



SHAPING PERCEPTIONS IN THE ARCTIC: THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE AND INFLUENCE IN A CONTESTED REGION

Date: November 20, 2024

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KEY EVENTS

On November 20, 2024, Dr. Adam Lajeunesse presented *Shaping Perceptions in the Arctic: The Role of Narrative and Influence in a Contested Region* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed included China's Arctic narrative, evolution of Chinese narratives in the Arctic and the Chinese-Russian cooperation.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Lajeunesse examined China's evolving narratives in the Arctic, focusing on how these narratives are designed to project a peaceful and cooperative image while simultaneously pressuring the United States. He highlighted the strategic use of media to contrast China's peacekeeping missions with supposed U.S. 'militarization,' particularly in response to American freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Dr. Lajeunesse explored the growing Chinese-Russian cooperation in the region, emphasizing how this partnership serves to challenge U.S. influence and promote China's broader geopolitical goals. This issue is significant as it underscores China's attempt to reshape international norms and perceptions, which has implications for global stability and U.S. strategic interests.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Lajeunesse analyzed China's strategic narrative in the Arctic, focusing on how it portrays its activities as part of a "win-win" approach, emphasizing

peaceful cooperation while subtly showcasing its military capabilities. He highlighted that China frames its Arctic operations as promoting mutual benefit and regional stability, using this narrative to reassure international audiences. However, this rhetoric also serves to subtly signal strategic deterrence to the United States, particularly by linking its Arctic presence to U.S. actions in the South China Sea. Dr. Lajeunesse pointed out that this dual messaging strategy allows China to maintain its image as a peaceful actor while cautioning U.S. policymakers about its growing military influence in the Arctic.

Dr. Lajeunesse discussed the evolution of China's Arctic narrative, illustrating how it carefully balances its self-portrayal as a responsible global actor with its strategic ambitions. He explained that Chinese communications often emphasize scientific research and environmental protection in the Arctic, framing these efforts as part of its commitment to global sustainability. Simultaneously, China critiques U.S. military activities in the region, casting them as destabilizing, which it hopes will bolster its position as a more cooperative and constructive player. Dr. Lajeunesse noted that this “win-win” narrative is designed to enhance China's soft power and legitimacy, allowing it to counterbalance what it calls more aggressive military postures from other Arctic nations.

Dr. Lajeunesse explored the growing cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic, emphasizing the implications of this partnership for U.S. interests. He described how China, while adopting a subtler approach, aligns with Russia through joint military exercises and infrastructure projects, presenting a unified front against U.S. influence. This partnership, framed within the “win-win” rhetoric, suggests a shared goal of establishing a multipolar governance structure in the Arctic. Dr. Lajeunesse highlighted that this evolving relationship complicates U.S. strategic calculations, as it must contend with a more cohesive Sino-Russian partnership that leverages both economic and military cooperation to reshape the region's geopolitical landscape.

Question and Answer

How would you suggest the Arctic to be more collaborative between states rather than an increasingly polarized domain?

Dr. Lajeunesse stated that while the Arctic was once a symbol of collaboration, particularly during the Cold War, recent geopolitical shifts have made such cooperation increasingly difficult. Dr. Lajeunesse noted that historically, the Arctic was viewed as a more cooperative region, even during the Cold War, when the U.S. and Russia worked together on issues like the Polar Bear Treaty. This

collaborative spirit came to dominate the regional discourse through the 1990s and into the early 2000s, with the region often described as one of “High North, Low Tension.” However, he emphasized that this atmosphere has changed significantly. With the Arctic Council's activities frozen, the inclusion of Sweden and Finland in NATO, and China's growing presence in the Arctic alongside Russia, the idea of the Arctic as a low-tension, demilitarized zone seems to be a thing of the past.

With the Trump administration most likely returning to their previous position that the NW Passage is international waters, how can Canada fight this claim and ensure the Passage remains under Canada's sovereignty? Do you anticipate China to probe more into the passage if the US continues the position that the NW Passage is an international strait?

Dr. Lajeunesse indicated that a potential Trump administration may adopt a more transactional stance on the Northwest Passage, which could lead to increased legal and political tensions between Canada and the U.S., with potential implications for external involvement from countries like China. Dr. Lajeunesse noted that the U.S. position on the Northwest Passage, particularly under a Trump administration, may differ from past approaches that prioritized the broader U.S.-Canada relationship over specific disagreements. He referenced the previous Trump administration's actions, such as challenges to Canadian sovereignty by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and discussions around free navigation voyages, suggesting that these could indicate a more assertive stance. Dr. Lajeunesse mentioned that this might result in a more visible confrontation between the two countries over the passage. From a Chinese perspective, he suggested this could be seen as an opportunity to explore divisions between Canada and the U.S., which might affect their military and political alliance. He stressed the importance of both countries recognizing the risks of external powers leveraging such disagreements to create further tension.

Social media has been a predominant theme today. Each of you have a different mandate — Do you see how all three of you would collaborate in shaping/informing hybrid warfare tactics and strategies?

Dr. Lajeunesse suggested that while efforts to collaborate on hybrid warfare strategies are ongoing, challenges like information overload persist. Dr. Lajeunesse acknowledged that there are ongoing efforts within NATO and individual countries to collaborate on shaping hybrid warfare tactics and strategies. He pointed out that each country has organizations working internally and with allies, but the sheer volume of information and the number of allies and

connections make coordination a complex task. He highlighted that the recent inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO offers a significant learning opportunity, as these countries are highly skilled in defending against hybrid attacks and malicious information operations. Dr. Lajeunesse expressed hope that NATO is beginning to learn from its newest members.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Dr. Lajeunesse discussed China's growing economic ambitions in the Arctic, focusing on its investment in infrastructure projects, such as ports and shipping routes. He highlighted how these investments are framed as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, aiming to secure new trade routes and access to natural resources while promoting regional development.
- Dr. Lajeunesse explored the role of legal and institutional frameworks in the Arctic, emphasizing China's efforts to integrate into existing governance structures, such as the Arctic Council. He noted that China's active participation in these institutions is part of its strategy to legitimize its presence and influence in the region.
- Dr. Lajeunesse highlighted China's emphasis on environmental protection in its Arctic narrative, noting its commitment to research on climate change and its impact on Arctic ecosystems. He pointed out that this focus on environmental stewardship helps China position itself as a responsible stakeholder in global climate governance.
- Dr. Lajeunesse examined China's military modernization efforts, particularly in the context of Arctic security. He discussed how China's increasing capabilities in the region, including icebreaker development and military research bases, reflect its broader strategic ambitions and potential security concerns for other Arctic nations.
- Dr. Lajeunesse analyzed the energy collaboration between China and Russia in the Arctic, highlighting joint ventures in oil and gas exploration. He emphasized how this partnership not only strengthens economic ties but also serves strategic purposes, giving both nations greater leverage in the region's energy markets.

FURTHER READING

Lackenbauer, P., Bouffard, T., & Lajeunesse, A. (2022). Russian information operations: The Kremlin's competitive narratives and arctic influence objectives. *Journal of Peace and War Studies* (4th ed.), e161-e186. https://doi.org/https://issuu.com/norwichuniversityoc/docs/pawc_journal_2022_final_single_page/166

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