.1. Research problem
The changing character of the world order causes states’ strategies to change rapidly. It is therefore necessary to re-contextualise the Arctic security theatre in accordance with current events, especially given the concomitant decline of Arctic cooperation and the Arctic’s emergence as an arena of strategic competition. Moreover, the Arctic constitutes a representative case, as all challengers for world leadership are present in the Arctic and that it is the only region in the world in which NATO and Russia share territorial borders.

1.2. Aim and research questions
This study has two goals: 1) to recontextualise the security theatre in the Arctic as a reflection of the return of great power politics and the concomitant decline of Arctic cooperation, and 2) to examine the explanatory power of defensive realism, offensive realism and PTT on the great power behaviour identified in their Arctic strategies. Thus, this thesis’ contribution is twofold, providing both realpolitikal and scholarly insights. The aims are achieved by mapping the US, Russia and China’s respective Arctic strategies through qualitative content analysis using Jacob Westberg’s (2021) analytical framework for grand strategies, and analysing the strategies given the explanatory power of defensive realism, offensive realism and PTT. Lastly, the different realistic strands are compared in order to test which one is best suited for accurately predicting great power behaviour.

In order to carry out this research, this study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. In what way can the end of the post-Cold War era and Arctic exceptionalism be identified in the great powers’ grand strategies in relation to the Arctic?
   a. What is the identified context, ends, means and ways?
2. To what degree can the current strategies be explained by defensive realism, offensive realism or power transitions theory?

1.3. Scope

In order to analyse what the current strategies of the Arctic great powers are, this study will only take policy documents currently in use into account. As the purpose of the thesis is to recontextualise the Arctic theatre in relation to the changes occurring in current politics, this thesis will only examine the strategies presently pursued. These have been supplemented by government official statements and secondary sources to account for more recent changes. Furthermore, this study will not consider any other cases than the US, Russia and China, as its purpose is to explore great power competition in the Arctic, and they constitute three out of five states categorised as great powers in Håkan Edström and Jacob Westberg’s (2021) conceptualisation of the international system, from which this thesis departs. According to Edström and Westberg (2021), only great powers categorised as dissatisfied can cause shifting power dynamics in the international system, and this thesis therefore only examines the current dominant power (the US) and the two dissatisfied great powers (Russia and China), thus discarding the satisfied great powers (the United Kingdom and France).

1.4. Research design

This study takes on the character of a comparative case study, which is carried out through qualitative content analysis in order to map and analyse the current grand strategies of the US, Russia and China in relation to the Arctic, given the upheaval of the international order. The independent variable analysed thus consists of the end of the post-Cold War era, and the dependent variable consists of the great powers’ respective Arctic strategies. In order to answer the research questions, this thesis utilises a qualitative content analysis using a directed approach, in which a categorisation matrix based on the general assumptions on great power behaviour derived from defensive realism, offensive realism and PTT. Subsequently, the matrix is used to analyse the empirical material, which consists primarily of policy documents derived from the respective governments, and to some extent of statements from relevant officials as well.
as secondary sources. The study is thus derived from a neopositivist epistemological position where the analysis takes on the shape of a nested analysis, meaning that the cases are (the US, China and Russia) are analysed within an overarching context or case (the Arctic theatre). This is done in order to investigate different outcomes (the separate strategies) within a context that is as similar as possible.
2. Previous research

This chapter is divided into two parts: previous research on great power strategies belonging to a realist paradigm as this thesis situates itself within the realist tradition, previous research on Arctic security, and finally previous research on great power strategies in the Arctic. The chapter identifies several behavioural assumptions later revisited in the theoretical framework.

2.1. Realist research on great power behaviour

In the early Cold War era, realism established itself as the dominant theoretical perspective within IR, focusing on questions related to the competition between the two great powers, nuclear deterrence and the eventual stability of the prevailing bipolar order. After a period of decline in the post-Cold War era, realism is once again relevant as its foundational concepts are re-emerging. However, it is not necessarily the particular Waltzian structuralist iteration that should be revived, due to its failure to account for state motives and threat perception (Donnelly 2013:44). Instead, this thesis departs from defensive and offensive realism, as well as PTT.

Both offensive and defensive realism assume that the international system is decentralised and anarchical, causing states to develop self-help strategies to protect and promote their interests (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 1990). Furthermore, Waltz (1979) identified the sole motive of states as the own survival and can be achieved by either internal or external efforts. The motive for why states pursue this objective, however, varies depending on whether one belongs to the defensive or offensive realist camp. On the defensive side, scholars argue that the international system punishes aggression, therefore causing states to avoid capability gaps that favour their adversaries, but not necessarily maximise gaps in their own favour (Donnelly 2013:44). States are therefore seen as defensive positionalists, seeking its own survival by maintaining status quo (Edström & Westberg 2021:11). On the offensive side, scholars argue that states seek to ensure their survival by improving their relative position, thus increasing their ability to enforce their will on other states (Morgenthau 2006; Mearsheimer 2001). As put by prominent offensive realist John Mearsheimer
(2001:2-3), the anarchic structure of the international system encourages states to increase power vigorously, with the ultimate aim of all states being to become “the hegemon – that is, the only real great power in the system”. Therefore, great powers are “rarely content with the current distribution of power” and “almost always have revisionist intentions”. Thus, there are “no status quo powers in the international system” (Ibid.).

PTT’s rendition of the international system looks slightly different. PTT perceives the system as hierarchical rather than anarchical. A state’s position in the hierarchy rests on its power advantage or disadvantage in relation to rivals and its ability to manage the international system in ways that benefit its allies and satisfy their interests (Edström & Westberg 2021:19). At the top sits the dominant power, and directly underneath sits the two categories of great powers: the satisfied powers, who contribute to the allocation of resources to the dominant state and assist it in maintaining the system; and dissatisfied powers, who are not fully integrated into the norms and rules of the system established by the dominating state (Lemke 2004). Which category a major power ends up in is determined by how similar its domestic institutions are to those of the dominant power (Ibid.). The more similar, the more likely the state is to benefit from the status quo, and by extension the more likely the state is to be a “satisfied state”. Conversely, if states are not fully integrated into the dominant state’s norms, they face forced integration. If the state in question is not interested in integration and want to maintain their own norms, they perceive integration as a threat (Edström & Westberg 2021:19). PTT thus corresponds with the wider approach to realism, as its reasoning is based on the idea that states’ acknowledgment of a disadvantage in the power distribution vis-a-vis their opponent, may cause them to adapt to avoid capability gaps (Darwich 2015:60). If they manage to adapt their capabilities to match that of their opponent, the state’s threat perception regarding material force is likely to remain on the same level. Conversely, if the state fails an attempt to diminish a capability gap it is likely that threat perception will increase. As a result, the prime motivating factor for decisions on war and peace is a country’s relative satisfaction with the rules of the global or regional hierarchy and a desire to improve the nation’s political position in it (Edström & Westberg 2021:19).
2.2. Previous security assessments of the Arctic

The last year and a half has made the changing character of international politics evident. Prior to February 2022, scholarly debate regarding the Arctic was dominated by the belief that there are no “hard” security issues in the region whatsoever. David Welch (2020:475), for example, argued that the end of the Cold War in combination with technological advances which have rendered the old monitoring activities in the Arctic unnecessary, caused the Arctic to lose any particular “hard” security value. He stated that it is impossible to imagine that significant military operations in the Arctic will ever be feasible, necessary, or desirable as the climate, terrain, remoteness and lack of base infrastructure in the Arctic will make military operations inhospitable (Ibid.). Instead, he and others such as Lawson Brigham (2014) and Heather Exner-Pirot (2020:307) believed that the main sources of instability in the region were derived from non-traditional security issues such as energy, economic, and environmental security, as well as the instability of legal and governance frameworks. According to James Kraska (2014:246), armed conflict in the Arctic is unlikely as disagreements in the region can be solved under UNCLOS and IMO framework, and since all Arctic states have expressed faith in diplomatic solutions. Ragnhild Groenning (2016) even stated that the concerns over increased risk of conflict in the Arctic have been alarmist rather than alarming. If traditional security was given any attention, it was only in terms of strategic deterrence and not as a possibility for kinetic conflict. However, as military spending and activity in the Arctic increase, it is evident that this is no longer the case. The “soft” security issues may remain, but the “hard” ones have undoubtedly returned. Additionally, the previous scholarly dialogue on Arctic security has been dominated by the idea of Arctic exceptionalism, thus leaving a significant gap in existing research as this era of scholarship has come to an end.

2.3. Research on great power strategies in the Arctic

As a consequence of Arctic exceptionalism, there has not been substantial work assessing the Arctic from a point of realpolitik. The strategies themselves were not
lending themselves to that type of analysis either, as the division among scholars on what the security challenges in the Arctic actually entail is reflected in them. Just like scholars were interpreting security in the Arctic in a traditional sense during the Cold War era, the Russian and US policies of the time are exclusively preoccupied with military security, namely strategic deterrence. As the Cold War came to an end, the focus of academics and policymakers alike turned to primarily soft security issues such as climate change, food security, security of indigenous peoples, et cetera. Yet, there have been a few cases of work done on Arctic great power strategies from a realist point of view. The most influential is Ryan Patrick Burke’s *The Polar Pivot*, released right before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It systematically maps the US, Russia and China’s strategies leading up to 2022, revealing an increased focus on the Arctic as an arena for great power competition.

According to Burke (2022:126), the US’s overarching goal in the Arctic was then to maintain status quo and by extension its own role as global hegemon whilst challenged by revisionist powers Russia and China, and to a lesser extent maintain control of strategic throughways, commons and resource pools. Furthermore, Burke (2022:202) argues that the US Arctic strategy has been underdeveloped as a result of the US having “blindly [clung] to the dated ideology of US exceptionalism seeking liberal hegemony”. The Russian Arctic strategy also saw a more assertive rhetoric than previously, as the 2008-2020 principles almost exclusively focus on economic interests, whereas the 2020-2035 principles indicated a shift toward security priorities in the Arctic, which points to Russia’s intent to further its defensive militarisation, and to assert an aggressive posture to ensure its Arctic interests (Ibid.:92). Lastly, Burke (2022:98) discerned that China’s strategy gave no credence for the suspicions that China intends to militarise the Arctic, although he identified a more assertive tone in its policies.

Excluding Burke’s contribution, there has been no significant analysis of Arctic strategy from a realist viewpoint. This study aims to contribute to filling this gap.
3. Theoretical frameworks

This chapter departs from the conceptualisation of the contemporary international system put forward by Håkan Edström and Jacob Westberg (2021) in *Military Strategy of Great Powers: Managing Power Asymmetry and Structural Change in the 21st Century*, on which this study is founded. Thus, this section will first account for their rendition of the international system. Secondly, Westberg’s theorisation of grand strategy will be presented. Finally, the three strands of realism are distilled into a theoretical framework for analysing great power strategies.

3.1. Edström and Westberg’s conceptualisation of the international system

Edström and Westberg (2021) base their conceptualisation of the international system on PTT, by supplementing PTT’s analysis of attitudes towards the status quo with motives related to status competition, positional conflicts and the use of military force. They argue that “recognition by other states as having a special status may increase a particular state’s political capital and give it access to exclusive decision-making forums” (Edström & Westberg 2021:23). In the current state system, recognition includes ideas of each state having equal formal rights to sovereignty, procedures of diplomatic representation, and collective recognition by peers acknowledged as membership and representation in the UN or organisations such as the G7 or G20. Edström and Westberg apply Deborah Welch Larson and her colleagues’ definition of status for their conceptualisation, which determines status as “collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes”. This relative ranking implies a view of status as a “positional good”, meaning a scarce resource that cannot be enjoyed by everyone.

In relation to security, positional competition may be a zero-sum game. As Randall Schweller (1999) argues, in these matters, a gain for one player becomes a corresponding loss for the opponent. Moreover, the subjective characteristics of estimations of power capabilities creates a risk of states experiencing “status inconsistency”, meaning that a state receives mixed signals from other states regarding
its relative position, or that a state perceives its own rank as higher than what other states are prepared to recognise. The presence of status inconsistency means it is more likely that open status competition will be triggered as long as the adversaries are evenly matched in terms of power capabilities (Wohlfforth 2011). In sum, Edström and Westberg (2021:24) believe status competition to be an important complement to the previous structural realist focus on the distribution of material power capabilities, and that recognition of status rank constitutes a basic goal for states regarding power maximisation and increased influence (Edström & Westberg 2021:26).

Thus, Edström and Westberg (2021) concludes that the present system is a 1+1+3 system, where the dominant power is the US the sole emergent superpower is China, and the three great powers are made up of The United Kingdom, France and Russia. Out of these, Russia and China count as dissatisfied states. Although both count as dissatisfied powers, the difference between China and Russia is their power capabilities.

![Figure 1. The structure of the international system in the present 1+1+3 system (Edström & Westberg 2021).](image)
3.2. Grand strategies

This thesis adopts Jacob Westberg’s (2021:22-23) definition of grand strategy for analysis, which describes grand strategy as a strategy for how – by which means – a state’s (or an organisation’s) fundamental security-political goals shall be realised with help from the own political system’s political, military, and economic means of power. This definition draws on work by Colin Gray (1999:162), who put forth that security strategies are not necessarily utilised in times of war, but in times of peace as well as it does not have to contain threats of or an active usage of military violence. According to Gray, strategic effects can be reached with diplomacy, propaganda, cultural, and economic warfare as well. Similarly, Barry Posen (1984) defined grand strategy as “a political-military, means-ends chain, a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself. […] A grand strategy must identify likely threats to the state’s security, and it must device political, economic, military and other remedies for those threats”. Westberg’s contribution to the definition consists of his inclusion of the context in which the state operates, thus acknowledging an extra dimension beyond the traditional Clausewitzian ends-means paradigm. Thus, the theorisation allows for an all-encompassing analysis of both the geopolitical changes in the Arctic and the great powers’ national positions.

When the categories of ends, means and context are combined, the need for states to coordinate political diplomatic, economic and military strategies arises. These coordination efforts are referred to as “ways” and constitute a variation of lines of action available to states which aim to combine diplomatic, economic and military efforts. Ways point to the course of action and operational design employed to fulfil the ends with the employed means, based on the state’s conception of its international context, thus linking three of Westberg’s analytical categories and embodying the fourth.

To operationalise grand strategy and its inherent strategic concepts, this thesis employs defensive realism, offensive realism and PTT to create a matrix of the alternative combinations of diplomatic, economic and military efforts available to great powers. Subsequently, this following section will provide an account of the alternative
strategies available from the realist viewpoint and compile them into an analytical matrix.

3.4. Theorisation

Based on the structure of the international system presented previously, the five system-determining states are given different strategic options depending on which realist paradigm one prefers. For this section, Posen and Ross’ (1997) four visions of US grand strategy are used and sorted into each theory within the realist paradigm: neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security, and primacy.

Consequently, the secondary great powers must adjust their strategies in response to the unipolar power’s strategic decisions, depending on whether they want to cooperate with the dominant power or not. In turn, the secondary great powers’ attitude towards the dominant power are dependent on how they view their own status and role in the present system, which determines their strategic choices. The alternative strategies for secondary powers are based on those presented by Edström and Westberg (2021): balance of power, isolation and hedging. These are in turn based on the work of Stephen Walt (2009). In the next subsection, an account of alternative strategies available to the dominant power will be given, which is subsequently followed by an account of alternative strategies for secondary powers.

It should be noted that this thesis only considers itself with strategies available for dissatisfied great powers according to PTT, as Russia and China have been determined to be. No states that are deemed satisfied major powers in Edström and Westberg’s conceptualisation of the international system are studied.

3.4.1. Alternative strategies of the dominant power

Starting with defensive realism, scholars advocate for a neo-isolationist strategy or one of selective engagement. Since defensive realists believe that the international system punishes aggression, they propose status quo-oriented strategies which aim to maintain the state’s position in the system and protect its own territorial borders. Corresponding with this logic, neo-isolationism represents the least ambitious strategy out of the four presented by Posen and Ross (1997) and advocates that national defence should focus
on protecting the security, liberty and property of the dominant power’s – the US’s – people. According to Posen and Ross (1997), this is the “only vital US interest” and thus renders all international ambitions present in the other strategies both unnecessary and counterproductive (Edström & Westberg 2021:43). The attraction of this strategy is dependent on elite threat perception and whether they believe that there is any real threat to the dominant power’s territory. In the case of the US, neo-isolationism is deemed a viable strategy due to the US’s protected geographic location, advantage in terms of nuclear weapons, and the assumption that Russia and China balance each other, thus not risking increasing their capacities enough to pose a threat to the US (Posen & Ross 1997). Therefore, there is no real threat to the sovereignty and safety of the US and the US can afford to wait for definite evidence of attack rather than undertake pre-emptive strikes (Ibid). Neo-isolationism's preoccupation with status quo-preservation, belief in traditional balance of power and extreme prioritisation of the dominant power’s own territory, it is a spot-on example of defensive realism.

Additionally, one could argue that selective engagement is a defensive realist strategy. Like neo-isolationism, it is a status quo-oriented strategy which primary objective is to preserve peace among great powers (Edström & Westberg 2021:47). Great power war brings the greatest military capacities into play and therefore have the greatest potential negative effects on the dominant power’s interests. The purpose of US engagement should therefore be to directly affect the tendencies of great powers to go to war with one another (Posen & Ross 1997:17). Just like advocates for neo-isolationism, advocates of selective engagement expect states to balance. However, Posen and Ross (1997) also “recognise that balancing may be tardy, statesmen may miscalculate, and nuclear deterrence could fail”. Given the interest in peace among great powers, the dominant power should engage abroad in order to hinder rising powers in the regions where consequences of a challenging power could be the most serious (Ibid.). The most important tools for regional detainment are a strong nuclear deterrent and the capacity for fighting two regional wars simultaneously. Subsequently, the best vehicle for these capacities is traditional military alliances, specifically NATO in the US’s case (Edström & Westberg 2021:48). Selective engagement’s belief in traditional balance of power, aim to preserve status quo, and preoccupation with preventing war between major
powers in order to protect the dominant power’s territory, results in it being categorised in this thesis as belonging to the defensive realist school of international relations.

However, for offensive realists, the proposed strategy for the dominant power is *primacy*, meaning that the referent state seeks to not only achieve a dominant position in the system but achieve supremacy by politically, economically and militarily outdistance any global challenge (Edström & Westberg 2021:42). Apart from increased spending in these areas, offensive realists predict that great powers conduct a strategy of containment. This entails promoting an active policy in regions of interest to contain potential challengers. For example, Kissinger and Brzezinski’s arguments for a US policy which included “political reassurance for Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity” as well as “a more visible show of interest” in the independence of other post-Soviet states in order to diminish Russia’s regional power (Brezinski 1994). Additionally, offensive realists display a scepticism towards international organisations, as they lack the means to maintain and restore peace. However, they may still fulfil a purpose for the dominant power, as they can provide a diplomatic cover that “renders the rule of an extraordinary power more palpable to ordinary powers” (Posen & Ross 1996:39-40). Primacy’s support for international aggression and hegemonic preferred world order thus makes it a prime example of offensive realist thinking.

Lastly, the PTT branch of scholarship aligns with the strategy of *cooperative security*. PTT argues that the international system is the most stable when there is one dominant power, which is supported by multiple smaller states. In order to achieve this support, there must therefore be cooperation. Cooperative security advocates believe that the security of states is characterised by strategic interdependence (Edström & Westberg 2021:45). They believe that world peace cannot rely on spontaneous balance of power strategies, as these will only be used when states consider that their own, more narrowly defined, vital interests are at stake (Posen & Ross 1997:25). Instead, international institutions – particularly the UN – and regional institutions – in particular a transformed NATO – are to play a critical role in coordinating the deterrence and defeat of aggression (Ibid.). These institutions should respond to imminent threats and deter all who would break the peace (Ibid.). Moreover, advocates of cooperative security mean that their preferred institutional system is not
yet in place, and that until it has, the US will have to maintain elements of its armed forces which go beyond those required for its territorial defence and make these capacities available to multinational international operations (Edström & Westberg 2021:45). By pooling resources together with its allies, the dominant power prevents dissatisfied states from reaching the capacities necessary to challenge its position at the top of the hierarchy. In order to achieve the support necessary for cooperative security, the dominant power needs to spread satisfaction as broadly as possible. According to Tammen (2008:321), this is best done by “socialising”. He means that it is critically important for the dominant power to manage the policy preferences of other, challenging, countries. By wrapping a web of international obligations, relationships, and common understandings around an emerging challenger, the challenger is “socialised” into an international system with rules and norms acceptable to the dominant power. Cooperative security’s emphasis on international cooperation led by the dominant power, and its belief in a hierarchical international system renders it a strategy in correspondence with PTT.

3.4.2. Alternative strategies of secondary powers

For secondary powers, the various potential strategies are not as easy to attribute to one certain theoretical paradigm as for the dominant power. Some strategies correspond to more than one theoretical paradigm and states may pursue multiple strategies simultaneously. However, this overlap is to be expected since the theoretical branches share a common intellectual heritage.

For defensive realists, a *balance of power strategy* is the most likely strategic outcome. In fact, balance of power strategies are essentially defensive strategies, as their prime objective is to avoid losses and protect a state’s relative position (Schweller 1994:74). This is done both by unilateral and collective balancing. Unilateral balancing consists of the internal efforts to develop and mobilise national military capacities which improve the state’s capability to resist pressures from the dominant power and increase costs of a direct attack (Edström & Westberg 2021:12). On the other hand, collective balancing corresponds to defensive realism as the other great powers are expected to form a counter-balancing coalition if a dominant power
tries to establish hegemony. By pooling resources together, the coalition increases the security of each member state by increasing the cost of attack, much like unilateral balancing (Ibid.:52). Unilateral and collective balancing may be used for both defensive and offensive balancing, depending on what the state’s ultimate aim is. Thus, balance of power strategies are proposed by both defensive and offensive realist scholars. Hard balancing corresponds with PTT as well, as dissatisfied states are expected to undertake both unilateral and collective balancing. According to PTT, emergent superpowers can only achieve the rank of a superpower by internal balancing as economic advancement is a necessity for achieving parity with the dominant power in terms of material capabilities (Lemke 2004:58).

However, only defensive realists and PTT proponents propose soft balancing as a viable alignment strategy. Walt (2009:104) defines soft balancing as the “conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to US preferences” which “soft balancers combine their diplomatic assets in order to defend their interests”. Contrary to hard balancing, soft balancing use international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements instead of military means (Edström & Westberg 2021:53). By applying soft pressure on the dominant power, the secondary powers once again increase the cost of attack and thereby increase security for themselves, which aligns with the logic of defensive realism. This strategy is also seen as likely for secondary powers by PTT scholars, as it can function as a means to hinder the dominant power’s attempts to establish cooperative security or by “socialising” the referent state.

Additionally, defensive realists propose isolationist strategies, which aim to isolate or distance secondary great powers from the dominant power. Edström and Westberg (2021) present three isolationist options that differ in intensity: distancing, strategic autonomy, and buck-passing. Distancing is defined as a proactive strategy which a secondary power undertakes to prevent undesired outcomes and advance desired ones by promoting its own interests contrary to the dominant power (Elgström 2000:5). By distancing itself, the referent state limits its chances for primacy as it is not aggressive enough. Distancing is thus incompatible with offensive realism, which promotes broad international intervention (Posen & Ross 1997). It is also incompatible
with PTT, which expects states to choose antagonistic strategies (Lemke 2004:58). Furthermore, strategic autonomy aims to reassure secondary powers as dominant in their own region and to limit the influence of external great powers or superpowers there (Edström & Westberg 2021:54). Lastly, isolationist strategies include buck-passing, which is defined by Edström and Westberg as the referent state free-riding “on the security provided by other members of the alliance”, thus “passing the buck” to some or several of its allies. Although distancing is an inherently defensive realist strategy, the other two isolationist strategies are compatible with defensive as well as offensive realism, since they can be implemented with both revisionist and status quo-oriented intentions. Like offensive realism, PTT believes that dissatisfied secondary powers will take antagonistic measures toward the dominant power. Dissatisfied states are therefore not expected to choose distancing but may opt for strategic autonomy or buck-passing.

In contrast to offensive realists and proponents of PTT, defensive realists believe hedging to be a viable alignment strategy. There are two alternative versions of hedging: multiple courting and leash-slipping. Multiple courting consists of a combination of alignment strategies involving cooperation with several different states or institutional settings, as well as efforts of pursuing different simultaneous strategies toward a particular state (Edström & Westberg 2021:54). In the context of secondary powers strategies towards the dominant power, multiple courting is defined as “efforts to utilise resources related to several different institutional settings to become less dependent on institutions dominated by the unipolar power” (Ibid.). The other hedging strategy, leash-slipping, is closely related to multiple courting. Walt (2009:107) defines leash-slipping as states forming alliances “not to balance or constrain the unipole, but to reduce their dependence on the unipole by pooling their own capabilities”. It is thus not a strategy meant to balance against the dominant state in the near term but rather a way of gaining some measure of autonomy and defend the own state against future uncertainties (Ibid.). Due to their status quo-oriented nature, hedging strategies are inherently defensive and have therefore been categorised as such in this thesis’ conceptual framework.
Table 1. Alternative strategies of great powers according to defensive realism, offensive realism and power transition theory.

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<tr>
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<th>Defensive realism</th>
<th>Offensive realism</th>
<th>Power Transition Theory</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dominant power</td>
<td>Neo-isolationism</td>
<td>Primacy</td>
<td>Cooperative security</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Selective engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary powers</td>
<td>Balance of power (hard and soft)</td>
<td>Balance of power (hard)</td>
<td>Balance of power (hard and soft)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation (distancing, strategic autonomy, buck-passing)</td>
<td>Isolation (strategic autonomy, buck-passing)</td>
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<td>Hedging</td>
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In order to analyse which theoretical strategy each great power’s grand strategy in the Arctic best corresponds to, the analytical framework of this thesis is stipulated through the categories of context, ends, means, and ways. These categories were defined in the previous section, although the “ways” category was expanded upon in this section.
4. Methodological considerations

In this chapter, the methodological considerations of this study will be accounted for. First, the justification behind the choice of case as well as contextual background is laid out. Second, a presentation of the chosen method of analysis – qualitative content analysis – is presented. Finally, a discussion of the empirical material used is included.

4.1. The case of the Arctic

This thesis uses the Arctic theatre as overarching case for a nested case study for three reasons. Firstly, the presence of the hegemon and both dissatisfied great powers renders it a suitable region for examining great power balancing, especially since the lack of substantial international governance creates a setting similar to an anarchic international system. Secondly, there is a need for scholars to reevaluate Arctic security in the wake of the end of Arctic exceptionalism since the suspension of the Arctic Council; the return to “hard” security issues due to the increased militarisation; the introduction of new, non-kinetic means of warfare; and the return of great power politics as a result of Russia and China emerging as challenging powers. Thus, the US, Russia and China make good cases for analysing great power politics, as they are defined as such in accordance with Edström and Westberg’s (2021) rendition of the present international system. Lastly, the Arctic is subject to drastic environmental changes as its ice melts by 13% each decade, and at an increasingly accelerated rate, as temperatures rise. Recent predictions warn that the area might be entirely ice-free already in 2035 (NASA 2022). However, the melting sea ice also opens up new transportation routes such as the Northwest Passage and the NSR; warmer oceans lead fish to emigrate northwards, making the Arctic Ocean a new hotspot for international fishing; and there are estimates of large findings of oil, natural gas and rare earth minerals (Lopez 2022). The emerging economic opportunities in the Arctic have caused increased attention being directed towards it, and a deeper understanding of the situation will prove helpful for other Arctic states’ policymaking processes.
4.2. Qualitative content analysis

This study is conducted through qualitative content analysis, as it aims to map the US, Russia and China’s respective Arctic strategies by identifying the context in which the strategies were composed as well as their proposed ends, means, and ways. In essence, content analysis entails a systematic way for describing textual content, carried out either in a quantitative or qualitative manner (Bergström & Boréus 2005:44). Qualitative content analysis is especially suitable for this project as the aim of the method is to determine patterns and meanings in the empirical material as well as compare different texts using the same analytical tools, rendering it a great method for comparative analyses using texts for material. This is done by investigating the occurrence of specific words, expressions, metaphors and arguments, as well as inquire into the context in which these are stated (Elo & Kyngäs 2008:109). In contrast to quantitative content analysis, the qualitative method allows the researcher to explore not only the explicit statements, but themes, core ideas, formal aspects, and what is excluded from the material (Drisko & Maschi 2015:82). In other words, qualitative content analysis provides a means to understand not only the manifest, but also the latent content of the material (Ibid.:87). Lastly, qualitative content analysis is especially beneficial for descriptive qualitative research, which is the ambition with this study’s mapping exercise (Ibid.).

Margrit Schreier (2014) divided qualitative content analysis into eleven different versions, of which the directed approach is the most fruitful for this study. Furthermore, the directed approach is often used in cases where the researcher wishes to retest existing data in a new context (Catanzaro 1998). This corresponds with the purpose of this thesis, as it will attempt to reevaluate the great powers’ Arctic strategies in the context which emerged in tandem with the end of the post-Cold War era and the end of Arctic exceptionalism. When using the directed approach, the researcher utilises existing theory or prior research by identifying key concepts or variables as basis for initial coding categories (Hsien & Shannon 2005:1281). Thereafter, operational definitions for each category are determined using the theory (Drisko & Maschi 2015:87). As the analysis progresses, additional categories may be added, and the initial coding scheme is revised and refined (Hsien & Shannon 2005:1286). Since the structure
The process of qualitative content analysis is carried out through three main phases: preparation, organising and reporting. However, there are no systematic rules for analysing data. Instead, the key feature of all content analysis is that the words of the text are classified into much smaller content categories (Ibid.:109). During the preparation phase, the researcher develops a categorisation matrix based on the earlier theory or model (Ibid.:111). In this thesis, the categorisation matrix is based on the three realist strands’ assumptions about great power behaviour, which is presented in the following section. Once preparation is finished, the researcher systematically examines and interprets the empirical material by identifying patterns and sorting the finds into the established categorisation matrix (Drisko & Maschi 2015:106). Lastly, the findings are analysed in relation to the overarching theory, which in this essay is defensive realism, offensive realism and PTT.

4.3. Analytical framework

In order to analyse grand strategies, Jacob Westberg (2021:40) proposes that scholars utilise the Clausewitzian ends-means paradigm with the addition of context. Thus, Westberg presents four subtypes for analysing strategies by investigating a state’s use of political, military and economic means of power: context, ends, means and ways.

Context

Firstly, Westberg argues that the context in which the state operates determines a state’s strategic choices, as its perception of the international context impacts who and what is perceived as a threat and enemy, which in turn influences the state’s impression of security and situational awareness. Perception of context is determined by both external and internal impact factors related to the state’s own characteristics. The analysis of
external factors includes a state’s relations to other states and organisations, presence and absence of more or less well-functioning common institutions for different forms of security cooperation, as well as the power distribution and tension levels between major powers. Regarding internal factors, the own state’s geographic extent and position, experience of previous conflict, the nation’s political identity and culture, as well as political system are determining components of strategy. The way states perceive their own role in world politics also affects their strategies, for example whether they perceive themselves as leaders and which values should be prioritised.

In relation to the Arctic, context is influenced by the referent state’s experiences in the region regarding other powerholders; its threat perception in relation to its Arctic territorial integrity, freedom of action, or sovereignty; as well as its perception of the organisation of the international system, in terms of what kind of actions are rewarded and what are punished. Thus, when coding the category of context, focus lies on who and what is perceived as a threat by the referent state, which internal and external factors are deemed important, and what issues are emphasised or minimised.

*Ends*

Secondly, the sub-element regarding ends encompasses the objectives and interests of the referent state. These entail pronounced goals within the political as well as military sphere, on both the national and international level. All states' strategies are expected to conform to aspects regarding their own Arctic role, the neighbouring nations, and the effect others have on their position. Thus, the empirical analysis aims to investigate what interests are highlighted and prioritised by the great powers to ensure a secure position and continued influence in the Arctic theatre. Apart from existing issues, economic and political possibilities arising from climate change should also be of interest as it entails widespread exploitation, increasing the possibility of access to resources and influence.
Means

Thirdly, the sub-element of means encompasses what methods of power are described as necessary, feasible and prioritised within the strategy. These instruments of power may be either physical or psychological and are often utilised to ensure control in various ways, including economic, political and military (Westberg 2021). Thus, the coding pays attention to mentions in the material regarding diplomatic, cooperative, economic and military means.

Ways

Lastly, the category of ways points to the course of action and operational design employed to fulfil the ends with the employed means, thus linking the previous categories. Westberg (2021:28) describes ways as the strategy’s core, and as the glue that binds ends and ways together with context. The coding for this category aims to identify the main tendencies concerning ways in the Arctic. It will thus pay attention to whether the state pursues collaboration or not, whether it favours a passive or inactive approach, and whether it aims to preserve the status quo or has revisionist intentions.

The findings will subsequently be sorted into the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter.

4.4. Material

This thesis analyses the great powers’ Arctic strategies by consulting the official policies guiding their approach to the Arctic currently in use. For the US, these consists of primarily the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region, and secondarily the 2022 National Security Strategy. For Russia, its Arctic strategy is primarily defined in the 2020 Foundations of the Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035, and secondarily in the 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. Lastly, for China, its Arctic strategy is primarily defined in the 2018 China’s Arctic Policy, and secondarily in its 2023 Defence Policy. All documents are issued by and received from official government authorities and institutions' websites.
The use of government reports further adheres to the claim made in the definition of the dependent variable, stating that strategies are the bridge between political objectives, policy, and operational plans. Hence, the Arctic strategies are chosen as they are created with the purpose of mediating the state’s stance on the Arctic region specifically. The national foreign and security strategies are included as they provide a broader approach and expand the state’s view on security only handled partially in its Arctic strategy, thus contributing to the study by portraying the state's general perception of the external context and threats. Statements concerning cooperation and international organisations also indicate the national stance, which is transferable to the Arctic region. However, the general national strategies are handled with caution, as they are not specifically directed to the Arctic and thus might provide skewed results if aspects not related to the Arctic are included.

The strategies analysed in this study range from 2018 to 2023. The oldest strategies – the Russian and the Chinese – have been updated since, in response to increasing geopolitical tensions following the war in Ukraine. The difference in time is relevant as the geostrategic security situation in the Arctic has accelerated fast in the last couple of years. Newer revised reports, announcements and meeting minutes are therefore incorporated as supplements. The secondary material also serves to account for the presumption that Russia and China, in capacity of autocratic states, may not adhere to the principle of transparency to the same extent as a democratic state. Lastly, the inclusion of secondary material also provides a solution to the language issue, as the author of this thesis has a fluent comprehension of English, but only speaks a degree of Russian, and no Chinese whatsoever. China and Russia have both provided official translations of their Arctic strategies as well as national security and defence strategies, but concerning secondary strategic documents, this thesis relies on translations made by other scholars. All documents interlinked provide a coherent picture and understanding of each state's security strategy in the Arctic region, fulfilling the aim of the study. Moreover, it is important that the analysis follows the methodological decisions made and that the procedure is transparent and thus able to replicate, ensuring high validity (Bass & Semetko 2021:59). Transparency is ensured by pervading the analysis with explicit references and quotations.
4.5. Demarcations and limitations

Alternative approaches to this study are possible. For example, using a more holistic understanding of great power behaviour using other strands of theory, such as constructivism or liberalism, could have been fruitful. Realism is often criticised as too narrow for its focus on material capabilities, and that including a constructivist approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of Arctic security. However, as the changes in the international system are characterised by realist tendencies, i.e. anarchic structure, militarisation, resource competition and military alignment, this thesis disregards constructive interpretations and the demarcation considered appropriate.

Furthermore, which abstraction level to position this thesis could have been altered. For example, by focusing on only one unit of analysis, the study would have taken on a less abstract character and gained deeper knowledge. However, as the aim of the thesis is to draw general assumptions about great power behaviour, it is deemed necessary to analyse all great powers present in the Arctic. Correspondingly, the abstract level of the study excludes control variables in form of medium or small states. This is considered motivated, as the purpose of this study is focused on great powers asserting themselves in the international system, and no other sorts of states. Lastly, while temporal comparisons would be possible, the aim of this study is to recontextualise the Arctic in response to current changes in the international system and does not take into account what the post-Cold War era strategies emphasised.
5. Empirical analysis

The empirical analysis is divided into two sections presenting and analysing the content derived from the empirical material against the analytical framework. The categories of context, ends, means and ways guide the first part by interchangeably analysing all great powers’ strategies based on the categorisation matrix. Thereafter, the results discerned from the empirical material are analysed against the assumptions on great power behaviour derived from defensive realism, offensive realism and PTT in the analytical discussion.

5.1. Context

This section analyses relevant internal and external aspects which have influenced the great powers’ Arctic strategies, as well as their stated threat perceptions. When accounting for context, information from the empirical material and external sources are used to supplement characteristics not thoroughly conveyed in policies.

5.1.1. Internal aspects

The geographic characteristic of each great power determines their Arctic strategy, as its perception of territorial vulnerability influences its threat perception. Russia possesses the vastly largest Arctic territory out of the three cases, with 45% of its total landmass being located inside the Arctic circle and 53% of the Arctic coastline being controlled by the Russians (Paul 2023; the Arctic Council 2023). Russia’s only Arctic borders consist of its border with Finland in the west and its maritime border through the Bering Strait with the US in the east. Regarding its western border, Russian territorial vulnerability has seriously increased since Finland’s accession to NATO. As stated by Russian minister of defence, Sergey Shoigu, “after Helsinki joined the alliance, Russia’s land border with the bloc’s countries almost doubled”, which poses a threat as it is “likely that additional military contingents and NATO strike weapons, capable of hitting critical targets in the north-west of Russia” will be deployed on Finnish territory (Nilsen 2023). However, regarding territorial infringements, Russia’s concerns are concentrated to its maritime territory – especially along the NSR where there are some contested
straits. Indeed, Moscow lists “ensuring the unalterability of the historically established international legal regime of the inland maritime waters of the Russian Federation” as one of its primary Arctic goals (Office of the President of the Russian Federation (PotRF) 2020). Additionally, Russia has claimed an area of approximately 1.7 million square kilometres of seabed, encompassing some 75% of the international Arctic seabed, which it aims to add to its sovereign territory (Breum 2023).

Moreover, the US’s protected geographic position has long been emphasised as a crucial aspect for its absence of physical threats and dominant position in modern global politics. This perception has changed in recent years, as US officials increasingly have reported on threats to American territorial sovereignty as a result of increased Arctic presence. As General Terrence O’Shaughnessy stated in a report to Congress in 2020: “The Arctic is no longer a fortress wall, and our oceans are no longer protective moats” (Paul 2023:6). Although the US’s Arctic territory is relatively small – only 15% of the total US landmass is located inside the Arctic circle (Ibid.) – it is a strategically important area for US homeland defence. The US identifies the Arctic as an avenue of approach for American adversaries’ missiles and long-range aviation assets as it provides the shortest distance between the US and Eurasia (Air & Space Forces 2023; Garamone 2023). Conversely, American missile attacks constitute a prime concern for Russia and China as well.

China does not possess any territory in the Arctic. Nonetheless, it conveys a perceived territorial vulnerability in relation to the Arctic, as a result of the accelerating climate change in the Arctic. According to China, the “Arctic situation now goes beyond its original inter-Arctic States or regional nature, having a vital bearing on the interests of States outside the region” and the climate changes in the Arctic “have a direct impact on China’s climate system and ecological environment, and, in turn, on its economic interests in agriculture, forestry, fishery, marine industry and other sectors” (the Chinese State Council (CSC) 2018).

Moreover, the way states view themselves as Arctic actors affect their strategies. The US’s Arctic identity is relatively newfound because of previous lack of interest in the region from domestic politics. Most Americans are uninterested in the Arctic and do not identify themselves as an Arctic nation. Alaska was only admitted as
the 49th state in 1953 and in a 2019 US survey, Americans continued to mildly disagree with the assertion that the US is an Arctic state holding broad and fundamental interests in the region (Paul 2023:1). In comparison to other Arctic powers, the US has therefore not had a robust Arctic policy and has showcased a remarkable gap in substance relative to policies informing US approaches to other global hotspots (Burke 2022:111). As recently as 19th of December 2023, the US Department of State released a statement saying that they will move forward with the US extended continental shelf claims in the Arctic – 16 years after Russia first tabled theirs. The general lack of US policy orientation toward the Arctic throughout the years created an avenue of approach that Russia and China have been able to exploit with their own policies. In response, the US has increased its Arctic policy substance since 2019, but in a reactive rather than proactive manner (Ibid.).

In contrast, the Arctic has long inhibited a central role in Russian strategic thinking and policy. Not only because of military presence, natural resources or other commercial activities, but as a mental and identity resource for Russia since its origin as a state (Fondahl, Espiritu & Ivanova 2020:195). Russia’s first Arctic policy was published in 2000 and designated the region as an “independent object of state policy” due to Moscow’s “special interests” in the region and stated that the “Arctic [was] of exceptional military-strategic importance” to Russia (Burke 2022:89). Through its accumulated claims for the Arctic seabed, including the North Pole and its powerful mythology, Russia has signalled its perceived strength and robustness to the Russian public and the world – similarly to previous leaders of Russia and the USSR’s utilisation of Russian Arctic conquest to project power and strength (Breum 2023).

Although China does not possess territory within the Arctic circle, it has an Arctic identity that predates the US’s. China has had an Arctic policy orientation since the 1925 Spitsbergen treaty, which entailed it to build research stations on Svalbard (Burke 2022: 98). China’s commitment to the Arctic has overwhelmingly been scientific, but its 2018 White Paper marked a more assertive tone in terms of economic and diplomatic goals. According to Beijing, the Arctic should be categorised as a ‘global commons’, thus belonging to all of the world’s nations. Its Arctic identity is thus founded on a basis of cooperation, in which China expresses that it should take lead.
Much like Russia, China’s Arctic commitment serves as an identity-generating factor within China: Beijing uses the polar regions as a forum for public education in which scientists teach Chinese youth “to love science” and “love their country”, explicitly stated, aimed to project strength domestically (Brady 2017:37-43).

Furthermore, China and Russia are both facing domestic economic problems. China struggles economically after facing a “hard landing” following the last years’ GDP growth, trade war with the US, struggles with growing debt and a lack of energy sources and raw material in form of metals and minerals (Lanteigne, Koivurova & Nojonen 2020). China is thus looking for new economic opportunities with new partners, turning its attention to the Arctic as “the utilisation of sea routes and exploration and development of the resources in the Arctic may have a huge impact on the energy strategy and economic development of China” (CSC 2018). Simultaneously, Russia is dealing with the consequences of western sanctions following the war in Ukraine. Moscow is therefore also seeking new partnerships and aims to “[capitalise] on the unique geographical position and transit capacity of Russia” to advance the national economy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (RMoFA) 2023).

Lastly, all cases convey a perception of themselves as a global power obliged to steer the rest of the world in the right direction, on a quest to establish their own domestic norms and values internationally. For example, the US states that realising its Arctic vision “will require U.S. leadership at home and abroad” and that this leadership will be characterised by the US’s values (The President of the US (PotUS) 2022a; PotUS 2022b:2). Specifically, the US states that it “will not leave [its] future vulnerable to the whims of those who do not share [its] vision for a world that is free, open, prosperous, and secure” (Ibid.). Likewise, Russia perceives itself as a bastion of decency aiming to protect Russian values of “human nature, truth, freedom and justice” (PotRF 2022), thus juxtaposing itself in relation to the US-led western powers’ “destructive neoliberal attitudes that run counter to traditional spiritual and moral values” (RMoFA 2023). Lastly, China also wishes to function as “a guiding power” in the world, as stated by President Xi in 2016, and as a “norm entrepreneur” in the Arctic (Koivurova & Kopra 2020) although explicitly stating that China does not
seek hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence (China’s Ministry of National Defence (CMoND) 2023).

5.1.2 External aspects
Regarding external aspects, the US, Russia and China’s strategies are largely affected by the same factors. Climate change, Russia’s 2022 extended invasion of Ukraine and changing international power distribution has affected them all in some way. For the US, the primary external factor consists of the war in Ukraine as it “has raised geopolitical tensions in the Arctic […], creating new risks of unintended conflict and hindering cooperation” (PotUS 2022a:6). Although the Arctic Council explicitly did not deal with matters related to traditional security, its suspension as a consequence of the war removed the main forum for international cooperation in the Arctic. In response, the US strategy was altered from an emphasis on cooperation between all Arctic states to a complete absence of relations with Russia, as “Russia’s brutal war in Ukraine has made this cooperation virtually impossible in the Arctic at present” (Ibid.). Instead, the US’s only security cooperation in the Arctic takes place within the NATO framework, as 7 out of 8 Arctic states now are, or are becoming, members. Consequently, Russia and China are excluded from any circumpolar security cooperation forums, and Russia is excluded from the main regional cooperation forum, the Arctic Council – something China publicly has opposed.

Subsequently, the upheaval of the post-Cold War era has launched a global race for influence which impacts Arctic strategy. The US has identified its main competitor as China since it “is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective” (PotUS 2022b:8). However, as China does not have any territory in the Arctic, it must rely on Russia for its Arctic foothold. Instead, the US perceives Russia as the most direct threat in Arctic matters, as it has a substantial Arctic presence in terms of territory and capabilities. Likewise, Moscow has identified the US as its main competitor for becoming “one of the leading centres of development in the modern world”, thus threatening US dominance, leading the US to aim to “weaken Russia in every possible way” (RMoFA 2023). Russia does not,
however, consider China a competitor, instead identifying it as a “friendly sovereign global centre of power and development” as China’s commitments in principle overlaps with the “Russian approaches to a future world order” (Ibid.:23). In contrast to Russia and the US, China does not as explicitly state its global intentions. It acknowledges that it is operating in an environment characterised by “major changes in the world unseen in a century” where “global governance is in dysfunction”, “Cold War mentality is resurfacing” and “unilateralism, protectionism and hegemonism run rampant” but does not name any main competitors (Xi 2022; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

Moreover, the Arctic is increasingly becoming a region of focus as climate change paves the way for new economic opportunities. This constitutes a crucial external factor for US grand strategy: according to General Glen VanHerck, the changing climate ranks among his top concerns as an increase in extreme weather events and the opening sea lanes in the Arctic tax US resources and strain readiness (Clark 2023). According to the US, Arctic climate change entails two security challenges: the emergent economic opportunities will allow the US’s adversaries greater presence and increase activity in the region, and melting permafrost may cause damage to military infrastructure built on top (PotUS 2022a:6; Garamone 2023). As VanHerck put it, “the environment, especially in the Arctic, [is] creating opportunities and vulnerabilities for our competitors to take advantage of”, thus causing the region to become a theatre of great power competition (Ibid.). However, Russia and China do not connect climate change to any “hard” security concerns, instead primarily describing it as a “soft” security concern, or in positive terms as provider of economic opportunity.

5.1.3. Threat perception
All great powers’ state that the world order is changing but they convey different perceptions of threat in relation. The US presents a threat perception where the current status quo – which has served US interests since the end of the Cold War – is in upheaval. In the Arctic specifically, the threat to status quo has been caused by China’s expanded slate of economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military activities, which it now intends to use to increase its regional influence, as well as by Russia’s significant
investment in military presence and development of economic infrastructure in its Arctic territories (PotUS 2022a:6). Thus, the Arctic now constitutes a theatre of power projection in which the US-led status quo is threatened, and the US fears a decrease in influence. In contrast, Russia perceives the changing world order to be a consequence of attempts “made to restrain the natural course of history, to eliminate competitors in the politico-military and economic spheres, and to suppress dissent” by western powers. Russia therefore welcomes the upheaval of the US-led international order, as “the formation of a more equitable multipolar world order is underway” (RMoFA 2023). Beijing, however, has not formulated a threat against China as a consequence of the changing order.

Moreover, challenges to status quo combined with hindered Arctic cooperation increase the risk of unintended conflict in the region, thus posing a threat to all Arctic actors. For the US, Russian threats to the US’s vulnerable Arctic territory currently composes the biggest risk for conflict. Russia is located only 55 miles away at the Bering Strait and has a significant capability advantage compared to the US. According to General VanHerck, Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles make the US northern warning system “look like a picket fence” and Russian submarines pose a “persistent, proximate threat capable of carrying a significant number of land-attack cruise missiles that can threaten [US] homeland” (Lopez 2022b). Although Russian officials maintain their bases and assets in the Arctic are defensive, they arm their icebreakers with Kalibr-K missiles, thus fuelling the American perception of Russia as a threat (Garamone 2022). The US also warily observes China, as it “has sought to increase its influence in the Arctic by rapidly [increasing] its Arctic investments, pursuing new scientific activities, and using these scientific engagements to conduct dual-use research with intelligence or military applications (PotUS 2022b:44). Russia is also becoming increasingly territorial, with President Putin pledging to protect Arctic waters “by all means” from the US and NATO, most likely as a result of its substantive resource commitment to developing the NSR (Russia Maritime Doctrine 2022). As the NSR becomes more accessible, it may be used for both economic and military transportation. Russian leadership anticipates that, in the event of conflict, such critical infrastructure would be targeted and has therefore placed it under protection in form of
A multilayered defence shield of anti-access/area denial capabilities all along the route (Lanteigne, Koivurova & Nojonen 2020).

As China does not possess Arctic territory, the primary threat in case of regional conflict instead consists of its Arctic operations being hindered: for instance, the Arctic serves as the base from where optimisation and modernisation of the BeiDou satellite system is performed, which provides essential information and communications for Chinese military activities such as position, navigation and timing capabilities, unique mass communications and user tracking, and military C2 capabilities (US Department of Defense (USDOD) 2023:100).

An element of the impending status quo upheaval is the risk of erosion of the international institutions. From an American viewpoint, the threat towards status quo entails that the “basic laws and principles governing relations among nations […] are under attack” (PotUS 2022b). For example, Russia’s “reckless nuclear threats” endanger the global non-proliferation regime (Ibid.:3), and China is trying to adjust international norms and governance structures in its favour, particularly by economic coercion in the Arctic (Garamone 2022). The US Coast Guard has also warned that China might disobey UNCLOS in the Arctic, given its behaviour in the South China Sea (Paul 2023:2). The risk of erosion is especially critical for the US, as it has relied on these institutions to uphold its dominant position since the end of the Cold War. Russia also states that international institutions are eroding, but as a result of the US and other western powers using “a wide range of illegal instruments and methods, […] including the introduction of coercive measures (sanctions) in circumvention of the UN Security Council” (RMoFA 2023). In the Arctic, this results in a concern that foreign states are attempting to “revise the basic provisions of the international treaties governing economic and other activities in the Arctic and establish national regulatory frameworks without taking into account these treaties and types of regional cooperation”, thus threatening to “obstruct the Russian Federation’s legitimate economic or other activities” and increasing the risk of conflict (PotRF 2020). Lastly, the biggest threat according to China is the “blueberry pie” scenario, meaning that the entire Arctic – both ocean and land – is divided up between the Arctic littoral states, thereby excluding China from the region and the “Arctic scramble for resources” (Koivurova et al. 2020).
The current international institutions, e.g. the Arctic Council, UNCLOS, etc., prevent this scenario.

5.2. Ends

Based on the great powers’ threat perceptions and the identified external and internal impact factors, four categories of pronounced ends are visible: overarching goals regarding the changing world order, as well as specific, sub-category, goals in relation to international cooperation, military security and economic security.

5.2.1. Upheaval of world order

The US’s primary goal both globally and in the Arctic is to protect the status quo and avoid a bipolar trajectory, as expanded upon in 4.1. This goal is rooted in the US’s national interests, namely “to protect the security of the American people; to expand economic prosperity and opportunity; and to realise and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life” (PotUS 2022b:7). As a dimension of sustaining status quo, the US aims to build “the strongest and broadest possible coalition of nations that seek to cooperate with each other, while competing with those powers that offer a darker vision and thwarting their efforts to threaten our interests”, thus serving to sustain American dominance through the common institutions on which its influence is founded (Ibid.).

Simultaneously, Russia explicitly aims to challenge the US and "establish an equitable and sustainable world order” which will be achieved by consolidating Russia as “one of the responsible powerful and independent centres of the modern world” (RMoFA2023). To increase its influence, Russia aims to “ensure Russian sovereignty in all domains”, expand “mutually beneficial cooperation” and “promote traditional Russian moral and spiritual values” (Ibid.).

Although China does not express itself in the same assertive terms as Russia, it also indicates a wish for increased global influence as evident by the statements on China as a “guiding power” and “norm entrepreneur” presented in earlier. As the nineteenth Party Congress Report in 2017 put it, China has entered a “new era,” one in which it is “moving closer to centre stage” (Smith 2021:9). In response to the
changes, China under Xi Jinping has adapted “Major Country Diplomacy” aimed at legitimising a more proactive, and in some cases assertive, role for China (Ibid.:13). Under the banner of Major Country Diplomacy, China actively seeks to reform international order, engage in ideological competition with the West to secure legitimacy for its one-party authoritarian system, and assume greater responsibility for global affairs in accordance with its elevated power and status (Ibid.). In relation to the Arctic, China defines it as an “aviation crossroads” between the major capitals of Europe, Russia, North America and Asia, noting that this crossroads is only 8,000 kilometres away from all northern great powers and therefore constitutes an optimal position from which to control the whole northern hemisphere using strategic bombers and ballistic missiles (China Aerospace Research Institute (CASI) 2022).

5.2.2. International cooperation

All great powers agree that the Arctic should remain a peaceful region, despite the current tensions. In order to uphold peace, the US means that the Arctic must have “guardrails” in form of functioning common institutions and all states’ adherence to international laws to manage competition and resolve disputes without force or coercion (PotUS 2022a:5). These institutions also function as a way of cementing American values as the Arctic norm. As the war in Ukraine has rendered cooperation with Russia in the Arctic “virtually impossible”, the US instead focuses on maintaining cooperation with their allies and partners – explicitly stated to be Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (including Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – in existing fora and believes that it should take a leading role (Ibid.). The US bases this opinion on its contributions in developing the “governance architecture enabling this regional cooperation […] over the past quarter century” and the importance of working through existing multilateral fora and legal frameworks dedicated to solving shared challenges in the region” (Ibid.:13-14). The US recognises the Arctic Council as the region’s primary forum despite its suspension, stating that it will “seek to maintain the Arctic Council as the principal multilateral forum for the Arctic by working through the Council whenever possible” and making “funding for U.S.-led Arctic Council activities more consistent” (Ibid.). Regarding legal frameworks, the US states that it will “work to
advance implementation and enforcement of existing international agreements, “including the CAO Fisheries Agreement, the International Maritime Organisation’s Polar Code, and the Agreement on Enhancing International Science Cooperation in the Arctic” (Ibid.). Additionally, the US states that it will “protect navigation and overflight rights and freedoms across the Arctic […] in accordance with international law as reflected in [UNCLOS]” (Ibid:14). Since the US presently has not ratified UNCLOS, it also states that it will “continue to support joining UNCLOS” (Ibid.)

As a consequence of its exclusion from Arctic Council activities, Russia has abandoned goals related to international cooperation through the forum, and instead aims to pursue cooperation with non-Arctic states “pursuing a constructive policy toward Russia”, such as the BRICS countries or bilaterally with China (RMoFA 2023). Concerning international law, Russia is focusing its attention on UNCLOS, as that is the forum in which Russia’s continental shelf claims can be consolidated and Russia’s maritime sovereignty is protected (Ibid.).

China, too, advocates for international cooperation. However, it places emphasis on non-Arctic fora for cooperation as it is excluded, or plays a diminished role, in the region-specific ones. For example, China underlines the UN Security Council – of which it is a member – in its 2018 Arctic Strategy, whilst hardly mentioning the Arctic Council – of which it is a mere observer. Additionally, Gao Feng, China’s special envoy for Arctic affairs, stated following the Arctic Council’s exclusion of Russia that “China does not recognise the legitimacy of the limited resumption of the Arctic Council [without Russia], and the nation will continue collaborating with Russia and other Arctic nations” (Schreiber 2022).

5.2.3. Military security
All great powers emphasise the Arctic’s role in military deterrence as it provides the shortest path of attack between the American and Eurasian continents, rendering deterrence the primary military objective (CASI 2022; PotUS 2022a; PotRF 2020). The US specifically aims to “deter threats to the US homeland and [its] allies by enhancing the capabilities required to defend our interests in the Arctic” (PotUS 2022a). Although there is no conflict in the Arctic at the moment, the military’s role amid intensifying
competition, is to maintain and gain war-fighting advantages while limiting those of the US’s competitors (Ibid.). Therefore, the US military “will act urgently to sustain and strengthen deterrence, with the PRC as its pacing challenge” (Ibid.). As stated in its Arctic Strategy, the US’s highest priority is to protect the American people and its sovereign territory and rights, which is rooted in its territorial threat perception (Ibid.). The prime challenge for achieving this goal is that the “Arctic environment poses region-specific challenges that require tailored technology, assets, infrastructure, training, and planning”, and thus the US must “enhance and exercise both [its] military and civilian capabilities” (Ibid.).

Likewise, Russia identifies “preventing the use of military force against Russia, and protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity” as its primary objective for providing military security in the Arctic (PotRF 2020). Russia’s 2023 Foreign Policy expands upon this in a more assertive tone, stating that Russia aims to counteract “the unfriendly states’ policy aimed at militarisation of the region and limiting Russia’s ability to exercise its sovereign rights” in Russia’s Arctic zone (RMoFA 2023).

In contrast, China does not have any stated military goals in the region. Indeed, it emphasises cooperation and “harmony”, and “stands against aggression and expansion, and opposes arbitrary use of arms” (CMoND 2023). In regard to its development of national defence aims, China emphasises that it does so only to “meet its rightful security needs and contribute to the growth of the world’s peaceful forces” and that “no matter how it might develop, China will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence” (Ibid.). Although Beijing has not placed any military force into the Arctic, it emphasises the region as a zone of importance. In the realm of nuclear deterrence, the US is able to threaten Chinese strategic targets with bombers and missiles using the Arctic as its base of operations (Kopra & Puranen 2023). It is therefore possible to conclude that the Arctic serves a military purpose for China, as a component of the global objectives for the PLA put forward by the 20th Party Congress, which aim to “establish a strong system of strategic deterrence” (USDoD 2023).

Moreover, the 2020 edition of Science of Military Strategy – the newest rendition of an influential textbook on military thinking published by China’s National Defence University – states that “military-civilian mixing is the main way for great powers to
achieve a polar military presence” and that China should “give full play to the role of military forces in supporting polar scientific research and other operations” (CASI 2022:165).

Consequently, US and Nordic officials suspect China to be conducting dual-use activities in the Arctic through the use of its remote sensing satellite data receiving station in Sweden which covers Europe and the Arctic, its investments in civil Arctic harbours capable of facilitating the operations of Chinese submarines, and the BeiDou satellite system which allows China to develop and use underwater drones as well as more stealthily communicate with subsurface vessels, to name a few examples (USDoD 2023). Thus, for all the Chinese rhetoric in its Arctic and national defence strategies about not contributing to militarisation, it is possible to conclude that China, like the other cases, aim to increase its status in the international arena, and thereby must possess the requisite military capability and presence in the region to project power and generate influence.

5.2.4. Emergent economic opportunities

Lastly, the great powers all express objectives in relation to the emerging economic opportunities in the Arctic. The US recognises that the changes in sea ice could generate economic benefits, and it thus seeks to pursue and manage these opportunities in consultation with its Arctic population (PotUS 2022a). However, as stated previously, the US also acknowledges that “new opportunities also will bring additional challenges, from the potential for new illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and greater environmental degradation to risks to maritime navigation, a greater likelihood of accidents, and changes to traditional lifestyles”, further emphasising the need for functioning governmental frameworks (Ibid.:6).

Russia has a much more detailed objective for the new economic opportunities, where it intends to “advance the Northern Sea Route as a competitive national transport corridor”, enlarge geological “exploration of prospective mineral resource fields of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation”, establish “attractive conditions for private investment” by providing state support for businesses, improve “infrastructure of mineral resources hubs logistically connected to the NSR”, “increase
oil and gas extraction rates”, “produce liquefied natural gas”, and promote fishing (PoRF 2020; RMoFA 2023). Russia’s partner of choice in developing the NSR is China, and the two countries jointly announced their cooperation on the “Polar Silk Road” in 2017.

The same year, the Polar Silk Road was added to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – its mega connectivity project, characterised by infrastructure investment along a constellation of economic corridors, including the NSR (Heggelund, Lamazhapov & Stensdal 2023). Through the NSR, China gains access to alternative, shorter, transport routes to Europe and the US – estimated distance savings are up to 50% (Humpert 2011) – as well as access to Russian energy resources in form of gas, oil and minerals located along its Arctic shoreline. These opportunities are crucial to China as it aims to avert its impending economic crisis. Apart from providing economic benefits, the BRI forms a central component of President Xi’s “Major Country Diplomacy” strategy, which calls for China to assume a greater leadership role for global affairs in accordance with its rising power and status (Smith 2021). In the Arctic, this strategy expresses itself in China aiming to “participate in the development of Arctic shipping routes” as well as in “the exploration for and exploitation of oil, gas, mineral and other non-living resources” (CSC 2018). The Polar Silk Road project also includes Sino-Russian collaboration on off-shore shale gas, fishing, biotech research and polar tourism (Brady 2017:87-102). However, since the war in Ukraine, China’s economic strategies in the Arctic seems to have changed. Although not explicitly stating any strategic change, the PSR has largely disappeared from official Chinese discourse, raising questions about China’s long-term intentions with its Arctic policy (Heggelund et al. 2023). Indeed, the development of the PSR in 2022 and 2023 seems to have slowed down drastically: from a record 14 voyages operated by the state-owned China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) along the NSR in 2021, to not a single COSCO or Chinese-owned ship sailing the route in 2022, most likely due to fear of secondary sanctions and staggering cost as a consequence of the war in Ukraine (Heggelund et al. 2023). On paper however, the PSR is still supported by Chinese policies (such as its 14th Five-Year Plan), in which efforts are concentrated in research and development of
technologies necessary for polar shipping and mining, thus indicating a long-term commitment (Ibid.).

5.3. Means

In order to respond to the threats established in 5.1. and the objectives presented in 5.2., the great powers’ strategies propose military, economic and diplomatic efforts.

5.3.1. Military means

First of all, all states’ strategies advocate for increased military spending and increased military presence in order to reach their military goals. Specifically, the US plans to expand “the US Coast Guard icebreaker fleet to support persistent presence in the US Arctic and additional presence as needed in the European Arctic” (PotUS 2022a). Due to the Arctic being a frozen maritime region, icebreaking provides the only year-round access and are thus strategically the most important equipment for power projection and deterrence. Currently, the US only possesses one operational icebreaker fleet, making expansion essential. An extended icebreaker fleet will also aid the US in its goal to protect the freedom of navigation as Arctic activity increases. Russia also plans to extend its icebreaker fleet, as evident by Moscow’s 2023 amendments to its Arctic strategy which states that Russia will construct “at least seven Project 22220 nuclear-powered icebreakers” and “an additional four non-nuclear-powered icebreakers”. Russia presently possesses the world’s largest icebreaking fleet, at around 30 vessels. China is currently operating three icebreakers and has commenced construction on another one – the world’s largest – planned to be operational in 2025 (USDoD 2023).

Moreover, the US will “make targeted investments to strategically enhance security infrastructure as required” to enable its security aims. Due to the American Arctic’s history of being politically overlooked, communications in US Arctic territory are currently spotty and infrastructure sparse (Garamone 2023). The US strategy aims to amend this by investing in modernised domain awareness to detect and track potential airborne and maritime threats, as well as by improving sensing and observational capabilities, including for sea ice, ship traffic, and weather (PotUS 2022a). Washington is also upgrading its Arctic military capabilities by establishing new
commands such as the 11th Airborne Division aimed to develop expertise in Arctic mobility and extreme cold conditions, and modernising existing bases by stationing most of its latest generation fighter aircraft there (Garamone 2022; Paul 2023:6).

Russia, too, is modernising. It has for the past few years been rebuilding its Arctic military capabilities to its Soviet capacity, creating an “Arctic shield” aimed to protect the NSR along 6,000 kilometres of its Arctic coastline by modernising and expanding existing military facilities, as well as creating numerous new ones (Humpert 2022). Russia’s Arctic military bases, airfields, and radar installations are especially concentrated along the western reaches of the NSR, in proximity to its Northern Fleet headquarters on the Kola peninsula (Ibid.). The Northern Fleet underwent reorganisation and received substantial upgrades in 2021, becoming one of Russia’s five military district (Ibid.). Russia’s Arctic command thus in part serves to protect the forces of the Northern Fleet and its nuclear deterrent (Ibid.).

As China does not possess any territory in the Arctic, its focus in the region lies in maintaining and establishing dual-use facilities in accordance with international law. According to the Science of Military Strategy, the projection of military power towards the Arctic must progress with extreme caution and, at least initially, exploit the legitimate cover provided by military-civil fusion projects (CASI 2022). Such strategies are sometimes referred to as “lawfare”, defined by Charles Dunlap (2008) as the “strategy of using – or misusing – law as substitute for military means to achieve an operational objective”. Currently, China does not deploy any hard security means in the Arctic, and an official change in strategy is yet to come. However, it is not an impossible trajectory, as China took its first steps towards establishing hard security cooperation in the Arctic by signing a memorandum of understanding with the Federal Security Service of Russia on strengthening maritime law enforcement cooperation (Kopra & Puranen 2023). Moreover, Russia and China’s strategic partnership has taken on a military character outside of the Arctic. For instance, in 2022, China’s Northern Theatre Command sent a 2,000-member contingent of army, navy, and air force units to participate in the Russia-hosted multi-national military exercise Vostok-2022 (USDoD 2023:131). As Beijing has increasingly determined that its armed
forces should take a more active role in advancing its foreign policy goals, it is not unlikely that the Arctic will become a future venue of similar exercises.

Likewise, the US’s advocate for increased Arctic military cooperation to reach its objectives, emphasising coordination of shared approaches within NATO and other Arctic partners who share NATO’s security interests. In extension, this entails joint exercises and training in the region, as well as investing in improvements to collective deterrent (PotUS 2022a; Paul 2023:4). The pervading emphasis on alliances and partnerships throughout the US strategy is most likely due to the US’s insufficient Arctic capabilities, as a consequence of neglect and its main maritime capacities being concentrated to the South China Sea. For example, General VanHerck has voiced concerns that Northcom is being de-prioritised when requesting forces as consideration of the needs of other combatant commands, especially the US Indo-Pacific Command, is assigned prominence, thus overriding Northcom needs (Lopez 2022).

5.3.3. Economic means

The aim to take advantage of the emerging economic opportunities in the Arctic has resulted in the great powers significantly investing in Arctic economic infrastructure. For the US, that entails developing critical minerals production, strengthening supply chains, catalysing private sector investments, build harbours and airfields, et cetera, in its Arctic territory (PotUS 2022a:12). The previously mentioned investment in icebreakers serves to ensure US access to Arctic resources as well – without icebreakers, the US cannot operate freely in the Arctic and may thus not be able to participate in the Arctic “gold rush” (Lopez 2022).

For Russia, the primary untapped resources consist of the possibilities of global transport in relation to the NSR, and the gas, oil and mineral finds located along it. Thus, the investments largely regard maritime infrastructure, and infrastructure for resource processing.

Similarly, China has invested significantly in the Yamal project, a joint Sino-Russian venture around a liquefied natural gas in northwestern Siberia as a part of its Polar Silk Road project. In 2016, Chinese banks loaned 12 billion US dollars to the Yamal plant, effectively covering two-thirds of the project’s external financing demands.
As a result of investments, China’s National Petroleum Corporation and the Chinese company the Silk Road Fund together currently own 30 percent of the project’s shares (Ibid.). Outside of its partnership with Russia, China’s most important bilateral economic relationships are with Iceland and Greenland. China emerged as an ideal commercial partner for Iceland in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, during which Iceland’s economy had been severely harmed. The two countries signed a free-trade agreement in 2013, centred on energy and fisheries: Iceland delivers technology, technical support and highly qualified professionals in well-drilling, while China provides access to one of the largest economic markets in the world (Ibid.). In Greenland, China has continually expressed interest in investing in mining ventures and infrastructure. China’s economic interest in Greenland has yet to render significant results, with many projects being, as put by Rasmus Nielsen, head of Nuuk’s NASIFFIK Center for Foreign and Security Policy, “kind of vetoed by the Washington” or Copenhagen (Van Brunnersum 2022). However, should Greenland gain full independence from Denmark, as its leading party promotes, the situation would be different. A newly independent and cash-strapped Greenland would likely view China as an ideal economic partner, just like Iceland. Some scholars have identified China’s economic partnerships in the Arctic as examples of “debt trap diplomacy”, meaning a tactic deployed by Beijing to gain political or economic concessions from lower-income countries by over-extending infrastructure loans that then prove impossible to pay back on time (Parsons 2022). As a result of reservations about potential debt traps, most proposals of Chinese investment in Greenland have been shut down. Additionally, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has caused challenges for Chinese economic expansion in the Arctic, in Western countries and Russia alike. Sanctions against Russia has rendered the future of many economic projects and investments with Chinese stakeholders uncertain, as in the case of the Sino-Russian Arctic LNG2 project and the Kvanefjeld uranium-mining project (Kopra & Puranen 2023; Biagioni 2023).

5.3.4. Diplomatic means
As a consequence of the breakdown of unhindered Arctic cooperation, all great powers emphasise supplementing the Arctic Council with other collaborations and pursuit of
new partnerships as means to realise their stated objectives. The US means to seek new partnerships and arrangements, with states that share its interests, through international Arctic forums. In the long term, the US states that it may be possible for some cooperation with Russia to resume under certain conditions, but for the moment it will work with its allies and partners, as well as with “other governments that uphold the rule of law” (PotUS 2022a:14). Moreover, the US plans to work through the Arctic Council whenever possible in order to sustain it. In addition, it seeks to advance implementation and enforcement of existing international agreements such as the IMO Polar Code, CAO Fisheries Agreement, and Agreement of Enhancing Science Cooperation in the Arctic. Lastly, the US states that it will work to ratify UNCLOS in order to defend US interests, “which are best served by widespread adherence to the international rule of law” (Ibid.).

Likewise, Russia plans to work within the BRICS framework, and pursue bilateral partnerships with other non-Arctic states following its suspension from the Arctic Council. For example, Alexei Chekunkov, Russia's Arctic Minister, announced in March 2023 that Russia will develop an international Arctic science station in cooperation with the BRICS countries, as “Moscow itself considers it important to strengthen cooperation in the region with non-Arctic states when existing Arctic cooperation formats, such as the Arctic Council, are expected to be weakened” (Edvardsen 2023). China and India are already working together on Arctic research through the station in Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard (Ibid.).

As stated previously, China emphasises the role of international law in its Arctic strategy. Therefore, Beijing plans to actively engage in all possible multilateral forums and negotiations on Arctic governance (Kopra & Puranen 2023). Within UNCLOS, the primary framework for Arctic governance, China would like to see certain sea lanes along the NSR and the Northwest Passage defined as international waters (Ibid.). Moreover, China has partaken in international negotiations – apart from its observer role in the Arctic Council – which directly and indirectly govern the future of the Arctic, such as the Polar Code, and the Fisheries Agreement. Besides official exchanges, China emphasises large informal gatherings, such as the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik and Arctic Frontiers in Tromsø (Ibid.). Lastly, China’s
diplomatic strategy consists of using international opposition to further its agenda. For example, China has utilised Russia’s increasing international isolation following the War in Ukraine, making Russia increasingly dependent on Chinese investments and resulting in China largely benefiting from deteriorating relations between Russia and the West. However, the war in Ukraine has caused democratic countries to come together, in turn causing a backlash in their relations with China, as China remains “neutral” in response to the war (Ibid.; Devyatkin 2023).

5.4. Ways

This category binds the previous categories together, functioning as the operative method. Thus, some of the aspects have been presented in previous sections and will not be accounted for in detail. This section aims to compile the main tendencies of the great powers’ respective Arctic strategies, configured to dichotomies of collaborative or independent, proactive or passive, as well as status quo-preserving or revisionist ways, thus setting up the analytical discussion in the following chapter.

5.4.1. Collaborative or independent

As shown in previous sections, all great powers showcase the strive for a collaborative Arctic structure in some way. However, to what extent, what shape and with whom these collaborative efforts should be varies depending on each state’s context, stated ends and available means. The US emphasises the importance of “guardrails” for sustaining a peaceful Arctic. It thus works through the Arctic Council, although in its current A-7 constellation until the war in Ukraine is resolved, whenever possible and emphasising the importance of international legal frameworks such as the Fisheries Agreement, the Polar Code and UNCLOS. Russia’s exclusion from the Arctic Council ensured the severance of all ties between itself and the other Arctic littoral states. Instead, it focuses on collaborating on Arctic matters within the BRICS framework and emphasises UNCLOS for solving disputes regarding maritime sovereignty. Finally, China places emphasis on non-Arctic fora, such as the UN Security Council, as it is not a full member of the Arctic Council and following Russia, its primary Arctic partner, being excluded from cooperation.
Moreover, the great powers strategies varies when it comes to military alignment. The US is the only great power that emphasises alignment as its threat perception is closely linked to its territorial vulnerability in the Arctic given its lack of icebreakers, insufficient understanding of the operating environment of the Arctic theatre, and its main maritime capabilities being located in the South China Sea. Through its alliance with the Arctic NATO members, the US thus gain access to crucial military infrastructure in the Arctic region and can project military power, as well as gain critical expertise regarding the Arctic operating environment through joint exercises such as Cold Response and Trident Juncture. In contrast, Russia’s strategy does not promote any multilateral military alignment in the region, although its global objectives aim to “enhance the capacity and international role of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation” (RMoFA2023). China actively denounces any military alignment, stating that “China advocates partnerships rather than alliances and does not join any military bloc” (CMoND 2023).

Lastly, all great powers emphasise bilateral partnerships in their respective Arctic strategies. The US primarily promote partnerships regarding military means, emphasising Canada’s importance for defence of the US homeland through the North American Aerospace Defense Command; Sweden for cooperation on submarine efficiency; Finland for expertise on constructing icebreakers; Norway for access to military bases; and Iceland and Greenland for logistics, communications, domain awareness, medical support, and rescue (Garamone 2023; Villalobos 2021). As stated in previous sections, Russia and China both emphasise their strategic partnership as their primary partnership in the region, as they collaborate on economic development, international governance, and upgrades of military infrastructure. While Russia has no other significant partners in the Arctic, China has bilateral agreements regarding economic development and scientific research with Iceland and, to some extent, Greenland.

In sum, the great powers’ Arctic strategies are characterised by varying degrees of collaboration. The US favours collaboration to the greatest extent by promoting a collaborative governance structure in the Arctic, military alignment and bilateral partnerships. Both Russia and China take a semi-collaborative approach as
China emphasises its bilateral partnerships for maintaining a foothold in the Arctic but explicitly states that it is not pursuing military alignment; and Russia somewhat advocating for military alignment on a global level but not necessarily in the Arctic, where its collaborative focus lies within sustaining legal frameworks and prioritising non-Arctic partnerships with BRICS countries.

5.4.2. Proactive or passive

From the great powers’ Arctic strategies one can discern that all take on a proactive approach: they all state their intention to take a leading role in Arctic affairs, spread their domestic values internationally, and project power in a world undergoing massive changes. However, they advocate for different kinds of methods, where the US primarily aims for military and diplomatic means, China for economic and diplomatic means, and Russia for economic and military means, resulting in a broad combination of approaches. The strategies also differ in terms of extent of involvement. China is the great power with the most substantive involvement, acting in multiple domains and with the greatest variety of partners. Operating in alignment with its Major Country Diplomacy, Beijing utilises lawfare, the BRI and debt-trap diplomacy to gain increased traction in the Arctic.

In contrast, Russia operates in significantly fewer areas. Although stating that it will consolidate Russia as a “powerful and independent centre of the world”, the only project in which the RMoFA (2023) has been truly proactive in regard to the Arctic, is in its investment of the NSR. Other ambitions, such as in relation to diplomatic means, have been altered following the Russian exclusion from Arctic cooperation by the A-7: prior to 2022, Russia’s Arctic diplomatic strategy heavily emphasised the use of the Arctic Council. For example, the original rendition of Russia’s 2020 Arctic Strategy stated that it aimed to strengthen “good-will bilateral relations with the Artic states as well as multilateral regional cooperation forums including the Arctic Council” (PotRF 2020). Thus, much of the Russian strategy may be classified as reactive, rather than classically proactive.

Similarly, the US’s strategy is characterised by its late arrival to Arctic affairs. It does not have the same focus on economic resource extraction as Russia and
China, only in bypass mentioning critical minerals mining. Its focus lies instead in responding to the newly established perception of threat to the US homeland from China and Russia and aiming to close the capability gap between them as a result of previous neglect, thus also rendering its strategic stance reactive rather than classically proactive.

Although the characteristics of their active stances may differ, there is no evidence that suggests that any of the great powers takes a passive, or defensive, role in Arctic affairs. They are all actively trying to promote strength and assert their positions in the international system, as evident by increased investments in deterrence, building of broad coalitions and attempts to influence international governance structures.

5.4.3. Status quo-preserving or revisionist

The post-Cold War era in international relations has been characterised by an increase of international cooperation and decrease in military spending, and has widely been upheld by liberal international institutions such as the UN and NATO through which the US has broadcasted the values of liberal democracy – rule of law, market economies and human rights (Yilmaz 2008:46; Mearsheimer 2023). As the US perceives that this world order, which cemented the US’s role as global leader, is threatened, it states its intention to preserve it (PotUS 2022b). The emphasis put on cooperation and upholding the "rules-based international order" in its Arctic strategies serves as evidence of the US’s intention to preserve the post-Cold war status quo. Lastly, the US is identified as pursuing a containment strategy, actively trying to decrease Russian and Chinese influence in the region by preventing strategic partnerships between China and the US’s allies and excluding Russia from Arctic cooperation. The US is thus identified to be status quo-preserving in opposition to revisionist.

In contrast, both Russia and China’s Arctic strategies are identified as revisionist to some degree. As opposed to status quo states, revisionist states are characterised as seeking to “change the distribution of goods” in both material and ideational domains, ranging from territory and markets to international law, status, and dominant ideology (Paikin 2023). As Russia states that it wants to emerge as “one of the powerful and leading centres” of the imminent multipolar world order, it aims to
redistribute material and ideational goods in the Arctic by upgrading its military resources and increasing economic power. Additionally, Russia challenges the liberal values characterising the current world order, stating its intention to “counter the attempts to impose pseudo-humanistic or other neo-liberal ideological views” (RMoFA 2023:8). However, it does not openly state that it wishes to challenge the validity of the existing Arctic common institutions. On the contrary, Russia’s Arctic strategy underlines its commitment to the Arctic Council and UNCLOS (PotRF 2020). Thus, Russia’s position should be understood as neo-revisionist rather than fully revisionist, as it challenges the perceived excess of US hegemony but defends the integrity and institutions of Arctic society.

Moreover, China attempts to redistribute material goods in the Arctic by increasing economic capabilities and establishing a military foothold in the Arctic by military-civilian fusion projects, and ideational goods by employing its Major Country Diplomacy and participating in Arctic governance. Like Russia, China does not openly oppose the existing Arctic institutions, stating that “China supports the peaceful settlement of disputes over territory and maritime rights and interests by all parties concerned in accordance with such treaties as the UN Charter and the UNCLOS and general international law” (CSC 2018). China should thus also be considered neo-revisionist in its Arctic affairs.
6. Findings and analytical discussion

This chapter revisits the general assumptions presented in the theoretical framework regarding what great power behaviour is to be expected according to defensive realism, offensive realism and PTT, and reviews the findings of the empirical analysis in relation to the categorisation matrix.

Based on defensive realist assumptions, the US should show signs of neo-isolationism or selective engagement in its Arctic strategy. The US explicitly stated that it values the protection of the security, liberty and property of the American people as evident by its statement that “[American] national security institutions and workforce underpin America’s global leadership and the security, prosperity, and freedoms of the American people” (PotUS 2022b:46), thus corresponding with the first indicator of neo-isolationism. However, unlike defensive realist reasoning, the US perceives that its sovereign territory is threatened, as it states that Alaska is vulnerable to attacks from Russian and Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles, and its territorial waters have been violated by Russian and Chinese military vessels. Thus, the US strategy only fulfils one out of two criterions of neo-isolationism. In regard to selective engagement, the US cannot be considered to actively engage abroad in order to hinder the rise of adversary powers. Although it does in other regions, the US’s Arctic policy is characterised as reactive rather than proactive, meaning that it has no opportunity to hinder Russia and China’s rise in the Arctic as it has yet to reach parity. Moreover, the US emphasises a strong deterrent in the Arctic by both nuclear and other military terms, which corresponds with selective engagement. Lastly, it also promotes military alignment in its strategy, as evident by its focus on cooperation on Arctic security within NATO. Thus, the US strategy corresponds with two out of three indicators for selective engagement.

Moving on to offensive realist assumptions, the US is predicted to pursue primacy in the Arctic. Primacy entails that the US should take a revisionist approach, which can be denounced by analysing its strategy. On the contrary, the US is identified to take a status quo-preserving approach. Moreover, primacy suggests that the US should take a sceptical stance towards international organisations. In contrast, it puts a
significant emphasis on collaboration within existing frameworks in the Arctic. However, the US pursues a policy of containment in the Arctic, aiming to actively diminish Russian and Chinese power projection by excluding them from Arctic cooperation, inflicting sanctions, et cetera. Finally, the US should be aiming to outdistance China and Russia in military, economic and political capabilities. Although the US is upgrading and extending its military capabilities in Alaska, investing in economic opportunities and taking on a more decisive leadership role in Arctic forums, it is impossible to categorising it as outdistancing China and Russia. The US has neglected the Arctic for so long that these changes rather should be perceived as reaching parity with its adversaries. Thus, only one out of three indicators of primacy are identified in the US Arctic strategy, and offensive realism largely fails to explain its behaviour.

Thirdly and finally, PTT expects the US to pursue cooperative security in the Arctic to preserve the current world order. Cooperative security entails that the US should be pursuing strategic interdependence, which there is significant evidence for in the US Arctic strategy. By attempting to form a “strong coalition” with partners and relying on them for icebreaking capabilities, the US is emphasising its dependence on cooperation within NATO to reach its security goals. Furthermore, cooperative security entails that the US should be attempting to socialise China and Russia into supporting the current international system by trapping them in a web of international responsibilities and treaties. The US does this to some extent: it is actively trying to get Russia and China to adhere to UNCLOS, but at the same time it expelled Russia from the Arctic Council. It is also actively fostering satisfaction within its own band of allies and partners by investing in Arctic states that are economically vulnerable, such as Greenland, to prevent them from becoming dissatisfied and choosing a US adversary for partnership. As the US Arctic strategy corresponds fully with one, and to some extent with the other criteria of cooperative security, PTT is identified to hold the biggest explanatory power for the US’s behaviour in the Arctic.

When it comes to revisionist secondary powers, the four categories of indicators presented in the categorisation index need to be applied to Russia and China’s respective Arctic strategies and examined. Starting with Russia, it showcases hard
internal balancing regarding balance of power-strategies, due to its development and modernisation of Russian Arctic military bases and re-establishing Arctic commands. However, it showcases no significant hard external balancing, as the Sino-Russian partnership only concerns hard security measures in terms of collaboration on coast guarding. Yet, as Russia collaborates with China on the NSR and through BRICS, it can be concluded that Russia conducts soft balancing. Concerning isolationist strategies, there is evidence that Russia pursues distancing and strategic autonomy, as it has chosen to promote its own interests in the region and regain independence by “asserting sovereignty in all domains”. However, there is no foundation for buck-passing, as there is not enough cooperation between Russia and China in order for Russia to “pass the buck” to China in terms of challenging the US. Regarding hedging, one cannot say that Russia is effectively pursuing mutual courting. It does seek to establish new partnerships with non-Arctic states, but it does not have any active policy for cooperating with its adversaries or pursuing institutions not dominated by the US apart from China and the other BRICS countries. The lack of a proper alliance in the Arctic also entails that there is no evidence of leash-slipping in the Russian Arctic strategy. As a result, the Russian strategy corresponds with defensive realist and PTT assumptions to the largest extent, as Russia pursues hard internal balancing but no hard external balancing, soft balancing, distancing and strategic autonomy, but no buck-passing or hedging strategies. The lack of hard external balancing and buck-passing, as well as the presence of soft balancing and distancing in the Russian strategy concludes that offensive realism has a slightly smaller explanatory power than defensive realism and PTT.

Due to China’s lack of Arctic territory, it is not possible to say that it is conducting any hard balancing in a traditional sense. However, Beijing is modernising and expanding the People’s Liberation Army as a general objective, and it is pursuing hard balancing in the Arctic in a non-traditional sense, as it is conducting dual-use projects in the region. As stated previously, the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic does not involve any cooperation on hard security matters, and China cannot be considered as pursuing any external counter-balancing. However, it does conduct soft balancing due to its diplomatic coordination with Russia. Concerning isolationist
strategies, China is interpreted as pursuing distancing as it actively is promoting its own interests in the Arctic and is not always following the US’s lead, for example in its violation of US maritime territory, asserting its right for “freedom of navigation” similar to its activities in the South China Sea. It is also possible to identify indicators of strategic autonomy in China’s Arctic policy, as it attempts to dominate not only in its own region (the Asian-Pacific) but in the Arctic, a region in which it does not hold territory. Additionally, it is possible to identify the Chinese strategy to pursue buck-passing, as it is letting Russia deal with challenging the US militarily in the region, while keeping its own military activities under tabs. Lastly, regarding hedging, it is identified that China pursues multiple courting, as evident by its attempts to invest in infrastructure, tourism, research facilities, et cetera, in multiple Arctic nations, regardless of affiliations. However, China does not pursue leash-slipping as there is no proper alliance in the Arctic. It is therefore possible to discern that defensive realism holds the biggest explanatory power for China’s behaviour in the Arctic, as the strategy corresponds with five out of seven indicators of behaviour proposed by defensive realism, whilst offensive realism and PTT can explain China’s behaviour in the Arctic to some, although smaller, extent.

Thus far, the analysis has concluded that several aspects of realist great power behaviour are identified. Several aspects can be argued to coincide, albeit some do not fully conform to the assumptions. Although all strands of realism hold explanatory power for predicting great power behaviour, the assumptions made by PTT best correspond with the current trajectory. Differences are also deductible between the different cases, as the different prerequisites for Arctic engagement differ. Although all parameters of the analytical framework are important for explaining differences in strategy, the differences are largely a result of differing contextual factors. China’s lack of Arctic territory, Russia’s lack of material capacity vis-a-vis China, and the US’s neglect of Arctic policy all constitute examples. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the inclusion of context is essential when analysing differences in strategic approaches, as an exclusion of this parameter would not have rendered a correct account of the mechanisms behind the differences. However, this finding raises further questions of
whether theoretical framework used in this study can be generalised or if it is entirely dependent on context.

Moreover, the strategies make clear that one must adopt a broad understanding of security in the Arctic. The emergence of new iterations of achieving security goals, primarily identified in the Chinese strategy in terms of debt trap diplomacy, lawfare and dual-use projects; as well as the threat perception connected to climate change entails that matters of “soft” security are eroding the hard/soft security dichotomy previously favoured in academia. During the era of Arctic Exceptionalism, there has been a failure to understand how traditional and non-traditional security threats overlap and reinforce each other. Since the beginning of the post-Cold War era, the way in which security is understood by security agencies and operators has evolved, where Arctic states and security agencies now are seeing environmental and military security as two sides of the same coin, and as increasingly co-constitutive.
7. Conclusion

This final chapter presents concluding thoughts and suggestions for future research. This thesis has investigated the US, Russia and China’s respective grand strategies in the Arctic given the changing landscape of international politics, as well as analysed the explanatory power of defensive realism, offensive realism, and PTT. Thus, the study provides an in-depth understanding of great power behaviour in a representative region, as we stand on the brink of a new world order.

The answer to the research questions were identified using the analytical framework and the theoretical conceptualisation, and carried out through qualitative content analysis. The empirical analysis successfully mapped and compared the respective strategies, producing insight into the various aspects affecting great power behaviour. The results indicate that the threat perceptions following the increasingly tense geopolitical atmosphere in the Arctic pervade the strategies, as the thesis presumed it would, thus cementing realism’s overarching capability of predicting great power behaviour. This showcases itself in the presence of territorial vulnerability, instances of increasing or decreasing capability gaps, and the usage of international institutions. However, out of the three realist strands, PTT was found to hold the largest explanatory power.

Findings from the analysis also highlighted a shift in threat perceptions, where the dichotomy between hard and soft security is eroding, as evident by their increasingly interchangeable nature. Lastly, it was concluded that the great powers’ strategies differed largely due to its respective context, thus rendering generalisable results difficult to discern. Yet, these aspects provide for valuable insights for future research.

Considering suggestions for future research, the foreseeable future will be crucial for Arctic strategic studies. The impending US presidential election will likely impact its Arctic strategy, as potential candidates have vastly different approaches to the region. For example, if Donald Trump is reinstated as president, it is possible that the US will pivot to a more neo-isolationist strategy than under Joe Biden, as it did during Trump’s last stint in office. The trajectory regarding the war in Ukraine is likely to
impact Russia’s Arctic strategy, as a continuation of military losses and economic sanctions may cause it to decrease its efforts to maximise capabilities in the region. We do not yet now what the next era of international politics will bring, and this research will have to be repeated in the near future in order to discern what the post-post-Cold War order will entail.
8. Bibliography

8.1. Primary material


8.2. Secondary material


