

The Narratives War in the Arctic: Between Russian Disinformation and International Rivalries

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Disinformation - the intentional dissemination of false or manipulated information - has become a preferred tool for certain states, enabling them to extend their influence without resorting to military means. These skilfully constructed campaigns aim to shape perceptions and orient public narratives in favor of the strategic objectives of state actors. Russia exploits these techniques to control discourse around key issues in sensitive regions such as the Arctic, where a direct military confrontation would [compromise its economic interests](#).

Long perceived as an [exceptional territory, sheltered from international outbursts](#), the Arctic is the scene of profound transformations due to global warming and [changing geopolitical dynamics](#). This context of upheaval and uncertainty is conducive to power struggles and misinformation. Against this backdrop, it is essential for Canada to take a close look at these communication strategies in order to quickly refute false information and offer convincing counter-narratives.

Russian communication strategies on NATO in the Arctic

In recent years, NATO's presence in the Arctic has become a prime target for Russian disinformation campaigns. Russian communication strategies towards NATO in the Arctic have highlighted a series of narratives designed to undermine the alliance's image and divert attention from Russian actions in the region. Researchers P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Troy Bouffard and Adam Lajeunesse have highlighted [Russian communications tactics associated with NATO in the region](#). Using this analytical framework, [a study of articles published by TASS and Sputnik between 2020 and 2023](#) reveals that 80% of content mentioning the keywords “NATO” and “Arctic” incorporates at least one of the six themes identified by the researchers. Three of these themes are central to the press articles studied.

Firstly, at the heart of the Russian press's communication strategy is the idea that NATO acts as a destabilizing force, threatening the balance of the Arctic and fuelling perceptions of regional disruption. In 205 articles, the circumpolar region is presented as a space where geopolitical tensions are intensifying due to the significant increase in NATO's presence and exercises.

This theme is frequently associated with the absurdity of the Russian threat, aimed at discrediting [concerns about the power's military activity](#). Moscow's muscular presence is deliberately reduced to harmless gestures. [For example](#), the articles emphasize Russia's military activities as non-threatening or in compliance with international law, while stressing the superior number of NATO military installations compared with those of Russia. However, [observations by the International Institute for Strategic Studies \(IISS\) and Reuters](#) point to a strategic reality favorable to Moscow, whose military presence in the Arctic Circle notably exceeds that of NATO by around a third in terms of bases.

A third major theme highlights the idea that the Arctic states are under the direct influence of the United States, describing these countries as pawns in a power game where Washington imposes its interests. In this vision, NATO members, including Canada, are depicted as [lacking autonomy](#) and entirely subject to American hegemony. This simplistic but recurring hierarchical framework (72 articles) denounces the subordination of NATO allies to Washington's will, creating a clear opposition between the United States and its allies on the one hand, and Russia on the other.

In press articles, the three themes are frequently juxtaposed and combined to offer a coherent image of the Arctic: a space where NATO, as an external actor, exacerbates tensions and where Russian initiatives are systematically demined and legitimized. Added to this are three secondary themes: *sanctions by Arctic states harm their own interests*, *the USA and NATO are poor guests*, and *American colonialism*. These are combined with the three main themes and serve to accentuate the idea that NATO, led by the USA, is the instigator of unjustified regional escalation. Thus, the sanctions imposed by the Arctic countries on Russia are [portrayed as being dictated by the USA and unjustified](#) due to the absence of a Russian threat. Similarly, the Russian press links the theme of Arctic states' subordination to Washington to the idea that the US and NATO are bad hosts, accusing the White House of [imposing military installations on the territory of their allies and worsening environmental degradation](#).

The impact of the invasion of Ukraine on Russian communications strategies

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has profoundly transformed international relations, also [impacting Arctic regional dynamics](#). In response to Russia's military aggression, Western states suspended their cooperation with Russia within [the Arctic Council](#) and [other regional organizations](#). Against this backdrop, Russia has stepped up its efforts to denounce NATO. The theses of the military Alliance as a destabilizing element and of Russia's non-threatening presence are gaining prominence in press articles. In addition to attempting to [discredit the Finnish and Swedish candidacies](#), accusations of the expansion of the Western military coalition are reflected in the [denunciation](#) of the multiplication of its activities and military infrastructures in the polar region.

In response to growing isolation in the North, news agencies multiplied stories about “the idea of a Russian threat is absurd” and “the Arctic states are pawns of the United States” in the period following the invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, this Russian isolation is accompanied by a novelty in terms of narrative. Indeed, in its media discourses, [Russia demonstrates that it is seeking to diversify its partnerships in the Arctic by engaging with a wide range of countries](#). Analysis of press articles also highlights a Russian strategy that relies on exploiting geopolitical tensions in other regions to reinforce

a sense of solidarity with its non-Western partners. By linking issues in the Arctic to those in other areas, [such as the Indo-Pacific](#), Russian communications seek to project an image of a responsible, non-threatening global player, while criticizing the actions of the United States and NATO.

Russian media develop narratives in which [Western military forces are portrayed as agents of destabilization](#), while Russia is presented as a peaceful actor. [This discourse, reminiscent of Cold War tensions](#), stages an alliance between Russia and China in opposition to the United States and its allies. The aim is to draw a binary picture in which the West appears as the aggressor, while Russia and its partners pose as defenders of an equitable international order. To support these narratives, the Russian media, while omitting their own flagrant violation of international law, denounce, [for example](#), the aggressive posture of the United States and its refusal to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, presenting these actions as contrary to international law, hostile and destabilizing.

Policy considerations and recommendations for Canada

By amplifying the Western threat while minimizing the scale of Russian actions, disinformation constitutes a major strategic challenge for Canada, as it can disrupt the way the country and its allies perceive Arctic security and orient their policies. This phenomenon jeopardizes international efforts to counter Russian geopolitical ambitions and undermines the stability of the Arctic region. It risks diverting attention from regional challenges, making it more difficult to develop common defense and governance strategies.

What's more, this misinformation [can divide Canadian public opinion and manipulate markets to Russia's advantage](#), creating internal tensions and disrupting Canada's strategic priorities. Although Canada has certain tools at its disposal to counter disinformation, such as [rapid response mechanisms](#), these are not sufficient to deal with this destabilizing threat as a whole.

Faced with a rapidly changing Arctic, marked by competing interests and accessibility challenges, informed decision-making depends on access to quality information. It is therefore essential that Canada work with its allies to develop monitoring tools to detect and respond to Russian disinformation campaigns in real time. Mechanisms must also be developed to rapidly provide accurate and verifiable information, particularly on military deployments or NATO activities in the region. The creation or reinforcement of rapid response teams dedicated to disseminating reliable information during key moments of tension, such as deployments or visits to the Arctic, is essential. Such transparency would limit the impact of misinformation and maintain a coherent strategic position for Canada.

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