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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Variation in states' discursive (de)legitimation of international institutions: The case of the Arctic Council

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Abstract

Governance institutions such as the Arctic Council face ongoing (de)legitimation that impacts the broader legitimacy beliefs which enable them to govern effectively. Research has increasingly studied how different actors engage in legitimation and delegitimation that bolster or challenge legitimacy, but there has been limited study of the variation in the (de)legitimation practices of individual states and the reasons for this variation. This article studies variation in discursive (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council by the United States and China. It advances a theoretical argument for how this variation in (de)legitimation is driven by broader political developments. Using content analysis, it maps these two states' (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council over a 12-year period and examines evidence for this theory. The article finds that both states vary considerably in their (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council over time. Changes in the intensity of their (de)legitimation are found to be linked to political developments including heightened security tensions, positive/negative shifts in environmental politics, and institutional changes. This contributes empirical evidence and new theoretical insights to the body of research about how different actors engage in (de)legitimation of global governance.

Keywords: Arctic Council; China; global governance; legitimation; United States

Introduction

In 2011, the United States (US) Secretary of State Hilary Clinton made a speech after an Arctic Council ministerial meeting, providing a resounding endorsement of the institution's role governing the region. Eight years later, the then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo instead used his speech to express grievances about Russia and China and raise questions about the Arctic Council in which they were given influence. These are examples of the ongoing discursive legitimation and delegitimation directed at the Arctic Council. Lacking legal or coercive means, the Council depends greatly on beliefs about its legitimacy to carry out governance. Because legitimation and delegitimation processes can impact these beliefs, it is vital to understand these. Although research has increasingly examined the varying support key stakeholders give the Arctic Council,[1] it has rarely focused on legitimation and delegitimation. We need to know not only whether states are broadly supporting the Arctic Council, but whether they bolster or challenge the legitimacy which allows it to provide governance.

[1]Torbjørn Pedersen, 'Debates over the role of the Arctic Council', *Ocean Development and International Law*, 43:2 (2012), pp. 146–56; Svein Vigeland Rottem, *The Arctic Council: Between Environmental Protection and Geopolitics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) pp. 91–5.

Research has increasingly studied the *legitimation* and *delegitimation* – or (de)legitimation – processes which can reinforce or challenge beliefs that a political institution's rule is rightful and appropriate.[2] This research is based on the recognition that these (de)legitimation processes matter because they can impact the legitimacy beliefs institutions depend upon to function effectively.[3] Much initial research has focused on how governance institutions engage in self-legitimation.[4] However, this agenda has broadened to study how other actors – including states, political and social elites, the media, and civil society – also engage in (de)legitimation practices directed towards institutions.[5] Research about variation in these practices has mostly examined (de)legitimation by different actors[6] and their use of different kinds of (de)legitimation.[7] There has been less research about how actors vary in their (de)legitimation practices over time: whether the intensity and tone (between legitimation or delegitimation) changes, and if so, what leads to this variation.

Some studies have begun to address these questions.[8] Kentikelenis and Voeten[9] analysed the varying extent that leaders' speeches in UN General Assembly debates between 1970 and 2018 supported or challenged global economic institutions. They found a trend of declining delegitimation and moderately increasing legitimation across this period. Although their data shows shorter-term variation in intensity of (de)legitimation, potentially tied to political events, they do not analyse this further. They also do not disaggregate to individual states. Because particular key states (such as the US) may have an outsized influence on the legitimacy of institutions, it is necessary to know how they separately engage in (de)legitimation over time, alongside studying the international community as a whole. It is often assumed particular states will consistently support or challenge institutions, but this does not always appear to be the case.

Schmidtke[10] studied variation in elite, rather than state, discursive (de)legitimation of the European Union (EU), G8, and United Nations (UN) in media articles from four Western democracies between 1998 and 2013. He found that the intensity of (de)legitimation these elites produced about each international organisation (IO) varied over time, with periods of high-/low-intensity legitimation and delegitimation. Notably, he also found evidence that political events including security crises and institutional reforms drive these shifts in intensity. This suggests broader

[2]Magdalena Bexell, Kristina Jönsson, and Anders Uhlin (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Martin Binder and Monika Heupel, 'The politics of legitimation in international organizations', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:3 (2021), pp. 1–18; Jens Steffek, 'The legitimation of international governance: A discourse approach', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9:2 (2003), pp. 249–75; Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations: Introduction and framework', *Review of International Organizations*, 14:4 (2019), pp. 581–606.

[3]Ian Hurd, 'Legitimacy and authority in international politics', *International Organization*, 53:2 (1999), pp. 379–408.

[4]Jennifer Gronau and Henning Schmidtke, 'The quest for legitimacy in world politics: International institutions' legitimation strategies', *Review of International Studies*, 42:3 (2016), pp. 535–57; Henning Schmidtke and Tobias Lenz, 'Expanding or defending legitimacy? Why international organizations intensify self-legitimation', *Review of International Organizations* (2023), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-023-09498-0}.

[5]Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance*; Anders Uhlin and Soetkin Verhaegen, 'Elites' (de)legitimation practices toward international organizations', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3:2 (2023), pp. 1–13.

[6]Binder and Heupel, 'The politics of legitimation in international organizations'; Uhlin and Verhaegen, 'Elites' (de)legitimation practices toward international organizations'.

[7]Karin Bäckstrand and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Explaining variation in legitimation and delegitimation practices', in Magdalena Bexell, Anders Uhlin, and Kristina Jönsson (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 74–95.

[8]Franziska Boehme, 'Exit, voice and loyalty: State rhetoric about the International Criminal Court', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 22:3 (2018), pp. 420–45; Alexander Kentikelenis and Erik Voeten, 'Legitimacy challenges to the liberal world order: Evidence from United Nations speeches, 1970–2018', *The Review of International Organizations*, 16:4 (2021), pp. 721–54; Henning Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media: Patterns and explanations', *Review of International Organizations*, 14:4 (2018), pp. 633–59.

[9]Kentikelenis and Voeten, 'Legitimacy challenges to the liberal world order'.

[10]Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media'.

political developments may be linked with actors' (de)legitimation, providing a potential reason for their variation over time. However, there has not been similar study of the (de)legitimation practices of state actors or for other types of governance institutions.

This article therefore expands on these studies of (de)legitimation by systematically mapping variation in individual states' legitimation and delegitimation of governance institutions and investigating how this is linked to broader political developments. It studies this through the case of the Arctic Council. This high-level intergovernmental forum was established in 1996 to provide governance over the Arctic, which may be defined as the geographical region within the Arctic Circle.[11] The Arctic Council makes a good case for studying institutional (de)legitimation and its links with political developments for three reasons. First, the Arctic Council is highly contested,[12] meaning there is likely to be considerable (de)legitimation of it. Second, the institution is at the centre of current geopolitical tensions, meaning that it is a good test for how these affect (de)legitimation. Third, researchers have described how 'Arctic exceptionalism' means the region is isolated from global security politics.[13] This means if we find political developments matter for (de)legitimation even in this hard case, they are likely to also matter elsewhere.

The growing body of research about the Arctic Council has studied how much participants broadly support the institution.[14] There have been studies showing how changes to its institutional design, and the admission of new participants, has affected support.[15] Others have studied how key states engage with the Arctic Council, including the US[16] and China.[17] However, these observations about states' support only partly capture how their approaches shift over time. There have also been very few studies focusing on (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council by states. This is a significant omission because the (de)legitimation of key states not only reflects their own support or challenge of the institution but can also affect broader legitimacy beliefs held by others.

[11]This is the area north of the Arctic Circle, latitude roughly 66°300'. It includes the Arctic Ocean and the northernmost parts of the eight Arctic states – Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands, although they are extensively self-governed), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States – and is home to approximately 4 million people. {https://www.rgs.org/schools/resources-for-schools/arctic-governance-and-the-arctic-council}.

[12]Pedersen, 'Debates over the role of the Arctic Council'.

[13]Gabriella Gricius and Erin B. Fitz, 'Can exceptionalism withstand crises? An evaluation of the Arctic Council's response to climate change and Russia's war on Ukraine', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:3 (2022), pp. 1–6; Juha Käpylä and Harri Mikkola, 'On Arctic exceptionalism: Critical reflections in the light of the Arctic sunrise case and the crisis in Ukraine', FIIA Working Paper, 85 (7 April 2015), available at: {https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/on-arctic-exceptionalism}.

[14]Piotr Graczyk, Malgorzata Smieszek, Timo Koivurova, and Adam Stępień, 'Preparing for the global rush: The Arctic Council, institutional norms, and socialisation of observer behaviour', in Katherine Keil and Sebastian Knecht (eds), *Governing Arctic Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), chapter 7, pp. 121–39; Valur Ingimundarson, 'Managing a contested region: The Arctic Council and the politics of Arctic governance', *Polar Journal*, 4:1 (2014), pp. 183–98; Sebastian Knecht, 'The politics of Arctic international cooperation: Introducing a dataset on stakeholder participation in Arctic Council meetings, 1998–2015', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:2 (2017), pp. 203–23; Pedersen, 'Debates over the role of the Arctic Council'; Jennifer Spence, 'Is a melting Arctic making the Arctic Council too cool? Exploring the limits to the effectiveness of a boundary organization', *Review of Policy Research*, 34:6 (2017), pp. 790–811.

[15]Matthew D. Stephen and Kathrin Stephen, 'The integration of emerging powers into club institutions: China and the Arctic Council', *Global Policy*, 11:S3 (2020), pp. 51–60.

[16]Zengjun Kuang, 'New developments in US Arctic strategy and their implications for Arctic governance', *China International Studies*, 99 (2023), pp. 107–26; Annika E. Nilsson, 'The United States and the making of an Arctic nation', *Polar Record*, 54:2 (2018), pp. 95–107; David L. Larson, 'United States interests in the Arctic region', *Ocean Development and International Law*, 21:2 (1990), pp. 167–91; Evan T. Bloom, 'United States perspectives on the Arctic', in Dawn Alexandrea Berry, Nigel Bowles, and Halbert Jones (eds), *Governing the North American Arctic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 233–41.

[17]Reinhard Biedermann, 'The polar Silk Road: China's multilevel Arctic strategy to globalize the Far North', *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations*, 6:2 (2020), pp. 571–615; Martin Kossa, 'China's Arctic engagement: Domestic actors and foreign policy', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, 32:1 (2020), pp. 19–38; Brianne Wodiske, 'Preventing the melting of the Arctic Council: China as a permanent observer and what it means for the Council and the environment', *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review*, 36 (2014), pp. 305–30.

This article contributes to the literatures about (de)legitimation and the Arctic Council by asking two main questions: first, how does the discursive (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council by key states vary over time? Second, do political developments contribute to shaping the (de)legitimation which these states produce?

It answers these questions by mapping variation in the discursive (de)legitimation practices of two key actors, the US and China, towards the Arctic Council between 2010 and 2022. It presents a systematic content analysis of documents from the US State Department and Chinese state media (*Xinhua*) during this period. This analysis aims to capture changes in the tone (between legitimation and delegitimation) and intensity of statements about the Arctic Council. A second step in the analysis then investigates whether these statements are made in connection with references to political developments.

The article makes an empirical and a theoretical contribution. Empirically, it systematically maps two key stakeholders' variation in discursive (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council over a decade. This understanding contributes to research focused on (de)legitimation, providing novel data about a previously unexplored case. It can also be of benefit to policymakers involved with the Arctic Council. Theoretically, the article advances an argument for how different kinds of political events/developments may produce variation in states' (de)legitimation practices and examines evidence for this within the data. It identifies types of political developments that may be linked with increases in the intensity of states' discursive legitimation or delegitimation. There has been relatively little theorising about what shapes actors' (de)legitimation, so this provides a foundation for future research testing explanations of variation.

The next section introduces the case of the Arctic Council and previous research on state engagement and discourse about this, focusing on the US and China. It motivates the need to examine their (de)legitimation. The article then provides a theoretical framework describing how (de)legitimation is conceptualised and outlining expected connections between discursive (de)legitimation and political developments. It presents the content analysis method used to examine the US and China's discursive (de)legitimation. After this, the analytical findings are presented. The article then discusses their implications for our understanding of (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council and wider global governance.

Research about the US and China's approaches to Arctic governance

The Arctic is changing rapidly due to climate change, which is also leading to increased economic activity in the region. As the ice melts, it increases the potential for resource extraction in the region and also for global states to utilise shorter polar shipping routes as an alternative to the Suez Canal.[18] This means the Arctic and its governance institutions are attracting increased attention from states across the world, including the major Asian states.[19] Previously, some ascribed to the Arctic an 'exceptionalism' which kept it detached from global political dynamics.[20] However, there is increasing geopolitical competition in the region and a concurrent increase in military activity.[21] Russia has significantly increased its military presence in the region over the last decade, while the US has responded with its own expansion of military activity.[22] The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which saw Sweden and Finland opt to join NATO, has only

[18]Emilie Broek, 'The Arctic Is Hot: Addressing the Social and Environmental Implications', SIPRI (September 2023), available at: {https://www.sipri.org/publications/2023/sipri-policy-briefs/arctic-hot-addressing-social-and-environmental-implications}.

[19]Angela Wang, 'The rise of Asian state actors in the Arctic', *Asia Policy*, 18:1 (2023), pp. 5–11.

[20]Käpylä and Mikkola, 'On Arctic exceptionalism'.

[21]Matthew Gross, 'Geopolitical competition in the Arctic Circle', *Harvard International Review*, 2 (December 2020), available at: {https://hir.harvard.edu/the-arctic-circle/}.

[22]Mike Baker, 'How the US military is preparing for an Arctic future with eyes on Russia', *The New York Times* (27 March 2022), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/27/us/army-alaska-arctic-russia.html}.

furthered these trends and exacerbated military tensions in the region,[23] straining the region's 'exceptionalism'.[24]

Regional governance has been established to respond to the changes occurring in the Arctic. The Arctic Council is one of the main forms of such governance.[25] Established in 1996, it was initially focused on environmental cooperation but has gradually expanded its mandate and authority,[26] while continuing to exclude security from its mandate. The organisation has eight member states (the US, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, and Russia) and six permanent participants (representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples). Other states and organisations can obtain observer status, allowing them to contribute but not make decisions. This observer status depends on the Arctic states' consensus and remains conditional once granted, subject to periodic renewal.[27]

Existing research has increasingly studied states' participation and support for Arctic governance institutions,[28] indicating that this varies over time. It has been argued that US participation in Arctic governance immediately after the Cold War was limited.[29] This apathy lasted until 2009 when growing climate change concerns drove greater engagement.[30] The broader shift to unilateralism under Trump, and increasing securitisation of the Arctic, has been shown to produce further shifts in US participation and renewed ambivalence.[31]

Focusing on the Arctic Council, studies similarly find varied US participation. They describe how the US gave only limited support to the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) which preceded the Council[32] and was unenthusiastic about initial proposals for an Arctic Council.[33] It became a more engaged participant in the 2000s,[34] spearheading several of the Arctic Council's major achievements.[35] The 2009 Obama presidency brought further increases in US support for the Arctic Council, which continued in the run-up to and during the US chairmanship from 2015–17.[36] However, since then, it is argued the US has decreased support and is instead focused on bilateral relationships, possibly because of growing security concerns.[37] While showing

[23]Colin Wall and Njord Wegge, 'The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War', Center for Strategic and International Studies (25 January 2023), available at: {https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war}.

[24]Tomasz Branka, 'The end of Arctic exceptionalism? New Arctic approach after February 24, 2022', *Przeglad Strategiczny*, 15 (2022), pp. 373–92; Gricius and Fitz, 'Can exceptionalism withstand crises?'.

[25]Other institutions involved in Arctic governance include the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and groupings such as the Arctic Five.

[26]Cayla Calderwood and Frances Ann Ulmer, 'The central Arctic Ocean fisheries moratorium: A rare example of the precautionary principle in fisheries management', *Polar Record*, 59:1 (2023), pp. 1–14.

[27]Danita Catherine Burke and Teale N. Phelps Bondaroff, 'Becoming an Arctic Council NGO observer', *Polar Record*, 54:5–6 (2018), pp. 349–59.

[28]Gricius and Fitz, 'Can exceptionalism withstand crises?'; Paula Kankaanpää and Oran R. Young, 'The effectiveness of the Arctic Council', *Polar Research*, 31 (2012), available at: {http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/polar.v31i0.17176}; Knecht, 'The politics of Arctic international cooperation'.

[29]Roman S. Czarny, 'U.S. and the Arctic in the last two decades', *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences*, 16:2 (2018), pp. 190–206; Rob Huebert, 'United States Arctic Policy: The Reluctant Arctic Power', University of Calgary School of Public Policy Publication Series, 2:2 (May 2009), available at: {https://ssrn.com/abstract=3053702}; Nilsson, 'The United States and the making of an Arctic nation'.

[30]Nilsson, 'The United States and the making of an Arctic nation'.

[31]Kuang, 'New developments in US Arctic strategy and their implications for Arctic governance'.

[32]Nilsson, 'The United States and the making of an Arctic nation'; Oran R. Young, *Creating Regimes: Arctic Accords and International Governance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[33]Nilsson, 'The United States and the making of an Arctic nation'; Bloom, 'United States perspectives on the Arctic'.

[34]Bloom, 'United States perspectives on the Arctic'.

[35]Elana Wilson Rowe and Helge Blakkisrud, 'The Arctic Council and US Domestic Policymaking', Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (January 2019), available at: {https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19880}.

[36]Nilsson, 'The United States and the making of an Arctic nation'.

[37]Kuang, 'New developments in US Arctic strategy and their implications for Arctic governance'.

broader trends in the US's Arctic Council participation, studies remain divided about the timing of its shifts in approach and what factors drove these changes.

For China, research debates the extent it has supported or challenged forms of Arctic governance.[38] Some studies argue it is increasingly revisionist and uses 'lawfare' to contest Arctic institutions,[39] while others propose it is status quo orientated and has largely supported regional institutions,[40] Many of the latter suggest that while China mostly shows support, it still pushes for reforms,[41] particularly greater inclusion of non-Arctic states and recognition of their rights.[42] Sørensen[43] argues that China has become more assertive but continues supporting institutions because it recognises how these prevent Arctic states from monopolising the region.

China has participated as an ad hoc observer in the Arctic Council since 2007.[44] In 2008, it began to officially express an intention to become an observer of the organisation, and it was granted observer status in 2013.[45] China has been found to display varied participation and support for the institution. While studies describe its considerable support in the early 2010s as part of its bid for observer status,[46] some argue that since then its supportive statements have declined.[47] The 2018 Arctic white paper, China's first comprehensive Arctic policy document, made few references to the Arctic Council.[48] While some studies have argued Chinese compliance with the Council's observer criteria shows its institutional support,[49] others instead have suggested that China challenges these criteria,[50] that it has shown steady participation in the Arctic Council's Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) and ministerial meetings, but limited participation in working groups.[51] Some argue that rather than the Arctic Council, China increasingly pursues involvement in other institutions where it can have greater influence.[52]

There have therefore been a number of studies showing that both the US and China vary over time in their engagement with Arctic governance institutions and particularly the Arctic Council. However, this research has not systematically evaluated these shifts or approached this topic from the perspective of (de)legitimation. Studying how the two states engage in discursive

[38]M. Taylor Fravel, Kathryn Lavelle, and Liselotte Odgaard, 'China engages the Arctic: A great power in a regime complex', *Asian Security*, 18:2 (2022), pp. 138–58; Mia M. Bennett, 'How China sees the Arctic: Reading between extraregional and intraregional narratives', *Geopolitics*, 20:3 (2015), pp. 645–68.

[39]Andrea Beck, 'China's strategy in the Arctic: A case of lawfare?', *Polar Journal*, 4:2 (2014), pp. 306–18; Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[40]Nong Hong, 'Emerging interests of non-Arctic countries in the Arctic: A Chinese perspective', *Polar Journal*, 4:2 (2014), pp. 271–86; Su Ping and Marc Lanteigne, 'China's developing Arctic policies: Myths and misconceptions', *Journal of China and International Relations*, 3:1 (2015), pp. 1–25.

[41]Timo Koivurova, Sanna Kopra, Marc Lanteigne, and Adam Stepień., 'China's Arctic policy', in Timo Koivurova and Sanna Kopra (eds), *Chinese Policy and Presence in the Arctic* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), chapter 3, pp. 25–41; Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Gaoqi Zhang, 'Northern Expedition: China's Arctic Activities and Ambitions', Brookings (April 2021), available at: {https://www.brookings.edu/articles/northern-expedition-chinas-arctic-activities-and-ambitions/}.

[42]Hong, 'Emerging interests of non-Arctic countries in the Arctic'; Nengye Liu, 'China's emerging Arctic policy: What are the implications for Arctic governance?', *Jindal Global Law Review*, 8:1 (2017), pp. 55–68; Yuanyuan Ren and Dan Liu, 'A rule follower, a challenger, or a learner? Recasting China's engagement in the Arctic', *The Yearbook of Polar Law Online*, 9:1 (2019), pp. 201–42.

[43]Camilla T. N. Sørensen, 'China is in the Arctic to stay as a great power: How China's increasingly confident, proactive and sophisticated Arctic diplomacy plays into Kingdom of Denmark tensions', in Lasse Heininen and Pirot Exner (eds), *Arctic Yearbook 2018* (University of the Arctic, 2018), available at: {https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2018/}.

[44]Nong Hong, *China's Role in the Arctic: Observing and Being Observed* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2020).

[45]Hong, *China's Role in the Arctic*.

[46]Bennett, 'How China sees the Arctic'.

[47]Biedermann, 'The polar Silk Road'.

[48]Mariia Kobzeva, 'China's Arctic policy: Present and future', *Polar Journal*, 9:1 (2019), pp. 94–112; Koivurova et al., China's Arctic policy'.

[49]Ping and Lanteigne, 'China's developing Arctic policies'; Wodiske, 'Preventing the melting of the Arctic Council'.

[50]Hong, 'Emerging interests of non-Arctic countries in the Arctic'.

[51]Graczyk et al., 'Preparing for the global rush'.

[52]Biedermann, 'The polar Silk Road'; Ren and Liu, 'A rule follower, a challenger, or a learner?'.

(de)legitimation of the Arctic Council provides an effective way of capturing their changing approaches and the implications of this for the perceived legitimacy of the Arctic Council.

Theoretical framework

Global governance institutions are continuously impacted by (de)legitimation processes which can affect legitimacy beliefs about them.[53] Legitimacy beliefs are societal perceptions that an institution's authority is appropriately exercised.[54] Institutions may benefit from forms of *legitimation*, or processes that can reinforce legitimacy beliefs about them. Alternatively, they may face *delegitimation*, or processes that challenge these beliefs. These processes of legitimation and delegitimation are typically an evaluation of the rightfulness and appropriateness of the institution's exercise of authority based on a set of criteria,[55] rather than broader endorsement or criticism.

There is ongoing debate about whether (de)legitimation is a strategic action, deliberately undertaken to achieve a goal, or a practice.[56] Following other recent research, this article treats (de)legitimation as a social practice which is sometimes but not always deliberate.[57] This better captures how actors engage in (de)legitimation, recognising it can also be unintentional.

Bäckstrand and Söderbaum[58] categorise (de)legitimation practices as either discursive (statements evaluating the institution), behavioural (actions such as giving or withdrawing funding), or institutional (changes to the institution to increase legitimacy). This article focuses on discursive practices, viewing these as a main way actors engage in (de)legitimation of governance institutions. Institutional practices mainly involve an organisation's self-legitimation.[59] Although behavioural (de)legitimation is also important (as with the US denial of funding to UN bodies), this is normally accompanied by discursive practices which have a larger audience.

Discursive practices of *legitimation* and *delegitimation* involve actors making statements, either spoken or written, which have the potential to enhance or diminish beliefs about the appropriateness of an institution's authority.[60] When actors make discursive statements, evaluating an institution's appropriateness, they do so based on normative criteria they hold.[61] A statement of *legitimation* can therefore be defined as a positive evaluation that an institution complies with specific normative criteria.[62] For example, a statement that the 'UN General Assembly accepts all sovereign states as equal participants' is legitimation of the institution based on normative criteria of inclusion and fairness. Meanwhile, a statement of *delegitimation* can be seen as a negative evaluation that an institution does not adhere to certain normative criteria.[63] For example, someone

[53] Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance*.

[54] Lisa Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, 'The social legitimacy of international organisations: Interest representation, institutional performance, and confidence extrapolation in the United Nations', *Review of International Studies*, 41:3 (2015), pp. 451–75; Tallberg and Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations'.

[55] Karin Bäckstrand and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance', in Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand, and Jan Aart Scholte (eds), *Legitimacy in Global Governance: Sources, Processes, and Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), chapter 6, pp. 101–18; Magdalena Bexell, 'Global governance, legitimacy and (de)legitimation', *Globalizations*, 11:3 (2014), pp. 289–99.

[56] Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance*.

[57] Bäckstrand and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance'.

[58] Bäckstrand and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance'.

[59] Uhlin and Verhaegen, 'Elites' (de)legitimation practices toward international organizations'.

[60] Bexell, 'Global governance, legitimacy and (de)legitimation'.

[61] Bexell, 'Global governance, legitimacy and (de)legitimation'; Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media'.

[62] Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media', p. 637, states that legitimacy communication with 'positive tone signals normative support … Negative tone indicates that elites perceive a mismatch between their legitimacy standards and IOs' institutional design, purpose, or policymaking.'

[63] Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media'.

might say that 'the IMF voting quotas do not reflect states' current global standing', to express a discrepancy between the institution and a normative criterion of fairness.

Discursive (de)legitimation is therefore a communicative process involving statements an actor makes to justify or contest an organisation's authority vis-à-vis different target audiences. These audiences can include other states, participants in organisations, and the public domestically and overseas.[64] Global governance institutions involve the participation of many stakeholders, meaning the legitimacy beliefs of all these audiences are potentially important.

Different actors engage in (de)legitimation of governance institutions.[65] These include member states, non-member states, and non-state actors, either involved in or the recipients of governance. Global governance institutions also engage in extensive self-legitimation.[66] Much recent research has focused on (de)legitimation by elites[67] or non-state actors.[68] While recognising these actors' role in (de)legitimation, this article focuses on state actors affiliated with an organisation because these are considered particularly important in shaping legitimacy beliefs.[69] Research has shown governments can sway public legitimacy beliefs about international institutions,[70] underpinning the importance of examining states' (de)legitimation. This article therefore focuses on the political representatives charged with speaking on behalf of the state. When these actors evaluate an institution, this should be seen as the official attitude of the state they represent, rather than their own individual views.

The link between (de)legitimation and political developments

After mapping variation in the intensity and tone of (de)legitimation, the article then investigates whether this variation is linked with global political developments. The connection between (de)legitimation practices and political events is an area lacking testable pre-existing theories and empirical studies from which new theories can be developed. This article is therefore a first attempt to explore this relationship. However, previous research allows formulation of theoretical arguments.

This study adopts a constructivist approach to how state actors form their positions regarding institutions, seeing these as shaped by a combination of interaction within institutions and domestic policymaking processes.[71] It theorises that global political developments may affect states' legitimation and delegitimation practices because these developments can change understandings about the world. The actors making (de)legitimation statements (in this article 'state actors' or those speaking for the state) can be seen as embedded within a social, intersubjectively formed

[64] Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance*.

[65] Bäckstrand and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance'; Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance*.

[66] Schmidtke and Lenz, 'Expanding or defending legitimacy?'.

[67] Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media'; Lisa Dellmuth, Jan Aart Scholte, Soetkin Verhaegen, and Jonas Tallberg, *Citizens, Elites, and the Legitimacy of Global Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Anders Uhlin and Soetkin Verhaegen, 'Practices of (de)legitimation in global governance: A comparative overview', in Magdalena Bexell, Anders Uhlin, and Kristina Jönsson (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) pp. 49–73.

[68] Klaus Dingwerth, Antonia Witt, Ina Lehmann, Ellen Reichel, and Tobias Weise, *International Organizations Under Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Jan Aart Scholte, 'Civil society and the legitimation of global governance', *NGO Management*, 3:3 (2020), pp. 98–112; Eero Vaara, 'Struggles over legitimacy in the Eurozone crisis: Discursive legitimation strategies and their ideological underpinnings', *Discourse and Society*, 25:4 (2014), pp. 500–18.

[69] Jonathan Symons, 'The legitimation of international organisations: Examining the identity of the communities that grant legitimacy', *Review of International Studies*, 37:5 (2011), pp. 2557–83.

[70] Lisa Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, *Legitimacy Politics: Elite Communication and Public Opinion in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[71] Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'International norms and domestic politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:4 (1997), pp. 473–95.

set of understandings about the world.[72] The US government and Chinese party-state both have socially constructed understandings related to broader societal understandings. When they make a (de)legitimation statement evaluating a government institution, state actors will draw upon this broader set of understandings.

Research has found actors' (de)legitimation is influenced by two factors,[73] both of which are shaped by broader understandings. First, actors' ideological positions and attitudes impact their (de)legitimation practices. These attitudes may be based on those of the societies in which they are embedded.[74] This means that if political developments lead to a shift in broader societal attitudes, this may translate into a shift in the attitudes of state actors, resulting in changes to their (de)legitimation.

Second, the legitimacy beliefs actors hold themselves (or their confidence in an institution) also affect their (de)legitimation. When actors have greater belief in an institution, they are more likely to engage in legitimation of it, while less belief can lead to delegitimation.[75] Constructivist legitimacy research has argued that broader societal understandings shape individual legitimacy beliefs, forming the normative criteria on which these are based.[76] Political developments can be expected to change these societal understandings, impacting on the legitimacy beliefs of actors and thus how they engage in (de)legitimation.

Different types of political developments are likely to contribute to shaping (de)legitimation practices in distinct ways. This article concentrates on three main categories of political developments: (1) increased security and economic tensions between states; (2) environmental developments; (3) institutional changes. The following section discusses possible ways these three types of political developments might change understandings and so contribute to shaping legitimation and delegitimation of institutions by states (particularly major powers). However, for all three categories, the impact on (de)legitimation is likely to depend on the specific development and the context in which it occurs. How any particular political development shapes (de)legitimation practices towards a specific IO needs to be empirically researched. This article provides initial study of the connection between political developments and (de)legitimation, where the study of causal effects of specific political events is left for future research.

Increased security and economic tensions

Increased security or economic tensions between major states might be expected to lead to more delegitimation of the relevant institution. Increased tensions can lead to a decline in societal trust regarding other members of the institution, something shown to be critical to state support of organisations.[77] Research has indicated that states' views of other IO members, especially their ideological proximity with the US, are related to their tendency to express support for the institution.[78] If increased tensions shift these views about other members, they are likely to make the state produce more delegitimation (Table 1[a]). For instance, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine almost certainly impacted other states' understanding about regional institutions such as the Arctic Council where Russia plays a significant role.

[72]Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities & Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[73]Uhlin and Verhaegen, 'Elites' (de)legitimation practices toward international organizations'.

[74]Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–917; Sabine Saurugger, 'Constructivism and public policy approaches in the EU: From ideas to power games', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20:6 (2013), pp. 888–906.

[75]Uhlin and Verhaegen, 'Elites' (de)legitimation practices toward international organizations'.

[76]Steven Bernstein, 'Legitimacy in intergovernmental and non-state global governance', *Review of International Political Economy*, 18:1 (2011), pp. 17–51; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 'The social legitimacy of international organisations'.

[77]Brian C. Rathbun, 'Before hegemony: Generalized trust and the creation and design of international security organizations', *International Organization*, 65:2 (2011), pp. 243–73.

[78]Martin Binder and Monika Heupel, 'The legitimacy of the UN Security Council: Evidence from recent General Assembly debates', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:2 (2015), pp. 238–50.

Table 1. Expected ways political developments shape (de)legitimation practices.

Political development	Subcategory political development	Contribution to shaping (de)legitimation
Increased security and economic tensions between states	(a) Increased security/economic tensions	Increased delegitimation
Environmental developments	(b) Environmental/climate change development	Increased legitimation
	(c) Positive development in global environmental politics	Increased legitimation
	(d) Negative development in global environmental politics	Increased delegitimation (or possibly increased legitimation as a defence)
Institutional changes	(e) Increased institutional authority	Increased delegitimation (possible legitimation)
	(f) Change in institutional membership	Increased legitimation (possibly increased delegitimation dependent on new members)

Conversely, increased security or economic tensions could make states view an institution as more important, producing more legitimation (e.g. Sweden and Finland's increased support for NATO). However, this is less likely for major powers such as the US, China, and Russia, who are less focused on IOs' role protecting them. It is also unlikely these tensions will impact states' beliefs about organisations without a main mandate in security or economic issues, such as the Arctic Council. Because these organisations' problem-solving function is not resolving security or economic conflicts, they are unlikely to be viewed as more important because of increased tensions in these areas.

Environmental developments

Environmental developments can be divided into environmental changes and political responses to these changes. For institutions providing environmental governance, it can be expected that changes to the environment (particularly climate change) will contribute to shaping the (de)legitimation that states direct towards them. These developments may lead to greater societal recognition of the importance of an issue. Increased societal recognition about the significance of climate change has been shown to increase public support for policies to address this issue,[79] and research has indicated that experience of extreme weather events reinforces views favouring climate cooperation.[80] These changes in societal understanding may then shape government approaches to international cooperation. We could therefore expect that developments such as evidence of climate change, or extreme weather events, will result in increased state legitimation of institutions like the Arctic Council (Table 1[b]). Although these developments could lead to views that cooperation is failing, producing more delegitimation, this is less likely. The sense that cooperation has failed still implies a recognition that there is a problem to be solved and that IOs are therefore important. The sense of the importance of cooperation may override lack of confidence, particularly when few alternative institutions exist.

A second kind of environmental developments are those in the international regime tackling environmental problems. Here, positive political developments in global environmental politics

[79]Sam Crawley, Hilde Coffé, and Ralph Chapman, 'Climate belief and issue salience: Comparing two dimensions of public opinion on climate change in the EU', *Social Indicators Research*, 162:1 (2022), pp. 307–25; Stefan Linde, 'Political communication and public support for climate mitigation policies: A country-comparative perspective', *Climate Policy*, 18:5 (2018), pp. 543–55.

[80]Peter D. Howe, 'Extreme weather experience and climate change opinion', *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 42 (2021), pp. 127–31.

may have 'spillover' impacts on state (de)legitimation of other environmental institutions. These developments may shift societal understanding, increasing belief in multilateral institutions. Research found successful UN climate change summits, such as the 2015 Paris conference, have a positive effect on broader beliefs about environmental cooperation.[81] We could therefore expect this kind of political event to increase discursive legitimation for environmental institutions such as the Arctic Council (Table 1[c]).

How negative political developments in global environmental politics contribute to shaping (de)legitimation is more ambiguous (Table 1[d]). Negative events may damage belief in the role of multilateral institutions, adversely affecting belief in climate cooperation in a way that produces increased delegitimation. Research has argued that the failures of the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference lowered people's broader faith in state-led multilateral environmental governance[82] and that former president Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement hurt faith in broader governance.[83] However, these negative events may also spur defence of institutions, resulting in more legitimation. It has therefore also been argued that Trump's withdrawal boosted the UN climate regime's legitimacy.[84]

Institutional changes

Developments involving the institution itself can be expected to change societal understandings and so contribute to shaping state (de)legitimation about it.[85] General institutional changes have been shown to result in increased intensity of legitimacy communication, both positive and negative.[86] Research showed that transition from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to the World Trade Organization (WTO) increased state delegitimation.[87] When it comes to IO authority, some research holds that increased authority leads to more delegitimation,[88] or to increased self-legitimation,[89] but the effect is debated. Increased authority could result in perceptions that democratic involvement is reduced and contribute to more delegitimation (Table 1[e]). It could also make people view the organisation as more effective, producing greater legitimation. Finally, changes to institutional membership may also affect (de)legitimation, but the tone could depend on who new members are (Table 1[f]). Generally, admitting members and decreasing inclusivity might be expected to produce increased state legitimation. However, states might also react negatively to the inclusion of other actors.

This does not propose political developments are the only factor affecting discursive (de)legitimation. Other factors potentially shaping the (de)legitimation of governance institutions could include the institutional processes actors are involved in or their own political goals. The above argument proposes that political developments, alongside such other factors, can *contribute* to

[81] Eva Lövbrand, Mattias Hjerpe, and Björn-Ola Linnér, 'Making climate governance global: How UN climate summitry comes to matter in a complex climate regime', *Environmental Politics*, 26:4 (2017), pp. 580–99.

[82] Matthew J. Hoffmann, *Climate Governance at the Crossroads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[83] Sheila D. Collins, 'America First: The Trump effect on climate change policy', in Castro Joana Pereiria and André Saramago (eds), *Non-Human Nature in World Politics* (Berlin: Springer, 2020), pp. 179–203.

[84] Mark Cooper, 'Governing the global climate commons: The political economy of state and local action, after the U.S. flip-flop on the Paris Agreement', *Energy Policy*, 118 (2018), pp. 440–54; Laura von Allwörden, 'When contestation legitimizes: The norm of climate change action and the US contesting the Paris Agreement', *International Relations* (2024), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1177/004711782312228}.

[85] Tobias Lenz and Lora Anne Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change in international organisations: A cognitive approach', *Review of International Studies*, 43:5 (2017), pp. 939–61.

[86] Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media'.

[87] Kentikelenis and Voeten, 'Legitimacy challenges to the liberal world order'.

[88] Dingwerth et al., *International Organizations Under Pressure*; Monika Heupel, Gisela Hirschmann, and Michael Zürn, 'International organisations and human rights', *Review of International Studies*, 44:2 (2018), pp. 343–66; Schmidtke and Lenz, 'Expanding or defending legitimacy?'.

[89] Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, 'Self-legitimation in the face of politicization: Why international organizations centralized public communication', *Review of International Organizations*, 13:4 (2018), pp. 519–46; Schmidtke and Lenz, 'Expanding or defending legitimacy?'.

shaping states' discursive (de)legitimation practices. This article does not attempt to demonstrate a causal relationship between certain political developments and changes in state (de)legitimation. Instead, it provides initial investigation of connections, looking for evidence of relationships using content analysis.

Materials and methods

This article studied the US and China's discursive (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council. These two states were chosen because they are key states in the international system and are both important actors in Arctic governance and the Arctic Council.[90] Rather than focusing on one state, study of their (de)legitimation practices side by side provides a fuller picture of how multiple stakeholders reinforce or challenge the Arctic Council's legitimacy. It allowed analysis of whether the US and China respond to each other in their participation and (de)legitimation of institutions (see for example Cui).[91] It also allows for comparisons between them.

The US was chosen because it is a key stakeholder in the Arctic Council and broader regional governance, a founding member of the institution vital to its effectiveness. China was selected because it is also important to the Arctic Council, and it offered several comparisons: between a Western and non-Western state, and between a full member and an observer. Russia could also have been studied. It is an important stakeholder in the Arctic and regional governance. The deteriorating relations between Russia and the West make it increasingly important to understand its shifting attitudes to the Arctic Council, assuming Russia will continue to be part of this organisation. However, currently in Arctic governance, and also in terms of studying the broader phenomenon of variation in (de)legitimation of IOs, Russia presents an atypical case. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine means that its role in different IOs has been radically disrupted, complicating any study of its ongoing (de)legitimation practices. The practical difficulties of studying Russia at this time also provide another reason for not choosing this case.

The timeframe was 2010–22. The study aimed to analyse the US and Chinese (de)legitimation over a decade, considering this sufficient to find variation. Beginning in 2012 would have given little time before China's 2013 leadership change and admission as an Arctic Council observer. For this reason, 2010 was chosen as the starting point. This period could potentially capture variation in (de)legitimation practices and political developments, which in the period included leadership changes (for the US, from Obama to Trump in 2017, and to Biden in 2021; for China, from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in 2013), changes to Arctic Council membership (with China and five other states becoming observers in 2013), and other political developments (launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative [BRI], the 2015 Paris Climate Conference).

Materials

The analysis used material from these 12 years that expressed US and Chinese official state views about the Arctic Council. For the US, the best source of these statements was considered to be press releases, information briefings, and transcripts of speeches produced by the US State Department. In China, the closest equivalent is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). However, unlike the US where the State Department produces virtually all documents about foreign relations, in China the MFA publishes only a limited amount. Instead, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tends to use state media to communicate about foreign affairs. For this reason, instead of MFA publications, this study used Chinese and English articles by the state news agency *Xinhua*.

[90] Page Wilson, 'Society, steward or security actor? Three visions of the Arctic Council', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 51:1 (2016), pp. 55–74.

[91] Shunji Cui, 'China–US climate cooperation: Creating a new model of major-country relations?', *Asian Perspective*, 42:2 (2018), pp. 239–64.

The state-run *Xinhua* functions as a news wire service. Many outlets within the state-dominated media sector in China republish *Xinhua* output. *Xinhua* is often described as the CCP's 'mouthpiece',[92] and it is its main means of communicating information from different governmental departments. For example, when China issued its 2018 Arctic white paper, *Xinhua* published both the full text and explanatory articles. Examination of MFA documents about the Arctic Council showed that the majority of these were also published by *Xinhua*.[93] While US State Department and *Xinhua* documents are not identical in status, this is less critical because this study seeks to compare the two states' broader patterns of (de)legitimation rather than a close/quantitative comparison of language used. Because the analysis considered material from China in both English and Chinese, it could capture Chinese government statements directed at both domestic and foreign audiences.

Factiva was used to search for all documents published between 2010 and 2022 containing the keyword 'Arctic Council' (or '北极理事会' in Chinese). Because Factiva's US State Department archive ended in 2019, this was supplemented by documents collected from the department's website. This produced 223 US State Department documents and 309 Chinese state media documents (149 in Chinese and 160 in English).

Method

This material was studied using content analysis where two coders read separate subsets of the documents.[94] Coder 1 read a random sample of half of the English-language documents, whereas Coder 2 read the other half of these and the Chinese-language texts.

The coding procedure involved two steps. The first step aimed to capture variation in the intensity and tone of (de)legitimation and used a code scheme based upon previous literature about legitimacy communication.[95] The second step examined connections between this variation and political developments using a code scheme based on the theoretical argument made above.

Step 1 identified statements of (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council within the material. Based on the theory described above, these statements were defined as evaluations about the appropriateness of the institution's exercise of authority using normative criteria.[96] To be recognised as (de)legitimation, a statement therefore had to be an evaluation of the Arctic Council linked with a particular normative criterion. The code scheme categorises the tone of statements as either *legitimation* or *delegitimation*, based on whether they positively or negatively evaluate the Arctic Council according to particular normative criteria. Statements were also coded for the normative criterion they invoked. The scheme therefore also listed of normative criteria aggregated from those discussed in previous literature,[97] with two additional criteria related to the Arctic Council added – 'contribution to the environment' and 'contribution to peace and stability'. While not used in the analysis, this coding of criteria was a validity check for the recognition of evaluative statements.

[92]Junhao Hong, 'From the world's largest propaganda machine to a multipurposed global news agency: Factors in and implications of *Xinhua*'s transformation since 1978', *Political Communication*, 28:3 (2011), pp. 377–93.

[93]A search on the MFA website for documents about the 'Arctic Council' published 2010–22 gave 43 articles, of which 24 were reproduced identically by *Xinhua*, 10 were reproduced in a varied form, and 9 were not reproduced. These 9 were mostly short news stories about diplomatic activities. One potentially important document was a transcript of a 2015 speech by Zhang Ming, available at: {https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/ 201510/t20151017_678393.html}, but this contained limited references to the Arctic Council and is thus unlikely to have affected the analysis.

[94]See Appendix C for intercoder reliability checks.

[95]Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin, *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance*; Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media'.

[96]Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media'.

[97]Clara Brandi, 'Club governance and legitimacy: The perspective of old and rising powers on the G7 and the G20', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 26:4 (2019), pp. 685–702; Dominik Zaum, *Legitimating International Organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

The analysis coded any statement that provided an evaluation of the Arctic Council and could increase or decrease societal legitimacy beliefs, disregarding actual impact, which is unknown. The unit of analysis was a single *statement* which could range from part of a sentence to multiple sentences to several full paragraphs. For the US material, the coders considered anything attributed to a US government representative. Some documents also contained transcripts of other actors, which were not considered. For the Chinese material, the coders also considered quotations within the articles. Because writing articles involves a choice to include such quotations, these were considered a part of Chinese state views.

The following are examples of the coding in this step. A statement that 'the [Finnish] prime minister said she hoped that the Arctic Council will remain "at the centre of Arctic cooperation"' (*Xinhua*, 18 February 2020) was treated as legitimation, because it evaluated the Arctic Council based on a criterion of 'effectiveness'. Another statement – 'China has observer status in the Arctic Council, but that status is contingent upon its respect for the sovereign rights of Arctic states … China's words and actions raise doubts about its intentions' (State Dept, 6 May 2019) – was considered delegitimation because it negatively evaluates the Arctic Council based on its 'inclusion' of China. The statement 'Finland is currently the chairman of the Arctic Council' (*Xinhua*, 19 December 2018) was not coded because it does not give an evaluation (for more examples, see Appendix B).

Step 2 of the coding identified references to political developments linked with these legitimacy evaluations. As described in the theory section, this article argues political developments may affect (de)legitimation practices because they change the understandings that lie behind these practices. When this occurs, we will likely see evidence for it within discourse. Texts will include references to political developments, and the understanding these create, alongside their (de)legitimation statements. A political development can be treated as *related* to a (de)legitimation statement, or to have informed the understanding this is based upon, if they appear in close proximity in the text.[98] For example, a speech by Trump moves from delegitimation of the World Health Organization (WHO) to Chinese industrial espionage, suggesting conflation of the two issues.[99] While textual analysis only offers a crude way of measuring how issues are connected in a (de)legitimation actor's understanding, it can be a first means of uncovering links between legitimacy communication and political developments.

This coding scheme is based on the theoretical arguments about political developments impact on (de)legitimation. It therefore contains sets of codes to capture varieties of the three main categories of political developments: (1) increased security and economic tensions between states; (2) environmental developments; and (3) institutional changes. The coders began with this preformulated list. In the first reading, other political developments were marked 'other' and noted. These were then added to the coding scheme for a second reading, allowing the coding to capture unexpected political developments. In this step, the paragraph containing the (de)legitimation statement and one paragraph either side were read to see if they contained one or more references to political developments in the coding scheme (see Appendix B for an example).

Results

This section first gives an overview of the variation found in the US and China's (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council. It then focuses in more detail on the pattern of (de)legitimation displayed by each state, commenting on how shifts in their practices correspond to global political developments. After this, it presents the findings from the second step regarding how references to political

[98] Although unrelated subjects might be mentioned together, topics alongside each other mostly relate, something in linguistics described as 'sequential implicativeness'. See Suzanne Eggins, *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).

[99] Available at: {https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-press-conference-transcript-on-china-hong-kong-and-the-who}.

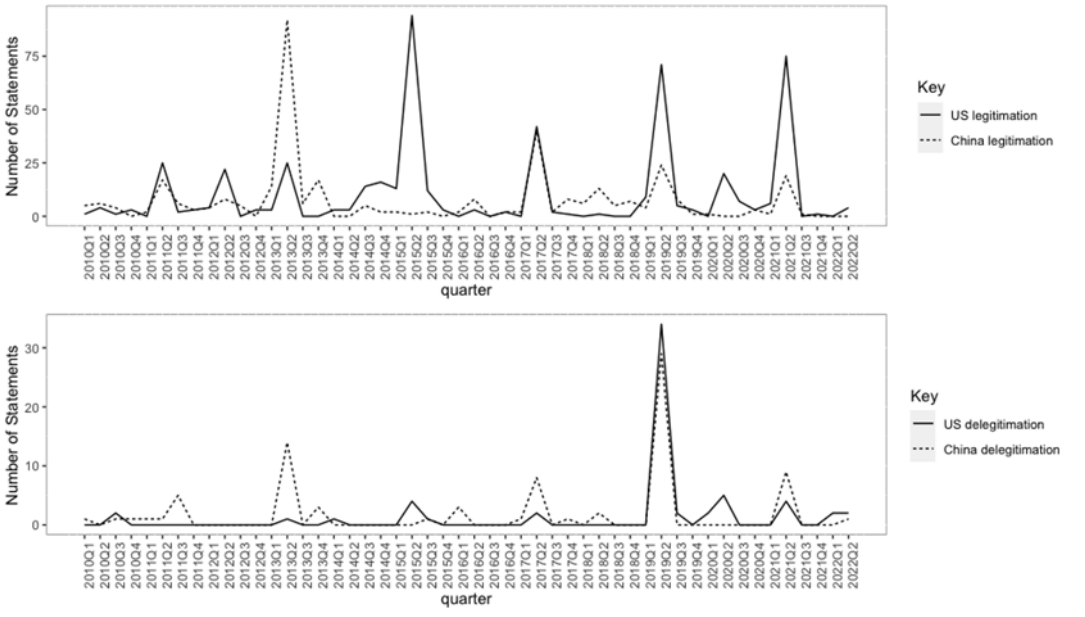

Figure 1. Variation in the US and China's discursive legitimation and delegitimation of the Arctic Council between 2010–22.

developments are related to change in the intensity of the US and China's (de)legitimation. Where a reference is made to codes in the coding scheme, this text is in italics.

Mapping of the US and China's statements between 2010 and 2022 revealed that both engage in extensive (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council (Figure 1). China produced 358 legitimation and 82 delegitimation statements in 309 documents. The US produced 507 legitimation and 62 delegitimation statements in 223 documents. Both states produced a combination of legitimation and delegitimation across the period, but supportive statements far outnumbered negative evaluations. This differs from some existing literature that has tended to present both as more critical,[100] where particularly China (as a latecomer and lacking influence) is generally viewed as challenging international institutions such as the Arctic Council.[101] Nevertheless, the fact that both still produced some delegitimation is also significant. In the case of the US, it shows that even a founding member of the Arctic Council and central stakeholder of the international liberal order (ILO) can also challenge it. More broadly, it indicates that as well as actors not affiliated with the organisation often focused on,[102] affiliated state actors also engage in delegitimation. Overall, while voicing occasional challenges, the US and China are supportive of the Arctic Council's governance and help maintain its legitimacy.

Both the US and China show considerable variation over time in their discursive (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council, switching between more and less legitimation and delegitimation at different times (Figure 2). This offers a nuanced picture of how the US and China engage with the Arctic Council. While studies have argued the US provides consistent support for the Arctic

[100]Biedermann, 'The polar Silk Road'; Nilsson, 'The United States and the making of an Arctic nation'.

[101]Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*.

[102]Dingwerth et al., *International Organizations Under Pressure*; Anders Uhlin and Catia Gregoratti, 'The interplay between delegitimation and legitimation', in Magdalena Bexell, Anders Uhlin, and Kristina Jönsson (eds), *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 96–112.

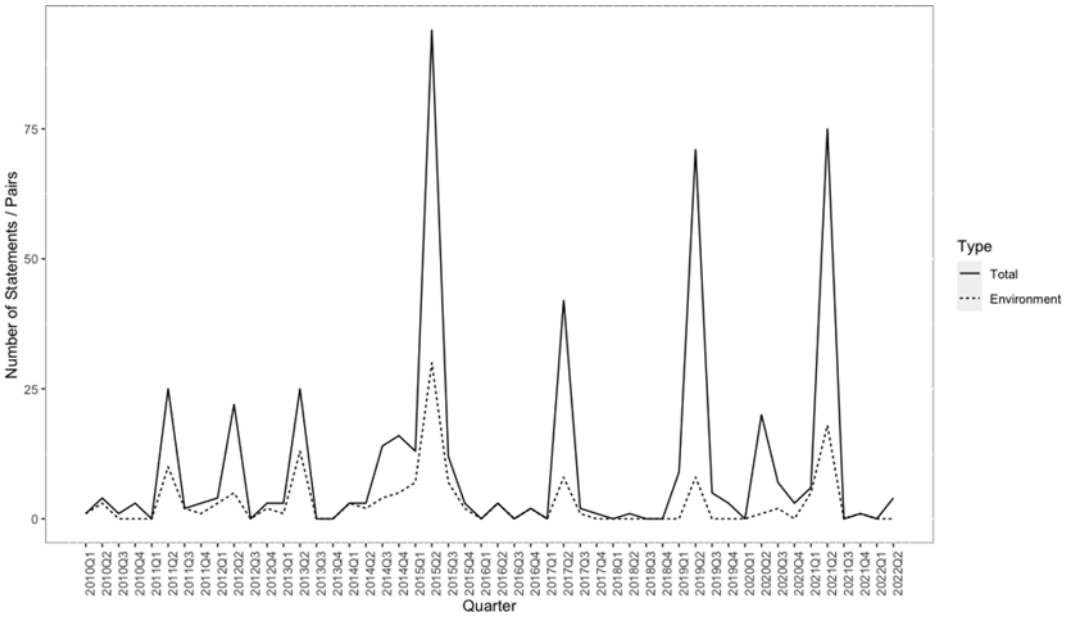

Figure 2. Total US legitimation statements and the number of references to environmental developments made alongside them, each quarter between 2010–22.

Council,[103] and China's support has diminished as it becomes more assertive,[104] neither is completely borne out by the data. Instead, both states to some extent fluctuate between more/less intense legitimation, with occasional intense delegitimation. This shifting intensity of (de)legitimation is similar to that Kentikelenis and Voeten[105] found for international economic institutions. Noticeably, in certain periods the US and China produce legitimation and delegitimation together, even making both kinds of statements within the same document, but the balance between types of statements varies.

There was very little alignment between the US and China's (de)legitimation patterns, or few situations where both countries increased or decreased their (de)legitimation at the same time. This indicates that the two states engage in (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council based on distinct concerns. This finding is a benefit of analysing the two states' (de)legitimation practices separately, rather than aggregating them as other studies have done.[106] One point where their communication corresponded was the second quarter of 2019, when both increased delegitimation. These parallel increases are likely linked to heightened great power tensions at the time. The correspondence might also suggest that the two states were reacting to each other.

The following section focuses more closely on the variation in each state's discursive (de)legitimation, noting how increases/decreases in (de)legitimation coincide with political developments. This starts to uncover links between political developments and increases in legitimation or delegitimation, which are then examined further.

US legitimation of the Arctic Council

The US provides relatively sustained *legitimation* of the Arctic Council throughout the 12 years (Figure 1), partly supporting the argument that as a founding member it provides ongoing

[103] Bloom, 'United States perspectives on the Arctic'.
[104] Biedermann, 'The polar Silk Road'; Sørensen, 'China is in the Arctic to stay as a great power'.
[105] Kentikelenis and Voeten, 'Legitimacy challenges to the liberal world order'.
[106] Kentikelenis and Voeten, 'Legitimacy challenges to the liberal world order'; Binder and Heupel, 'The legitimacy of the UN Security Council'.

support to the institution. However, intensity of US legitimation does still vary considerably over time. Overall, the US appears to make *legitimation* statements about the Arctic Council in a periodic way (Figure 1), with increases in statements in the second quarter of many years. This may be because the US tends to produce more statements about the Arctic Council around the organisation's key events.

Figure 1 shows two periods when US discursive legitimation breaks with this pattern of periodic peaks. During the first period, from the end of 2013 until the end of 2015, the US engaged in more legitimation, and this was more sustained over time. There is a particular peak in its legitimation statements during the second quarter of 2015. This increased US legitimation is potentially due to several different factors. First, it coincides with the second term of the Obama administration when the US government (and Obama personally) pushed cooperation in tackling climate change.[107] This supports the theoretical argument that *positive developments in environmental politics* lead to increased state legitimation of environmental institutions such as the Arctic Council (Table 1[c]). Second, this period preceded the US assuming the Arctic Council's rotating chairmanship in 2015, and this legitimation may be connected to its preparation for this role. The period was one in which the US government increased its interest in Arctic affairs, symbolised in 2011 when Hilary Clinton became the first US Secretary of State to personally attend an Arctic Council meeting. This statement offers an example of US legitimation at this time, showing a focus on the Arctic Council's environmental role:

> Climate change is a world-wide problem, and it is imperative that we address the impacts of climate change in the Arctic now before it is too late. Reducing black carbon emissions and methane emissions are worthy goals that we need to work with the international community to achieve, particularly our Arctic Council Observer nations. This would take place by first and foremost continuing the Council's great work on the subject of black carbon. (5 March 2015, Statement before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources)[108]

In the second period, from the end of 2015 through until the end of 2018, there is overall a low level of US legitimation of the Arctic Council, except for a moderate peak during the second quarter of 2017. In this quarter, the Arctic Council ministerial meeting was held in Fairbanks, Alaska, making the US the host nation, and the then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson provided some statements in support of the organisation and its part in multilateral cooperation to tackle climate change.[109]

Apart from this peak, it is surprising that there is so little legitimation during this four-year period. The US was the Arctic Council's chair and might have been expected to convey more support. The slump in legitimation statements is likely connected to the Trump administration. Unlike the previous administration, under Trump the US took a more sceptical attitude to climate change and international environmental cooperation. This *negative development in global environmental politics* may have led to less legitimation. However, this decline in US legitimation is noticeably not accompanied by an increase in delegitimation, apart from the spike in the second quarter of 2019. This suggests that although the US was less inclined to voice support for the Arctic Council during the early years of the Trump presidency, it was also not proactively attacking the organisation at this point. In fact, in the second quarter of 2019 when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attended the Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Finland, there is another peak in US legitimation. In the later stages of the Trump presidency, the US resumed support for some aspects of the Arctic Council (albeit coupled with challenges). The following statements are examples of US legitimation at this time, showing how it foregrounds specific aspects of the Arctic Council, particularly cooperation *only* between the Arctic states:

[107] Craig Jones and Luke Fowler, 'Administration, rhetoric, and climate policy in the Obama presidency', *Review of Policy Research*, 39:4 (2022), pp. 512–32.

[108] Available at: {https://2009-2017.state.gov/e/oes/ocns/opa/arc/remarks/240978.htm}.

[109] Timothy Gardner, 'Tillerson gives nod at Arctic meet to climate change action', *Reuters* (16 May 2017), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/article/us-arctic-summit-idUSKBN1870FT/}.

> As you know, the United States has been a strong supporter of the Arctic Council, which is composed of all eight nations that have territories above the Arctic Circle. And it is the premier international forum for building consensus to support peace and cooperation in the Arctic region. (2 May 2019, Senior State Department Official's previewing the Secretary of State's upcoming trip to Rovaniemi, Finland)[110]

> Together, with the seven other Arctic States, the United States builds cooperation at the Arctic Council based on shared values. (6 May 2019, Secretary Pompeo travels to Finland to attend the Arctic Council ministerial meeting)[111]

However, as discussed below, these legitimation statements during 2019 were accompanied by a large increase in US delegitimation.

US delegitimation of the Arctic Council

Overall, the US produces less delegitimation about the Arctic Council than China, which might be expected given that it is a core member of the organisation (Figure 1). However, towards the end of the 12 years analysed, the US starts to produce more delegitimation. This supports arguments that even long-standing members and important participants in the ILO's institutions still challenge its legitimacy. There is a large increase in US delegitimation during the second quarter of 2019. The following are examples of the delegitimation statements it made at this time:

> There are Arctic states and there are non-Arctic states. The eight Arctic states conduct governance of the Arctic region, and we reject attempts by non-Arctic states to claim a role in this process. (2 May 2019, Senior State Department officials previewing the Secretary of State's upcoming trip to Rovaniemi, Finland)[112]

> Russia, an Arctic Council member, has fruitfully cooperated with the Council in a number of areas, including education, oil spill response, search and rescue cooperation, and pollution issues. However, Russia's unlawful regulation of foreign vessels transiting off its coasts and the government's threats to use military force concern the United States Government, as well as other Council members. (6 May 2019, Secretary Pompeo travels to Finland to attend the Arctic Council ministerial meeting)[113]

These delegitimation statements evaluate the Arctic Council based on a criterion of 'inclusion' (shown to be frequently important in legitimacy evaluations[114]). They negatively evaluate the Arctic Council because of how it allows competitor states influence. This increased US delegitimation of the Arctic Council is evidence supporting the argument that increasing security tensions lead to more delegitimation (Table 1[a]).

Following this peak, the US continues to make some delegitimation statements in the second quarter of each year after this, but the number declines. The increase in US discursive delegitimation during this period could be the result of several factors. First, it may be related to the Trump

[110] Available at: {https://2017-2021.state.gov/senior-state-department-officials-previewing-the-secretarys-upcoming-trip-to-rovaniemi-finland-berlin-germany-london-united-kingdom-kangerlussuaq-greenland-and-nuuk-greenland/}.

[111] Available at: {https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-pompeo-travels-to-finland-to-attend-the-arctic-council-ministerial-and-reinforce-the-u-s-commitment-to-the-arctic/}.

[112] See n. 110.

[113] See n. 111.

[114] Petra Guasti, 'The politics of inclusion: Comparing the contribution of civil society actors to EU legitimacy', in Dagmar Schiek (ed.), *The EU Economic and Social Model in the Global Crisis*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), chapter 7, pp. 85–103; Vincent Pouliot and Jean-Philippe Thérien, 'The politics of inclusion: Changing patterns in the governance of international security', *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 211–37.

administration being in power and its more critical stance towards multilateral cooperation, particularly that focused on climate issues. Second, it may relate to the increase in geopolitical tensions during this period, when the US engaged in security and economic competition with other major powers, especially China and Russia. However, it should be noted that whenever the US increased delegitimation of the Arctic Council (in 2019 Q2, 2020 Q2, and 2021 Q2), at the same time it also increased legitimation. This might suggest that the US government maintained a somewhat ambiguous approach to the organisation, supporting some elements while challenging others. Its combined (de)legitimation might not therefore have substantially impacted broader legitimacy beliefs.

China's legitimation of the Arctic Council

China makes slightly less *legitimation* statements about the Arctic Council than the US, but still provides some support, sustained across the 12 years (Figure 1). That China provides such legitimation challenges the assumption that emerging powers, and latecoming participants in institutions, are prone to only delegitimise those organisations in which they have less influence. China's legitimation of the Arctic Council is less periodic than that of the US, which may be due its observer status and the different way it participates. Nevertheless, the intensity of China's legitimation does vary somewhat, with two periods of increased legitimation.

The first period of increased Chinese legitimation stretches from the start of 2011 through until the end of 2013. There is a pronounced peak in Chinese legitimation in the second quarter of 2013. It is likely this increase was part of China's bid to become an Arctic Council observer, which it achieved in May 2013. This supports the theoretical argument that *change in membership of an institution* leads to increased legitimation (Table 1[f]) The increase in legitimation around this time is evidence of how China sought to present itself as a positive and supportive participant in Arctic cooperation during this period. However, interestingly, while making these positive statements, China also simultaneously engaged in some delegitimation, something discussed further below. The following statements are examples of China's legitimation during this period:

> The Arctic Council – the core of which is formed by Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States – *has a crucial role to play in ensuring any resource exploitation is done responsibly*. (19 February 2013, UNEP calls for effective steps to protect fragile Arctic)[115]

> The Arctic Council is likely to function as a real governance body around the North Pole, a region where a widely approved international regime has yet to come, a prominent Finnish expert said on Monday. (13 May 2013, Expert talks about Arctic Council acting as real governance body)[116]

The first statement evaluates the Arctic Council positively based on a normative criterion of 'contribution to environmental protection', describing how the institution is important. The second is a positive evaluation of the Arctic Council based on 'effectiveness'. It is an example of how Chinese state media often endorses the Arctic Council by repeating other actors' statements about the organisation's importance or effectiveness. This way, China shows it aligns with other nations in recognising the Arctic Council. After this large increase in China's legitimation, the number of statements declines but it continues producing a small amount of legitimation.

The second period when Chinese legitimation noticeably increases is from the start of 2017 through until the third quarter of 2019. This is interesting because it is at a time of heightened political tensions when we might expect less, not more, Chinese legitimation

[115] Available at: {https://www.cma.gov.cn/en2014/climate/update/201408/t20140814_257469.html}.
[116] Available at: {http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-05/14/content_28815842.htm}.

of multilateral institutions. This increase in legitimation from China is potentially the result of several (interlinked) factors. First, it could be connected to China's 2018 publication of an Arctic white paper which codified its regional policy and goals.[117] The white paper itself contains limited references to the Arctic Council,[118] just a single paragraph containing one legitimation statement about how China 'highly values the Council's positive role in Arctic affairs'. However, China may have produced other documents referring to the Arctic Council at this time. Second, this was a period where the US made less legitimation of the Arctic Council. China may have increased legitimation to contrast with its competitor. Noticeably, China also produced some delegitimation at this time that challenged the Arctic Council because of the US role in the organisation. The following is an example of Chinese legitimation from this period which also criticises the US:

> The ministers signed on a joint statement, which reaffirmed the commitment to maintaining peace, stability and constructive cooperation in the Arctic, but did not mention the climate change issue. *The joint statement emphasized the role of the Arctic states in providing leadership in addressing new opportunities and challenges in the Arctic, working in close cooperation with the Permanent Participants.* (7 May 2019, Arctic Council countries fail to issue joint declaration).[119]

The italicised text provides legitimation, endorsing the Arctic Council's role. The initial section, however, is delegitimation that critiques the organisation for its failure (due to the US) to act on climate change.

China's delegitimation of the Arctic Council

China's delegitimation of the Arctic Council is more sustained than that of the US, with it also producing delegitimation during the early 2010s (Figure 1). This supports the idea that China, as an emerging power and latecomer to cooperation, with less influence, will be more prone to challenge institutions. However, China still only produces a relatively small number of delegitimation statements, and these are often combined with extensive legitimation as discussed above. This suggests that overall China has a mixed approach, supporting some aspects of the organisation while challenging others.

There are several points where China's delegitimation of the Arctic Council increases. The first is in the second quarter of 2013. This is likely related to China becoming an Arctic Council observer. This supports the theoretical argument that, as well as leading to increased legitimation, changes to institutional membership can sometimes lead to increased delegitimation (Table 1[f]). As discussed above, although China sought to show support for the Arctic Council at this time, it may have challenged aspects of the organisation in an attempt to exercise influence. The following statement, where China quotes Greenpeace, provides an example. The statement negatively evaluates the Arctic Council based on normative criteria that it should contribute to addressing environmental issues:

> 'The Arctic Council is intended to be a forum for ensuring the sustainability and environmental protection of the region, but the Harper government has indicated that it will use the forum to advance industrial development in the Arctic,' said Greenpeace Canada in a news release. (16 May 2013, Canada re-chairs Arctic Council with eyes on economic benefits)

[117] Matilde Biagioni, 'China's push-in strategy in the Arctic and its impact on regional governance', *Instituto Affari Internationali* (September 2023), available at: {https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/chinas-push-strategy-arctic-and-its-impact-regional-governance}.

[118] Koivurova et al. state that 'China's Arctic strategy pays little attention to the role of the predominant intergovernmental regional forum, the Arctic Council'. See Koivurova et al., 'China's Arctic policy', p. 30.

[119] Available at: {http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/08/c_138042515.htm}.

Another large increase in China's delegitimation occurs in the second quarter of 2019. While at other times delegitimation is counterbalanced by increased legitimation, here that is not the case, and China appeared to switch to challenging the Arctic Council. This may be due to a number of factors. It is likely related to the political tensions at this time, when China and the US were engaged in an escalating trade war which also impacted China's relations with other Western states. In March 2019, the EU called China a 'systemic rival' in a sign of worsening relations between China and European countries, including several Arctic Council members. This increased delegitimation could also be a response to the US, which was also engaged in extensive delegitimation and had particularly challenged Russia and China's roles in the Arctic Council. This may be seen as evidence to support the theoretical argument that *increased security tensions* lead to more delegitimation (Table 1[a]). The following statements are examples of China's delegitimation at this time:

> The Arctic Council ministerial meeting is due to take place on Tuesday in Rovaniemi, northern Finland. Speaking at an event where the protection of a fragile environment, rather than security issues, is widely seen as the underlying objective, Pompeo said Washington is 'fortifying America's security and diplomatic presence' in the Arctic. (7 May 2019, Chinese representative refutes unwarranted U.S. accusation on Arctic cooperation)[120]

> China expresses regret that the 11th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting failed to formulate a joint declaration, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson said Wednesday … The failure of issuing a joint declaration is due to disparities over climate change between the United States and other Arctic Council member countries, according to media reports (8 May 2019, China regrets failure to issue joint declaration at Arctic Council meeting)[121]

These quotations negatively evaluate the Arctic Council based on a normative criterion that it should contribute to tackling environmental issues and protecting the region. They suggest that it is not adequately fulfilling this role. As these quotations show, much of China's delegitimation of the Arctic Council at this time focused on the US actions within the organisation. This again suggests a connection between China's (de)legitimation practices and political developments occurring around the world. The following section further probes the link between variation in (de)legitimation practices and political developments.

Relating variation in (de)legitimation to broader political developments

This section describes findings from the second step of the analysis. In this step, references to political developments were assigned codes under three categories: *increasing security or economic tensions; global environmental developments*; and *institutional changes to the Arctic Council*. The coding studied when documents referred to these political developments alongside statements evaluating the Arctic Council. This allowed analysis of how the US and China's (de)legitimation practices were linked to global political developments.

Overall, the US and China's (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council was found to be connected to political developments, but in a complex way. *Increasing security and economic tensions* (particularly between the US, Russia, and China) appear to have contributed to the US and China producing more delegitimation of the Arctic Council at certain times, but not always. Meanwhile, it was found that *global environmental developments* also sometimes contributed to making the two states produce more legitimation and delegitimation. *Institutional changes to the Arctic Council* only appear to have affected (de)legitimation practices when China became an Arctic Council observer. The following section describes these findings in more detail.

[120] Available at: {http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/07/c_138040973.htm}.
[121] Available at: {http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/08/c_138042515.htm}.

Legitimation and political developments

The amount of US legitimation about the Arctic Council was found to be linked to environmental developments (Figure 2). In early quarters where the US produced more legitimation (2011 Q2, 2013 Q3, and 2015 Q2), many of these statements appeared alongside references to *global environmental developments* (either references to climate change or to forms of cooperation to deal with this issue).[122] Figure 2 shows the total number of US legitimation statements (Total – solid line) and the number linked to references to (Environment – dashed line) in each quarter. An example is an article from 24 April 2015, containing a legitimation statement about the Arctic Council followed by a reference to climate cooperation (italics):

> My government will work every single day with members of this council to help prepare Arctic communities for the impacts of this change. And we'll do everything we can to prevent even worse impacts in years to come, *which is why we negotiated our numbers last year with China, and why we went to India and moved to an announcement with India, and are working with other major emitting nations* (24 April 2015, Remarks at the presentation of the U.S. Chairmanship Program at the Arctic Council ministerial meeting)[123]

This suggests that developments in environmental cooperation were at least partly driving the US's legitimation practices during this period, leading to it producing more statements supporting the Arctic Council. This is evidence to support the theoretical argument that positive developments in environmental politics lead to more legitimation (Table 1[c]). As discussed earlier, this could be connected to the fact that the Obama administration was in power and was engaged with international efforts to tackle climate change, seeking to reflect this in actions towards the Arctic Council.

Later in the 12 years analysed, the US produces fewer legitimation statements about the Arctic Council, and the peaks in its legitimation are less frequent. During this period, far fewer legitimation statements were made alongside references to *global environmental developments*. This would suggest that changes in global environmental politics, possibly related to actions of the Trump administration, contributed to the reduced US legitimation. When the US did engage in legitimation in this period, it appeared to be largely unrelated to recognition of climate change and the need to cooperate on this.

China's legitimation of the Arctic Council was also found to be related to *global environmental developments* (Figure 3). Figure 3 shows the total number of Chinese legitimation statements (Total – solid line) and the number linked to references to environmental developments (Environment – dashed line) each quarter. When China made more legitimation statements in the quarters through to 2019, many of these were made alongside references to *global environmental developments*. For instance, in the second quarter of 2013, just over a quarter of China's overall legitimation statements were alongside such references. Similarly, in the second quarter of 2017, when China's legitimation statements peak again, around a quarter of these appear alongside references to *environmental developments*. An example is an article from 7 April 2017, where China expresses support for the Arctic Council and refers to broader climate cooperation (italics):

> Li said that China and Norway would champion multilateralism and were committed to pursuing an open global economy and free trade *as well as international cooperation to tackle climate change and sustainable development*. 'China will enhance communication with Norway

[122] These were: Climate change developments (Arctic); Climate change developments (Rest of world); Bilateral cooperation on climate change; Multilateral cooperation on climate change. The coding did not measure whether developments were 'positive' or 'negative'.

[123] Available at: {https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/04/241102.htm}.

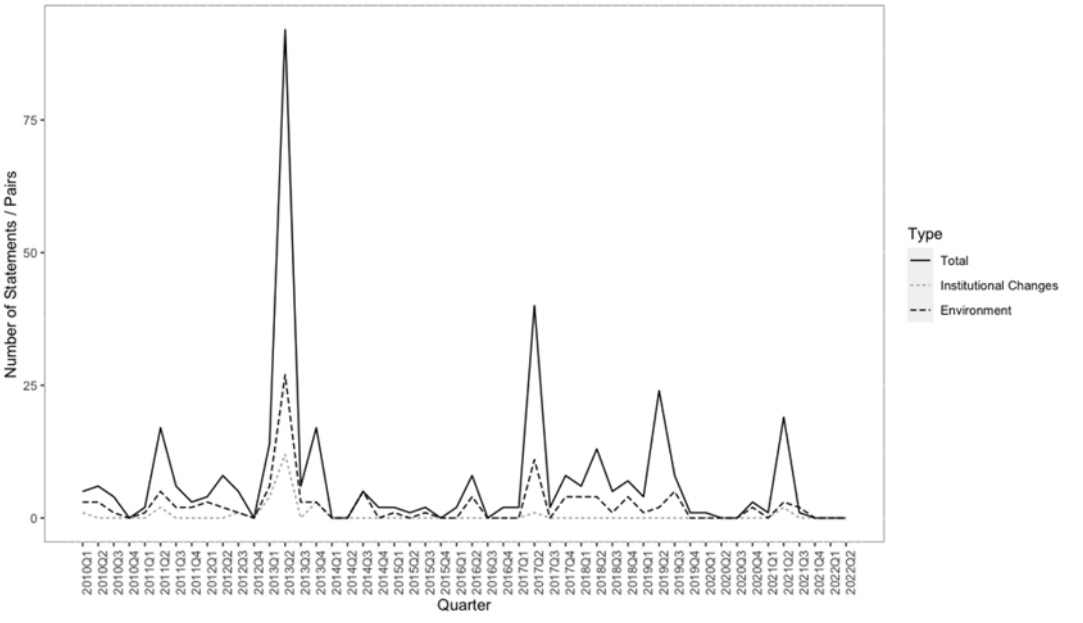

Figure 3. Total Chinese legitimation statements and the number of references to environmental developments/institutional changes made alongside them, each quarter between 2010–22.

> in international and regional affairs and achieve more fruitful cooperation within the Arctic Council and China-Nordic countries cooperation framework,' Li said. (7 April 2017, China, Norway ink cooperation plans amid full normalization of ties)[124]

This extensive occurrence of legitimation statements alongside references to *global environmental developments* suggests these political developments may be contributing to China's increased legitimation at these times. This offers further evidence to support the argument that *positive developments in environmental politics* lead to increased legitimation (Table 1[c]). Overall, the analysis suggested that international environmental developments may be an important driver of the US and China's legitimation practices. These developments played a role in both states producing increased legitimation of the Arctic Council.

Delegitimation and political developments

The US *delegitimation* of the Arctic Council was found to be somewhat related to growing political tensions (Figure 4). Figure 4 shows the total number of US delegitimation statements (Total – solid black line) and the number linked to references to increasing security tensions (Security Competition Related – dashed line).[125] In the two periods when the US produced significantly more delegitimation statements, namely the second quarters of 2019 and 2020, these statements were made alongside references to *increased security tensions*. This provides evidence to support the theoretical argument that *increased security tensions* lead to more delegitimation (Table 1[a]). An example is the document from 6 May 2019, which contains several statements coded as delegitimation because they negatively evaluate the Arctic Council based on a normative

[124] Available at: {http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2017-04/08/c_136191227.htm}.

[125] These sub-codes were: Russia & US security competition or tensions; China & US security competition or tensions; Military / security activity in the Arctic region by Russia; Military / security activity in the Arctic region by China.

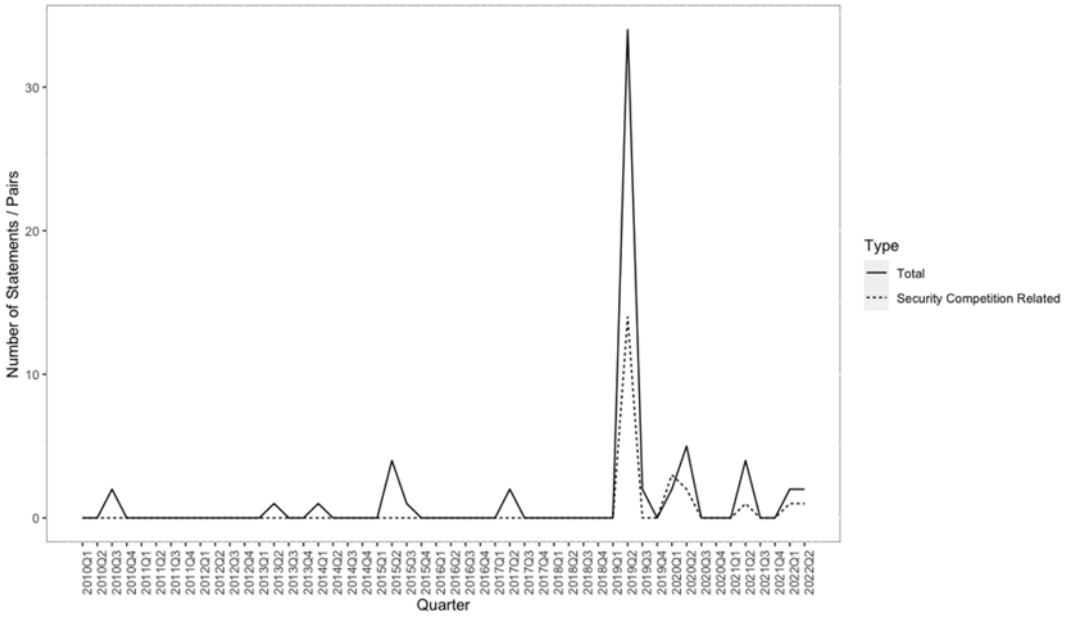

Figure 4. Total number of US delegitimation statements and number of references to security tensions made alongside them, each quarter 2010–22.

criterion of inclusion, challenging the Council's inclusion of participants deemed problematic (namely Russia and China):

> But Russia is unique. Its actions deserve the special attention of this Council, in part because of their sheer scale. *But also because we know Russian territorial ambitions can turn violent. 13,000 people have been killed due to Russia's ongoing aggressive action in Ukraine.* (6 May 2019, Looking north sharpening America's Arctic focus)[126]

The first part of this quote negatively evaluates the institution for allowing Russian involvement and not giving it special attention (elsewhere in the document a similar challenge is made regarding China). Meanwhile, this sits alongside references to broader security tensions and Russia's aggressive action. This link between US delegitimation statements and references to wider political tensions is common in the 2019 articles. In the second quarter of 2019, the US produced 34 of the total 62 delegitimation statements it made over the 12-year period. A large number of these statements were made together with discussion of China–US security competition (14.7% of delegitimation statements) and Russia–US security competition (11.8% of delegitimation statements).

However, while tensions between the US and China/Russia appear to have played a role in increased delegitimation at this time, this is not always the case. In the second quarter of 2021, for example, few US delegitimation statements were made alongside references to security competition. In 2014, when Russia's annexation of Crimea meant heightened security tensions, this did not produce an increase in US delegitimation. This suggests it was the particular tensions occurring in 2019/20 which contributed to making the US increase its delegitimation.

China's delegitimation statements were also found to be somewhat related to *increasing security and economic tensions* between major powers (Figure 5). When Chinese articles referred to these

[126] Available at: {https://2017-2021.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/}.

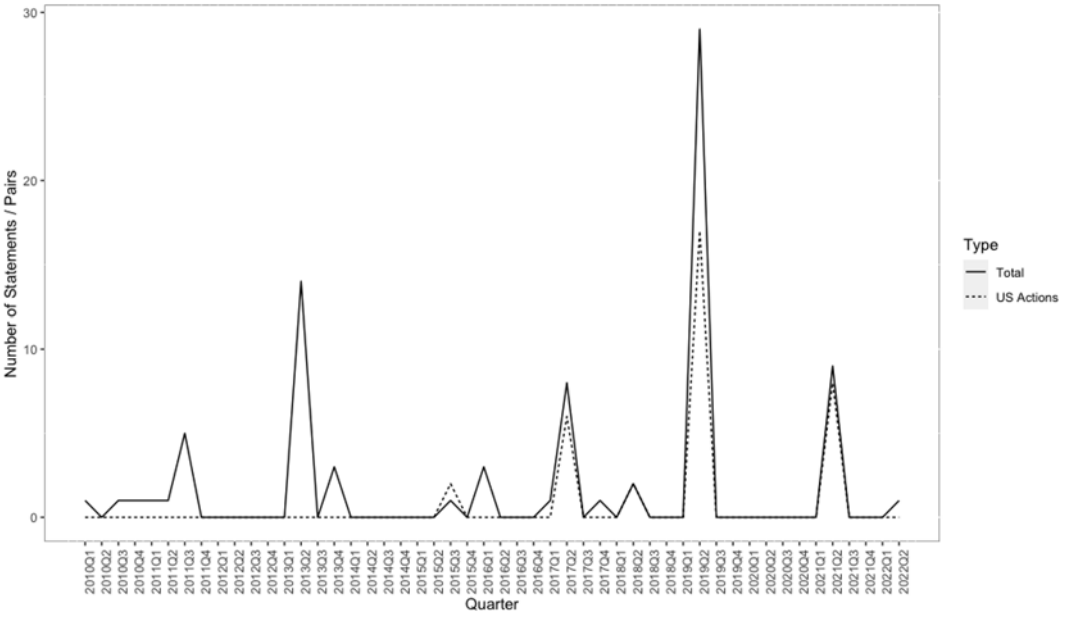

Figure 5. The total number of delegitimation statements by China and the number of references to US actions made alongside them, each quarter 2010–22.

increasing tensions, it tended to be with comments about US actions.[127] Figure 5 shows the total number of Chinese delegitimation statements (Total – solid black line) and the number of these alongside references to US actions (US Actions – dashed line) each quarter. In the three quarters after 2015, where China produced more delegitimation (2017 Q2, 2019 Q2, and 2021 Q2), many of its statements were alongside references to the US. This would suggest China's delegitimation was at least partly driven by the growing Sino-US tensions at the time. An example is the article from 17 April 2017:

> As Finland is making preparations to guide the Arctic Council during its upcoming three-year chairmanship in May 2017, worsened East–West relations plus the new U.S. administration bring more uncertainty to the immediate future of the Council. Finnish foreign minister Timo Soini said in Helsinki this week that it was not clear whether there would be smooth sailing or 'packed ice' ahead. Soini described uncertainty surrounding U.S. Arctic policy as a risk factor. (17 April 2017, Arctic Council cooperation faces more uncertainty as int'l situation worsens)[128]

Other Chinese statements challenging the Arctic Council's legitimacy similarly sit alongside references to US activities. It appears US actions at the time, and growing great power tensions, led China to increasingly question the Arctic Council's functioning (delegitimation based on an evaluation of effectiveness). This provides evidence to support the argument that *increased security or economic tensions* lead to more delegitimation (Table 1[a]).

However, security tensions with the US do not appear to be the only factor shaping the amount of Chinese delegitimation. Focusing on the second quarter of 2019 provides a more detailed picture of how China's delegitimation is related to political developments. In this quarter, China produced

[127]These sub-codes were: Military activity in the Arctic region by the US; Military activity outside of the Arctic region by the US; China & US security competition; Russian & US security competition; Russia & US tensions; Actions in the Arctic Council by the US; China & US economic competition.

[128]Available at: {http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-02/18/c_136065313.htm}.

29 of the 82 delegitimation statements it made during the 12 years. Many of these statements were made alongside references to developments in climate politics, coded as '*developments in multilateral cooperation on climate change*' (31%) or '*climate change developments in the Arctic*' (17.2%). An example is a quote from 7 May 2019:

> The United States withdrew from the Paris agreement one and a half years after it was passed by the international community in late 2015 … On Monday, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a speech raising the issue of the Arctic Council's purpose. He said the body has so far been focusing mainly on research, hinting a U.S. resolution to tap into the stage for political and military competition.

This statement negatively evaluates the Arctic Council based on a norm about contributing to tackling climate change, suggesting that instead it functions as a US tool. This statement sits alongside a reference to US actions in international climate cooperation. This indicates that, alongside growing Sino-US tensions, China's increased delegitimation was also spurred by the breakdown in climate cooperation. Just as environmental developments were found to shape China's legitimation, they also contribute to its delegitimation.

Conclusion

This article asked how discursive (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council by two key states, the US and China, varies over time, and how this variation is related to global political developments. It found that both states produced extensive (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council over time. They also varied considerably in the intensity of this, each displaying a distinct pattern of increases/decreases in legitimation and delegitimation. This might challenge arguments about consistent support by the US[129] and declining support and increasing challenge from China,[130] providing a more complex picture of the two states' shifting engagement.

The US produced more legitimation of the Arctic Council during the early 2010s, and this then slumped during the period that Trump was in power. This would support arguments that leadership is important in shaping US Arctic policy.[131] However, the analysis also found evidence that this pattern of legitimation was driven by developments in environmental politics. China's legitimation of the Arctic Council was less periodic and more sustained. It was less intense overall but increased significantly around when China sought observer status. This institutional change, together with developments in environmental politics, were found to have contributed to increased legitimation from China at several points during the 12 years that were analysed.

The delegitimation of the Arctic Council is even more important to consider, given the damaging effects that discursive challenges can have on its overall legitimacy. The US increased its delegitimation of the Arctic Council only near the end of the period analysed. This increased delegitimation was found to be the result of increased political/security tensions between the US and both China and Russia. During the Trump administration, the US engaged in delegitimation of the Arctic Council for its approach to inclusion that allowed adversaries continued influence. While it still supported other aspects of the institution, there was a sharp increase in delegitimation statements at the time. China's delegitimation increased around the time it became an observer, probably as it tried to exert influence. Then it increased again during 2019, when China challenged the organisation in connection with the US, with which it was engaged in a spiralling dispute.

These findings can also tell us about the variation in the discursive (de)legitimation of governance institutions more generally. They support studies showing that actors vary considerably in

[129] Bloom, 'United States perspectives on the Arctic'.

[130] Biedermann, 'The polar Silk Road'; Sørensen, 'China is in the Arctic to stay as a great power'; Bennett, 'How China sees the Arctic'.

[131] Katherine A. Weingartner and Robert W. Orttung, 'US Arctic policymaking under Trump and Obama', *Polar Record*, 55:6 (2019), pp. 402–10.

the intensity and tone of their (de)legitimation,[132] indicating this also applies to individual states. The analysis provides additional empirical data about the variation in (de)legitimation key states display regarding a previously unexplored regional institution. Several existing studies, focused on political elites representing their states, found that these actors engage in more delegitimation than legitimation of UN institutions in which they are involved.[133] This study's findings instead indicate that legitimation is more frequent. This reinforces recent studies showing political elites tend to support institutions in which their countries are members.[134]

Regarding delegitimation, existing literature has suggested that it is largely actors unaffiliated with institutions which engage in delegitimation towards them.[135] However, the findings in this study instead support the idea that state actors involved in institutions also engage in delegitimation.[136] They further suggest that type of state involvement can affect the amount of delegitimation, with the US (a full member) found to engage in less delegitimation than China (an observer). Nevertheless, the fact that the US still produced some delegitimation is significant, indicating how even a founding member of an organisation and a linchpin of the ILO can sometimes challenge institutions from within.[137]

This article sought to build on other studies which have pointed to a link between political events and actors' changing intensity of (de)legitimation.[138] It advanced theoretical arguments about how particular political developments might lead to increased legitimation or delegitimation. The analysis provided evidence to support several of these arguments. *Increasing security and economic tensions* were often seen to produce more state delegitimation. *Global environmental developments* were found to be related to increased amounts of legitimation, while *institutional changes in membership* appeared to sometimes lead to both increased legitimation and delegitimation. Overall, the evidence indicated an important, but complex, relationship between broader political developments and the intensity and tone of states' (de)legitimation practices.

The study was limited to examining the variation in (de)legitimation practices of two states and did not test causal relationships between political developments and legitimacy communication. Future research might further analyse the connections between particular political events and increases or decreases in (de)legitimation. It could also examine whether similar dynamics are seen in the practices of other state or non-state actors, directed towards the Arctic Council or other international institutions. As governance institutions such as the Arctic Council struggle to maintain the legitimacy that allows them to operate effectively, it is crucial to understand how and why states support and challenge them.

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000664.

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[132]Kentikelenis and Voeten, 'Legitimacy challenges to the liberal world order'; Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media'.

[133]Binder and Heupel, 'The legitimacy of the UN Security Council'.

[134]Boehme, 'Exit, voice and loyalty'; Uhlin and Verhaegen, 'Elites' (de)legitimation practices toward international organizations'.

[135]Dingwerth et al., *International Organizations Under Pressure*; Liesbet Hooghe, Tobias Lenz, and Gary Marks, 'Contested world order: The delegitimation of international governance', *Review of International Organizations*, 14:4 (2019), pp. 731–43; Uhlin and Gregoratti, 'The interplay between delegitimation and legitimation'.

[136]Bäckstrand and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance'.

[137]Stacie E Goddard, Ronald R Krebs, Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, and Berthold Rittberger, 'Contestation in a world of liberal orders', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:2 (2024), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae026}.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Coding scheme

Legitimacy criteria

Tone (choose one)

- Legitimation (positive evaluation)
- Delegitimation (negative evaluation)

Evaluation criteria – the Arctic Council is evaluated based upon … (choose one per statement)

(Input)

- Accountability
- Fairness
- Expert leadership
- Legality
- Transparency
- Participation
- Efficiency
- Leadership characteristics

(Output)

- Effectiveness (general)
- Contribution to environment
- Contribution to environmental issues
- Contribution to climate change
- Contribution to the public good
- Contribution to morality
- Contribution to peace and stability
- Contribution to cooperation/dialogue

Political Development codes follow below.

Political Development Codes

(1) Increased security and economic tensions between states

Security

- Russia & US security competition or tensions [52], cooperation [31]
- China & US security competition or tensions [25], cooperation [6]
- Military/security activity in the Arctic region by the US [19] > by Russia [25] > by China [4] > by others [8]
- Security activity outside of the Arctic by the US [6] > by Russia [21] > by China [1]

Economic

- China and US economic competition [10]
- Russia and US economic competition [0]

(2) Environmental developments

- Climate change developments (in the world [26]/or in the Arctic [126])
- Multilateral cooperation on climate change [114]
- Bilateral cooperation on climate change [41]

(3) Institutional changes

- Institutional changes to Arctic governance [51]

Other

- *Activity in Arctic Council by the US* [33], *by China* [5], *by Russia* [3], *by others* [10]
- *Contests for sovereignty (Arctic)* [22]
- *Greenland* [30]
- *Indigenous groups in the Arctic region* [86]
- *Maritime shipping activity/developments* [77]
- *Belt and Road Initiative* [14]
- *Exploitation of Arctic resources* [41]
- *Middle East conflicts* [51]
- *South China Sea* [5]
- *Taiwan* [1]
- *NATO* [39]

Appendix B: Examples of coded statements

Statements coded as legitimation and delegitimation

Source	Statement	Legitimation/ delegitimation	Evaluative criteria	Linked political developments
China (English) 29 March 2010 – Five states have responsibilities to administer Arctic	The Arctic Ocean coastal states are committed to implementing the Arctic Council's Arctic Offshore Oil and Gas Guidelines to ensure the protection of the Arctic marine environment during development, since they recognized that, managed sustainably, the immense resource potential of the Arctic Ocean would contribute to regional economic and social development.	Legitimation	Contribution to the public good	Climate change developments
US 31 October 2014 – Opening Remarks at the Arctic Circle Assembly	But before I say more about that, I want to take a moment to acknowledge and commend the Government of Canada for its superb leadership of the Arctic Council that began in 2013 – and will continue for another six months.	Legitimation	Leadership characteristics	Multilateral cooperation on climate change
China (English) 17 May 2019 – Increased strategic importance offsets slower environmental progress of Arctic Council	In the meeting of environmental ministers last October, the United States was no longer committed to the Arctic Council's target on reducing the spread of black carbon.	Delegitimation	Contribution to environmental issues	Multilateral cooperation on climate change
China (Chinese) 17 May 2013 – Arctic cooperation opens a new chapter	Analysts believe that the expansion of official observer states will further consolidate the status and execution capabilities of the Arctic Council. The Arctic cooperation mechanism based on consultation, cooperation and joint development has also taken a big step towards a broader and deeper direction. (分析人士认为, 正式观察员国扩容后, 北极理事会的地位和执行力得到进一步巩固, 建立在协商、合作、共同开发基础上的北极合作机制, 也朝着更广泛、更深入的方向迈进一大步)	Legitimation	Effectiveness	Institutional change, membership
China (Chinese) 7 May 2019 – The 11th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting failed to adopt a joint declaration	The 11th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting concluded on the 7th in the northern Finnish city of Rovaniemi. Due to the opposition of the United States, this session failed to issue a joint declaration. This is the first time in the 23-year history of the Arctic Council that this has happened. (第11届北极理事会部长级会议7日在芬兰北部城市罗瓦涅米结束。由于美国的反对, 本届会议未能发表共同宣言, 这是北极理事会23年历史上首次出现这种情况。)	Delegitimation	Effectiveness	Global environmental political developments

Coding of references to political developments alongside (de)legitimation

So we're working on all of this simultaneously, but it's a – I was in – **I went to the Pacific Islands Forum in Cook Islands this past summer, and those little islands may disappear. They may just absolutely disappear, and you'll have to have a lot of relocation of people, which will be very disruptive.** So there are human consequences, as well as economic consequences and health consequences, that are going to have to be dealt with.

The final thing I would say is the Arctic – we're about to see the first oil tanker go through the Arctic, because there is no ice to stop it. *So we're working through something called the Arctic Council to try to get ahead of that, to have an oil spill protocol that we would all deal with because it's not only the potential for drilling that could be catastrophic, but it's also an accident waiting to happen with a tanker* (27 November 2012, Remarks to the Millennium Challenge Corporation)

Italics = Coded as legitimation, positive evaluation of the Arctic Council based on a normative criterion of contributing to tackling environmental issues

Bold = Reference to political development, environmental change or climate change development.

Appendix C: Inter-coder reliability

The analysis in this article involved two coders reading different subsets of the material. The aim of this was to allow more material to be analysed, rather than for each coder to reinforce the validity of the others coding. We followed the recommended protocols[139] to ensure that the final coding of the two coders aligned to a high degree. In short, these are several measures adopted during preparation to ensure the reliability of the coding: (1) pilot coding of a small sample; (2) systematic assessment of ambiguities arising in the pilot coding phase; (3) adaptation of the coding scheme accordingly; and (4) detailing in a transparent manner the coding instructions.

All of these steps were adopted in the development of our coding scheme and instructions. Before the final coding, the two coders and one external assistant read and coded samples of English-language articles from 2009 (before the start of the material used). MaxQDA was used to produce percentage agreement scores of the three coders choices on this material and ambiguities in the coding (where the two coders disagreed) were discussed. Based on this, the code scheme and coding instructions were adjusted and specified to ensure that these coders achieved greater than 75 per cent agreement in their categorisation of statements on coding of a second sample from this period.

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[139] Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2004); Cliodhna O'Connor and Helene Joffe, 'Intercoder reliability in qualitative research: Debates and practical guidelines', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19 (2020), pp. 1–13.

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