

ACTIVITY REPORT



October 18, 2024
Arctic Circle Assembly
Reykjavík, Iceland

The Oedipus Effect: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Arctic Militarization

Renato Fakhoury, NAADSN Research Fellow

Gabriella Gricius, NAADSN Media Coordinator and Research Fellow

During the Arctic Circle Assembly this October, we hosted a panel titled “The Oedipus Effect: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Arctic Militarization.” This event brought together three panelists to discuss the increasing calls for military buildup and the growing security rhetoric that have permeated discussions about the Arctic region. These trends of securitizing and militarizing rhetoric are alarming, especially as they contribute to the perception that the Arctic is rapidly becoming a battleground for great power competition. However, our panel offered a different perspective—one that challenges this militarized narrative.

We introduced the concept of an "Oedipus Effect" as a lens to understand how predictions of Arctic militarization are contributing to the very outcomes they predict. We refer here to the role of prophecies in classic Greek mythology, where in attempting to thwart the prophecy that predicted that he would kill his father and marry his mother, Oedipus’s actions ultimately lead to the prophecy’s fulfillment.

In other words, the constant framing of the region as a space for military confrontation sets in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy, where states respond to perceived threats by ramping up their own military activities. For example, recent increases in military exercises and the expansion of naval capabilities by Arctic states are not solely responses to external threats but are often reactions to the security narratives themselves. This cycle of escalation risks turning the Arctic into a flashpoint, which is ironic given the region's history of cooperation.

Our panel instead highlighted the prominence of low-tension and desecuritizing narratives that are prevalent across the region, which offer examples for how to escape the Oedipus Effect where the fate of the Arctic as a militarized space might otherwise seem inescapable. One example was the case of Svalbard. While we might expect that such an archipelago that has long been an area where military planners have emphasized its potential as an Achilles heel for NATO given Russia’s presence, Norwegian and Russian discourse and behavior

has been largely desecuritizing across the Cold War and been maintained, even given increasing tensions between Russia and the West since 2022. A second case was that of Greenland, where the United States and Denmark largely have framed Greenland through a low-tension narrative to avoid any discourse of threats. Policymakers in Denmark emphasize that the maintenance of a low-tension narrative is key for its overarching Greenlandic policy while a U.S. position on Greenland is absent in its public-facing discourse. This is curious given the geo-strategic importance that Greenland has for the defense of North America. However, its absence in larger framing Arctic or national security strategies does the productive work of keeping Greenland as a low-tension area. One final case was that of both the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage. For both, Canada and Russia do not emphasize militarized threats – for the most part – to these spaces.

In all of the above cases, the lack of security discourse was present across the Cold War and largely been resilient to degrading tension between the West and Russia. Certainly, norms around the recognition that there are hard security threats to these areas have shifted since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. That being said, the continued dominance of these low-tension narratives suggests that there clearly are strategies that states are using to avoid an Oedipus Effect.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also prompted historically non-aligned Finland and Sweden to apply - and later be approved - for NATO memberships. While some branches of the media and academia feared that this move would intensify the existing security dilemmas in the area, we argued that Sweden and Finland's decision to join NATO represent a strategic choice for collective security that seeks to prevent, rather than provoke, militarization. By joining a multilateral defense alliance, both countries signaled a preference for cooperation and shared security rather than unilateral military build-up. This shift towards collective defense diminishes the need for Sweden and Finland to independently ramp up their military presence in the Arctic. Instead, they can rely on NATO's broader security guarantees, which spread the responsibility for regional defense across multiple states. This approach, centered on alliance-building and diplomacy, contradicts the notion that Arctic states are locked into a cycle of inevitable militarization.

Furthermore, their entry into NATO is more about deterrence than escalation. Joining the alliance provides Sweden and Finland with a credible security guarantee that can deter potential aggressors without resorting to increased military actions in the Arctic. In contrast to the self-fulfilling prophecy, which expects states to continually increase their military capacities in response to one another, NATO membership allows both countries to achieve security through political unity and collective defense, rather than through an arms race.

Sweden and Finland's NATO membership also has the potential to shift the Arctic security focus from military competition to diplomatic solutions. As NATO members, they can foster greater dialogue among Arctic Council nations and other international forums, prioritizing cooperation on shared challenges such as climate change, resource management, and migration, rather than solely focusing on military defense. This diplomatic emphasis provides an alternative to the expectation that heightened geopolitical tensions will automatically lead to increased militarization in the Arctic.

ACTIVITY REPORT



In the creation of our panel, we reflected on the word ‘prophecy’ – a term that often emerges when reading fantasy novels such as Harry Potter or Game of Thrones. In these types of novels, there are often two types of characters. On one hand, there are those who give too much stock to prophecy. Often antagonists, these characters often are overly bound by what it is said and do not allow themselves the creative power to think outside of pre-determined outcomes. This danger is what the Oedipus Effect could lead to in an Arctic context, where in speaking solely about a possible militarized Arctic, we invite this future in. In doing so, we forestall future scenarios where it is not the case. By contrast, there are other characters who are able to understand that prophecy serves a purpose, but it is their interpretation that matters. These characters are often protagonists and understand future prophesizing as a tool through to see one possible future while not closing the door to other options. Real security challenges exist in the Arctic, whether considering the possibilities of hybrid threats, or the threats to individuals who live within the region. Recognizing these threats is necessary, but future Arctic security discourse should do better at framing such threats as one dynamic amongst the many cases of cooperation within a low-tension environment as we outline above.