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TO DETER OR NOT TO DETER?
UNDERSTANDING THE A7 & NATO'S CHOICE FOR DETERRENCE
IN THE ARCTIC

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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To deter or not to deter:

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Abstract

Deterrence is a strategy aimed at preventing adversaries from taking unwanted actions by threatening credible consequences. This security practice is well-rehearsed by NATO, but conducting deterrence in the Arctic's international waters presents a series of questions regarding rational calculations that makes this choice puzzling. This thesis examines the logic behind choosing deterrence in the Arctic post-2022, amidst rising tensions between NATO and Russia, exploring the ritual features of NATO's deterrent discourse. Through Mälksoo's ritual approach and conducting Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the thesis scrutinises the A7 and NATO's deterrence discourse, particularly focusing on speech acts and their role in generating ontological security and identity. The analysis intersects the ritual approach with critical studies to reveal ritual-like features in NATO's deterrence discourse, characterised by ambiguity, repetition, the underscore of symbolic values, and a lack of specific delineation of red-lines and interests. The thesis concludes that the choice of deterrence in the Arctic post-2022 can be explained to the extent that ritual discourse produces ontological security. Ritual deterrence discourse is pivotal in addressing ontological insecurity among Arctic nations, fostering stability and identity alignment within the alliance, and reinforcing the identity of the A7 by aligning with NATO's stance. This study emphasises the necessity for clearer messaging, defining specific target audiences and adversaries, and establishing explicit boundaries to mitigate ambiguity. Furthermore, future research should explore the interplay between physical security concerns and deterrence strategies, offering insights into reflexive decision-making and alternative approaches to security challenges.

Keywords: Arctic, NATO, deterrence, ritual approach, discourse analysis, ontological security, role-identity, habit-driven

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Introduction

The end of the ‘Arctic Exception’ as a *sui generis* case of cooperation and the subsequent increased tensions in the region have made the Arctic a prominent field in Security Studies. The Arctic States’ heightened militarization in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is evidenced in the evolution of Arctic 7 (hereby A7) Arctic Strategies, the observed increase in military personnel, joint exercises and simulations, and the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO—the only members of the A7 who were not part of the alliance—in the fastest accession process in the organisation’s history.

This situation exhibits a shift in the A7’s priorities in the region, and it has raised concerns about escalation and the security dilemma. As the world reverts to an environment of tension reminiscent of the Cold-War, Western countries are choosing to respond in a familiar way to the ‘Russian Threat’, with deterrence as their main strategy. This shift from cooperation to military means can be seen not only in the various military movements conducted since¹, but also in NATO’s Strategic Concepts, the actualization of Arctic Strategies of the A7², or even the complete policy turn by the Nordics (as seen in Norway’s base policy, and the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO). This strategic choice raises questions at a time where the emerging dialogue on deterrence remains characterised by unsupported assertions, claims that contradict empirical records, and little reference to classic analyses (Mazaar, 2021: 12).

Examining the Arctic region is essential for understanding the dynamics of international cooperation and conflict, particularly in the context of NATO’s deterrent strategy. This is fundamental to understanding the events unfolding in the region and the future of interaction between different actors, because policy (military or civil) follows strategy. Understanding the choice for this strategy is fundamental to comprehend what policies will follow. The dynamics unfolding in this region provide insights in geopolitics and international cooperation theories, and its analysis is relevant first and foremost for revising security policies, but also environmental concerns, as a place particularly vulnerable to climate change.

¹ Including Arctic Edge 2022, Cold Response 2022, Northern Strike, Arctic Challenge 2023, and most importantly the Nordic Response exercise of Stead Defender in 2024.

² Most notably the US National Strategy for the Arctic of 2022, elaborated as a response to the “heightened tension with Russia” (NSAR, 2022) and NATO’s Strategic Concept of 2022, in its consideration of ‘Strategic Environment’.

Deterrence is a security practice well-rehearsed by NATO, and while its choice may at first glance seem intuitive given the threat and the range of strategic and economic interest in the Arctic (Boulègue, 2022), upon closer inspection it gives rise to a puzzle. Considering the threat Russia poses to NATO and the increment in tensions in all NATO-Russia borders (Rumer et al., 2021, Boulègue, 2022), a theory based on rational calculations expects the consideration of alternatives, as conflict management techniques that reduce these tensions, such as the traditional Nordic ‘balancing act’, diplomacy, or Flexible Non-Escalatory Options. However, NATO's strategy is chosen in an almost reflexive manner and without signs of having seriously considered alternatives³. Literature and historical empirics (Huth & Russett, 1984, 1990; Mälksoo, 2020; Morrow, 2017; Zagare, 2004) indicate that deterrence does not always reduce tensions but in certain situations may increase them, potentially leading to a security spiral. Moreover, the traditional application of this strategy by NATO against Russia is done in terrestrial border zones such as the Baltics and NATO's eastern flank states. Its application in the Arctic region is puzzling because international waters, like the Arctic, do not have territorial integrity as such at threat based on the fact that they are international waters: no nation holds sovereignty over them. This means that sovereignty and territorial integrity can not be violated, but more importantly, that red-lines are harder to establish. This buffer zone makes it so that we are not in a case of direct, border deterrence, nor in extended deterrence, but on something else, where deterrence might be counterproductive. If one analyses the situation closely, the aim of this deterrence can either be (direct) prevention from attacking any on the A7, who all are members of NATO; or preventing a challenger from attacking and annexating international waters (extended deterrence), and illegally claiming their sovereignty. Moreover, engaging in deterrence in the Arctic under unsuitable conditions may risk undermining NATO's deterrence efforts and credibility in other fronts. For instance, attempting deterrence in the Arctic without effective capabilities could lead to deterrence failure, potentially signalling to Russia that NATO's deterrence elsewhere might also falter. All things considered, the choice seems to defy rational calculation, and considering the geographical composition of the Arctic, the implications for IL, along the expectations from the literature, the choice of this strategy by NATO is puzzling.

³ The most significant push against this has in fact come from the Nordic countries, namely Norway, until they have been convinced to acquiesce. I explore this discourse evolution in detail in the third chapter of this work.

By questioning the features of deterrence that make its choice puzzling, I am not arguing against the existence of a threat in the Arctic that deserves to be countered, but highlighting how this shift does not entirely respond to the rational theory assumptions. The persistence of NATO's reflexive choice of deterrence in the Arctic, overlooking alternatives and lacking a clear argument for its suitability in a region where traditional deterrence may be less effective, remains unexplained despite the existence of a threat.

The objective of this thesis is to examine the logic behind choice for deterrence in the Arctic. The specific features that will be analysed are ritual characteristics and the connection between identity and ontological security through 'concerns with identity'. The research question is: "To what extent do the ritual features of deterrence discourse explain NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022?". Based on Mälsoo's 'ritual approach', the theoretical expectation is that NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022 can be explained by understanding deterrence as a ritual-like practice that produces ontological security and is manifested through ritual discourse with ritual features.

In response to escalating tensions and militarization in the Arctic region following geopolitical shifts, this thesis examines the logic behind NATO's choice for deterrence. The research puzzle centres on the discrepancy between traditional deterrence strategies and the unique dynamics of the Arctic, leading to the aim of exploring how NATO's deterrence ritual discourse in practices addresses ontological security concerns among Arctic nations. The research question probes the extent to which NATO's deterrence discourse, characterised by ritual-like elements, explains the choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022. Through the ritual approach to deterrence, this study explores the interplay between discourse, identity, and security, contributing to a deeper understanding of contemporary security challenges and the evolving nature of international relations (hereby IR) in the Arctic.

This thesis has three chapters. The first chapter discusses the different paradigms of deterrence theory in a theoretical framework that examines rational deterrence and the psychological models, to illustrate its limitations. It also reviews Mälsoo's ritual approach and rituals in IR, conceptualising deterrence as a symbolic practice. Additionally, it explores critical security theories (securitization, identity, and ontological security) and how they address the social construction of security threats and the role of identity in shaping actors' choices. The second chapter outlines the methodological approach, conducted through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) over 73 speech acts spanning from March 2022 to March

2024. Due to the focus on speech acts and identity, discourse analysis is the most suitable strategy of inquiry, given its capacity to illustrate the interconnectedness between textual and social processes. The final chapter is an analysis of the sources, divided in two sections, examines the ritual features of deterrence in detail. First, ritual-characteristics are found in deterrence discourse across the dimensions of audiences, rationalities, expected impacts and interests. Second, the discourse demonstrates the A7 and NATO's concerns with identity, in its ontological security-seeking and the alignment with role-identity.

Chapter I. Understanding Deterrence: From Rational To Ritual Approach.

1. Deterrence Theory

This chapter will revise deterrence theory, conceptualising this idea and its different approaches, to better explain how deterrence plays out as a strategy and in practice. Starting with Rational Deterrence Theory and the psychological models, concluding with its main criticisms. Then I will introduce the ritual approach to deterrence, based on the social theory of deterrence. Lastly I present a constructivist perspective, with emphasis on security and identity, the latest contributions to the scholarship, to lay the foundation of the framework and concepts that will be used for the analysis.

1.1. Classical Deterrence Approaches

The concept of deterrence conveys threats of retaliation issued for preventing unwanted action, usually a military attack, once the threatened party becomes aware of the attacker's intentions. Even though in international politics it is used in more contexts, the focus remains in preventing the attack. Deterrence theory has three aims: describing the events in deterrence situations; explaining how it works, and prescribing guidelines for decision-makers to maximise their chances of achieving desired outcomes (Morgan, 2003).

The basic premise of this theory is the study of the adversarial relationship between two actors: the one starting a potential conflict and target of the deterrent threat (challenger, or deterred) and the one trying to prevent it (defender or deterrer). The defender aims to stop a particular action by the challenger, such as an attack on themselves (direct deterrence) or someone else (extended deterrence) (Achen & Snidal, 1989). The challenger makes the first move, deciding whether to attack or not. Everything that happens after this moment is outside the scope of deterrence theory as the challenger's move indicates the failure of the deterrent strategy.

Deterrence studies the different policy instruments, policies and capabilities a defender can use (military force, the threat of sanctions and the offer of rewards) to dissuade an attacker from initiating some specific action (Huth & Russett, 1990: 469). The strategy relies in convincing the potential attacker that the expected utility of initiating an attack is less than the expected utility of not doing so (Huth & Russett, 1990: 469-470), not necessarily that it

would not win, but that initiating would be detrimental (Jervis et al., 1985). This is eminently a cost-benefit rational calculation, which explains why most of the academic debate has played out around rationality.

It is important to note that most of this scholarly debate was developed during the Cold War and most if not all works are influenced by ideological biases very present in both sides (Dillon, 1989; Freedman, 2005), and some scholars even argue that the theory and practice of deterrence is an expression of the political culture in the United States (Jervis et al., 1985; Tankha, 1986). Furthermore, many of the ensuing debates (namely, debates between George & Smoke and Achen & Snidal; and Huth & Russett and Lebow and Stein) were around operationalisation, case selection and coding that resulted in contradictory results. Many of the discrepancies on case selection were due to a disagreement about the corpus analysed in specific cases, where in the same conflict each assigned opposite ‘challenger’ and ‘defender’ roles to the same states. As Mälksoo puts it: “Parties to a conflict often disagree over who is actually attacking whom” (Mälksoo, 2020: 57). An exemplary case for this is the Berlin Blockade and the crisis of 1958 and 1963. In these conflicts, the authors assign opposite roles to the actors involved. This brings into question the practical utility of these labels for analysis, as two adversaries are always going to assign themselves the defender role and the Other as the challenger, domestically and on the international arena. And secondly, the validity of many of the results produced, if authors can not seem to agree on case selection and coding.

1.1.1 Rational Deterrence Theory

After World War II, Bernard Brodie, Arnold Wolfers and Jacob Viner were the first to develop the theory as they explored the implications for security of nuclear weapons (Jervis, 1979; Lupovici, 2010). Followed by important works like Kaufmann's *Requirements of Deterrence*, which laid out deterrence as a strategy of conflict management with three components: capability, cost, and intentions (Lebow, 1985; Morgan, 1985). Resolve and credibility are also outlined as determinant factors of success.

While the first had reduced impact, the second wave developed in the late 1950s and incorporated game theory models, which made it much more popular. However, it still

provided little empirical evidence to support its claims and had a lot of criticisms⁴ (Jervis, 1979). Furthermore, academic knowledge of the conditions under which deterrence theory applies was still very limited (Jervis, 1979).

These criticisms inspire a third wave which addresses risk taking, rewards, probabilities, misperceptions, and domestic and bureaucratic politics (Jervis, 1979), and incorporates the notion of credibility of the threat and certainty regarding the ability and commitment to respond after the attack (Achen & Snidal, 1989). An abundant production of comparative case studies (Huth & Russett, 1984, 1990; Lebow & Stein, 1990) originating in this wave lead to a series of generalisations that are viewed by some scholars as the solution to the empirical gap previously criticised. These case studies are considered constitutives of theory or potential substitutes for the rationality postulates of deterrence theory (Achen & Snidal, 1989).

The main premises of rational deterrence theory are three assumptions that do not consider abnormal decision-making (“irrationality”) or variations in outcomes due to external factors (changes in preferences, norms, roles, or culture) (Achen & Snidal, 1989). They are: the ‘Rational Actor Assumption’ (rationality informed by the actor’s fixed preferences and choices, with decisions made to optimise their interests); the ‘Principal Explanatory Assumption’ (differences in outcomes are explained by differences in opportunities available to individuals); and a ‘Principal Substantive Assumption’ (which treats the state as a single, rational entity whose actions—changes in personnel, decision-making patterns, or bureaucratic politics—are not explanatory factors).

Rational deterrence studies have been centred around what makes deterrence work (Huth & Russett, 1990; Lebow & Stein 1990; Zagare, 2004). However, most of empirical evidence is an account of what makes it fail: George and Smoke (1974) created a typology of three main sequences/causal paths for deterrence failure based on the action taken by the challenger: First, ‘Fait accompli’ the challenger acts driven by the perception of weak commitment of the defender; second ‘a limited, reversible probe’ in which the challenger creates a controlled crisis—low-level and essentially non-deterrable act—in order to put pressure on the defender and force it to clarify its ambiguous commitment so the challenger can learn about the defender’s values and intentions; and third a ‘controlled pressure’ done by an challenger that

⁴ At this point it still failed to explain how to induce change in the other’s motives; how to transform hostile relations into peaceful ones; how to determine whether changes have taken place; and how and how much a state can change the intentions of an adversary.

recognises an unequivocal commitment a defender. At this point, the initiator believes it possible to erode that commitment by exploiting certain weaknesses or situational advantages and by convincing the defender that its options are limited and that the risks are great.

Rationality

A necessary consideration when analysing rational theory are its limitations, some of which include empiricity, causality and the paradox of the instrumentality of deterrence in state behaviour and provoking war, but most importantly, the debate around rationality. This is a central part of the rational theory of deterrence, given the concept “was conceived in terms of actor rationality” (Morgan, 2003: 44). This is an extensive discussion approached from many points of view. The purpose of this work is not to examine this concept in depth, but its parameters need to be set. In general terms, rationality can be understood as the approach to decisions in the way that gives the best chance of maximising one's value position, on the basis of a calculation of potential gains and losses and probabilities of enemy action (Snyder, 1960: 173). To this point, Zagare introduces a distinction between rational actor and rational choice (Zagare, 1990: 238). The latter consists in an utilitarian calculation of costs and benefits and consequent choosing of the less costly option. This definition encompasses behaviour, and it is not necessarily connected to a rational actor, as “defining rational behaviour for the deterrer did not require assuming that the challenger was rational” (Morgan, 2003).

Regarding actor rationality two considerations need to be addressed: first, actors are never fully rational or lack the sufficient time or information necessary to be rational, especially in situations of crisis, where rationality is affected by preferences, perceptions and biased or incomplete information (Morgan, 2003). Furthermore, “breaking into the opponent's cognitive world to figure out how the opponent thinks” is impossible and therefore any action based on this deduction will never be rational (Morgan, 2003: 59). However, even though we can not demand rationality of actors, they can still exhibit rational or irrational behaviour, and make rational or irrational choices (Zagare, 1990). Second, often, leaders and decision makers, contrary to the expectations of the rational assumption, do not weigh all parts of the deterrence equation equally (Stein, 1985). Moreover, as the psychological model points out, rationality is affected by motivated, or affect-driven, and unmotivated biases which affect deterrence and threat perception (Jervis, 1982). In other words, actor rationality is complex, as they may not always be fully rational or accurately understand their opponent's thinking;

and leaders' decisions in deterrence may be influenced by biases, affecting their threat perception and their choices, including the choice for deterrence.

With all this being said, classic deterrence theory has a big last consideration regarding rationality: actors do not always prefer preserving the status-quo (Zagare 2004; Lupovici, 2010), and this does not mean they are acting irrationally, but simply that their interests do not align with the status quo. This argument is relevant for the discussion at hand as Russia's behaviour falls in this category, and understanding NATO and the A7's choice for deterrence requires an understanding of their challenger.

Need for alternatives explanations

Considering the above, I believe that in the Arctic we can observe behaviour that responds to somewhere in between the 'a limited, reversible probe' and a 'controlled pressure' from Russia as the initiator and NATO and the A7 as the defenders. And given this pattern responds to a sequence of failure of deterrence, we can suspect that the strategy of deterrence in the Arctic might fail. Following this logic, the choice for deterrence in the Arctic can not be explained by rational deterrence theory.

On top of this, there are works that provide empirical claims that the existence of a formal military alliance, far from playing a positive role in deterring enemies, when lacking more tangible ties, actually works against the success of deterrence (Huth & Russett, 1984, 1990; Morrow, 2017). Not only that, but the value of military strength is also put in question with the example of the United States military power during the Cold War, which despite its prowess, was never so dominant as to prevent the overt challenges from an aggressor (Huth & Russett, 1984). This presents the question of just how military superior a defender has to be to deter an initiator for deterrence to work, which is one of the main criticisms to this theory: "What counts as a deterrent and how much of it is necessary to make deterrence successful remains a deeply political question" (Mälksoo, 2020). Moreover, considering the Cold War's military build up, the theory presents the question of whether a superior buildup (enough to deter) is possible, or even worth it, especially considering the risk of a security spiral.

As I have outlined, rational deterrence theory often explains why deterrence strategy fails, but not why it is chosen. Therefore, to answer the research question, I need other theories that explain why it has been chosen by NATO in the Arctic.

1.1.2 Psychological models of deterrence

Many disciplines before political science have pointed out that leaders' decisions are influenced by emotions, not rationality, before this idea reached deterrence theory. Especially in situations of uncertainty, emotions drive behaviour. Psychological models of deterrence focus on how statesmen make decisions and act by analysing the effects of emotions and beliefs on actors' perceptions and calculations (Jervis, 1985). This theory mainly deals with the need to examine the psychological factors that affect decision making process and persuasion. First, this model argues that the decision making process is affected by a combination of threat perception and a series of estimations and beliefs which are what states choose this strategy. Secondly, as the effectiveness of deterrence is only partially related to the deterrer's retaliatory capabilities, persuasion is key: "for it is the persuasiveness of the message about those capabilities rather than the capabilities themselves that determines success or failure" (Morgan, 1985, 125). As such, the dimensions that this theory brings to the discussion are good analytical fields to explain why a deterrence strategy is chosen, as it focuses on what factors make certain decisions. For deterrence, the three main factors that affect decision making are threat perception, beliefs and biases and estimations.

Threat Perception

A fundamental aspect of this model is the examination of the conditions that lead states to perceive others as threats to their security (Jervis et al., 1985). While this may have many causes, the theory presents 'challenging the status quo' as the most prevalent: "a major cause of the perception of threat is the belief that the other has broken a rule of the game of international politics" (Cohen, as in Jervis et al., 1985). The disregard to international norms (the status quo) is perceived as a threat, not because of *what* it is (a challenge) but the *how*: the behaviour itself entails a threat, regardless of the content of the threat (Jervis et al., 1985). The way in which the behaviour is conducted, may inform better of what the threat is, or the intent behind the action, than the threat itself⁵. An actor's threat perception conditions the choices it makes to defend itself.

⁵ To support this claim Jervis provides the example of the German's building a fleet (in Churchill words, 'a luxury, not a national security need') which for the British meant it had to be aimed at threatening Britain; or the US independence, in which questioning the method to raise money from the colonies, (the method should have been the least grievous to the people, to not trigger resistance) may indicate that the British had another purpose.

Beliefs and biases

The adoption of a deterrence strategy is conditioned by beliefs which are in turn reinforced and influenced by the biases. Said biases can be motivated, such as needs of states or decision-makers themselves; or unmotivated, such as predispositions of decision-makers. These beliefs affect rational calculations, for example of military strengths, often seen in history when powers misjudge other states⁶ (Jervis et al., 1985). When looking upon these biases, unmotivated ones usually precede policy (a misjudgement motivates a policy choice) and motivated ones follow the policy as a ‘rationalised justification’:

“When the motivated biases play a dominant role, many of the beliefs that seem to provide the reasons for the choice of policy are actually rationalisations. The policy comes first, often for reasons that are politically illegitimate or psychologically painful to recognize, and the justification follows, reversing the normal order in which beliefs about other states precede and lead to the foreign policy” (Jervis et al., 1985).

We can see this phenomenon in the choice for deterrence in the Arctic if we consider that deterrent policy follows the motivated need to oppose Russia in a visible, threatening way to discourage more attacks after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, military organisations are predisposed to believe in the efficacy of the offensive (Jervis et al., 1985).

Estimations

Finally, estimations make a derisive part of decision making and what compels an actor to make a choice. The evaluation of interests in IR involves intrinsic—vital interest—and strategic interests, which are reputation, resolve, credibility, and prestige (Stein, 1985). Evidence shows that leaders assess their own resolve based on the value of their interests, but the opponent's resolve is evaluated according to past behaviour (Stein, 1985). Strategic interests like credibility and reputation impact states’ concerns about living up to commitments, because it influences other actors’ trust in them in the future (Jervis, 1982). These are interests, despite not being accounted for in rational theory, that need to be taken into account when trying to understand the choice for deterrence somewhere where traditional interests are less clear. NATO’s reputation, resolve and credibility, are at risk in the face of Russian increased militarization in the region.

⁶ An example of this is the Arab–Israeli War of 1973; or more recently, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

A necessary element of the rational calculation of cost-benefit of military action central to the Rational theory, is the Estimation of Military Capabilities, which is affected by cognitive variables (Stein, 1985). This includes estimated impact of technology and force postures on strategy, offensive capacity, and mobility of their forces. However, “psychological explanations do not expect leaders to engage in careful, ‘objective’ consideration of military capabilities” (Stein, 1985). Moreover, these considerations are also affected by biases, especially when trying to understand the strategy of the other party and behave accordingly, as evidence suggests that “leaders often tend to underestimate their own capabilities and overestimate those of their adversary” (Stein, 1985). About military balance it is worth highlighting that it is not a durable variable and can change very easily. This, coupled with the fact that “inferior military capability is only a temporary deterrent to use of force” (Stein, 1985) suggests that this should not be the factor that determines the choice for deterrence. Military capabilities deter the potential attacker less than it seems.

In conclusion, the examination of classical deterrence illustrates the complex dynamics of deterrence theory, rooted in the rationality of actors and their strategic calculations. Despite its historical development and undeniable relevance in the last decades, the theory's dependence on a premise of rationality reveals significant limitations and challenges within classical deterrence theory, necessitating alternative perspectives. This theory is useful to understand how rational calculations affect how actors choose deterrence as a strategy, but does not explain why when this rational calculation is missing, actors still choose it. The addition ritual approach to deterrence, created with the ideas of social theory of deterrence, offers a lens through which to explore the choice for deterrence in a more nuanced way.

1.2. A ritual approach to deterrence - a Framework

Maria Mälksoo develops the ritual approach to deterrence in her 2020 article by studying NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Poland and the Baltics. This approach is mostly influenced by the social theory of deterrence with authors like Lupovici, Freedman or Tannenwald, giving a new perspective to what seemed the end of the theory after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the invasion of Kuwait and the Breakup of Yugoslavia (Zagare, 2006). Social theory proposes that deterrence can also be comprehended as an idea, not only a strategy, and has added important insights to understanding the social functions and uses of deterrence (Mälksoo, 2020: 58). Mälksoo contributes to this scholarship by developing her ritual approach to deterrence.

This approach includes notions of identity and ontological security to mediate uncertainty, managing others intentions, and articulating the actor's own signals and commitments. It shares elements of both rational deterrence theory and the practice-centric approach (Mälksoo, 2020; 2024). From the latter she incorporates into her framework the "logic of habit"—deterrence as a reflexive habit—and the "posture of competence" or deterrence as practical knowledge. Her ritual approach expands these ideas with a framework based on the idea of deterrence as a ritual-like performative practice with a productive capacity of agency, identity and reality beyond its conventional role of deterring potential threats. This idea is central for this study, as it will be the pillar in which I pose the research question: To what extent do the ritual features of deterrence discourse explain NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022?

Despite using some premises from rational deterrence, this approach questions whether deterrence is a rational response to objective reality (Mälksoo, 2020: 58). Instead, it argues that "deterrence intervenes in reality when it becomes an answer to an actor's identity need and, by extension, a source of its ontological security, internally and externally validating the actor's self by allowing it to sustain a coherent autobiographical narrative and maintain routinized interactions with significant others" (Lupovici, 2016: 69).

This theory offers an analytical frame to analyse the ritualistic nature of deterrence. By studying deterrence as a ritual-like practice, this theory proposes that certain deterrent movements are more symbolic than a "robust territorial defence in case of an attack". Mälksoo uses the case of NATO's eFP to illustrate her argument: "The performance of carefully calibrated symbolic deterrence on the Alliance's eastern flank after Russia's annexation of Crimea helps to maintain NATO's self-identity as a defensive alliance for its contemporary audiences" (Mälksoo, 2020: 55). The integration of identity and ontological security theories, explain certain actor's behaviour, making up for rational theory, which only accounts for 'rational calculations'. According to the ritual approach, more than addressing the supposed threat it intends to deter, eFP illustrates the correlation between deterrence and allied identity. This framework expands the understanding of deterrent practices beyond being motivated by physical security, and connects it to ontological security and the mechanics of collective identity consolidation via specific ritual-like activities (Mälksoo, 2020). As ontological security refers to an individual's subjective sense of self and stability, it influences their actions and choices and guides actors to pursue actions that reinforce their

identity. In the context of NATO's deterrence, I expect ontological security to play a role, as deterring adversaries reinforces NATO's identity and sense of security. This influence on strategy in the Arctic provides a subjective sense of self and certainty that must be maintained over time. This continuity is partly achieved through the repetition (Oren & Solomon, 2015) of ritual-like practices.

It is necessary to underscore two crucial factors for the better understanding of this framework. Firstly, this theory does not say that deterrence is a ritual but that it is a ritual-like practice. Unlike a ritual—a structured symbolic activity that fosters shared reality and solidarity among participants through repetition of an activity—deterrence is a *practice* with ritual characteristics. For example, claiming a piece of land can be done by a mere declaration of sovereignty, but the act of planting the flag is a ritual practice. In the same sense, I will explore how deterrence, just like the flag setting, is also a practice with ritual characteristics, to explain its choice when rational theory can not. This is a practice that through repetition in a circular dynamic, symbolically refers and constitutes a shared reality. Secondly, there is an important differentiation between ritual-like practice and ritual discourse. Ritual-like practice refers to structured activities imbued with symbolic significance, while ritual discourse refers to the communicative expression of these ritual characteristics, as illustrated in Figure 1:

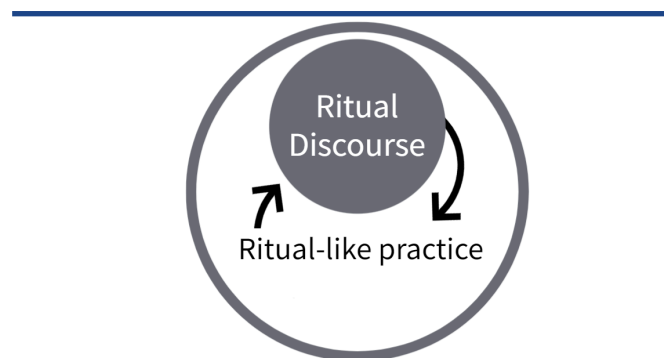


Figure 1: Difference between ritual-like practice and ritual-discourse (Own elaboration)

In the context of deterrence, the discourse surrounding deterrence strategy serves as a manifestation of its ritualistic features. By recognizing deterrence as a ritual-like practice, the shift moves from viewing it solely as a strategic calculation and instead focuses on its symbolic and performative dimensions.

This approach is complementary to rational deterrence, as it shares elements of both rational deterrence theory and practice-centric reading of deterrence, but draws the attention to the performative (and ritualistic) elements of this practice (Mälksoo, 2020: 61). This addition makes up for the criticisms made to the classical theory around ‘rationality’ assumptions, especially when aiming to understand a choice where rationality seems to be lacking. The focus shifts from whether or not the choice is rational, to what it does, something the scholarship has neglected.

Moreover, the ritual-approach to deterrence serves to mediate ambiguity, and has political benefits like the development of collective emotional cohesion (essential to alliance bonds), solidarity and unity (Collins, 2004). Additionally, the ritualization of deterrence provides a powerful mechanism for conveying the credibility of commitment and “dramatising the deterrent intent”, especially when the material means or the agreement and consensus within an alliance are not clear. Considering these characteristics of ritualistic practices, deterrence is not merely a symbolic act but a strategic choice with profound implications: by ritualizing deterrence, actors and alliances actively negotiate authority, define their sense of self and societal values, and project a unified front to external actors. This helps deliver clear messages and mitigate ambiguity, which enhances credibility and alliance cohesion. The theoretical implications of deterrence as a ritual-like practice helps explain the choice from a strategic perspective.

Of all the common features, found among ritual-like practices and deterrence, “performance is the defining feature among the ritual-like qualities of deterrence as a specific type of demonstration, communication and constitution of a threat, credibility and resolve” (Mälksoo, 2020). Additionally, the ritual-like practice that is part of this performative dynamic is repetition (Oren & Solomon, 2015).

Ritualised actions, which serve as negotiations of authority, self, and society (Bell, 1992) can offer strategic advantages by making use of the dramatisation and mobilisation present in rituals (Mälksoo, 2020). Mälksoo pinpoints the elements that surround the practices of rituals—like the constitution of a shared reality, the symbolic reference to that reality, or simple repetition (Oren & Solomon, 2015)—and identifies them within the practice of deterrence, unveiling the performative facet of this strategy. I use her categorisation of ‘political functions’: Posturing, Reasoning, Reassuring and Mediating ambiguity (Mälksoo, 2020: 64) as analytical categories of ‘rationalities’ behind each speech act. As well as what

she calls a “circular dynamic between the performative constitution of agency through practice and actor’s intentional orchestration of an ingrained deterrer identity” (Mälksoo, 2020: 66), in other words, the process of performing actions (deterrence) and embodying a deterrer identity influences each other in a continuous loop.

These considerations about the ritual features and political functions of deterrence explain why even though the shared meaning and ways of deterrence are believed by some to be an empirical fallacy in IR (Chilton, 1985 as cited in Mälksoo, 2020), it might be a ‘necessary fiction’ (Mälksoo, 2020). As a very recent theory, this framework requires being applied in different scenarios, as well as the appropriate conceptualisation of several concepts regarding rituals.

2. Rituals in International Security

This section explores the role of rituals in shaping deterrence strategies and fostering collective identities among states. For IR scholarship rituals offer a lens through which to understand political practices, from diplomacy to conflict dynamics. Moreover, in the context of deterrence, the ritual discourse surrounding NATO's deterrence practices in the Arctic post-2022 indicates a deeper need for ontological security within the organisation, which may influence the choice for deterrence in the region.

First I introduce the concept of rituals, examining their nature and symbolic significance. Next, I delve into their specific role in shaping deterrence choices, highlighting their performative aspects and implications for identity construction. This provides a framework for analysing deterrence as a ritualistic practice and its broader implications for security dynamics.

2.1. Ritual practices in International Relations

After the cultural shift the international society experienced post Cold War, there has been a significant emphasis on the social construction of reality using symbols, myths, and metaphors (Aalberts et al., 2020; Kustermans et al., 2021). This perspective has become crucial for understanding the dynamics of IR. Rituals and ritual practices are widely present in international politics, from core institutions like diplomacy and law to war and conflict dynamics. Political practices are susceptible to be studied through the lenses of ritual to understand how they construct reality (Aalbertset al., 2020; Kustermans et al., 2021).

The concept of ritual is defined as a rule-governed (structured and typically accompanied by social expectations and norms) activity of symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance (Lukes, 1975: 291). As such two things need to be present for a practice to be a ritual: an activity of symbolic character; and a social understanding of what this activity means and relates it to a particular significance. In the case of deterrence, if an activity (with the aim to deter) lacks either the social understanding of what it means (certain act translates to ‘do not attack’) or an audience able to understand your message (‘fluent in deterrence language’), the message will not be sent. In this case, there will be a deterrent act but not a ritual, as it lacks the second element, “social understanding of what this activity means and relation to a particular meaning”. As this is impossible in real life (the reason to be of deterrence is to be understood as such by the challenger), deterrent practices always have a ritualistic element.

With this definition, the focus is moved away from the mystical and religious connotations often associated with it by important scholars like Durkheim. More specifically, Collins’ defined ritual is a “mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (Collins, 2004 as cited in Mälksoo, 2020). The example of placing a nation's flag over a territory is an illustrative example of the practice of a ritual in IR, an act and symbolic gesture loaded with profound meaning. This ritual signifies the expression of ownership and sovereignty over the land, producing a reality whose meaning is shared by the international community, even if they do not agree, everyone understands what it means. By visibly marking territory with a national flag, states communicate their presence, authority, and territorial claims to both domestic and international audiences. For example, in the context of deterrence, the act serves as a ritualised expression of power and resolve, sending a clear message about its willingness to defend a place’s territorial integrity. Studying deterrence as a ritual requires analysing the symbolic acts and gestures employed by actors to assert power, influence, and security to audiences. I do this by analysing the rationalities behind the speech acts.

Features identified by the ritual scholarship like formalism, traditionalism, disciplined routines, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and performance (Bell, 1997) are also present in deterrence. Like other ritual-like practices, the structured practices of deterrence rely on a series of patterns based on historical precedents, norms, and the symbolic power of certain

objects, like nuclear weapons⁷ (Mälksoo, 2020; Tankha, 1986). These patterns both guide and legitimise the interactions between opposing actors, forming the basis of deterrence strategies (Mälksoo, 2020).

2.1.1. Ritual as a meaning-making practice

Regarding the study of practice as a ritual, authors of this scholarship have highlighted the difficulty and its methodological problems involved in the study of ritual (Lukes, 1975). The main one being how to establish whether one interpretation of its symbolism is more valid than another (Lukes, 1975). Considering rituals as a meaning-making practice is fundamental to the analysis of deterrence discourse, as rituals play a role in constructing threats and reinforcing security narratives and practices. Semiotics offers a theoretical foundation to study symbols, as it consists in the practice of meaning-making and its object of analysis are symbols.

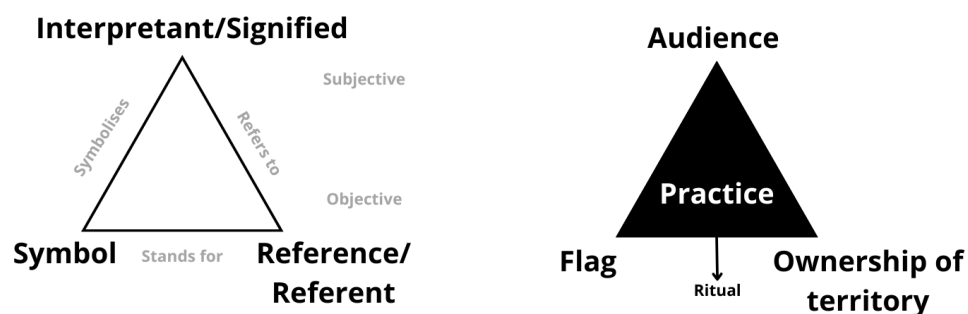


Figure 2: Meaning-making

(Own elaboration)

The ritual serves to fix a particular meaning to a practice. For example, setting the flag of a country over a territory means ownership of territory. The practice of setting the flag is a ritual of claiming this territory. Audiences understand this meaning because it has been ritualised: the action equals a fixed meaning. In the same way, deterrence symbolises the use of force to an audience that understands it. The iteration of the speech act is enough to create meaning, without need to materialise this practice further than its dialectic articulation. This is one of the ritual-characteristics of deterrence discourse: the fact that what creates meaning is the articulation of the message, not the message’s content.

⁷ “Deterrence strategies and theories in international security have attached special symbolism to nuclear weapons, making missiles effective already in peacetime for their ability to influence political assessments in target states and societies” (Mälksoo, 2020).

Rituals, as speech acts constitutive of reality, are performative for enacting and embodying the symbolic within social contexts by translating abstract ideas into concrete practices (Collins, 2004; Mälksoo, 2020). And deterrence, like rituals, enacts and embodies symbols within social contexts, translating abstract ideas (for example, unity) into concrete practices (alliance). Constructivist theory argues that reality is both spoken and acted into existence, so deterrence is a performative practice insofar it recreates a reality where deterrence is considered not only meaningful interaction and a conflict management practice (Mälksoo, 2020) but also necessary for (ontological) security. Deterrence, like rituals, depends on its capacity to produce the effect it names, making it a mechanism that produces a reality through symbols that all parties have to understand (and belief in) for it to work. Moreover, deterrence serves as an identity-making practice since it aims not only to produce physical security but also to generate ontological security and identity coherence.

2.1.2. The symbolic power of deterrence

The “content of deterrence is neither self-evident nor automatic” (Mälksoo, 2020: 54) as proven in the debates about credibility. However, rather than being based on material, tangible presence and military capabilities, there is a symbolic meaning surrounding deterrence strategy that communicates and signals commitment and threat (Mälksoo, 2020). This is done by what Mälksoo calls the ritualization of deterrence: the strategic use of ritual features and symbolic action central to deterrence as a social practice.

As a type of political practice, rituals organise and constitute reality symbolically, making the fictions of the world tangible, conceivable, relatable, empirically and materially available (Aalbertset al., 2020: 241-242). In other words, rituals are practices of meaning-making. As such, they create relations which shape the emergence and reproduction of power, authority and subjectivities and constitute our way of relating to the world and each other (Aalbertset al., 2020: 241).

It is important to emphasise that while it shares many common characteristics with similar practices, ritual differs from habitual practice for its rule-boundedness and reflexivity and the fact that performance as its defining feature and performativity as its core effect (Mälksoo, 2020).

Table 1: Deterrence as a ritual practice

As...	Military practice	Political practice	Identity-making practice
What it is	Instrumental management of security threat	Symbol-Contextual practice	<i>Deterrentification</i> (Vuori, 2016)
What it does	Sends message of - reassurance (to allies) - Deterrence (to enemies)	Make and fix meanings to certain practices	Constitutes Identity of the Deterrer
What does it produce	Physical Security	Meaning	Ontological Security

Table 1 outlines the three dimensions of deterrence as a ritual practice: military practice, political practice, and identity-making practice. These are analytical dimensions, not exhaustive but interrelated to each other, and deterrence is all of them at the same time. In the realm of military practice, it involves the practical execution of strategies aimed at both reassuring allies and deterring potential adversaries, ultimately seeking to ensure physical security. As a political practice, on the other hand, focuses on the manipulation of symbols and meanings associated with deterrence, with the goal of framing narratives and influencing perceptions surrounding it, thus producing meaning. Lastly, as an identity-making practice revolves around constructing and reinforcing the identity of the deterrer, shaping internal and external perceptions to cultivate ontological security—this is ultimately the object of my analysis, as it is what the theoretical expectation is based on.

Together, these dimensions contribute to a nuanced understanding of deterrence as not only a strategic endeavour but also a ritualistic and symbolic practice deeply intertwined with military, political, and identity-related dynamics, and help explain its choice even when purely rational calculations do not. The annexation of Finland and Sweden to NATO exemplifies this well: signing the ratification treaty of the accession is a political practice that has been ritualised through its practice over time (actors signing treating signifies agreement), and creates identity as it generates unity among the A7; produces physical security (increases NATO defensive capabilities), meaning (a message to challengers) and ontological security, as NATO's and A7's identity as a deterrer is reinforced.

3. Identity and Critical Security Theories

This section explores some critical security theories, including securitization, identity and ontological security, to present the theories that will support the analysis. By examining how actors construct and protect their identities in the face of security challenges, these theories offer insights into why they make specific strategic choices, such as the adoption of deterrence.

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new threats—such as rogue states and terrorism—along the problems of the classic framework, the development of interpretative approaches offered a new perspective on the study of deterrence, focused on the social functions and uses of deterrence (Mälksoo, 2020). In particular, constructivist theory has made important contributions to the study of security (Hopf, 1998; Fierke, 2013; Mitzen, 2006), some of which the social theory has been constructed upon by emphasising how the importance of context provides insights for solving puzzles other theories can not.

Constructivist approaches focus on showing that the central components of deterrence (rationality, credibility and resolve) are social constructions (Mälksoo, 2020). Understanding deterrence as a social construct solves the ‘rationality’ issues and allows to examine emotive, political and material dynamics of this security practice, factors which remain unaccounted for in traditional deterrence scholarship (Mälksoo, 2020). This new approach to the theory does not argue that material factors do not matter, since they also affect context, but that “viewing deterrence as a way—and to some extent as the only way—to provide security in the nuclear age is itself the social construction” (Lupovici, 2010). This perspective offers explanations to behaviour like Jeonniemi and Luke’s argument about the ‘game’ of deterrence and how it operates as a self-fulfilling prophecy: when actors in a conflict believe they are engaged in a ‘game’ of deterrence and have common knowledge of it, they tend to reinforce and institutionalise practices that support it (Lupovici, 2018: 716). This dynamic was observed between the superpowers during the 1970s, where US and Soviet decision makers acted in accordance with their shared understanding of deterrence, thus validating its effectiveness (Joenniemi, 1989:45; Luke, 1989 as cited in Lupovici, 2018). This suggests that the mutual belief in deterrence among adversaries can solidify its perceived efficacy.

If rationality and strategic thinking were what determined the study of deterrence in the second wave, and observations from psychology and the process of decision-making in the third, discourse is the main object of analysis of the fourth wave, which provides a new

perspective to understand how deterrent threats may influence the behaviour of actors. It focuses on the discursive aspects of deterrence and views its policies and practices through a social lens, hence its name (Vuori, 2016). This theoretical framework proposes an interpretative approach to make up for rational deterrence theory's various limitations with a focus on identities and threat constructions (Vuori, 2016) to highlight the importance of discourse and securitization, which I described in previous sections. From constructivist discourse theory, I specially will use the concept of empty signifiers, a constructivist concept (Wendt, 1999; Mitzen, 2006; Lupovici 2016), which play a fundamental role in discourse. As Laclau defines it, an empty signifier is a linguistic or symbolic element that lacks a concrete meaning or reference, or "a signifier without a signified" (1996: 36). For example, 'freedom' is a term that lacks specific content or meaning on its own but serves as a symbolic placeholder onto which individuals can project their own interpretations (Stengel & Nabers, 2019: 258). In this sense, it functions as a 'blank canvas' that allows a diverse range of people to associate their own meanings with it, depending on the individual's perspective or context (Stengel & Nabers, 2019: 258).

3.1. Identity

This section explores the significance of identity within IR, particularly focusing on role identity theory, the way in which states and alliances construct their identities and how identity influences their decision-making.

Identity is a key concept of constructivist theory for IR, and an object of extensive discussion (Brubaker & Cooper 2000; Mitzen, 2006; Wendt, 1999; among many others). Moreover, it is a fundamental factor in alliance construction and role attachment (Barnett, 1996; Walts, 1997). One example of this is the recognition of shared history, interests or values, as the factor that clusters states together. Particularly, identity is central to the concept of ontological security for states, which proposes that states, like individuals, have a distinct identity that they feel obligated to protect against challenges (Karp, 2018). This, in turn, affects how states behave in the face of challenges and shapes their preferences, and thus is fundamental to understand their decision-making processes (Karp, 2018: 65-66).

Identity is not an easy concept to define, but for the purposes of this work it will be understood as a dynamic process that drives actions reciprocally, and thus, emerges from interactions between self and others, mutually shaping each other (Wæver, 2002: 21-22). This

discursive and symbolic construction, reflects the belonging of an actor to a particular group, (a nation, a state, an alliance...) and reinforces itself over time (Mitzen, 2006: 344). Identities are composed and affected by internal and external structures (Wendt, 1999: 224). In other words, affected by the actor's own understanding of itself and how others perceive it. Moreover, identity and actor's interests are constituted in a process of interaction dependent on and built upon discourse (Wendt, 1999; Tannenwald, 2007; Lupovici, 2010). For its study in IR, it is considered a property of actors that generates motivations and behaviour (Wendt, 1999: 224), conditions their actions, and often explains them. For this reason, identity (and discourse) is a good explanatory factor to understand complex decision-taking, especially in relation to ontological security.

3.1.1. Role Identity

Identity comprises role identities, which consists in acting in a particular way to fulfil the expectations of the role the actor has been assigned (Stets & Burke; 2000: 226) or chosen for itself. This means interacting and negotiating with role partners, or manipulating the environment to manage the resources under the role's management (Stets & Burke; 2000: 226). which are often not sourced internally (beliefs, biases and perceptions) but also externally, with positions forced on actors by the representations of significant Others (Wendt, 1999: 228), enemies or allies (Karp, 2018). An example of this, is the 'forced' role by the rest of the members of the European Union upon Germany as a leader (Karp, 2018).

Conditioned by role identity is the actor's attachment to strategies that may affect its behaviour (Lupovici, 2010). By practising the strategy of deterrence, actors shape their own and others' perceptions of their role in the international arena (Lupovici, 2010), and thus build and reproduce expectations and a particular identity (ie: NATO as a deterrer), as well as link this identity to a state of ontological security. For social theory of deterrence, an actor's behaviour may be driven not only by strategy but also by the need to validate their identity. And what is more, the continued election of deterrence also validates the strategy on itself, as continuity is supposed to build credibility, and the basis of deterrence's effectiveness is credibility (Freedman, 2005). Not only this attachment is linked to the identity-making of the actors, but to the idea of deterrence itself: a big part of the credibility component is based in the continuity of the strategy (Freedman, 2005).

This idea is present in the theory as deterrence has been constituted into a form of strategic thinking tied to role identity that limits the election of other strategic alternatives. Additionally, internalised roles reflect aspects of an actor's sense of self that reflect and motivate behaviour (Mitzen, 2006). This happens as a result of internalisation of the discourse of deterrence among the political elites, the security establishment, and the public sphere (Lupovici, 2010) and thus results in the institutionalisation of the strategy (Vuori, 2016; Lupovici, 2018). When considering deterrence, this idea suggests that deterrence serves not only to deter an enemy, but also as a way of reproducing identity and alignment by reassuring allies and domestic audiences. This is particularly relevant among actors that have a role-identity in the basis of this strategy. In this sense, the choice for deterrence can be driven by identity concerns, not only to deter an enemy.

3.2 Ontological Security

This section explores ontological security theory, which explains how actors seek to maintain a sense of existential security and continuity in their identities. This concept connects with the previous section on identity and role-identity by exploring how they contribute to the construction and maintenance of ontological security. Furthermore, it relates to the ritual approach to deterrence by highlighting how deterrence practices can be understood not only as rational calculations but also as attempts to reinforce ontological security through the performance of rituals that affirm identity and belonging.

Ontological security consists on the security of the self, as opposed to physical security, which is the security of the 'body' (Mitzen, 2006: 344). It is the subjective sense of who the actor is, which enables and motivates its action and choices (Mitzen, 2006: 344). It entails maintaining a stable sense of self despite external challenges, avoiding the need to fundamentally reassess the 'self-narrative' (Mitzen, 2006). The aim is to reduce existential anxieties to a degree where they don't jeopardise their capacity to uphold this self-narrative.

Actors achieve their ontological security in two ways: first, by routinizing their relations with others (Mitzen, 2006: 342). And second, by choosing the course of actions most coherent with their sense of self (Steele, 2008: 526). Therefore, the actor's behaviour is in part motivated by the search of ontological security, and this is manifested in its actions and choices.

Unlike physical security ontological security is concerned with a secure identity and certainty about who the actor is, not to peace or absence of conflict. In fact, actors often perpetuate conflictual relations because it provides ontological security: there is certainty, continuity and stability in who they are when they are fighting, an adversarial ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological insecurity, on the contrary, refers to the state of not knowing what threats to confront or ignore, which incapacitates the actor to face dangers and thus renders it insecure (Mitzen, 2006; 345). The disruption of routines plays a key role in ontological security, as they often happen in crisis situations. However, it is also part of ontological security that actors can adapt to change without losing their stability, as change is part of the natural development of things (Mitzen, 2006: 350). For example, as it will be developed in the analysis, after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Nordic countries were unsure about the new reality (the continuity had been disrupted) and how to face it. In uncertainty, NATO’s role identity as a deterrer indicates that it needs to behave as such not only to communicate commitment to a challenger, but also to achieve certainty, continuity and stability with itself, as deterring is what NATO does: “I am, therefore I deter” (Mälksoo, 2020).

Ontological security is not only dependent on the self, but also on the environment, and therefore, the actor also needs to possess confidence and certainty about what surrounds it (Mitzen, 2006: 345-346). As such, external factors influence insecurity (physical and ontological) and also affect how actors connect to each other. To produce continuity and certainty within themselves, actors align with those that would bring them stability, which explains why shared values are such a key part of alliance cohesion. This is widely studied in alliance theories, but particularly is what Walt calls “Ideological Solidarity, Shared Identities and ‘Security Communities’”; consisting of actors who share common political values and objectives (Walt, 1997: 168-170). What is more, in the absence of other identity-signifiers like religion or nationalism (Kinnvall, 2004:763-764), alliances are especially dependent on continuity and shared ideals. This is very present in NATO’s discourse, where the construction of enemies is about ‘authoritarian regimes’ (as opposed to democracies, which is ‘us’) “that do not share our values and undermine the rules-based international order” (Bauer, 2022).

Ontological security theory explains how actors seek to maintain a stable sense of self despite external challenges, which in turn influences their actions and choices, including the choice for deterrence. This connection underscores the importance of understanding how ontological

security considerations shape decision-making processes within NATO, particularly in the context of deterrence strategies, as they strive to uphold a coherent sense of identity and stability amidst evolving geopolitical challenges. Additionally, the discussion emphasises the role of shared values and alliances in providing actors with continuity and certainty, further highlighting the relevance of ontological security considerations in shaping collective security practices like deterrence within NATO

3.2.1 Habit-driven actors and routinization

The way to reduce uncertainty is to produce routines which create trust (Gidens, 1991 as cited in Rosenau, 1986). This is routinization, a mechanism that generates basic trust by regularising social interactions (Mitzen, 2006: 346-347). This makes both the external world and the self (the actor) understandable, and thus, ontologically secure because it is not uncertain. In a way, ritual practices are part of this mechanism as well: without having to conduct the whole act, the symbolic action that conveys the act gives the audience the intended message, producing ontological security for the speaker and the receiver.

In line with this logic is the Habit-driven actors approach, which refers to actors who pursue goals and face challenges through habitual behaviours (Rosenau, 1986: 861-864). Their actions are inspired by a collective pool of habits formed from past experiences, cultural norms, memories, beliefs and role expectations (Rosenau, 1986: 861). This results in ‘habitual behaviour’, through which they respond to situations in a characteristic and repetitive way. Habit-driven behaviour is part of this routinization mechanism. My argument here is that deterrence is in a way reflexive, NATO deters—not only because NATO is— but also because NATO is used to. It is important to highlight that “the readiness to learn is part of an actor’s habit pool” (Rosenau, 1986: 864), which is why it is important to analyse behaviour, so actors can learn and adapt.

As such, the search of ontological security influences actors’ behaviour and choices by providing them with a subjective sense of self and certainty that has to be maintained in time, compelling them to act in ways that align with their perceived identity and to seek stability and continuity in their interactions. In this sense, it informs strategic choices such as the choice for deterrence as performing this strategy maintains both its sense of self (as a deterrer) and security in the physical sense as well.

3.3. Securitization

Finally, the last theoretical component of the analysis, is securitization theory, which has informed a great part of the social theory of deterrence (Lupovici 2016, 2018; Vuori, 2016), and it connects the theoretical discussion on rituals and identity with practical application. It highlights how rituals contribute to framing issues as security threats, mobilising support, and reinforcing collective values, deepening our understanding of the interplay between security, identity, and ritual in international politics.

Securitization is a discursive process in which a particular actor identifies a security threat which legitimises and justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle it (Buzan et al., 1998, 23-26). It can be of different natures (military, political, economic, environmental...), but ultimately, the justification of extraordinary measures is reserved for more immediate threats such as military and political, as they are more easily constructed as 'existential threats'. Through securitization, a referent object goes from non-politicized to politicised to securitized (Buzan et al., 1998). For example: cooperation in the Arctic prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was politicised as it was part of public policy, required government decision-making and allocation of resources; but after Russia's aggression it became securitized: now this space ceased to be suitable for collaboration and became a scenario of possible conflict in NATO borders and thus an existential threat requiring and justifying emergency measures. The issue is securitized only "if and when the audience accepts it as such" (Buzan et al., 1998: 25), which makes audiences an essential part of the analysis. For the purpose of this work, and as per Buzan et al., audience refers to those who receive and accept the designation of an existential threat, thereby legitimising emergency actions or special measures.

Securitization is achieved through securitizing moves and manifested through speech acts (Buzan et al., 1998: 25). It consists in a discursive process by which using speech acts takes politics beyond the established rules and re-frames the previous issue as a special kind of politics. Therefore, speech acts are the unit of measurement of securitization discourse: a chain of interconnected speech acts construct discourse. Analysing the speech acts used to construct the strategy of deterrence can be used to explain the communicative dynamisms involved in deterrent relationships, which in our case requires explaining why they are constructed.

The framework of analysis grounded in securitization theory provides a base through which we can study political moves via speech acts by focusing on: who (what actors) can deter (or emit these speech acts); through what (mainly, practices, and policies, but also object); for whom (what is being protected), why (intentions); with what kind of effects; and under what kind of conditions. The focus of this theory is not when and why deterrence succeeds but what deterrence does. It explores which kinds of logic rationales (Vuori, 2016) and narrative deterrentification speech produces, and it is widely used in the current 'fourth wave of deterrence'. This is relevant for my study because before understanding why the choice for deterrence has been made, it is fundamental to understand what it does, in this case, produce ontological security.

3.3.1. Deterrence as a practice of securitization

Securitization theories inform the social approach of deterrence by providing a nuanced and complete understanding of deterrence as a practice. It includes the analysis of material elements (hard power and violence), language (threats), and social attributes (identity and culture). Understanding deterrence as a speech act uttered with the aim of securitizing a specific issue is fundamental to understanding its strategic choice.

Deterrence discourse revolves around securitization. This is demonstrated when considering the audience dimension, as the same securitization move can be either deterrence, to a challenger, or assurance, to allies (Rapp Hooper, 2015: 128-129). First, if the audience is the opponent, the securitizing move is the deterrent threat that poses as a warning to the deterred: the retaliation that will follow their attack to the deterrer will be an existential threat to the opponent. Second, if the audience is the own domestic public and decision-maker elites of the deterrer actor(s): the general threat posed by the opponent is the existential threat, and the extraordinary measure is the threat of retaliation to the potential attacker. In both cases, deterrence is a securitizing move (Lupovici, 2018). Once the existential threat has been successfully constituted, emergency measures taken for the preservation of the actor's security are legitimised in defence of the political community (Lupovici, 2018). Therefore, understood as a securitization move, deterrence strategy does not require rationality, just a threat, and threats, as I have argued above, can be constructed through discourse. In the issue at hand, this means that the choice for deterrence might be explained if one understands the articulation of a deterrence strategy as a securitization move regardless of the material actions

actually taken or not. This emphasises the role of ritual practices which is present in discourse.

Additionally, the repetition of ambiguous phrases is a key element of ritual-like practices (Oren & Solomon, 2015). This characteristic can be seen in ritual discourses of securitization, where many voices joining in a chorus-like fashion to produce a repetitive, ritualised chant that characterises the threat, as exemplified for example in the case of the securitization of Iraq in US discourse (Oren & Solomon, 2015: 315-316).

Securitizing an issue is fundamental for constructing a deterrent message because it constitutes the threat. Deterrence can be effective with little or no rationality (Morgan, 2003), so both its choice and success have less to do with the rationality of its choice and more with the construction around its effectiveness in giving or providing security to the deterrer. In the right intersubjective context and carried out by an actor whose role identity depends on being a deterrer, deterrence is not so much of a choice but rather an ontological state of being. As Mälksoo puts it in the title of her work: “I am, therefore I deter”.

As an analytical framework, securitization theory deepens the understanding of deterrence practices by centering the study in the process, the evaluation of the normative aspect of the practice (Lupovici, 2018) and less on the outcomes. Moreover, regarding discourse, it provides the analytical tools to assess the level of threat, extraordinary measures taken, and the audiences of these securitization moves, all of which are important dimensions in the study of discourse.

In summary, critical security theories like securitization, ontological security and identity theories, provide valuable insights into actor decision-making and what explains it when classical theories of deterrence can not. They emphasise the social construction of security threats and the role of identity in addressing ontological security concerns and shaping actors' choices. Specifically, deterrence operates as a socially constructed practice, reinforcing identity and security. Ontological security-seeking, motivates actor's choices by providing a sense of self with which they have to align to increase certainty and continuity. As outlined, the interplay between security theories informs strategic decisions like the adoption of deterrence. These factors contribute to the framing of threats, the formulation of responses, the creation and maintenance of collective identity, and the motivation to make choices based in alignment with the given identity.

In this chapter, I delved into various aspects of deterrence theory, examining both classical and psychological approaches. Despite being widely used by the scholarship, these theories have not fully resolved certain critical issues that rational calculations can not explain on its own, like NATO's reflexive choice of deterrence in the Arctic, overlooking alternatives and lacking a clear argument for its suitability. To solve this puzzle I will use Mälksoo's ritual approach and assess its explanatory power, guided by the theories of identity and ontological security. Based on these theories, the ritual features of deterrence discourse I identified are ritual-characteristics (performative capacity, repetition of structures of meaning and vagueness and empty signifiers throughout four dimensions: audiences, rationalities, established consequences and interests) and concerns with identity and ontological security-seeking.

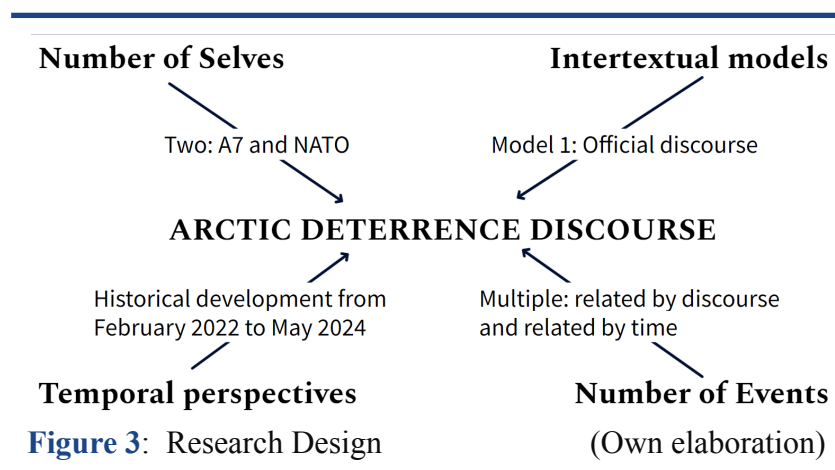
Chapter II: Research Design, Methodological Approach And Data Collection.

1. Research design

This study employs a single case study approach focused on the Arctic region. The case is the choice for deterrence in the Arctic, which leads to the research question: To what extent do the ritual features of deterrence discourse explain NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022?

The theoretical framework that the analysis will be based on is mainly built on Mälksoo's ritual approach, expanded by role-identity, ontological security and securitization theories. Based on them, the theoretical expectation is that NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022 can be explained by understanding deterrence as a ritual-like practice that produces ontological security and is manifested through ritual discourse with ritual features.

The research design follows Hansen's (2006) poststructuralist method based on a four-dimensional structure. The method focuses on Two Selves (A7 and NATO); the temporal perspective is composed by the historical development from the full-scale invasion to March 2024; the intertextual model I will use is the first model 'Official discourse', as deterrence discourse is solely articulated by experts, military and political elites; and finally for the number of events I will analyse multiple, related by event (discourse) and related by time.



1.1 Assessing the explanatory power of ritual-approach.

This single-case study will assess the explanatory power of Mälksoo's theory, aiming to see if with the considerations of ontological security theory and the ritual approach to deterrence, it can explain the choice for deterrence strategy in the Arctic. Single case studies are widely used in social sciences for their ability to develop and test complex theories using detailed

empirical evidence (Ulriksen & Dadalauri, 2016) and preferred among the scholarship to conduct trustworthy theory testing (Achen & Snidal, 1989). With this in mind, considering the specificity of the research question and the puzzle, a single-case study is the best choice to delve in deeply and properly assess the explanatory power of Mälksoo's approach.

Disciplined Interpretive Case Study (DICS) is used to test existing theories in new situations (Odell, 2001: 163), which is ideal to fulfil the needs of this study. This method requires the case selection to be done based on the intrinsic importance of a particular event, the analysis of which is valuable to interpret or explain using known theories (Odell, 2001: 163). Despite being speculative, the arguments produced in this analysis strengthen conclusions by assessing the theoretical applicability of the approach in question. The interpretative nature of DICS complements formal and statistical research (Odell, 2001: 164), making it suitable for filling a gap in the existing literature, as statistical research is what most of the deterrence scholarship amounts to. Thus, a DICS will allow me to assess the explanatory power of the theoretical ideas outlined in Chapter I, particularly the ritual approach to deterrence.

1.2 Case selection

The case focus of this study is the choice of deterrence by the A7 and NATO in the Arctic region. The Arctic presents a unique context where traditional notions of deterrence intersect with evolving geopolitical dynamics. From the perspective of conventional deterrence theory, which is historically known to exacerbate tensions and initiate security spirals, several factors make the A7 and NATO's adoption of deterrence in the Arctic a compelling subject for analysis. This includes the legal and geographical characteristics of the region, compromised by international waters that make it a buffer zone, whereas NATO typically applies deterrence strategies in terrestrial border zones like the Baltics and its eastern flank states, where territorial integrity is clearly at stake and red-lines can be easily established. Moreover, despite the difficulties, a deterrence strategy is in place and observable through discourse, which makes this case a good one to test if identity theory explains this behaviour, when rational theories leave questions unanswered. For one, the security dilemma and arms spiral at stake would make explaining this situation through a realistic lens difficult. By delving into the A7's choice of deterrence in the Arctic, this thesis explores the complex motivations behind this choice, which highlights the connection between identity, ritual, and strategic decision-making within the context of deterrence.

The Arctic is suitable to answer my research question because it is the scenario where the dynamics between NATO and Russia have changed most drastically: from a solid, unique case of international cooperation to a strong deterrence posture and militarization (Boulègue, 2019, 2022; Rumer et al., 2021; Friedman, 2021; Karis, 2022; Humpert, 2023). While the reason for militarization is quite clear (Russia's aggression to Ukraine), why, among all the choices deterrence has been the chosen strategy—particularly in such a vulnerable environment—is puzzling, and therefore studying it relevant.

Other cases which could be studied with this theoretical framework—and are currently being analysed by the 'RITUAL DETERRENCE' project by the University of Copenhagen—are NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Poland and the Baltic states, Extended Nuclear Deterrence or Cyber and Hybrid Deterrence. All these cases provide comprehensive insights into the multifaceted nature of deterrence and its implications for international security. Following their example, I have chosen the Arctic as a place of great geopolitical interest for NATO and where military interests have taken the front stage after decades of cooperation.

1.2.1. The case of the Arctic in the study of identity and ritualistic practices

The region's geographical characteristics make it a borderzone separated by—currently unnavigable waters—which creates an peculiar situation: neither a case of direct nor extended deterrence, but of something else. The aim of this deterrence can either be dissuading an attack to any of the A7, who all are members of NATO, and thus would be a case of direct deterrence; or dissuading an attack and annexation of international waters, that by definition are not the sovereign territory of any state, which situates them outside of the scope of direct deterrence, maybe in extended deterrence. This ambiguous setting makes it a good case to study how ritual practices are at play when material conditions are harder to display: both sides are forced to send messages and signals through deterrent symbols, because material displays, such as moving troops to the enemy's border, are more complex and costly to conduct. This is true not only in monetary terms, but also in terms of how the current situation of uncertainty regarding Russia makes it risky to make more 'aggressive' signalling because the line of what is a threat and what can be understood as an attack for Russia's current leadership is unclear at the moment.

Along the Pacific Coast and NATO's eastern flank, the Arctic, including Alaska, is the only other contiguous border with Russia, making it the perfect scenario to study deterrence.

Moreover, as a place where conflict has not broken out, without virtually no land or people to conquer in a traditional sense, the ritual and performative element are more likely to be present than in other situations. Like in cyber or space deterrence, material aspects take a second stage in this environment, where the ritualistic aspect of this strategy is more prevalent. This is a particularly good scenario to study the explanatory power of identity and ritual practices as the reasons that moved NATO's A7 for a deterrence strategy, that has not been analysed through this perspective in the literature.

As I have outlined in the research design, this study has two selves: the A7 and NATO. With Sweden's recent accession to the military organisation, all the A7 are now part of NATO, and the two discourses are pretty similar and more often than not coincide, specially from 2023 onwards. I have chosen to focus the analytical approach of this study in a single-case study (choice for deterrence in the Arctic) and group all the involved actors together as opposed to comparative because analysing each country differently would highlight the differences among them. By analysing them together as one case under the umbrella of the military organisation, I focus on the commonalities, interests and principles that inform their decision making process. For the detailed contrast of each position however, I do analyse different trends in narratives among different countries, but this is overall to reflect the general narrative of the two selves: A7 and NATO.

Assessing the explanatory power of Mälksoo ritual approach to deterrence in this context aligns with the aims of my study because I will analyse how and whether deterrence can be performative of deterrer identity and of ontological security, which would illustrate the features that explain its choice and answer the research question. The geographical conditions of the Arctic that make it a suitable case to study, presenting a buffer zone composed of international waters, an unique scenario to find ritual-characteristics as the options to materially carry out deterrence as a practice are reduced by the ice. Alternative cases, also suitable, are currently being studied (Ritual Deterrence, 2022).

1.3 Timeframe selection

The selected timeframe for this study starts from 24th February 2022, marked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, to the accession of Sweden to NATO the 7th of March 2024. This timeframe was chosen for its significance in understanding the evolution of attitudes and behaviours within the Arctic Council (previously A8, now A7) towards Russia, particularly in

the context of security and cooperation in the Arctic region, and thus explain the choice for deterrence.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represents a pivotal moment in IR, and particularly in the Arctic region, as it entailed the termination of cooperation between the A8. The aftermath of the full-scale invasion witnessed shifts in political discourse, strategic posturing, and alliance dynamics, with implications for Arctic governance and cooperation. Following this, the attitudes and behaviours of A7 towards Russia have undergone notable changes, reflecting broader geopolitical realities and strategic considerations.

By focusing on the post-2022 period, this study illustrates the factors contributing to the A7's adoption of a deterrence strategy in the Arctic. By examining recent developments, the analysis examines the drivers motivating and shaping the A7's deterrence approach and its implications for Arctic governance and cooperation. This timeframe allows for a targeted investigation into contemporary trends and dynamics, offering insights into the evolving nature of Arctic geopolitics, policies and the strategic behaviour of key actors.

2. Data analysis method - Critical Discourse Analysis

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Discourse is a fundamental aspect of the practice of deterrence (Dillon, 1989; Luke, 1989; Vuori, 2016; Lupovici, 2018; Mälksoo, 2020). This methodological choice responds to the research's needs to understand the intricacies of deterrence practices within the theoretical framework. My theoretical expectation is that NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022 can be explained by understanding deterrence as a ritual-like practice that produces ontological security and is manifested through ritual discourse with ritual features. Discourse analysis "illustrates how textual and social processes are intrinsically connected, and describes the implications of this connection for the way we think and act in the contemporary world" (George, 1994 as cited in Milliken, 1999). This method permits the delineation of how speech acts construct the social reality of deterrence as a ritual-like security practice. Moreover, the discourse productivity dimension highlights the importance of defining rationalities, speech act purposes, and expected impacts, a fundamental part of the analysis.

Studying how the speech acts fit in the particular system of signification of security will showcase the features of deterrence that make it a ritual discourse. Discourse understood as a structure of meaning-in-use requires analysing language practices (speech acts) to find out the structures of signification (Holzscheiter, 2013). To do so, DCA will be conducted in a combination of Fairclough's two level method and predicate analysis. Fairclough's methodology proposes two levels in which discourse functions: discourse as text and discourse as social practice. The first is 'description', analysing discourse as text—which will make up most of my analysis—and the second is 'interpretation', which contemplates discourse as social practice (Fairclough, 1992: 231).

To analyse the discourse as text, the aspects that will be dissected are wording (looking at the intertextual relations present in the text to construct its linguistic content, specifically for symbolism) and 'word meaning' (which allows the analysis of key terms of significance to the actors and audiences as well as the words "whose meanings are variable and changing", (Fairclough, 1992: 236-237) like empty signifiers. The analysis of discourse as a social practice will be mainly done when analysing the 'securitization' rationality, and with 'concerns with identity' feature. This detailed analysis of each argument used to securitize the threat showcases how deterrence discourse acts as a social practice.

This interpretative analysis uncovers how the speech act constructs the particular object it refers to. In the case at hand, predicate analysis can outline how the subject (NATO's and the A7) constructs its identity as a deterrer and the threat to a potential challenge through ritualistic speech acts that manifest in a deterrence strategy, which without a material use of force, deter. Deterrence is a successful message because all actors use and understand this structure of meaning, and can 'speak' on it.

Additionally, predicate analysis, often used for texts, diplomatic documents or transcripts, focusing on the verbs, adverbs and adjectives that attach to nouns (Milliken, 1999). The analysis of "predications" uncovers how the speech act constructs the particular object it refers to. In the case at hand, predicate analysis outlines how the subject (NATO's and the A7) construct their identity as a deterrer and the threat to a potential challenge through ritualistic speech acts that manifest in a deterrence strategy, which without a material use of force, deter. Deterrence is a successful construction because all actors use and understand this structure of meaning, and can 'speak' on it.

Chapter I portrays the productive capacity of discourse, and in particular of deterrence. The discourse productivity dimension is analysed in the rationalities of the speech act and expected impacts, and allows the identification of the main audiences, and thus, operationalising the practice, or a particular ‘regime of truth’(Milliken, 1999).

Conducting a single-case study through CDA is the best method to obtain a detailed and nuanced understanding of NATO’s choice for deterrence in the Arctic region. By employing a single-case study, I delve deeply into the specific context of the Arctic and examine NATO’s deterrence discourse to unveil all the ritual features within this unique geopolitical setting. CDA allows for a thorough examination of the discourse, identity, and ontological security-seeking, enabling an assessment of the motivations behind NATO and the A7’s choice. This approach ensures the solution of the puzzle and research question adequately.

2.2. Principles of data analysis - Features of Ritual Discourse

2.2.1. Ritual characteristics

To isolate from the general discourse those speech acts with ritual characteristics, I will focus in the structure and the construction of the statements to pinpoint repetition (Oren & Solomon, 2015), vagueness and the overall rationality behind each speech act: if the rationality of the speech act is motivated by physical security it often follows this structure: ‘identification of threat’ plus ‘what actions are done or will be done to counter it’; however, if the rationality is the search for ontological security, the structure is as it follows: ‘Identification/construction of threat (in vague ways)’ plus ‘Justification of some type of action or empty signifiers’, as explained in Table 2:

Table 2. Sentence structure in ritual discourse

Sentence structure	Discourse
Identification Threat	Description of actions to counter threat Rational calculation (Classic Deterrence)
Example:	
“Russia is setting up an Arctic command to protect the forces of the northern Fleet and serve its nuclear deterrent, launching a new Naval strategy last month, pledging to protect	“NATO and allies are conducting more and more Arctic and anti-submarine exercises (...) Last month, as part of exercise Arctic cooperation, NATO conducted an air operation partly over Norway (...) also investing in new fighter planes, maritime

Arctic Waters by all means including surveillance aircraft and vessels equipped to also operate in the Arctic region (...)" (C5)

Identification Threat +

- Diffuse audience
- Rationalities⁸
- Lack of specified consequences
- Vague interests

Ritual discourse

Example:

"We see growing Chinese efforts to control our critical infrastructure, supply chains and key industrial sectors." (SP4) >>>

"We share security interests and face the same challenges. We can and should tackle them together. To *defend freedom against oppression. Democracy against tyranny.* And to uphold the international rules based institutions that benefit *all of us*" (SP4).

Drawing from Mälksoo's typology of interaction ritual chains, the first feature of deterrence discourse is 'ritual characteristics'. These are found across four analytical dimensions (based in Dillon, 1989, Lupovici, 2018 and Mälksoo, 2020): Audience, Rationalities, Expected Impact and Specified Consequences, and Interests. Of which I will consider ritual characteristics: 'diffuse audience', speech acts that follow any of these rationalities (Posturing, Reassuring, Mediating ambiguity, and Securitization) with a particular structure, lack of discursive boundaries or specified consequences and vague mention of interest.

Table 3. Analysis of ritual characteristics

Dimensions analysed	Focus of analysis	ritual characteristics
Audience	Who is the audience? How many are addressed? Identification of opponent and ally	Not clear target Several/fragmented audiences Not consistent Vague in character
Rationalities	Defining the rational/motives behind each speech act	Specific sentence structure (Table 2) Posturing, Reassuring, Mediating ambiguity or Securitization
Expected Impact	Is it predictable?	Unclear consequences and lack of red-lines
Interests	Are they mentioned? How vague/ clear are they?	Vague, unclear interests

To study in depth the dimension of Audiences and determine whether it is diffuse or not, I will analyse Internal Audiences (with Domestic Audiences and Domestic Elites), and

⁸ Posturing, Reassuring, Mediating ambiguity and a Securitization, as explained in Table 3.

External Audiences (Western Countries, and the Challenger). For the dimension of rationalities I will follow Mälksoo's typology of political functions: Posturing (displaying deterrent intent and capability), Reasoning (legitimising the deployment of forces for the domestic audiences of the patron state and the collective actor as a whole), Reassuring (Solidarity exchange and generation; performing the alliance), Mediating ambiguity (Negotiating international order and the actor's identity, describing one's part in the deterrent act), and Signalling relevance and Soliciting solidarity. The last two, along with Reasoning, I group together as a 'Securitization' category. If the analysed speech act's rationality falls into any of these four categories I will interpret it as having ritual characteristics. Once the ritual-characteristics have been isolated, I will focus on four dimensions to analyse how these ritual characteristics manifest in deterrence strategy.

As for the last two, Expected Impact and Interests, both analyses are centred around the assessment of whether or not these dimensions are clearly portrayed in the discourse (as a rational calculation needs) or are depicted in a vague manner. While vagueness is not in itself a characteristic I identified from literature, I included it based on the idea of Empty Signifiers, which are a common and used concept in IR. An empty signifier—a term that lacks specific meaning but serves as a symbolic placeholder for individual interpretations like 'freedom'—functions as a blank canvas that allows audiences to associate their own meanings based on their perspectives or context. I interpret the use of empty signifiers in discourse as ritual-like because filling this blank canvas according to shared social understandings fits the definition of a ritual practice.

2.2.2. Concerns with identity

The second feature, 'concerns with identity' is composed by its two purposes: 'ontological security-seeking' assessed by the routinizing relations and choosing actions coherent with sense of self (Mitzen, 2006); and 'reinforcing identity', done through alignment between role-identity and discourse.

Following ontological security theory, to determine whether A7 and NATO are seeking ontological security through their discourse and strategic shifts, I will conduct a temporal analysis of discourse from 2022 to 2024. An evolution contrasting the situation in 2022 to 2024 would reveal changes in actions that I will interpret as actions seeking ontological security if these are routinised actions and/or and actions coherent with NATO's deterrer

self-image. Additionally, an increase in ontological security after the use of deterrent discourse would confirm the assumption that ritual discourses are adequate to address ontological insecurity.

Lastly, to assess ‘reinforcing of identity’, I will observe the alignment between the discourse and identity. Comparing NATO's deterrence discourse to the identity discourse of the A7, as it is identity concept it aims to reinforce, will reveal if they are aligned or not. Through CDA I will outline both NATO's current deterrent discourse to NATO's concept of deterrer, guided by its role-identity, and see if they are aligned. Through CDA I will identify its main elements, the topics of most relevance and characteristic and see how they make a feature of ritual discourse. This analysis will complete an exhaustive study of deterrence discourse through Fairclough's both description (in the analysis of ritual-characteristics) and interpretation, focusing on deterrence discourse as a social practice for how it constructs identity through a ritual-like practice.

3. Source Selection

For this research, the data set consists of 73 textual materials extracted from various sources, including transcripts of speeches and statements on the official website of the NATO and selected media outlets such as High North News that provide the official statements of the A7 representatives. To complete this overview, I also included the transcripts of expert conferences. These sources were chosen to capture a diverse range of speech acts related to NATO's activities, policies, and strategic narratives in the context of Arctic security and defence. The detailed outline of the sources is in Appendix I. Sources.

The sampling strategy combines systematic and purposive sampling techniques to ensure the inclusion of relevant and representative texts, due to the lack of a big quantity of available sources that spoke about Arctic issues and deterrence specifically. Despite this, the inclusion from a diverse array of sources, from media outlets to expert conferences of civil and military nature, ensured the mitigation of selection bias of texts that would confirm my expectations. Given the dynamic nature of online content, the sampling process involved periodic monitoring of the NATO official website and media outlets for new publications and updates. The following steps outline the sampling strategy:

The selection of sources: the primary source for official statements, press releases, and speeches about NATO's engagement in the Arctic region was the NATO official website. To

complement this, I also used High North News (a reliable independent media outlet specialising in Arctic affairs), and transcriptions of the two most important expert conferences in Arctic issues: Arctic Encounters and Arctic Circle Conferences, both with high-profile politicians and military profiles as speakers. The source selection was limited to publicly available data and originally or translated to English, but considering the Selves (NATO and the A7) the language does not affect the reliability.

The data collection encompasses various textual materials highly discursive in nature, including transcripts from 9 Conferences, 10 Speeches and 54 Statements, all delivered by high-profile political figures, diplomats, military personnel belonging to NATO or any of the A7, and experts in the field. Through regular monitoring of the NATO official website and High North News I identified relevant publications and updates pertaining to Arctic security and NATO's involvement in the region. The selection criteria involved a first search within their archives for texts containing keywords such as 'deterrence', 'Arctic', and 'High North' to ensure alignment with the study's focus. The same process was done for the transcriptions of conferences, which were included if they contained the keywords. Then, the texts were included in the dataset if they addressed topics relevant to NATO's activities, policies, strategic discourses, or mentions of deterrence in the Arctic region within the specified timeframe chosen for this study (from 2022 to 2024). This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of pertinent information for analysis.

The sample size was determined based on the available texts across the selected sources. It amounts to a total of 73 texts encompassing Conferences (C), Statements (ST), and Speeches (SP) articulated by NATO and A7 representatives.

To ensure the reliability of the data set, the main source is NATO's own page. The clear and simple approach for source selection, and detailed principles for analysis, despite interpretative nature, gives validity to the results.

Chapter III. Features Of Ritual Deterrence Discourse

1. Ritual characteristics in NATO's deterrence discourse.

This section looks for ritual characteristics in NATO's deterrence discourse by analysing the audience the message is relied to, the rationalities and purposes behind each speech act, the expected impact of the message and the protected interests, to see how and if the ritual characteristics are manifested in the discourse surrounding the deterrence strategy in the Arctic.

1.1. Audience

1.1.1. Internal Audience:

Starting with Domestic Audiences, the messages targeted to them are the most symbolic, albeit not the most common. The symbolic nature of the message can be seen from the uses of communicative strategies characteristic of symbolic: comparisons, antagonistic language, and emotive language. An example of all these being used at the same time is "To defend freedom against oppression. Democracy against tyranny" (SP1), a dichotomous comparison in a short phrase, with clear identification of 'us' and 'them'. The simpler, informal language in words like "We can and should *tackle* them together" (SP1) and "trying to *trample over* the global rules" (SP8). The emotive language used to invoke emotion can be seen in "radicalised regime with clear totalitarian features... waging a brutal war against a neighbouring country" (ST10) or "An attack on Norway is an attack on NATO – and it will *burn*" (ST45). Particularly when addressed to northamerican audiences, there is mention of specific States and cities (SP2,), something that is not done with european public. The use of names is highly symbolic as it connects audiences to a reality with just one word, and effectively links their, in this case, American identity, to the speech act in question. This is exemplary of ritual-characteristics insofar as it is a securitising move articulated by connecting audience to identity, not to a threat.

When addressed to Domestic Elites, the situation is different. This audience is mainly addressed in the analysed conferences, and it consists of experts, military personnel, policy makers and practitioners belonging to A7 but also allied countries (mainly the UK and France). The message is often addressed to "Northern Europe, the North Atlantic and the

NATO alliance” (C1). There are some differences between the message when addressed to European elites, where it seems more focused on raising political awareness (C4S3) or North American elites, more concerned about increasing spending and economic reasoning (C3S2).

This audience is addressed with the aim to convince them of the need to increase investment in Arctic Security (C3S2), and to communicate to their citizens that security of this region is their security, even if it seems like a distant place: “[We need to make people] understand that these are not Alaska's priorities these are priorities of this country as an Arctic Nation” (C3). When the speakers address the audience they refer to “the public of your nations” (C1S6) as they relay the message that will later be given to their domestic audiences.

For these reasons, the discourse often addressed to domestic elites lacks ritual components, and it is more specific and does not fulfil the ‘vagueness’ requirement to be considered ritual-like. It aims to convince, especially during 2022, of the need to increase investment.

1.1.2. External Audiences

The discourse targeting Western Countries employs a symbolic narrative, emphasising the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them' and invoking shared values and identities. References to 'Allies' and 'like-minded' nations (C2S2, C2S3 ST1, ST10 ST13) underscore a collective approach to addressing challenges, rooted in shared democratic principles and a commitment to peace and the rule-based international order (C2S3, CSC5, C7, C8, SP6, SP2). This discourse highlights democracy as a fundamental value, intrinsic to both NATO's mission and the broader identity of Western nations: "That is what democracies are about... that is what NATO is about" (SP5). The concept of 'us' extends beyond the A7 group to encompass NATO members (C2S3, SP8, ST37), European allies (S38), and democratic regimes worldwide (C2S3, SP6, ST53S2). This messaging serves to reinforce a sense of unity and solidarity among Western nations, framing security challenges in terms of shared values and strategic interests.

Finally, regarding the Challenger(s), despite how this should be the most clear audience—considering I am dealing with a deterrence message, and who the message is directed to (challenger), is the most basic factor that composes deterrence—this was surprisingly the least clear audience.

On the one hand, Russia was clearly addressed. In terms of responsibility, always characterised as the initiator (which in deterrence theory would be considered ‘challenger’, situating NATO as the ‘defender’). In terms of temporality, Russia is considered a short-term (C3S4, SP1) and imminent, “our most significant and direct threat” (C5). In spatial terms, Russia is often characterised, specifically when the Nordics are the speakers, as ‘the Arctic neighbour’ or the ‘neighbour’ (C8, ST1, ST15), emphasising physical proximity. In terms of regime type, as an authoritarian or totalitarian regime that violates human rights, sovereignty and International Law (hereby IL) and rule-based order (C5, SP1, SP3, SP7S1, SP7S2, SP6, ST27S4). It is not always ambiguous, such as during the Munich Security Conference of 2024 (C10) where it is clearly addressed to Russian audiences; or the Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Kultaranta talks (SP3), which can be found in NATO’s official page translated in Russian, unlike the majority of the transcriptions.

China, on the other hand, is not so clear. It is mentioned in almost all analysed speech acts, and often paired up with Russia (which is a clear Other, and enemy) as another hostile regime, both “malign foreign actors” (SP1). It is also referred to as a challenge (to NATO security and western values and interests), but not a threat (SP6, ST30), and sometimes even less than that: “some of this may be simple opportunism...” (C6S1). It is explicitly underscored that China is not NATO’s adversary (SP6, SP3). From these statements it seems that NATO does not seek confrontation with China and that is what defines the ‘adversary’: one against which NATO seeks confrontation. It is clearly stated however, that should the situation change (on China’s side) then its status as ‘not-adversary’ will change, for example as a consequence of growing assertiveness and coercive policies (SP6). Simultaneously, it is also considered an emerging challenge (SP1), “long-term threat” (C3S4, SP1), and another “authoritarian regime that does not share our values and undermines the rules-based international order” (C5) that threatens western security in its efforts to control critical infrastructure, supply chains and resources (SP2). Moreover, the signed joint-declaration of “partnership between Russia and China without limits” (SP1) and Chinese and Russian vessels navigating the Arctic together, positions Russia next to China discursively as partners (SP1, SP6, ST37, ST39). Not only them separately, but the partnership itself is presented as a challenge to the West, particularly as together their military presence in the Arctic grows (ST37). Among the different actors that create the overall discourse, the narrative of China as a challenge and not threat, is slightly more prominent than the other. This contradicts NATO’s

official posture, as seen by the fact that more often than not they are both addressed together, and spoken about next to each other.

What is clear is that the Other is always characterised as those who do not share western values (C5, C7, SP3, SP5), and this sentence is often accompanied with 'authoritarian regimes' characterised by the fact that they 'undermine rule-based international order' (C5, SP3, SP2).

The fact that speeches regarding NATO deterrence often target multiple audiences rather than directly addressing the challenger reflects a ritualistic aspect of NATO deterrence discourse. A clear, directed message is fundamental for clarity and correct understanding by the receptor of the message, but given there are several potential receptors (audiences) this deterrent message demonstrates ritual characteristics. Rational deterrence theory is based on the idea of rational calculations to make decisions. If the recipient of the message is unable to identify who the speaker wanted to address this calculation can not be made in the first place, as the challenger might not even know they are supposed to make a calculation. An example of this is the Spanish-American War of 1898, in which the Spanish did not even notice the US attempts to deter them. In this sense, a deterrent message with multiple audiences would not serve for a 'rational calculation'. However, it still has symbolic power and effects, as the message is put in the general discourse, the challenger and other actors can still receive it, and act accordingly. Following the Spanish-American War example, the US's efforts to deter Spain were still received by US citizens and created the perception of the conflict as an important endeavour and of Spain as an adversary generates a sense of identity and an 'us' versus 'them' dynamic.

The message is not productive of security because it is addressed to the challenger (Russia, and maybe China) but simply because it is being 'consumed' by the Self: by performing the speech act the feeling of security is produced. Otherwise, it would directly be addressed to the challenger, creating a directional relation. In the first example in Figure 4, the only thing a message from defender to challenger can be is a deterrent message; however, in the second, the same message by the same defender can be many things (deterrence to the challenger, agenda-setting to the elites or the domestic audiences, reassurance to the allies) but the message on itself becomes the focus: the articulation of the message is what produces security, not its content. This is one characteristic of ritual discourse.

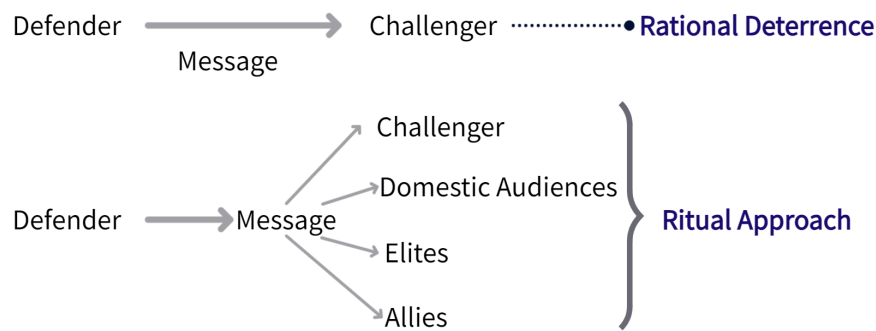


Figure 4: Diffuse targeting

(Own elaboration)

Save for the case of the discourse targeted to domestic elites, the examination of A7 and NATO's deterrence discourse in the Arctic context reveals ritual characteristics in the dimension of audience targeting. Unlike traditional deterrence that emphasises a clear, directed message from defender to challenger, NATO's discourse is directed to multiple audiences, each with its own interpretations and responses. This multiplicity dilutes the clarity of the message, rendering it more symbolic and ritualistic in nature. Nevertheless, despite its lack of direct productivity in altering the behaviour of specific adversaries—as it hinders the capacity to do rational calculations—the articulation of the deterrence message itself contributes to a sense of security by engaging various audiences and shaping perceptions of threat and response.

In conclusion, without a clear receptor, or with a receptor whose status as adversary or level of threat is not agreed upon by the deterrers, deterrence displays ritual characteristics. Considering this is the dominant discourse related to Arctic security, deterrence discourse manifests ritual characteristics in the Audience dimension.

1.2. Rationalities

Following Mälksoo's typology, I analyse the texts to find if they follow the structure of ritual-discourse, a habit-driven motivation, and one of the five possible political functions: Posturing, Reassuring, Mediating ambiguity, and Securitization.

1.2.1. Posturing

Posturing can be mainly identified in the military exercises: Arctic Edge 2022, Cold Response 2022, Northern Strike, Arctic Challenge 2023, and the Nordic Response exercise of

Stead Defender, the most relevant military movements due to the level of cooperation demonstrated. Among the rest of the sources, there are also speech acts with this rationality, especially those that highlight that the way to face the threats in the Arctic is through Allied presence (C10, ST1). NATO's message has to clearly posture its resolve to respond to "any attack on one Ally" (C10). Posturing in this sense, covers the most basic principles of deterrence: display intent and capability, and reaffirm NATO's identity as a deterrer: "[This] exercise is not only a great success but also proof of the alliance's dedication to deterrence and to defend ourselves" (ST49). The communicated intent is the resolve to respond to a direct attack, and the demonstration of capability is displayed in the military movements, the increase in investment and the better equipment (C10, C5, SP5, ST1, ST7S3, ST8, ST22, ST34, ST39).

While this on itself can perfectly fit into rational deterrence discourse, it is often followed by sentences like: "with strength and unity, we will continue to deter aggression, protect our values and interests and keep our people safe" (C5) which are vague goals expressed through empty signifiers like strength and unity. Additionally, the structure I outlined previously as illustrative of ritual-characteristics: identification of threat plus posturing (in vague terms) is observed through the sources⁹:

"There is no decline in activity in the Russian Arctic despite the war in Ukraine." and "We work closely with our allies and partners while developing the strategy. It is critical that we have alignment with them, and a strategic focus is on how we collectively can use joint presence to ensure stability. It is crucial that we align with our combatant commands. A major coordination process is now taking place" (S29).

Most of the analysed speech acts follow the structure of identification of threat in clear terms, followed by a long statement that talks about cooperation, 'alignment', 'joint presence' and 'stability'. In this case, these words work as empty signifiers, as the lack of specificity in what they exactly mean—despite clarity being one of the theoretical requirements of a rational deterrence message—makes them just a sequence of nouns that put together equal

⁹ All analysed sources (99) have statements following this logic except for C1S7, C5, ST11, ST21 and ST44. ST48.

deterrence. Alternatively, a precise statement would define clearly what is being done to counter the threat¹⁰.

Despite its vagueness it delivers the message: ‘do not attack, we are committed and coordinated to respond’. Moreover, despite the vagueness not being suitable for the mechanics of rational deterrence, it still serves the purpose of creating an unified identity.

In ritual deterrence discourse is the posture that produces the feeling of security: “the purpose of NATO is to prevent war, is to preserve peace (...) and we have done so successfully for decades. Because our deterrence is credible” (SP9), not the message.

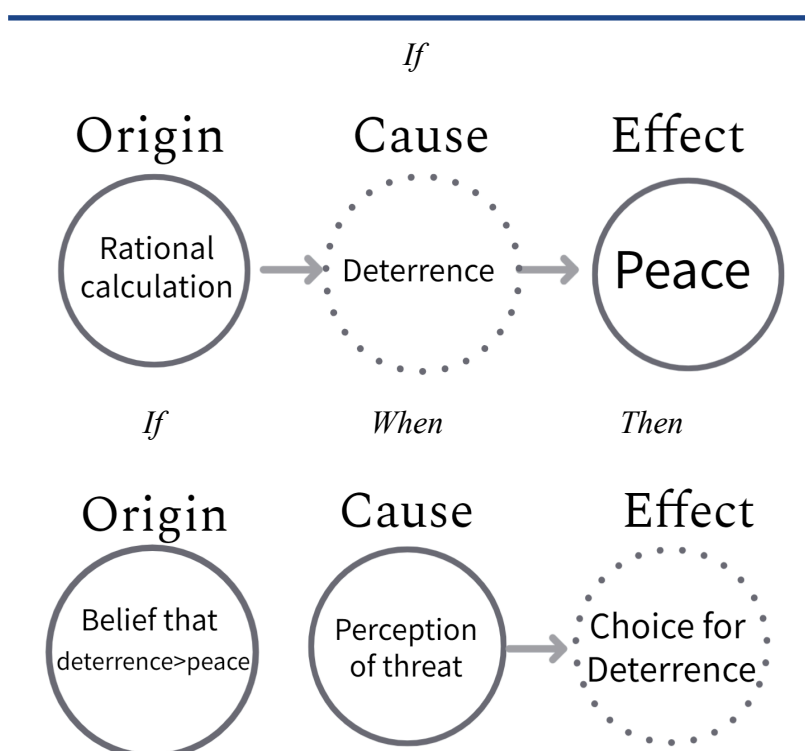


Figure 5 : Logic of ritual-like practice (Own Elaboration)

When using this particular argument, it is not that after a rational calculation the decision-makers conclude that the best strategy is deterrence, but that the actors who make these decisions are already convinced that what has sustained peace (absence of conflict) for 75 years is the articulation of a deterrent strategy, in a clear example of habit-driven behaviour.

¹⁰ “NATO and allies are conducting more and more Arctic and anti-submarine exercises (...). Last month, as part of exercise Arctic cooperation, NATO conducted an air operation partly over Norway (...) also investing in new fighter planes, maritime surveillance aircraft and vessels equipped to also operate in the Arctic region (...)” C6S1

However, that peace exists because the discourse has constructed a reality in which when using deterrence (in theory) there is never war. In this sense, the repeated articulation of this narrative, creates its confirmation, even if it's hypothetical, and serves as a ritual-like practice that reinforces the existing belief in deterrence. Thus the ritual practice of bringing up a shared symbolic reality (a conflict with NATO) as a possibility, is what creates the effectiveness of the discourse of deterrence. In other words, deterrence is not a direct cause of peace, but peace is a product of the shared belief in deterrence's effectiveness, which has been reinforced through the repetition and ritualization of the narrative over time.

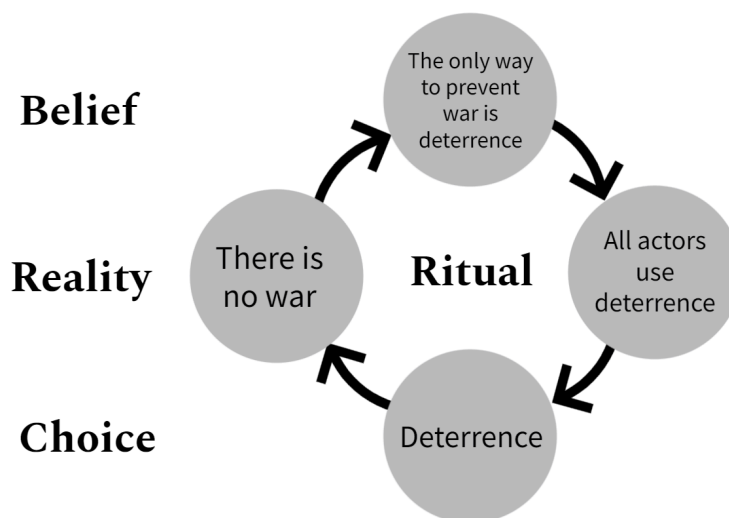


Figure 6: Ritual Approach circular dynamic (Own elaboration)

This representation of the circular dynamic demonstrates that understanding deterrence as a ritual-like practice, encompassing both of ritual-practice essential elements: symbolic activity and social understanding. Firstly, deterrence involves actions with meaning that transcends its literary meaning (and has made meaning through ritual), such as military posturing and public statements, which are designed to convey the message ‘do not attack’. This meaning derives from the beliefs, biases, estimations and threat perception that inform actors, not from a rational calculation, as proposed by the psychological model outlined in Chapter I. Secondly, these actions are embedded within a shared social context where both the actor and the audiences understand the significance of these deterrent signals. Therefore, the combination of symbolic gestures and a socially constructed understanding of their significance establishes deterrence as a ritual-like practice.

1.2.2.Reassuring

This purpose is included because, a direct threat from Norway, for example, even if it would follow a perfect rational deterrence structure (directly addressed to the challenger, specified actions and interests, high credibility...) by being articulated will symbolically reassure Norways' allies. Speech acts with these purposes effectively perform the ritual characteristics of deterrence discourse: they pose a threat to others, not necessarily threatening the adversary, but rather reassuring allies who share a common understanding of the constructed reality.

The argument of this rationality is that “as long as we convey that message, clearly to Moscow, no Ally will be attacked” (C10). A clear deterrent message is fundamental to maintain security, but it is clarity of the message (not to attack) that will produce security. This message is short, clear, and repeated: “[We want to] send an important message: NATO is here. NATO is vigilant. And NATO is ready to defend every inch of Allied territory” (SP2). This underscores the idea that the Arctic is NATO territory, especially after March 2024, when every A7 is a member of the alliance, and any aggressive movement in Arctic territory would trigger the response of NATO (SP9).

The articulation of this message is not only that NATO is present, but that NATO is strong: “NATO has been able to prevent a military attack against any NATO Ally for 75 years”(SP9). This strength originates from the ability to communicate commitment and resolve, as it is the very basis of NATO's identity. Unity is fundamental to maintain this security: “as long as we stand behind that message, together, we prevent any military attack on any Ally” (SP9). This is a message reassuring (to allies) but also communicates to the challenger that NATO wishes to prevent war, as it is its purpose, but will respond if provoked. This is the essence of a deterrent message, but it is ritual-like: the consequences of trespassing these limits (that the audience is left to interpret is any attack, in any “inch” of allied territory) its war, another big, powerful word with too many possible meanings to be considered precise. This practice reproduces the idea of a conflict, that as the own quote expresses, has never happened: “*NATO has been able to prevent a military attack against any NATO Ally for 75 years*”. No challenger knows what a NATO response even looks like, they can only guide themselves by NATO's practice exercises, but the articulation of the threat is enough on itself—as a ritual characteristic—to prevent the attack.

Another argument used for this rationality is the evocation of ‘cooperation’, ‘partnership’ and ‘unity’, concepts that are repeated and spread throughout the discourse, that in reality are

empty signifiers: they lack a clear meaning and can be filled with whatever the audience wishes to understand. Unity is shown in tight cooperation and dialogue, which is manifested, for example, in the increased number of meetings among the Scandinavian countries' presidents to discuss how to protect their security, integrity and sovereignty together (SP2). Unity is particularly important among the Nordic countries, whose closeness to the threats has forced them to be together for survival, or as registered: "For us Nordics [sticking together] should be a natural instinct" (SP6). They have implemented this rationality in their discourse more than any other A7, building up their trust through cooperation, based on shared values, but especially security interests (ST5S1, ST24S1, ST40, ST53S2). Unlike other A7, the Scandinavian countries are the closest to Russia and the ones that have changed their discourse the most drastically. While still focusing on cooperation as they did when that was the priority in the High North, now the cooperation is tight between them, in a reassuring posture to each other that is especially visible in the speech acts of the Norwegian, the Finnish, and to a lesser degree the Swedish President. This unity is materialised in defence plans like 'Vision 2030' that aims to enhance deterrence posture in the Nordic region and the Euro-Atlantic area (ST24S2, ST30).

Cooperation discursively ranges from resource sharing to joint drills. Despite their distinctions, they're regarded similarly to collaboration, a word with powerful symbolism in itself. The main aim of this rationality is to build trust among participants and allies, and this is articulated in the discourse:

"The value of the partnership that we have here in Alaska across the United states and really across the world (...) allows us to operate in the Arctic and support our partners (...) training and exercising with those partners and building those intra military links. (...) Partnerships are absolutely key to maintaining security in the Arctic region (...) that's the only way we see that we can operate (...) by creating a collective goal of maintaining peace, stability and constructive cooperation for an opening Arctic" (C1S3).

Values are one of the things at threat, but rather than articulate this as a security challenge it is portrayed as a source of strength: "our strength is derived not just from our knowledge or capabilities... but from the values we swear to protect. It's not just about what we can do... it's about who we are" (SP3). These values are a source of identity, and therefore their protection is fundamental to maintain NATO's and A7's identity secure. The centrality of

these types of arguments—which are the most symbolic and where solidarity is exchanged and generated—underscores the concern with identity in this dimension and how this is such a prominent feature of deterrence ritual discourse.

1.2.3. Mediating Ambiguity

This type of rationality works for allies and adversaries equally. In this sense it is similar to posturing, but focused on negotiating international order and the actor's identity, describing one's part in the deterrent act (Mälksoo, 2020). The principal problem for this category of rationality is something that one of the analysed speech acts underscores and one of my main arguments: "We talk a lot about Russia's violations of IL or unacceptable behaviour but rarely go into what the specific violations or unacceptable actions are – and what the specific sanctions for these are" and "Sometimes, there is value in strategic ambiguity, but I don't think that is the case in the Arctic" (ST33). When the deterrent discourse is not clear it is not possible to successfully mediate ambiguity, and in fact, the discourse is fragmented, and contradictory at times. Not only that, but among the A7, how to conduct deterrence in lieu of other strategies like assurance, there was not an agreement:

"With the Finns and eventually also the Swedes in NATO, it could also be a Nordic matter to discuss what to do in relation to this. It would be beneficial if we were not only in agreement about, for example, how large our air capacities are, but also how we can, to the best possible extent, conduct reassurance and avoid ending up in a war situation" (ST22).

Another 'ambiguous' point that these discourse dismisses is the notion that the Arctic is ungoverned, especially as a result of the changed situation regarding the Arctic Council and its consequences for Arctic governance. This discourse aims to underscore that the region is protected by IL and international frameworks, that also allow NATO to increase its presence and justify its enlargement (C8).

That being said, in this category the portrayed message, with the intention to clearly establish NATO's role in this geopolitical situation, is that deterrence is the first priority for NATO in the Arctic—substituting cooperation, the previous priority of the A7—with the intention to ensure that there is no conflict: "First, we must ensure robust deterrence. Not to start wars. But to prevent them. And preserve peace. Any sign of wavering or weakness on our part will invite challenges from those who wish us harm" (SP1). With this firm idea, that NATO does

not produce wars but prevents them, the deterrence discourse is reinforced and aims to reassure that deterrence will not be the cause of escalation. While it is a risk and therefore a threat, the responsibility of the escalation falls in Russia and the A7 and NATO discourse is very clear that “If we stay within the limits of IL and a rule-based world order, we cannot see that it is a provocation” (ST27S4).

These messages aim to communicate NATO’s resolve and dissipate any doubts about commitment by clarifying how NATO is facing this challenge: "From the Arctic to the Tropic of Cancer, from Florida to Finnmark, from seabed to space, you are providing critical leadership across the transatlantic region" (ST2). This is done through descriptions of the specific measures being taken through a wide range of initiatives in the Arctic, with the aim of strengthening domain awareness, surveillance, command and control capabilities, among others (ST1, ST3, ST17, ST21, ST28, ST49). It is these actions that provide the deterrent discourse with something fundamental for credibility and mediating ambiguity: coherence and continuity (ST17).

All this being said, the analysis of this category reveals that there are diverse narratives sometimes competing. The most obvious contradiction is the idea of ‘High North Low Tension’ of promoting the Arctic as a "peaceful, low conflict prosperous and Cooperative (...) geopolitical environment" (C2), versus the idea of the Arctic as an theatre of adversarial powers competing for resources and increasing their military presence—as seen for example in the reopening of Cold War era bases and the increase in their arctic capabilities—and consequential increase tensions (C2S2, ST7S1), as a result of deterioration of relations between the West and Russia. These contradicting statements fail to mediate ambiguity because they create more confusion.

It is also worth mentioning, however, that the tone changes over time and depending on the audience. For example, in the Arctic Encounters Conference of 2022, ‘securitization’ of an imminent threat was the principal rationality, but in 2023, the central message is that despite Russia's increasing military presence in the Arctic, the chances of conflict are low and the possibility of escalation is unlikely (C2S2, C4S3). These statements consider the “increased risk of spillover” (C2S2), but overall, this type of discourse with an emphasis on the conflict being improbable, in fact, de-securitizes the issue as the level of threat and threat perceptions are reduced. In this sense, these contradictory narratives, even though they do help negotiate international order and the actor’s identity, do not really mediate ambiguity. Moreover, all

throughout the discourse and without differentiation in speaker or audience, ‘defence’ and ‘deterrence’ are very often used interchangeably. This suggests again that it is not the clear action on itself that matters, but the message it transmits, which is one more characteristic of deterrence as a ritual-like practice.

1.2.4. Securitization

Securitization, as explained in the theoretical chapter, reflects the perceived level of threat the speakers have over a certain issue. To analyse it, I grouped under this concept Mälksoo’s Reasoning, Signalling relevance and Soliciting solidarity. Due to the amount of arguments and types of securitization moves used in this rationality category, I have divided them in four categories:

A. Global relevance of the Arctic

The first point of characterising the threat is to demonstrate why the region is relevant. Many of the analysed speech acts focused on importance by stating that the Arctic is not an isolated space (C1) ungoverned, and “up for grabs” (C8), but an object of increasing interest (ST1). This argument is often followed by mentions of the region’s strategic importance (mentioned 25 times). This global relevance motivates extraordinary measures like increasing investment to improve infrastructure and domain awareness (C1S6, ST1), and the necessity to update the approach in the region “to new geopolitical realities” (C6S1) and overall strategy with “enhance commitment” and positioning (with presence) the A7 to “both effectively compete and manage tensions it aims to deter threats” (C6S1). This securitization move has three main points:

- a. Geographical relevance of the Arctic—and the A7—to European security and western security (C1S7, ST18), a critical place to the defence of NATO territory (S19), and for transit for allied support and military staging, like the Svalbard archipelago (ST22). This idea confronts the general understanding that it is a remote place and breaches the geographical distance by bringing it closer to the everyday discussion of security.
- b. Strategic relevance (ST3S1): “The Arctic has also always had a strategic relevance for NATO: It hosts vital trade and communications links between North America and Europe” (SP3), especially in a rapidly changing international order with actors with potentially nefarious intentions (ST1, ST17). Moreover, “the melting ice in the Arctic is

creating new sea routes that would facilitate the movement of large vessels and shorten navigation times.” (ST17).

- c. The risk of escalation in a vulnerable region (C8, SP3, ST12 ST46S1) is on itself presented as a risk as well:

“One risk is the militarization of the Arctic and everything that comes with that. But the second risk that I see is the militarization of our mindsets, in a sense that we lose the ability to see everything which is outside the domain of military security” (C8).

B. Level of threat

“We are currently facing the most serious security policy situation in decades” (ST7S1) and the A7 and NATO need to stay vigilant (SP5, ST1, ST7S1, ST10, ST17, ST29). This securitization move has four main points:

- a. Russia itself as a threat, which justifies the use of any measure. As western countries have collectively lost confidence that Russia can be trusted militarily (ST19), everywhere Russia is military, is insecure. This argument is not stating that the Arctic space has to be securitized, but that anything related to Russia must be, and anywhere Russia is present, by default, is in danger. These arguments describe Russian military capabilities and increased investment and overall presence and involvement in the Arctic (C1S7, C2S4, C6, SP3). The most threatening characteristic of Russia is its behaviour, erratic and increasingly aggressive and under ‘radical leadership’, threatening because it is unpredictable (C2S2, C5, C8, SP8, ST12, ST50). This makes, first, calculations to counter its behaviour very difficult and incomplete; but also the aim of rational deterrence impossible: one can not deter an irrational actor¹¹ with rationality.
- b. Ruso-sino partnership in the Arctic Region (SP6, SP3, SP5, ST17, ST18, ST22, ST30, ST39, ST46S1). China also “has shown its eagerness to gain a toehold in the Arctic” (C6S1) and is “substantially building up its military forces, including nuclear weapons, without any transparency” (SP6). Their combined presence in the region threatens A7’s independence and security (SP1, SP8, ST34)—referring to Russia’s aggressive behaviour and China’s tentatives in Taiwan—highlights Western countries’ need for a different strategy of collective defence (SP8).

¹¹ At least from western countries’ perspective.

- c. Russia's interests in the Arctic and posturing to remain a 'dominant actor' (ST21, ST23, ST30, ST34, ST46S1). This has resulted in the militarization of the region, as shown in the rapid increase of military exercises in the Arctic on the Russian side but also NATO's (C4, C8, SP3, ST30, ST46S1). This argument constructs the Russian threat in the Arctic specifically, highlighting the increased development and spending, the temporal advantage it seemingly gives Russia compared to NATO and the A7, and how this demonstrates intent of making the "Arctic serve militarily and operationally as a strategic Bastion for its deterrence and defence" (C5). An example of this being the creation of the Northern Fleet and New Naval Strategy released, "pledging to protect Arctic Waters by all means" (C5) or the testing of new weapon systems in A7's immediate areas (C6, ST46). This perception of threat is enhanced by the fact that the military buildup in the region continues despite their losses in Ukraine, which shows that Russia puts significant importance in the Arctic (C8, ST29).
- d. Lack of preparedness of the A7 as a source of insecurity. Reflected in the need to make concessions as extraordinary measures to face this threat (ST18, ST22, ST23, ST27S1). There is a difference in how 'readiness' (used when NATO or the A7 state they have the military capabilities and resources) is used as opposed to 'preparedness' (when they refer to the lack of capabilities and resources). Lack of preparedness (particularly those NATO members that did not meet the 2% budget commitment) has political consequences for NATO as it is one of the main arguments for US leaving the alliance, one of the most recent shifts in discourse during 2024. This category also includes the lack of concrete limits of what "violations or unacceptable actions are, and what the specific sanctions for these are" (ST33). In this sense, it is not only lack of preparedness in materials terms, but also in this lack of clarity about boundaries, discursive and objectively.

C. Other

Finally, the threat of 'western values' are focused on "what is worth fighting for" (C7), including freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law (C7, SP5, ST8, ST12, ST23). This type of argument for securitization, while referring to an immaterial threat (the loss of values), signals relevance. It illustrates what is at stake, "what is worth fighting for" and solicits solidarity with the cause, which demands to remain united and continue to fight for these values, as they are what is most important (C7, ST23). The language used in these speech acts carries a poetic and literary quality, reflected in the deliberate choice to evoke

emotional responses and solidarity by appealing to values (ST23). There are also some historical analogies, mainly present in references to the Cold War or World War II (C1S7, ST12) which connect the audiences to threatening situations they know. Additionally, climate change, environmental protection and the fragility of the region, are ideas that are brought up sometimes (SP3, ST1, ST17, ST27S1, ST31), but occupy a marginal space of the discourse.

In conclusion, this analysis shows that even in those speech acts where there were some classical deterrence elements (C1S7, SP1, SP3, and ST44) ritual elements could be found and prevailed in the 'securitization' rationality. Almost no speech act followed the structure that would respond to a rational deterrence elaborated message, and even in those cases, they would still fit as a ritual-like practice, as they reproduce the other two identified ritual characteristics: vagueness, habit-driven behaviour.

Overall, the ritual-like nature of NATO's deterrence discourse in the Arctic is characterised by the repetition and reinforcement of key messages, despite some ambiguity and contradictions. While specific consequences for aggression may not always be articulated, the performative effects of these speech acts play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of security and stability in the region. All these are rationalities that display the sought structure; repetition of arguments, which in this case serves to increase the level of threat; and also showcase the importance of values and often rely on empty signifiers, demonstrating ritual characteristics.

1.3. Expected Impact and specified consequences

If a deterrent message has been formulated following a rational calculation, the impact this message has on its target audience (the challenger) should be also possible to calculate, as it should be a logical sequence of cost-benefit calculations. However, considering the analysed corpus of 73 texts, most of these speech acts were not even addressed at Russia or China, and therefore the predicted impact was unmeasurable. From statements like "We share security interests and face the same challenges. We can and should tackle them together. To defend freedom against oppression. Democracy against tyranny" (SP2), while the intent is clear as a threat, the possible response from Russia or China after receiving this message is not clear.

The logic of deterrence is that the defender tells the challenger what it ought not to do to not be attacked, it sets red lines and boundaries that should they be crossed by the challenger, would trigger a response by the defender. Most of the speech acts do not set these red-lines, and they do not tell, in regards to the Arctic, what would trigger a response from the Alliance.

These speech acts simply relay the information of strong commitment to the defence of the Arctic should it be attacked, without specifying what shape that defence would take nor what NATO or the A7 would consider an attack on their Arctic territory. As such, it is too vague to follow the rules of rational calculations—as calculations are impossible without clarity and complete information—but it does still relay the core message of deterrence: do not attack. What, where and how not to attack, these are questions of rational deterrence, which allow for rational calculation both of the challenger and the defender. In this sense, the impossibility of determining the impact on the challenger, or in other words, the lack of specified consequences should the challenger attack (or the alternatives it has to attacking, for the matter) is the most prevalent characteristic of deterrent ritual discourse in the Arctic. It is a speech act articulated simply for the performative effects produced by its articulation, not because of the content of its message.

This, in fact, is one of the main points made by Michael Peterson, lecturer for the US Naval College:

“In the West, we talk a lot about Russia's violations of IL or unacceptable behaviour but rarely go into what the specific violations or unacceptable actions are – and what the specific sanctions for these are. Right now, it is unstructured (...) But the clearer we can be, the more we can strengthen stability – especially in the Arctic. And that is a critical point.” (ST33)

In conclusion, when considering the ‘expected impacts and consequences’ dimension, NATO's deterrence strategy in the Arctic context exhibits ritual characteristics due to its performative power despite the lack of specificity and clarity in setting red lines and consequences for potential challengers like Russia or China. While the intent to deter aggression is clear, most speech acts fail to outline clear boundaries or triggers for a response from NATO or Arctic countries, however the message remains effective in its productive capability, as it still reproduces a shared reality (deterrence) in a ritual-like practice. Instead, they emphasise a general commitment to defence without specifying what actions would constitute an attack or how NATO would respond. This ambiguity makes it difficult to calculate the potential impact of the deterrent message on challengers and suggests a performative rather than substantive function. Peterson's observation underscores the importance of clarity in deterrence strategy to enhance stability, particularly in the Arctic region. This is incompatible with rational deterrence, insofar as for the latter, we would need

to see a clear discourse with red-lines and specified consequences, which is not visible in the Arctic. Thus, this analysis highlights another ritual-like nature of NATO's deterrence discourse in the Arctic, which is a vague and performative discourse rather than clear messaging.

1.4. Interests

Interests (as a reflection of what is protected by deterrence), as I expected from a ritual discourse, are often vague and undefined. I classified them in three categories:

Economic

This involves primarily exclusive zones (C1S4), trade routes, communication links like subsea cables (SP5, SP30), maritime navigability (ST22, ST30, ST35), fishing (ST33) and the exploitation of natural resources (ST22). Despite some of these interests being mentioned in some instances and specified in detail (C1S7, SP1), in the majority of the analysed speech acts they are often characterised in general, vague terms (SP6), as 'important and strategic' but never explained why in detail, unlike other interests. These statements are sometimes followed by sentences such as "race for resources" (C2S4), drawing similarities to the Cold War Space Race, an analogy often done in Arctic news and articles with references such as the 'Great Arctic Race'.

Military/ Strategic

While the address of military and strategic interest such as military capabilities was expected, it was surprising to see in the analysis that some of the strategic interests most mentioned were 'Presence' (in very simple, undefined terms) (26 times) and 'Cooperation' (20 times). In fact, these remain so vague but so amply used in deterrence discourse that could even be considered empty signifiers. How many soldiers or infrastructure is enough to be considered 'presence', is never established, which highlights the ritual-characteristics of this discourse, highly reliant in the symbolism and power of using certain words. "In the Arctic presence equals influence, so you need to be diplomatically also present" (C3) while other times it consists in investing in polar security, with actions such as setting up specific military commands (SP3, ST17); increasing number of operative troops (SP1); modernising domain awareness to detect potential threats, enhancing observational and surveillance capabilities, developing communications and maritime transportation infrastructure (C6S1); or conducting

more military exercises (SP2). While all of these are unequivocally examples of presence, they are all different. Presence evokes thought of strength, commitment or assurance, without needing specific numbers to justify or explain how much presence. As a rhetorical device, the use of ‘presence’ and ‘cooperation’ are powerful words easy to fill with meaning depending not on a material reality but in the context they are used and for the purpose for which they are used. That is their value and what makes them a strategic interest.

Situational and geographical advantage in regards to spatiality, such as for example with the Svalbard archipelago, brings strategic interest to NATO and the A7 that they wish to protect and make use of: “It is a geographical fact that all Russian traffic between the Northern ports and the Atlantic must necessarily pass through Norwegian waters” (ST35). The Arctic in itself (but it refers to the opportunities offered by its geography) is an interest, as the gateway to the North Atlantic (ST6, ST30) for both military and trade aspirations. Moreover, maritime links and communication potential between North America and Europe are also brought up, but this, along with trade, are a set of future, potential interests to defend in the case of a (melted) navigable Arctic, making the articulation of these interests symbolic. Still, the interest in protecting supply lines, infrastructure and logistics is material and objective, and these might be the most ‘rational choice’ elements of the deterrence discourse in the Arctic. However, out of the entire corpus analysed, these are mentioned very rarely (SP3, ST8).

Ideologic

Some of the most mentioned values being at threat and protected are the defence of freedom and democracy (C10, ST21, ST23), which is relevant first in regards to freedom and “Open and free Arctic” (ST4, ST6, ST16, ST33), as this are identity marks of the collective which are directly opposite to the challenger. I interpret respect for IL (C4S3, C8, ST35) as an interest because it is something that NATO and the A7 characterise as something they want to protect, a value that not only defines them and their collective identity but also something eminently at threat by Russia and to a lesser extent China. It is often followed or preceded by ‘protection of sovereignty’ and territorial integrity (C8, SP2), which is a direct concern born out of Russia’s aggressive behaviour in its ‘Near Abroad’, a space which could also include the Arctic Region. The possibilities and advantages of diplomacy (C3, SP2), cooperation, or dialogue are presented as a valuable interest, not at threat but lost as a result of Russia’s aggressive behaviour, especially by Norway. Defending and protecting these values is fundamental to protect the defender’s identity over anything else. These are not material

values, and therefore discursively can only be addressed by symbolism, embedding the deterrence discourse with ritual characteristics.

This idea of values first and military capabilities second, while maybe not real in practical terms, it is highly symbolic and very present, specially in Jens Stoltenberg speeches, who often uses this type of rhetoric “this is also not only about territorial integrity, but it’s also about believing in a free, democratic society” and “a stable democracy, a strong, resilient society and very advanced military capabilities” (SP4), which he later explains:

"So the problem is that these kinds of documents [referring to Ukraine's Budapest Memorandum], they ... if you have countries, such as Russia, who are violating those documents, they don't make so much difference. So you need documents, you need values, you need principles." (SP4)

To sum up, NATO's deterrence strategy in the Arctic displays ritual characteristics in how its interests are articulated. This analysis is in concordance with Mälksoo theory, which argues that despite how rational deterrence theory often treats credibility as if it is objective and measurable, symbolism and the ritual-like characteristic are present in deterrence practices. Repeating a pattern, these interests often lack specificity. Economic interests encompass exclusive zones, trade routes, and resource exploitation but are generally vague. Military and strategic interests, such as "presence" and "cooperation," rely on symbolic power without clear definition. Ideological concerns, including the defence of freedom, democracy, and IL, take precedence—at least discursively—over material interests. This prioritisation contributes to the ritual-like nature of NATO's discourse, emphasising values over tangible objectives. Overall, NATO's deterrence strategy in the Arctic is marked by symbolic articulations and a focus on ideological values, which makes sense due to the importance of role-identity in producing ontological security.

This analysis of NATO's deterrence discourse in the Arctic reveals ritual characteristics in several dimensions. Firstly, regarding the audience, the multiplicity of targets dilutes the clarity of the message, making it more symbolic and ritualistic in nature, as what produces the feeling of security is the articulation of the message, not its content. Secondly, in terms of rationalities, most speech acts exhibit ritual-like features in their structure but also specifically for their rationality in posturing, reassuring, mediating ambiguity, and securitization. Thirdly, considering the expected impacts and consequences, the strategy's performative power is a ritual-like characteristic, as it deters aggression despite lacking

specificity in setting red lines and consequences for potential challengers, despite the fact that this should make rational calculations for the challenger impossible and thus not deter. Finally, in how interests are articulated, the emphasis on symbolic values over material objectives underscores the ritualistic nature of NATO's discourse. Overall, NATO's deterrence strategy in the Arctic relies on symbolic articulations and prioritises ideological values, contributing to its ritual-like character and effectiveness.

These findings illustrate the disparity between the expected characteristics of a discourse constructed under rational theory—featuring a structured sentence format (including clear threat identification, actions to counter the threat, and rational calculations)—and the observed discourse, which exhibited ritual-like traits. The expected rational-theory discourse should also clearly identify opponents and allies for a specific audience, outline consequences and red-lines in response to challenges, and explicitly mention interests. However, the analysed discourse displays ritualistic characteristics instead.

2. Concern with identity

As a feature of deterrence discourse, concerns with identity reflect the search of security and stability in the self.

2.1. Ontological security-seeking

Grounded in ontological security theory, in this section I will analyse the evolution of discourse to see how actors seek ontological security by aligning with NATO's identity as a deterrer. Ontological-seeking is reflected in actions looking to routinizing relations and aligning actions with NATO's and A7's sense of Self. By examining changes in discourse from 2022 to 2024, I can also determine if ontological security has been reduced, maintained, or increased.

2.1.1. Routinizing relations

At the beginning of 2022, of the A7, only Sweden and Finland are not part of NATO, a situation that generates insecurity after the instability caused by Russia's aggressive behaviour towards its neighbours. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Swedish Prime Minister initially dismissed the idea of joining NATO (SP10), and the Finnish Prime Minister did not confirm anything at the beginning, considering it would

increase tensions in the region. By May both countries applied officially to NATO, and started the accession process, which would be the fastest in the Alliance's history. This is one of the key moments for the A7 in which they routinized their relations, as by joining NATO, they unite with not only the biggest military alliance in the world but also with core values such as democracy and freedom (SP6), and with other actors that bring them security, the most obvious being NATO. This is a movement of ontological-security seeking, especially considering at the time, they were under threat by Russia that joining the organisation would bring "serious military and political consequences" (Zakharova, 2022). The application to NATO is the first act of 'routinizing relations', by aiming to align all of the A7 with the military organisation. Following this goal, the speech acts centre around membership and how this will increase deterrence (C4S3), thus producing ontological security.

The successful routinization of action happens in 2024, marked by the accession of Finland and Sweden in NATO, concluding the enlargement process. There is a change of tone reflected in the clear message to adversaries: the A7 are completely aligned to NATO and NATO is resolved to respond to any attack to Allies (C10). At this point NATO has completely recuperated its discursive position as leader of "freedom, opportunity and prosperity" values (SP9).

The accession process is the culmination of a sequence of the A7 (particularly the Nordics) routinizing relations and choosing actions aligned to the new sense of self. As per their words, "Sweden is more vulnerable until the country is a full-fledged member of the alliance" (ST40), but after the accession: "We are now facing a new era. By allying ourselves militarily and joining NATO, we have taken the final step into the Western community of values, to which the Republic of Finland has belonged in spirit throughout its independence" (ST52) and

"Becoming a NATO member is a paradigm shift in Swedish foreign and security policy, but it is also the natural and final step of a journey Sweden has made in recent decades. Sweden's NATO accession is the culmination of a long farewell to the policy of neutrality and non-alignment" (SP10).

The effectiveness of these actions is manifested in the discourse change, and by 2024 the tone is more relaxed, the threat does not seem as imminent: "In the short term, however, Russia does not pose a conventional military threat" (ST46S1); "In some ways, Russia has been paying more attention to the Arctic in the last few years. But the situation remains relatively

stable” (ST44); “[Answer to: Have you encountered any Russian vessels?] I cannot go into detail regarding the patrol, but the area is quite calm at this time” (ST43) and “We currently do not see a direct military threat toward Norway or the Nordics” (ST53). Moreover, from 2024, the environmental concerns come back too (ST44, ST46), which indicates a return to one of the main security concerns in the region previous to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and concerns of different nature but still very relevant, like the future of NATO in the light of US elections and the “they must pay their bills” statement (ST49).

2.1.2. Choosing actions coherent with sense of self

In this aspect the first consideration is that there was not one coherent sense of self at the beginning, and all the actors involved have to combine their narratives coherently to make one. This is manifested firstly, in NATO stepping back from a position of leadership in 2022, which is not aligned with its own concept of Self. NATO is the leading defensive alliance in the world that represents “half of the world’s economic and military might” (SP5). In this speech is also hinted that the lack of leadership might come from a lack of agreement among members, and how this is basic for the correct functioning of the organisation: despite their need to “move forward as one” (SP3) and the fact that “We wear a uniform because we believe in the power of the collective” (SP3), they are “far away from the same level of unity” (SP5) in certain aspects. Despite the fact that NATO considers itself an “Arctic Alliance” (SP2) this inconsistency in the idea of Self, demonstrates a state of ontological insecurity, especially until Sweden and Finland join.

This changes in 2023, as NATO positions itself once again as the defender of democratic values, freedom, and the rule-based international order. As such, the actions it undertakes align with its concept of self: strengthening military presence not to provoke but to prevent conflict and maintain peace (SP4). Fundamentally, NATO’s concept of self is intrinsically connected with deterrence. By practising deterrence, it chooses actions coherent with its sense of self and thus reduces ontological insecurity. A straightforward explanation of NATO's behaviour is found in Mälksoo’s theory: NATO deters because NATO is a deterrer. If NATO did not choose deterrence in moments of insecurity, it would only increase its own ontological insecurity, even at the risk of physical insecurity. It is important to note that NATO's discourse is fundamentally connected with peace, not conflict (SP5). NATO is ontologically secure in peace, unlike some actors whose identities are constructed in opposition to others, requiring conflict for their sense of self. One might argue that NATO's

deterrence implies aligning with conflict, making A7's alignment with the alliance appear aggressive. However, dialectically, this aligns A7's discourse with a pacifist stance, emphasising NATO's purpose to prevent war for lasting peace (ST7S2, ST23, ST26, ST29, ST30). At this point in time, the tone of the discourse was of emergency and the aim was still focused on securitization: “We must prepare for the fact that conflict can present itself at any moment and in any domain, including the Arctic. The Russian threat can also come from the High North” (S30).

Also during 2023, more vocal NATO actors, mainly the US, persuaded the Nordic countries, previously inclined to dialogue and a policy of ‘balancing act’, of the benefits of a strong deterrence posture (ST16). This shift is evident in Norway, where after intense debate, politicians agreed to facilitate allied training, exercises, and presence, eventually establishing US military bases (ST18, ST19, ST31). While this entails a shift from the Nordic’s previous discourse, it reflects ontological-seeking behaviour, adapting policies to align with NATO's deterrence posture: “The time is ripe for us to discard the base policy and the self-imposed restrictions and draw up a new Russia strategy (...) it is important to work towards this now and send clear signals to Russia in the future” (ST27S2).

This shift is even more significant for the A7, as they unify their approach and sense of self. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, countries outside of NATO's protective umbrella experienced unprecedented insecurity, justifying a change in identity (ST30, ST33). As a result, by the end of the year, “NATO is now more prepared, secure, and united than ever” (ST30).

I have summarised the main ideas of this section in table 4:

Table 4. Ontological security-seeking

	Routinizing relations	Choosing actions coherent with sense of self
2022	Finland and Sweden apply to NATO	NATO distances itself from leadership position
2023	- Bilateral defence cooperation agreements (Finnish-American and Swedish-American) - Opening of American bases in Norway	Nordics changing from ‘balancing act’ policy to strong deterrence policy = A7 create unified sense of self
2024	Accession to NATO	A7 unified concept of Self, including the Nordics (“fraternal people of the North”)

Initially, the division between the A7 (especially among the Nordics) regarding their Russia policy, demonstrated a state of ontological insecurity. During 2023, by aligning with NATO the A7 addressed this insecurity. By 2024 once Sweden and Finland join the Alliance, the discourse among all A7 and approach to Russia is unified, demonstrating how over the two years, ontological security has increased.

In conclusion, ontological security-seeking, a part of ‘concern with identity’, appears as an aspect of ritual discourse prevalent in the Arctic. What is more, the analysis confirms that ritual discourse effectively increased ontological security. The accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO represents a pivotal moment, as it demonstrates how the A7 routinized their relations and aligned their actions with their new sense of self. By joining NATO, the A7 sought to increase their ontological security, looking for stability and protection in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape marked by Russia's aggressive behaviour. The ritual characteristics embedded within NATO's deterrent discourse served as a mechanism to reinforce the A7's identity—particularly the Nordics—and sense of belonging within the alliance. Moreover, the alignment with NATO's values of democracy and freedom further contributed to reducing existential anxieties and solidifying the A7's self-narrative, creating an unified concept to which they all could adhere. Through the strategic adoption of ritual discourses and actions coherent with their sense of self, the A7 effectively navigated ontological insecurities, ultimately enhancing their capacity to uphold a stable self-identity amidst external challenges and insecurity.

2.2. Reinforcing Identity

The aim to reinforce their identity is manifested through the alignment between discourse and identity. This objective reflects the actor's concerns with identity insofar as it provides coherence in a moment of uncertainty. Reinforcing identity is, along with ontological security-seeking, the main purpose of this discourse. According to the ritual-approach to deterrence, the discourse here is expected to play an important role by addressing an actor's identity needs, providing ontological security, and validating the actor's self both internally and externally. This allows the maintenance of a coherent self narrative and consistent interactions with others.

2.2.1 NATO's deterrent discourse

NATO's presents itself as 'the guardian of democratic values' with defence as its main priority. Deterrence thus is a response to Allies' interests and Russian's provocations, resulting in growing tensions in the Arctic (SP1, ST17, ST26, ST30). Defence is articulated in a deterrent strategy, aimed to protect vulnerable places, such as the Arctic (SP4), and the most fundamental element of deterrence, strong commitment, is reinforced in this discourse (ST1, ST16, ST42). Deterrence is based in remaining vigilant and ready for the unexpected (SP5, ST1, ST7S1, ST10, ST17, ST30, ST36), as the West has "collectively lost confidence that Russia can be trusted militarily, especially in a region where Moscow promotes and postures its intent to remain a dominant actor" (ST19). The Arctic in this discourse is presented as a place where deterrence is a particularly necessary strategy in the face of Russia's behaviour and China's growing interests (ST23, ST30, ST34), but where it is important to consider the risk of escalation (C8, SP3, ST12 ST46S1). This discourse reflects NATO and the A7's¹² firm conviction that whilst staying "within the limits of IL and a rule-based order"—despite Russia not working within these parameters—there is no room for deterrence to be mistaken as a provocation (ST27S4).

The current situation is presented as an opportunity to reinforce NATO's core values and purpose, and to work more closely with the EU and likeminded partners (SP1, ST45). But also to reinforce the unity of the Alliance in times of "growing competition and rivalry, NATO makes all its members stronger and safer" (SP8). NATO is presented as a security provider, which evidently has repercussions for ontological security-seeking (ST52). Following this logic, aligning with NATO is obtaining security in all domains, physical security and also ontological, despite some discursive divisions.

Ultimately, the essence of this discourse is to make clear that NATO's deterrent aim is to maintain a stable and peaceful Arctic region, where western interests are protected but where the present actors strive for stability (ST29, ST30).

¹² Canada (ST34), Denmark (ST41), Finland (ST52, ST53S1), Iceland (ST21), Norway (ST16, ST18, ST22, ST23, ST31, ST33, ST47, ST53S2), Sweden (ST37, ST40, SP10), US (ST1, ST29, ST31, ST43, ST51).

2.2.2. NATO's concept of deterrer and deterrence

Deterrence

NATO's conceptualization of a 'deterrer' as outlined in its deterrence discourse, aligns closely with the theoretical idea of role identity. The role identity of NATO as a deterrer is constituted in its discourse and shaped by its representations of significant others, such as allies (the countries it protects) and adversaries (the actors it deters). By practising the strategy of deterrence, NATO shapes perceptions of its role in the international arena and reinforces expectations associated with its identity as a security provider.

NATO in its discourse conceptualises a 'deterrer' as a defender, a preserver of peace (SP2, SP3, SP26), a present force in a vulnerable space (SP2, SP25) in a credible way. For this, a deterrer needs to have the ability to protect and defend (SP3), hence the policy priority of increasing capability and interoperability all throughout the discourse. A second quality that a deterrer needs to have is presence (SP2, SP6, ST18, ST25, ST37). This quality is seen in these speeches: deterrence is the answer to aggression "with strength and unity (...) to protect our values and interests, and keep our people safe" (ST6). Hand in hand with presence is cooperation, also an empty signifier but considered to strengthen the security of the allies (ST4, ST6, ST11S1, ST28, ST42, ST43, ST53).

All these elements work together and are what makes deterrence, which is spoken about as if it is a material thing: "the more we work together and demonstrate our capability, the more deterrence we can present" (ST42). Additionally, successful deterrence is an outline of what is tolerated and what is not, so it has clear punitive measures for specific violations (ST33). Overall, a deterrer for NATO is the one who sends a credible (SP6, SP26) and clear deterrent message to a challenger to remove possibilities of miscalculations and misunderstanding (SP2, SP26), which corresponds with the scholarly definition.

Also important is that deterrence is the first thing to do, precisely for NATO's assumed role-identity as The Deterrer: "First, we must ensure robust deterrence. Not to start wars. But to prevent them. And preserve peace. Any sign of wavering or weakness on our part will invite challenges from those who wish us harm" (SP8). It is not the purpose of this analysis to determine whether deterrence is or is not a direct cause of peace, and while this may be one of the reasons that inform its choice, another one is the fact that in this conceptualisation of deterrence (and of self) NATO is a habit-driven actor. "To prevent war, first we must ensure

deterrence”, here it is presented as a first step, since any doubt in resolve can trigger challengers to attack. This habit has been reinforced historically, to the point that after 75 years of peace, it has become unimaginable to do something else.

The discourse surrounding deterrence serves to validate NATO's role identity and reinforces its attachment to this role, thus informing the strategies it makes to reassert its identity. The continued election of deterrence over alternative strategies validates NATO's identity and enhances the credibility of this strategy in the eyes of both allies and adversaries. In this sense, NATO's attachment to the strategy of deterrence, is not only strategic but also serves to validate NATO's identity, contributing to its sense of ontological security.

Furthermore, the internalisation of deterrence discourse among political elites, the security establishment, and the public sphere leads to the institutionalisation of deterrence as a strategic thinking pattern within NATO. This internalisation reflects aspects of NATO's sense of self and motivates its behaviour and choices. Thus, NATO's deterrence symbolic discourse not only reinforces its role identity as a deterrer but also conditions its behaviour and decision-making processes in alignment with this identity and makes it a habit-driven actor.

Arctic Deterrence

Deterrence in the Arctic is geopolitically strategic, as this region is NATO's gateway to the North Atlantic (SP4, SP8, ST1, ST6, ST45). And it is a response to Russian increased presence in the region (SP4), but with the clear objective to communicate clearly to avoid doubts, which are prone to happen in spaces where the limits and 'grey areas' are not well defined, like the Arctic (ST27S2). To avoid a possible Russian misunderstanding that the West is 'provoking' it and give "Russia a legitimate reason to believe that we are to attack them" (ST27S3), the focus on the Arctic is discursive, and in this sense a ritual-like practice, to portray commitment. Deterrence in the Arctic can not be ambiguous: "there is value in strategic ambiguity, but I don't think that is the case in the Arctic. Being more predictable, clear, and transparent can be the key to strengthening stability in the region" (ST33). The lack of specificity is harming the message of deterrence in the region:

“In recent years, we in the West have also not been very clear about why NATO countries have strengthened their presence in the Arctic region. ‘We must deter Russia from aggressive activities’ it is often said. But what specifically are we supposed to deter the Russians from in the Arctic? Are we seeking to deter them from conducting

military exercises in sea routes? From conducting nuclear exercises in high-risk areas? What are the concrete objectives?” (ST33).

The implementation of this strategy is considered a recalibration of the previous “High north, low tension” policy to re-adjust the balance despite the militarization of the region (ST10, ST14, ST22, ST33), and has inspired debate, particularly among the Nordic countries (ST10, ST17, ST18, ST20). As put by the Chair of the Norwegian Defense Commission:

“It would be beneficial if we were not only in agreement about, for example, how large our air capacities are, but also how we can, to the best possible extent, conduct reassurance and avoid ending up in a war situation” (ST22).

Arctic deterrence is mainly based in presence (SP5, ST, 27S1, ST33), which differs from other strategic concepts for deterrence like the NATO’s eFP, which consisted (up until 2022) in a rotational force (Mälksoo, 2020); and building capacity, which until recently was inadequate for a region that NATO claims to have such relevance. Moreover, Arctic deterrence, at least discursively, is directly connected to Nordic security and nordic involvement (C4S2, C4S3, SP4, ST4, ST12, ST14, ST17, ST19, ST22, ST27S3, ST29, ST53S1, ST53S2).

From the speech acts it can be interpreted that what the strategy aims is to deter challengers from ‘intimidating’ other vessels:

“My primary concern is the operations of Russian naval vessels and the conduct of Russian military exercises in sea areas that are regularly used for civilian purposes, such as cargo shipping and fishing. This is a common tactic on the part of the Russian military. It endangers the safety of civilian seafarers and slows down the movement of goods in what is supposed to be a free and open maritime domain” (ST33).

As such, deterrence (presence) in the Arctic shows commitment and resolve to prevent that the Arctic region is not ‘open and free’ anymore (ST6, ST15, ST17, ST30), not so much to prevent an attack in general terms, like NATO’s core message suggests.

Confirming my expectation, the alignment between NATO’s discourse and NATO’s concept of deterrer, and how a deterrer behaves in the Arctic, indicates the discourse is mostly coherent ontologically. Following the analysis that NATO conceptualises a ‘deterrer’ as: a defender and preserver of peace, requiring the ability to protect and defend, maintain

presence, enhance cooperation among allies, and clearly outline punitive measures for violations; while mostly coherent, I have observed discordances in the details. These discrepancies appear specially in the level of specificity regarding the clarity of the message: a deterrer is supposed to set clear lines to the challenger of what can not be done, and this is lacking in the deterrent message regarding the Arctic, as I have mentioned in other sections. Not only there is no value in strategic ambiguity in the Arctic, it goes against NATO's role identity as a deterrer constructed over 75 years of having a strong deterrent posture.

Table 5. Arctic Deterrence

What is Deterrer?	NATO in the Arctic
Role-Identity: Defender & Preserver of Peace	Yes
With the capability to defend and protect	Increasing
Cooperates with Allies	Yes
Outlines clearly punitive measures for violations	No

2.2.3. Identity

NATO aims to keep the region free of military competition as much as possible, and limits its actions to what the A7 wishes (SP1).

NATO's concept of self

NATO's concept of self can be extracted from other sources, like Strategic Documents or its official page, but for the context of how NATO sees itself in the Arctic region I used the same selected sources, for reasons of the scope of this work but also looking for the most coherent message possible. From these sources, I infer that NATO identifies itself as an alliance of collective defence united because of shared values and purposes (SP1, ST1, ST6, ST17), and more specifically for the case at hand, as an "Arctic Alliance" (SP5).

The qualities that NATO's deterrent discourse highlights are cooperation (alliance, collective), security (defence) and value-focus. NATO defines itself as the guardian of values like democracy and freedom (SP2), and positioning itself discursively against its the embodiment of its opposite, authoritarian regimes (SP5): "freedom against oppression. Democracy against tyranny" (SP1), allows it to define itself against an Other. In this sense, values are fundamentally constitutive of NATO's identity (motivated by its role-identity). As

perceived by itself, NATO is more than a military alliance with military capabilities, and its security—specially the ontological aspect of it—is built through the shared values narrative. When identity and role-identity correspond, the actor feels ontologically secured, as proved by how by the end of 2023, NATO sees itself as “more prepared, secure, and united than ever” (ST30). Unity and cohesive messages and Finland and Sweden’s accession have reinforced the cooperation, security, and value-oriented elements of NATO’s self image, producing ontological security.

In this sense, NATO’s concept of itself is intimately tied to deterrence. This idea has been constructed throughout its history, composing NATO’s role-identity and habit-driven behaviour. NATO’s official page highlights that since its creation in 1949, NATO has been a pillar of peace, founded to prevent war and defend its members. Emerging from World War II, NATO's primary goals were deterring Soviet expansion, preventing European militarism, and fostering political integration (NATO, 2024). Over time, NATO evolved its strategies, transitioning from nuclear deterrence to détente and embracing a comprehensive approach to security (NATO, 2024). The collapse of the Soviet Union brought new challenges including conflicts in the Balkans and terrorism post-9/11 but NATO's mission remained unchanged: to safeguard peace through collective defence and unity (NATO, 2024).

The analysis of the discourse confirms that NATO’s main purpose is to prevent war, attacks on NATO Allies and to preserve peace (SP7S1, SPS2, SP9). As such, NATO constitutes its identity by enforcing strategies to maintain peace, it firmly believes these strategies—mainly deterrence—are the reason for durable peace. NATO deepens its ontological security by emitting this deterrent message, by aligning its identity with this discourse. This is relevant because according to this logic it is not the absence of threat that produces security, but the articulation of the message. With this I do not claim that there is no threat or that this is the reality, but that this is what is transmitted from the discourse. Engaging in this type of discourse not only increases ontological security for NATO but it is what constitutes it in the first place.

The A7 after Russia’s aggression to Ukraine

The question of A7’s identity after Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022 and stopped participating in the Arctic Council, is more complex than it seems at first sight. Starting 2022 there was an intense debate, specially among the Nordics and within the countries themselves, about how much they were willing to contribute to NATO’s deterrent posture or if it was the best

strategy in the first place. As some of the previous sections have mentioned, the debate in the Nordics was characterised by Finland's "new era" with their alignment to NATO and "final step into the Western community of values, to which the Republic of Finland has belonged in spirit throughout its independence" (ST52); Sweden "getting rid of 200 years of neutrality" (ST27S2, SP10) and Norway's complete policy shift in regards to Russia. After three years of intense political debate about the level of involvement necessary to deter Russia and how to manifest it clearly, the Nordics have undergone a change in discourse until they have agreed on the current one. Now they present a unified front, with strong commitment to deterrence and NATO. The evolution reflects a complete shift, evidently in Finland and Sweden but also Norway, which goes from advising against the establishment of US military bases in Norwegian territory (ST30) to agreeing to establish 15 bases (ST47), in a "radical revision of Norwegian base policy" (ST27S3).

The resulting unified discourse has crystallised in Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, and it is what has brought ontological security to the Nordics: "With Finland and soon Sweden in NATO, it will increase security of the Arctic and keep it stable and secure"(ST44) and "All the Nordic countries being part of the same defence alliance is a historic event, and it feels right and safe" (ST53), which explains their change in policy.

To sum up, the comparison among NATO's deterrence ritual discourse to its own concept of deterrer and the identity of the A7 nations reveals that while still fragmented in 2022, by 2024 all three concepts are aligned with the same message and feel more secure, as proved by the change in tone. Based on this finding, I argue that the alignment between discourse and identity evidences that a ritual-like practice of deterrence increases ontological security. Overall, NATO's deterrence discourse serves as a unifying force that—motivated by historical factors and habit-driven behaviour—reinforces the identity of the A7 nations by aligning with their shared values, enhancing ontological security through ritual-like practices. This discourse strengthens the bond between NATO and its member states, reaffirming their commitment to maintaining peace and security in the face of threats.

3. Results

The analysis confirms that as a ritual-like practice, deterrence presents the two identified ritual features, which are manifested in the discourse. First in the presence ritual characteristics all throughout the discourse, shown in its disperse audience targeting; the

constant repetition of vague ideas like ‘cooperation’ and ‘unity’, as well as rationalities that the literature identifies as ritual-like; the overall lack of specificity in consequences to challenges and interests, and the prioritisation of symbolic values. Second, the discourse proves to be deeply concerned with identity and focused on generating a feeling of security among allies, done through the search of ontological security and the reinforcement of identity.

3. 1. Ritual characteristics

Starting with the audience dimension, exploring its targeting of internal and external audiences reveals the first ritual characteristics of deterrence discourse. Internally, messages to domestic audiences leverage symbolic language to evoke national identities and emotions, while those to domestic elites do follow more rational structure, emphasising specificity and persuasion regarding increased investment in Arctic security. Externally, discourse directed at Western countries underscores shared values and collective interests, aiming to generate and exchange solidarity. However, when addressing challengers, particularly Russia and to a lesser extent China, proves more complex, with nuanced portrayals reflecting varying degrees of threat perception. This should not be the case for a clear and coherent deterrence message that follows rational calculations, which characterises this discourse as ritual-like.

The rationalities dimension displays habit-driven behaviour, the ritual structure and ritual characteristics in each of the political functions. Firstly, posturing is characterised by the repetition of vague terms like ‘strength’ and ‘unity’ to convey resolve, the structure pattern, and more than anything the performative power the articulation of this resolve produces. The circular nature of deterrence is revealed in this function: the continual assertion of the narrative linking deterrence to peace, is what serves to reinforce this belief through ritual-like repetition. This discursive practice creates the conviction that deterrence is what prevents war, incentivizing actors to choose it, thus ensuring that no actor pursues war, thereby maintaining peace. A rational calculation of deterrence would assess the utilitarian calculation of costs and benefits and choose the less costly option, and since this is not what has been observed, posturing reveals ritual-characteristics.

Secondly, for reassuring, ritual characteristics are in the performative power of deterrence (the fact that it is not the content message that produces the feeling of security but its articulation), and the search for the security of identity rather than physical security, as seen

in the shared values narrative and the demand of cooperation and solidarity as the most present arguments in the discourse.

Thirdly, when the rationality is to mediate ambiguity, the ritual characteristics are shown precisely in the failure to do so, due to vagueness and the lack of red-lines and consequences for potential challenges.

And finally, in the three first arguments used to securitize the Arctic, the ritual characteristics found in the discourse are the repeated articulation of these narratives, and its performative productivity, as securitization is what eventually has created the shared reality and pushed for extraordinary measures. The continued characterization of a threat has moved countries like the Nordics to take action, solely by articulating the threat, displaying ritual characteristics. Moreover, the securitization of ‘western values’ and the characterization of these values being under threat by authoritarian regimes that demonstrates ritual characteristics in the high emphasis on values to justify action, not utilitarian calculations.

Regarding the expected impact and specified consequences, the ritual characteristics of the discourse are seen in the lack of specificity and clarity in setting red lines and consequences for potential challengers like Russia or China, while maintaining its performative power. A rational deterrent message needs to be clear, to delineate the list of intolerable actions that would trigger response, otherwise, it is something else. I argue that given it still produces a feeling of security through its articulation, this ‘unclear’ or ‘limitless’ aspect, is one of the ritual characteristics of deterrent discourse in the Arctic

Finally, even the articulation of interests, aligning with Mälksoo’s theory, posits that despite rational deterrence theory’s treatment of credibility as objective and measurable, deterrence is also a ritual-like practice, often marked by a lack of specificity and ambiguity. When addressing the protection of interests, understood as a fundamental part of rational calculations, the mention of economic interests is usually vague, while military and strategic interests, such as ‘presence’ and ‘cooperation’, rely on symbolic power and empty signifiers. Ideological concerns, including the defence of freedom, democracy, and IL, are prioritised—discursively—over material interests, highlighting the ritual-like nature of NATO's discourse and its emphasis on values over tangible objectives.

3. 2. Concern with Identity

The analysis reveals that the A7 and NATO were seeking to increase their ontological security and their discourse reflects it. This is seen through the actions taken to routinise relations (Finland and Sweden application to NATO and later accession) and the actions taken to align coherently with the new sense of Self (Nordics changing from ‘balancing act’ policy to strong deterrence policy). Moreover, the increase in ontological security observed from 2022 to 2024 validates the efficacy of ritual-like deterrence discourse in addressing ontological insecurity. With the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO representing a pivotal moment, demonstrating the A7’s efforts to align their actions with their self-concept and seeking stability in the face of Russia's aggression. By joining NATO, the A7 aimed to bolster their ontological security, finding reassurance and protection amid geopolitical uncertainty. The ritual-like features embedded in NATO's discourse served to reinforce the A7’s identity, particularly among the Nordics, and aligning with NATO’s democratic values further alleviated existential anxieties, fostering a unified sense of belonging. Through strategic adoption of ritual discourses coherent with their self-perception (like deterrence), the A7 effectively navigated ontological insecurities, enhancing their sense of self and resilience amidst external challenges.

Finally, the analysis reveals that NATO’s deterrence ritual discourse, shaped by habit-driven behaviour, plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the identity of the A7. NATO’s deterrence discourse aligns closely with the identity concepts of the A7 nations, emphasising shared values, collective defence, and security. After the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, all the A7 nations are part of a unified alliance committed to preserving democratic values and deterring potential threats. Moreover, identity aspects like historical factors and habit-driven behaviour, are so ingrained in NATO’s identity that deterrence is habitual behaviour for both the alliance and its member states, in a way that does not leave space to consider other alternatives. The historical context of NATO’s formation during the Cold War, with its primary goal of deterring Soviet expansion, has shaped the habitual approach of prioritising deterrence as a means of preventing conflict.

In this regard, in response to the research question, to what extent do the ritual features of deterrence discourse explain NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022? I can conclude that the ritual features of NATO and the A7’s deterrence discourse, deeply marked by ritual-characteristics and concerns with identity, explain the choice for deterrence in the

Arctic post-2022, as they serve to address ontological security concerns and increase the feeling of security. The analysis demonstrates that the discourse is characterised by ritual features in all the examined dimensions, such as diffuse audience targeting, use of the ritual structure and rationalities, lack of clear consequences and prioritisation of shared values over specific, rational calculations, and overall in the use of symbolic language, emphasis on vague concepts like ‘cooperation’ and ‘unity’, and repetition. These ritualistic features were consistently found throughout 73 texts, except for some statements in C1S7, C5, ST11, ST21, ST44, ST48 that followed the rational structure or clearly mentioned interests. Evenso, the ritual features of deterrence discourse successfully generated ontological security among the A7 and NATO by reinforcing their collective identity and providing a coherent narrative amid geopolitical uncertainties.

Rather than a rational-choice calculation, the fact that discourse on deterrence in the Arctic is marked by ritual characteristics and displays concerns with identity, shows that the choice of strategy follows a ritual-approach logic. These findings have directly informed the research objective and addressed the puzzle, confirming the presence of ritual features in NATO's deterrence discourse and demonstrating their role in increasing ontological security among Arctic nations. The analysis revealed how deterrence discourse plays a crucial role by addressing the actors’ concern with identity, providing ontological security, and aligning the actor’s self concept with their own concept of Deterren.

Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to examine the logic behind the choice for deterrence in the Arctic after 2022. In the last decade, but specifically after Russia's full-scale of Ukraine the region has been marked by escalating tensions and instability, and has re-emerged as a point of strategic geopolitical significance. The end of the 'Arctic Exception' and the subsequent militarization in response to geopolitical shifts illustrates the region's relevance and newfound interest in Security Studies. The persistence of NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic, overlooking alternatives in an almost reflexive way, could not be explained by rational calculations, giving rise to the puzzle of why NATO continues to favour this approach despite its potential drawbacks. From it, the research question was: to what extent does NATO's deterrence ritual discourse explain its choice in the Arctic post-2022?. The key theoretical expectation was that NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022 can be explained by understanding deterrence as a ritual-like practice that produces ontological security and is manifested through ritual discourse with ritual features.

The first chapter reviewed classical deterrence paradigms, including Rational Deterrence Theory and psychological models, identifying their limitations, and introduced the ritual approach to deterrence. It also delved into the conceptualisation of ritual and critical theories to complete the understanding of securitization, identity, and ontological security. The second chapter outlined the research design and methodological approach, using CDA to examine how speech acts construct ritual deterrence discourse. Data was collected from 73 texts from NATO and A7 representatives, collected in a handcrafted database which included transcriptions from conferences, statements, and speeches from different media outlets. The analysis centred around the study of the two features of ritual discourse: ritual-characteristics and concerns with identity.

The analysis revealed ritual characteristics in the discourse. Among them, it is worth highlighting the diffuse targeting of the audiences, the use of symbolic language, the repetition of vague ideas such as 'cooperation' and 'unity', the lack of red-lines and consequences, and the overall concern with identity and ontological security over rational calculations. Regarding concerns with identity, the analysis effectively demonstrated ontological security-seeking, which deterrence discourse does by leveraging symbolic values and routinizing actions, effectively addressing ontological insecurities and reinforcing the identity and sense of self of the A7 and NATO member states. Finally, the analysis showed

alignment between discourse and identity, as well as demonstrated habit-driven behaviour in NATO, which does not leave space to consider other alternatives. The accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO exemplified how ritual-like practices enhance ontological security and align actions with self-concepts.

These findings suggest that the features of ritual discourse of NATO and the A7's deterrence, significantly explain the choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022, as they serve to address ontological security concerns and increase the feeling of security. This effectively answers this study's research question and confirms the theoretical expectation that NATO's choice for deterrence in the Arctic post-2022 can be explained by understanding deterrence as a ritual-like practice that produces ontological security and is manifested through ritual discourse with ritual feature.

Based on these findings, that underscore the gaps of rational theory and the academic potential of overcoming these limitations with critical security theories, the ritual approach to deterrence comes through as a productive theory to understand complex dynamics, particularly in spaces that do not fit into traditional conceptions of sovereignty, like space, cyber threats, and as illustrated throughout this thesis, the Arctic. This study effectively addressed the research puzzle by demonstrating that NATO's choice of deterrence in the Arctic post-2022 can be explained through the lens of the ritual approach to deterrence. By analysing NATO's deterrence discourse, the study revealed the presence of ritual characteristics and concern with identity, the two features of ritual deterrence discourse it aimed to find, and explained the logic for this choice, which was the objective.

Future research expanding on this approach could explore how the choice for deterrence can be explained in cases where the discourse does not produce ontological security, or where physical security is even more at threat, such as in direct borders rather than international waters. To complete these findings, the future focus should also incorporate physical security perspective and their relation to ritual deterrence, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between ontological and physical security in ritual deterrence.

Throughout the redaction of the thesis, I encountered several limitations. One notable limitation is the difficulty in separating ontological security from physical security in practical terms, despite it being theoretically possible. This separation is crucial for understanding how the discourse operates differently in scenarios where ontological security is not achieved, or where physical security is directly threatened, such as at a direct border

rather than in international waters, or the cyber-sphere. Based on this theoretical limitation, the scope of my research was limited to ontological security to assess the applicability of the ritual approach. This approach proves challenging when considering physical security concerns, as evidenced by Mälksoo's own focus on areas such as cyber or memory-political deterrence, where physical security is less at risk. Furthermore, the interpretative nature of this study presents another limitation. To address potential selection and interpretation bias, I clearly delineated selection criteria, concentrating on texts directly related to NATO and A7's activities in the Arctic. The data collection process involved monitoring reliable media, and included a variety of texts such as official statements, speeches, and expert conferences. These texts were analysed following a structured framework detailed in the methodology section to provide a balanced interpretation of deterrence discourse in the Arctic.

Despite these limitations, I believe that my analysis provides relevant insights into NATO's deterrence strategy. Firstly, it underscores the need for more precise targeting of audiences and a clear agreement on who the challengers are that the deterrence message is aimed at. Secondly, it highlights the necessity of clearly outlining red lines and explicitly stating what actions by the enemy are unacceptable to reduce ambiguity. While ritual-like practices do produce a sense of security for the self, now that this is achieved, they could potentially enhance physical security if their messages were more precise. By dissecting these speech acts, I have identified gaps in the discourse that need to be addressed to make the deterrent message clearer and more effective, at least in theory. This has significant implications for the success of deterrence for NATO and the A7. Furthermore, understanding deterrence as a ritual-like practice and a habit-driven choice prompts a reconsideration of reflexive decision-making processes in NATO and its allies. With this thesis I encourage the critical thinking of old, well-established theories, and the necessary exploration of alternative strategies in ambiguous vulnerable regions, especially in light of other emerging threats such as climate change.

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APPENDIX I. Sources

A. Conferences

Name	Speakers	Cite as
Arctic Encounters-2022- Plenary session VI: Security In A Changing Arctic: Facilitating Understanding Across Borders	-General Randy Church (Senior Advisor Arctic Security Affairs of the Dod Ted Stevens Center)	C1S1
	-Admiral Jonas Wickstrom Defense Attache To The Embassy Of Sweden To The United States	C1S2
	-Vice Admiral Michael Mcallister Commander Pacific Area Coast Guard United States	C1S3
	-Dr Rasmus Lander Nielsen (Head Of Center For Foreign And Security Policy University Of Greenland)	C1S4
	-Commissioner Neil O'rourke (Assistant Commissioner Arctic Region Canadian Coast Guard)	C1S5
	-Brigadier General William Radoff (Deputy Commander Of Alaska Norad Region, Canada)	C1S6
	-James Montague Deputy Head Of Defense Policy And Strategy British Defense Staff Of The Us And The Uk	C1S7
Arctic Encounters-2023- Plenary Session II: Arctic Geopolitics	-Dave Balton (Special Advisor on Arctic affairs for the White House)	C2
	-Kenneth Hill (Head of Greenland's representation)	C2S1
	-Douglas Jones he is a deputy assistant secretary	C2S2
	-Thomas Winkler (Denmark's Arctic Ambassador)	C2S3
	-Eloise Galleria (Sweden's Arctic Ambassador and Senior Arctic official)	C2S4
Arctic Encounters-2023- VIP Armchair National Strategy	-Libby Casey (The Washington Post)	C3S1
	-Lisa Murkowski (U.S senator)	C3S2
	-Ambassador David Balton (Special Advisor on Arctic affairs for the American president)	C3S3
	-Douglas Jones with the U.S Department of State	C3S4
Arctic Circle-Helsinki Security Forum Panel- 28 oct 2022	-Mika Aaltola, (Finnish Institute of International Affairs)	C4S1
	-Samu Paukkunen, (Deputy Director Finnish Institute of International Affairs)	C4S2
Arctic Circle-Nato and the Arctic- 19 oct 2022	-Urmus Paet, (Member of the European Parliament; Chair, EU Parliament Arctic Friendship Group)	C2S3
	Admiral Rob Bauer (Chair of the Military Committee, NATO)	C5

Arctic Circle-The United States' National Strategy for the Arctic Region- 24 oct 2022	-Derek Chollet, Counselor of the U.S. Department of State -Lisa Murkowski, United States Senator for Alaska	C6S1 C6S2
Arctic Circle-Global Security Threats-28 oct 2022	-Þórdís Kolbrún R. Gylfadóttir, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Iceland	C7
Arctic Circle Conference- Security and Defense 26 oct 2023	Admiral Rob Bauer, Chair of the Military Committee, NATO	C8
Munich Security Conference- 17/02/2024	-Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary General) -Kaja Kallas, Prime Minister of Estonia -Pete Ricketts, US Senator	C9S1 C9S2 C9S3
Total		27

B. Speeches

Name		Code
Spring session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (30 may 2022)	General Mircea Geoaă (NATO Deputy Secretary)	SP1
NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at Kultaranta talks (12 jun. 2022)	Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary General)	SP2
Speech by Admiral Rob Bauer 'Knowledge is Power, Character is more'	Admiral Rob Bauer, (Chair of the NATO Military Committee)	SP3
Speech at the 68th Annual Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NPA) (21 nov. 2022)	General Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary)	SP4
Opening speech at the Aspen - GMF Bucharest Forum (29 nov. 2022)	General Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary)	SP5
NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg speech at Keio University (1 feb. 2023)	General Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary)	SP6
	Admiral Rob Bauer (Chair of the NATO Military Committee)	SP7S1
Opening remarks at the meeting of the Military Committee in Chiefs of Defence (17 jan. 2024)	General Mircea Geoaă (NATO Deputy Secretary)	SP72
Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Heritage Foundation followed by audience Q&A (31 jan. 2024)	General Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary)	SP8
Pre-ministerial press conference - by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the meetings of NATO Ministers of Defence in Brussels (14 feb. 2024)	General Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary)	SP9
Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias	Tobias Billström (Minister for Foreign Affairs of	SP10

Billström at Selwyn College, Cambridge (16 apr. 2024)	Sweden)	
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C. Statements

Name	Who	Code
Arctic Chiefs of Defense meeting (9 feb. 2022)	General Wayne Eyre (Canadian Chief of the Defence Staff)	ST1
Briefs Military Committee on security trends in the North Atlantic and Arctic regions (5 may. 2022)	Vice Admiral Douglas G. Perry (JFC Norfolk Commander)	ST2
NATO Allies, Partners Promote Arctic Security, Military Cooperation (5 may. 2022)	Brig. Gen. Edward Vaughan (ASFR co-chair U.S. Air Force, USEUCOM's deputy director for security cooperation, policy, partnering and space capabilities)	ST3
Arctic Chiefs of Defence Meet to Discuss New Security Situation in the Region (9 aug. 2022)	General Wayne Eyre (Canadian Chief of the Defence Staff)	ST4
Nordic Countries to Further Strengthen Defence and Security Cooperation (16 aug. 2022)	Jonas Gahr Støre (Norway's Prime Minister)	ST5S1
	Eirik Kristoffersen (Norwegian Chief of Defence)	ST5S2
Arctic Circle Assembly (14 and 15 oct. 2022)	Admiral Rob Bauer (Chair of the NATO Military Committee)	ST6
The Norwegian Government Strengthens Preparedness of the Armed Forces (1 nov. 2022)	Jonas Gahr Støre (Norway's Prime Minister)	ST7S1
	Eirik Kristoffersen (Norwegian Chief of Defence)	ST7S2
	Bjørn Arild Gram (Norway's Minister of Defence)	ST7S2
Sweden's Chief of Defense Wants to Strengthen Military Presence in Northern Sweden (3 nov. 2022)	General Per Micael Bydén (Supreme Commander of the Swedish Armed Forces)	ST8
Highlights Canadian contributions to the Alliance (16 to 20 nov. 2022)	Admiral Rob Bauer (Chair of the NATO Military Committee)	ST9
Low Tension in the High North Should Still Be Our Aim (17 nov. 2022)	Espen Barth Eide (Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs)	ST10
Norway, Finland, and Sweden Increase Focus on the High North as Joint Operational Area (24 nov. 2022)	Bjørn Arild Gram (Norway's Minister of Defence)	ST11S1
	Antti Kaikkonen (Finland's Minister of Defense)	ST11S2
	Pål Jonson (Sweden's Minister of Defence)	ST11S3
Sweden Prepares for Massive Shift Within Security	Ulf Kristersson (Swedish Prime Minister)	ST12

and Defense (20 dec. 2022)		
"The End of the Era of Finnish Non-Alignment" (4 jan. 2023)	Sauli Niinistö (Finnish President)	ST13
Finland Explores New Direction for Its Arctic Policy (27 jan. 2023)	Henrik Haapajärvi (Finland's State Secretary)	ST14
US Senator for Alaska: "We are Sending an Important Message to Russia" (2 feb. 2023)	Lisa Murkowski (US Senator for Alaska)	ST15
The Nordic Region Strengthens Double-Edged Defense Cooperation With the US (17 feb. 2023)	Jakob Gustafsson (Swedish Defence Research Agency)	ST16
"Arctic remains essential to NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture", says Chair of the NATO Military Committee (2' and 21 oct. 2023)	Admiral Rob Bauer (Chair of the NATO Military Committee)	ST17
"Norway Must Sweeten the Deal to Keep the US' Interest," Says FNI Director (24 mar. 2023)	Iver B. Neumann (Director at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute)	ST18
US Department of Defense Working on Updated Arctic Strategy (5 apr. 2023)	Melissa Dalton (Assistant Sec. Department of Defense)	ST19
Norway's Prime Minister: "We Have To Take Care Of the Dialogue In The High North" (19 apr. 2023)	Jonas Gahr Støre (Norway's Prime Minister)	ST20
Iceland Authorises Visits by US Nuclear Submarines (25 apr. 2023)	Government of Iceland (Communicate)	ST21
Extremely Important to Also Focus On Reassurance in the High North (28 apr. 2023)	Knut Storberget (Chair of the Norwegian Defense Commission)	ST22
The Norwegian Defense Commission: The Defense Capability Must Be Significantly Strengthened. Now! (15 may 2023)	Knut Storberget (Chair of the Norwegian Defense Commission)	ST23
Ambitious Vision for Nordic Defence Cooperation in the Works (26 jun. 2023)	Pål Jonson (Sweden's Minister for Defence) Bjørn Arild Gram (Norway's Minister for Defence)	ST24S1 ST24S2
Chief of Norwegian Air Force Initiates Arctic Air Operations Center (17 aug. 2023)	Major General Rolf Folland (Chief of the Norwegian Air Force)	ST25
NATO Chief: "Great Powers Have No Right to "Spheres of Influence" Against Small Neighboring Countries" (18 aug. 2023)	General Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary)	ST26
Believes Norway's Cautiousness Toward Russia to Be Outdated (21 aug. 2023)	-Stian Jenssen (Director of the Private Office of the NATO Secretary General)	ST27S1
	-Lt. General Rune Jacobsen (Former Chief of the Army and the Norwegian Joint Headquarters)	ST27S2

	-Karsten Friis (Senior Researcher Karsten Friis at the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs) -Finnish MFA Elina Valtonen	ST27S3 ST27S4
Security in the Arctic is of Greatest Interest to France,” says French Commander (29 sep. 2023)	Commander Sébastien Chatelain (Military Attaché at the French Embassy in Norway)	ST28
The Pentagon's new Arctic strategy is scheduled to be launched at the beginning of next year, says Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Iris Ferguson at the Arctic Circle Assembly (25 oct. 2023)	Iris Ferguson (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Arctic and Global Resilience, the US)	ST29
NATO’s Military Leader: “We Must Be Prepared for Military Conflicts Arising in the Arctic” (30 oct. 2023)	Admiral Rob Bauer (Chair of the NATO Military Committee)	ST30
US Embassy Reopened Office in Northern Norway After Almost 30 Years (1 nov. 2023)	Elizabeth M. Allen (US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy)	ST31
“Icebreaking Gap” Will Require Coast Guard to Acquire Commercial Icebreaker Says New US Arctic Plan (2 nov. 2023)	Malte Humper (Nigh North News)	ST32
"We can obtain better security in the Arctic by looking to Norway" (7 nov. 2023)	Michael Peterson (US Naval War College)	ST33
Canada With Defense Policy Update on the Horizon (24 nov. 2023)	Bill Blair (Canada's Defense Minister)	ST34
The Government Is Fully Aware of the Threat Situation in the North” (24 nov. 2023)	Espen Barth Eide (Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs)	ST35
Change of command at the Norwegian Joint Headquarters in Bodø (29 nov. 2023)	Lt. General Yngve Odlo (former chief of Norwegian Joint Headquarter)	ST36
Lords Detect a More Demanding Arctic – Urge Greater UK Engagement in the Region (5 dec. 2023)	Lord Henry Ashton (Chair of the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee)	ST37
Broad Support for Defense Cooperation Agreement with the USA (15 dec. 2023)	Niklas Granholm (Swedish Defence Research Agency)	ST38
Alaska Congresswoman Wants U.S. Congress to Fund Icebreakers (19 dec. 2023)	Mary Peltola (U.S. Congresswoman for Alaska)	ST39
Researchers’ Response to the Swedish War Warning (22 jan. 2024)	Odd Jarle Borch (Professor of Strategy and Business Administration at Nord University. And leader of NORDLAB – Nord University laboratory for preparedness management)	ST40

New Agreement Secures Danish Drone Surveillance in the Arctic (24 jan. 2024)	Troels Lund Poulsen (Denmark's Minister of Defence)	ST41
Regaining Arctic Expertise: US Troops in Alaska Making Strides to Become the Army's Arctic Force (29 jan. 2024)	U.S. Army Major General Brian Eifler (Commanding General of the 11th Airborne Division)	ST42
The French Navy Strongly Present for Surveillance and Deterrence in the North (30 jan. 2024)	Commander Senior Grade Jean-Michel Pimbert (French frigate FS Bretagne)	ST43
Bidens Arctic Advisor: "Our Postures in The Arctic Have Changed" (31 jan. 2024)	David Balton (Executive Director at the Arctic Executive Steering Committee for the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy)	ST44
Nordic Response: Over 20 000 Soldiers From 13 Nations Will Practise Defending NATO's Northern Flank (2 feb. 2024)	Commander Senior Grade Thomas Gjesdal (Head of Communications for Nordic Response and the Norwegian Navy)	ST45
"Moscow Sees Its Posture in the Arctic As More Exposed Than Just a Few Years Ago" (13 feb. 2024)	-Vice Admiral Nils Andreas Stensønes (Chief of the Norwegian Intelligence Service)	ST46S1
	-Beate Gangås (Chief of the Norwegian Police Security Service)	ST46S2
	-Lars Christian Aamodt (Chief of the National Security Authority)	ST46S3
New Agreement Gives US Access to Four New Military Areas in the North (7 feb. 2024)	Bjørn Arild Gram (Norway's Minister of Defence)	ST47
US Strategic Bombers Deployed in Northern Sweden (27 feb. 2024)	US Air Forces in Europe (USAFE)	ST48
UK Aircraft Carrier in the North: "A Formidable Show of Strength" (15 mar. 2024)	Major General Rolf Folland (Chief of the Norwegian Air Force)	ST49
PM Støre: "Norway Will Reach NATO's 2 Percent Target Already This Year" (15 mar. 2024)	Jonas Gahr Støre (Norway's Prime Minister)	ST50
US Arctic Paratroopers Practised Rapid Deployment in Northern Norway (20 mar. 2024)	Brigade Nord Commander Terje Bruøygard	ST51
Finland's New President: "Fear is the Worst Possible Guiding Principle in Foreign Policy" (8 mar. 2024)	Alexander Stubb (President of Finland)	ST52
Finland's President and Norway's PM at Nordic Response: "A Historic Day for Many Reasons" (11 mar. 2024)	Alexander Stubb (Finland's President)	ST53S1
	Jonas Gahr Støre (Norway's Prime Minister)	ST53S2
Russia's Top Arctic Diplomat: Long-Term Cooperation in the Arctic Requires Conditions Now Lost (3 may. 2023)	Nicolay Korchunov, Russia's Arctic Ambassador and Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials	(Zakharova, 2022)

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Tartu, 20 May, 2024

Belén Padrón Salinas