Rapid basal channel growth beneath Greenland's longest floating ice shelf

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Abstract

Nioghalvfjerdsfjorden Glacier (N79) is one of the two main outlets for Greenland's largest ice stream, the Northeast Greenland Ice Stream (NEGIS), and is the more stable of the two, with no calving front retreat expected in the near future. Using a novel elevation reconstruction approach combining digital elevation models (DEMs) and laser altimetry, previously undetected local phenomena are identified complicating this assessment. N79 is found to have a complex network of basal channels that were largely stable between 1978 and 2012. Since then, an along-flow central basal channel has been growing rapidly, likely due to increased runoff and ocean temperatures, and possibly threatening to decouple the glacier's northwestern and southeastern halves.

1 Introduction

The Northeast Greenland Ice Stream (NEGIS) is the largest ice stream of the Greenland Ice Sheet, draining approximately 12% of its surface area and containing a sea-level rise equivalent of 1.1 m (Mouginot et al., 2015). Its discharge is routed through two major outlet glaciers, Zachariæ Isstrøm (ZI) and Nioghalvfjerdsfjorden Glacier (N79) (Fig. 1), the former of which has demonstrated a pattern of accelerating mass loss in recent decades (Mouginot et al., 2019a). N79 features a ∼70 km long floating ice tongue which provides a substantial buttressing effect to this branch of the ice stream (Mayer et al., 2018). At the end of its containing fjord, the ice tongue terminates upon a sill (Morlighem et al., 2017; An et al., 2021).

N79 experienced only minor changes in calving front and grounding line position between 1978 and 2020 (Fig. 1A, Supporting Information Fig. S1), possibly as a result of this configuration. Moreover, models such as the Ice Sheet Systems Model (ISSM) suggest that its grounding line and calving front are unlikely to change significantly over the next century (Choi et al., 2017). However, cosmogenic exposure and radiocarbon dating of surrounding rocks indicate that both N79 and ZI have retreated well inland from their current extents during the Holocene (Larsen et al., 2018), indicating that N79 may be more sensitive to climate change than previously thought. Indeed, velocity measurements show that, while not as dramatically as ZI, N79 has accelerated noticeably in the vicinity of its grounding line (∼ 10%) in recent decades (Mouginot et al., 2015). Moreover, the average water temperature is increasing, and the depth to the upper interface of warm Atlantic Intermediate Water (AIW) is decreasing in the open sea beyond the calving front (Schaffer et al., 2020); and many other glaciers in northern Greenland saw an onset of widespread calving events over the last decade (Ochwat et al., 2022). More recently, evidence of warm AIW has even been found in a marginal surface lake near the N79 grounding line (Bentley et al., 2022).

Laser altimetry time series indicate a dynamic thinning of less than 0.5 m annually between 1999 and 2009 on N79 (Csatho et al., 2014), with longer time series revealing an increased rate of thinning since 2012, with total thinning reaching over 50 m by 2020 close to the grounding line near the center of the glacier (Narkevic et al., 2020). However, this is only observed in a few locations because the sparse spatial coverage of airborne laser altimetry between 2009-2018 (Supporting Information Fig. S2) obscured whether the effect was a minor localized phenomenon or a more widespread trend that largely evaded the available altimetry flight lines. This question has significant implications, as reconstructions based on altimetry (e.g., Khan et al., 2022) make broad conclusions about N79 and other glaciers based on these sparse data.

This uncertainty can be mitigated by including digital elevation models (DEMs), which have a much denser spatial distribution of elevation data, albeit at the cost of poorer precision than altimetry. Using altimetry as control data for correcting any systematic error present in DEMs from multiple years within the time frame of interest can produce a reconstruction with high spatiotemporal resolution and accuracy. Here we present a novel elevation reconstruction of the N79 grounding region using such a technique.

2 Methods

Repeat coverage of WorldView (WV) stereo satellite imagery since 2011 enables the determination of ice sheet elevation changes with high spatial resolution and accuracy (Porter et al., 2022; Shean et al., 2019). We used ArcticDEM strips, generated from WV images using the Surface Extraction with TIN-based Search-space Minimization (SETSM) approach (Noh & Howat, 2018), to reconstruct elevation changes in the N79 region between 2012-2020. These DEMs, calculated using satellite ephemeris information only without applying ground control, still have vertical errors on the order of 4 m (Porter et al., 2022), which is unsuitable for precise change detection and investigating ice dynamic processes of outlet glaciers. We developed a correction algorithm, based on the approach of Schenk et al. (2014) to reduce this error. Altimetry time series, serving as control, were generated from Operation IceBridge Airborne Topographic Mapper (ATM) airborne (1993-2019), ICESat (2003-2009) and ICESat-2 (2018-present) satellite data using the Surface Elevation Reconstruction and Change Detection (SERAC) method (Schenk & Csatho, 2012). A spline-based approximation algorithm (Shekhar et al., 2021) infers the elevation at the date of the DEM acquisition for each time series, and a third-order polynomial correction surface is fitted to the resulting residuals for a given DEM. Once added to the DEM, the error is reduced, and separate DEMs can be mosaicked together with minimal edge discontinuity and a final uncertainty on the order of $\sim$1 m (Supporting Information Text S1). The pipeline also accounts for tidal flexure and the inverse barometric effect on floating ice (Supporting Information Text S2). In this manner, ice surface elevation DEMs, covering the N79 grounding line region, are created for 2012, 2014-2017, and 2020, with nominal dates in the spring to early summer (Supporting Information Table S1). The Greenland Ice Mapping Project (Howat et al., 2014) surface DEM is used outside the spatial extent of the corrected DEMs. A DEM generated from 1978 stereo aerial photographs (Korsgaard et al., 2016) is used for determining long-term elevation changes. Landsat and Sentinel imagery is used for qualitative assessment of surface features (e.g., Supporting Information Table S2).

The 2012-2020 gridded surface elevation reconstructions form the basis of several other data sets. Eulerian (static reference frame) annual elevation change is calculated as the direct difference between surface heights for consecutive years. Furthermore, using a hydrostatic assumption and a bathymetry model from An et al. (2021) as the bed elevation, the depth to the bottom of the ice shelf was inferred for each year and also used for estimating grounding line location (Supporting Information Text S3). The accuracy of the derived ice bottom elevations is assessed by comparing them with airborne ice-penetrating radar (IPR) returns (CReSIS, 2020). Basal drainage patterns are inferred for each year from the surface and bed DEMs using the MatLab Topo Toolbox (Schwanghart & Nikolaus, 2010), and tested for robustness using a Monte Carlo analysis as described in Narkevic (2021). Using this reconstructed basal routing to demarcate a basal drainage basin for N79, annual aggregate runoff is estimated using values from the Regional Atmospheric Climate Model v2.3p2 (van Wessem et al., 2018), assuming all runoff reaches the bed immediately.

Velocities for the period of interest, derived from a combination of radar and optical images using feature tracking and interferometry, are from Mouginot et al. (2019b). These are summer-to-spring annual averages from 2012-2017. From these, the surface strain rate components are derived and used as a proxy for surface stresses, and have an estimated uncertainty of $\sim$0.01 yr^{-1} based on the uncertainty in velocity. Eulerian change rates on floating ice are complicated by the advection of large fractures, so the velocities are used to reconstruct Lagrangian (moving reference frame) elevation changes for this region, i.e., taking the difference between elevation at an initial pixel, and the pixel to which that ice parcel would have advected by the subsequent DEM date (Supporting Information Text S4). This is performed in the manner of Shean et al. (2019).

Finally, to investigate the propagation of dynamic thinning to the grounded ice, SERAC time series derived from altimetry were partitioned into components due to surface processes as estimated by the IMAU-FDM v1.2G model (Brils et al., 2022) and ice dynamics.

3 Results

The cause of the anomalous rapid thinning detected by some SERAC time series is immediately apparent when comparing reconstructions from different years: a large along-flow channel appears in the center of the ice shelf near the grounding line, which experiences a higher rate of thinning than the surrounding ice (Fig. 1B and D-F). Moreover, it is not a novel feature of the ice, but part of an existing pattern of channels that has become increasingly exaggerated over time.

3.1 Morphology of N79

The floating ice shelf of N79 exhibits a lateral dichotomy. The northwestern ice shelf (NWIS) gradually becomes thinner with distance from the grounding line and is marked by a relatively uniform pattern of crevasses, while the southeastern ice shelf (SEIS) is characterized by larger, sparser flow-perpendicular channels separated by ∼5-10 km with surface bulges in between (Figs. 1B, 2A) The bulges create an across-flow step-wise thickness discontinuity up to ∼100 m at the center of the floating tongue (Reeh et al., 2000, Fig. 1C). This pattern remains visible within ∼40 km of the grounding line, beyond which the two halves appear more uniform. There are also three major along-flow channels, one at each margin, and one in the center. The central channel is less uniform than the others, consisting of segments trailing upstream from the northwest end of the SEIS flow-perpendicular channels. Around 2000, a second band of channels with a more oblique orientation appeared closer to the margin, essentially on top of the SEIS marginal channel (Fig. 1B yellow features), one of which causes the southern channel to fork (i.e., Figs. 1C, 1E). Overall, between 1978 and 2020, the ice sheet has become thinner, with more intense and complex channelization, with several channels reaching the grounding line by 2020 (Figs. 1D-F, Supporting Information Figs. S1B, S5).

The flow-perpendicular channels in SEIS are not necessarily analogous to the crevasses in NWIS. Near the grounding line, one can observe annual "ripples" in the ice sheet that first appear angled upstream toward the center and are reminiscent of the basal channel pattern predicted for hetereogenous ice tongues under no-slip conditions by Sergienko (2013), and may represent the nascent form of the large flow-perpendicular channels. These generally rotate until perpendicular to flow, and some ultimately grow a new segment of the central channel, forming a hook shape, and developing a complex surface morphology with internal ridges (Fig. 2B). If in hydrostatic equilibrium, these ridges would correspond to subglacial keels, or they may be uncompensated compressional features. There are no radar flights spanning the flow-perpendicular channels to indicate which is the case. Over time (i.e., with distance from the grounding line), the flow-perpendicular channels tend to become narrower along-flow and more subdued in vertical relief.

Around 2012, two flow-perpendicular channels emerged near the grounding line in close proximity, the second of which did not fully rotate into flow-perpendicular position in subsequent years (Fig. 1B). The central channel segment connected to this flow-perpendicular channel has since grown, thinning the ice in its location at a prodigious rate, reaching nearly 100 myr^{-1} between 2017-2020 at the intersection of the transects in Figs. 2C-2D. This thinning is nearly twice the 50 myr^{-1} melt rate detected in 2011-2015 near the grounding line (Wilson et al., 2017). SERAC time series indicate the ef-

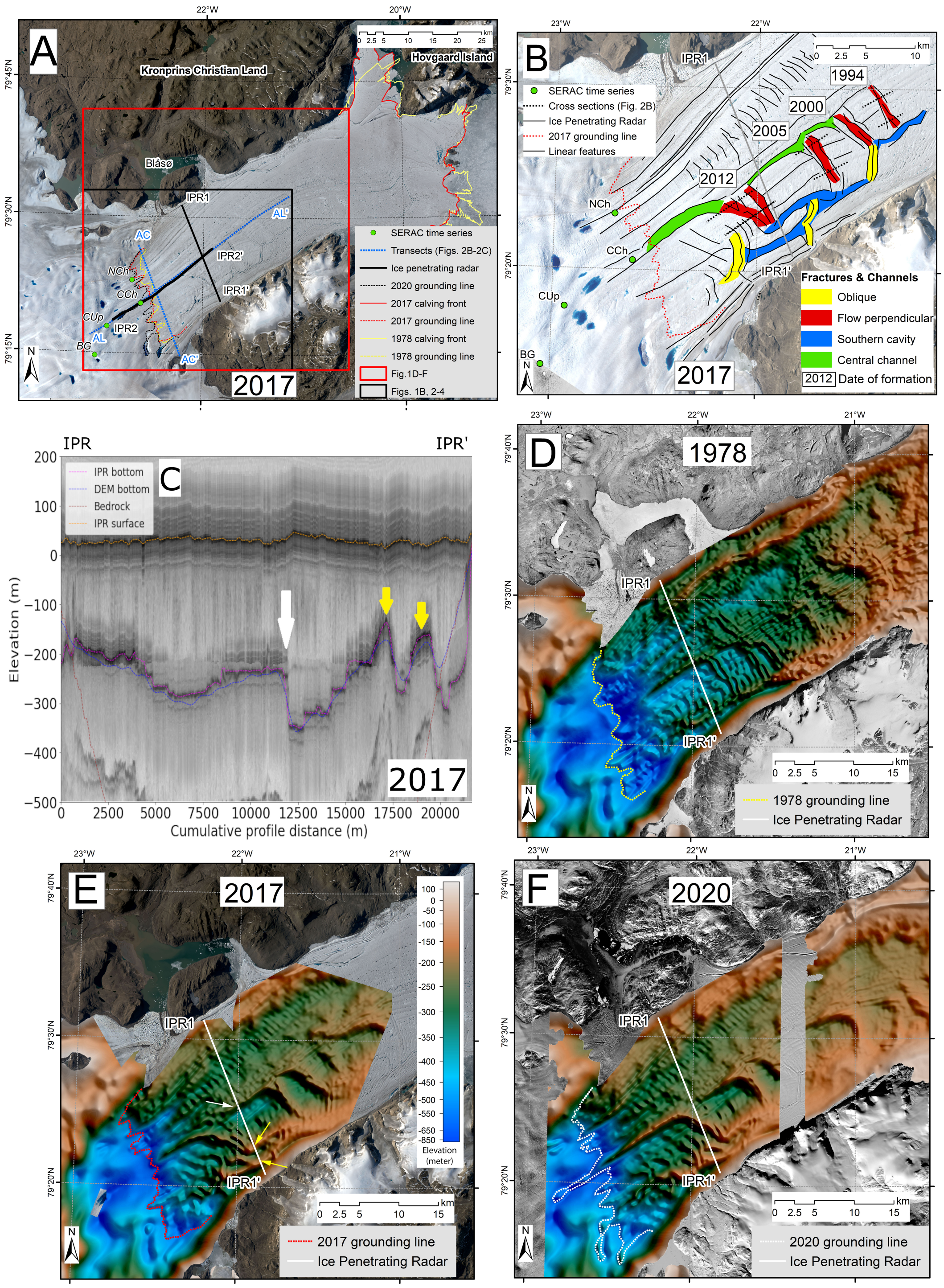

Figure 1. (A) Map of the study area showing calving-front and grounding-line changes between 1978 and 2020, and the locations of transects and SERAC times series. The larger box marks the area shown in Figs. 1D-1E, and the smaller box in Figs. 1B, 2-4, and Supporting Information Figs. S5-7. (B) Interpretation of observable surface features, with the year of formation for flow-perpendicular channels. (C) IPR profile from April 3, 2017, showing the abrupt flow-perpendicular thickness change across the center (white arrow) and the (forked) southeast marginal channel (yellow arrows, see arrows also in Fig. 1E). (D) 1978 ice bottom reconstruction, showing the buoyancy-inferred bottom depth for floating ice, and bedrock depth elsewhere. (E, F) Similar reconstructions for 2017 and 2020. Satellite images and aerial photographs shown in the figures are listed in Supporting Information Table S2.

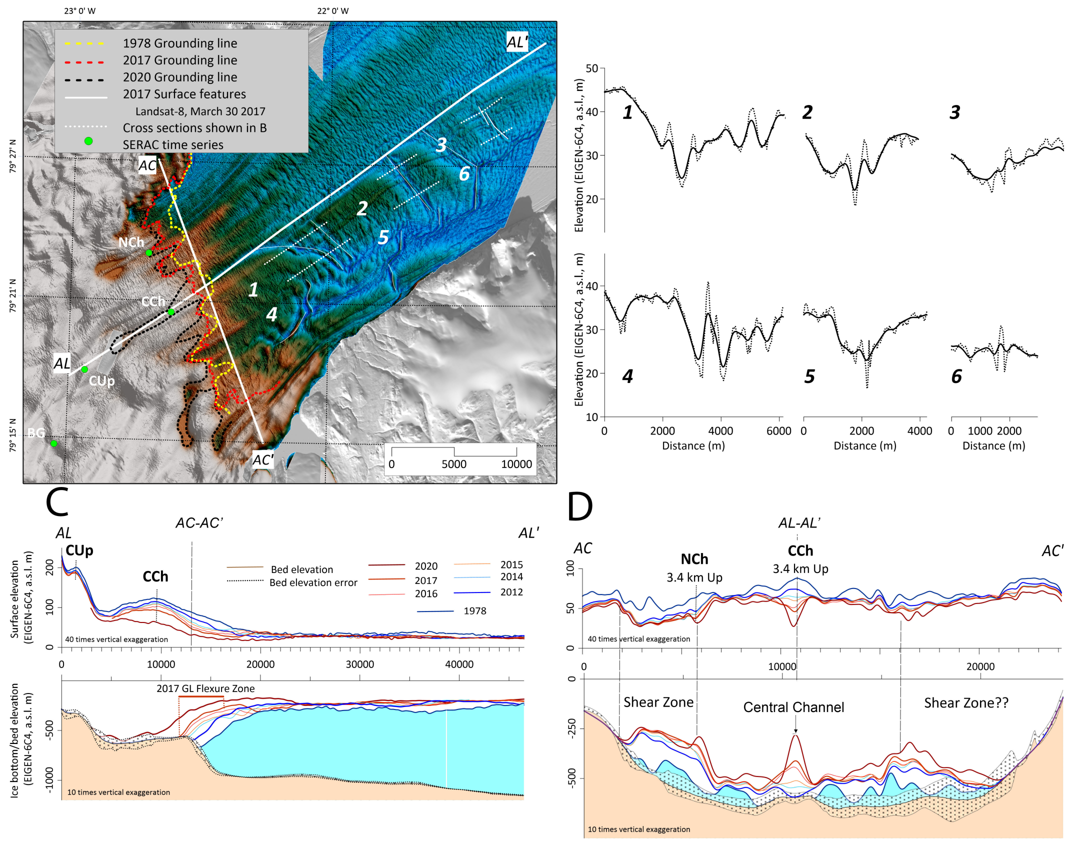

Figure 2. (A) Shaded relief ice surface elevation in 2017 with grounding line locations, ice shelf fractures from Landsat imagery, and locations of transects shown B. (B) Surface elevation profiles across flow-perpendicular channels, illustrating their complex morphology. Dotted lines show elevations from the 30-meter resolution DEM and solid lines from the DEM smoothed by a Gaussian kernel of 600 meter to emphasize surface topography reflecting basal channels. (C) Along and (D) Across-flow profiles of ice surface and bottom elevation showing central channel growth (C, D), grounding line retreat (C), and thinning in the shear zones (D). Shear zone extent is defined based on across-flow strain rates (Fig. 4B) and 2017 grounding line flexure zone is from (ESA, 2017)

fects were already detectable upstream of the grounding line by ∼2015 (Fig. 3F). Thinning continued along the basal channel and the connected subglacial channel (Figs. 3F, S6), and by 2020 the hydrostatically-inferred grounding line had experienced significant local retreat upstream of the central and SEIS marginal channels (Figs. 2A, 2C). This effect was sufficiently pronounced to shift the basal drainage patterns in the area. The potential basal drainage pathways from the reconstruction indicate three major outlets into the fjord: two corresponding to the marginal channels and one that, before 2016, entered the fjord about 1 km southeast of the central channel. By 2016 the channelized thinning shifted this pathway directly into the central channel (Fig. 3A, Supporting Information Fig. S5). The ensuing inferred grounding line retreat then proceeded along the central and southern basal drainage paths. These results, however, come with the caveat that the bed elevation in this area is uncertain and cannot be strongly claimed without additional evidence described below.

While there are no radar flights over the basal channel-subglacial channel system, inferences supporting its rapid thinning and corresponding grounding line retreat can be made from the 2014 and 2017 along-flow IPR transects, which are slightly southeast of and parallel to the channel (Fig. 3B-C). In the grounding zone (7500 to 13000 m along-track) one can see that the ice bottom horizon by 2017 has become both more reflective, indicating there is more water, and slightly higher. This suggests the area was grounded in 2014, and not fully grounded three years later. The ice bottom derived from surface elevation assuming hydrostatic equilibrium underestimates the bottom of the floating ice (Fig. 3C), suggesting that the ice is not in hydrostatic equilibrium. The 2017 radar profile also depicts the rapidly thinning ice shelf basal channel as a new ”ghost” horizon ∼200 m above the ice bottom picks, which is likely a side echo from the bottom of the basal channel, about 100 m higher than it was in 2014 (Fig. 3B, 3C). One can also see the expression of the basal channel at the point where the flight crosses the hook-shaped connection between the central and 2012 flow-perpendicular channels, and it is even thinner than in the surface DEM-based reconstruction. Finally, the flattening of the ice sheet surface ”bump” along the basal channel by 2020 (Fig. 2C, around CCh) also suggests the transition from grounded ice to floating ice conditions.

The increasing dynamic thinning of the grounded ice is illustrated by the SERAC elevation time series reconstructions shown in Fig. 3F. About 2.5 km upstream of the 2015-2017 grounding line over the subglacial channel connecting to the central channel, there is a sudden ten-fold increase in the rate of surface thinning beginning around 2015 (CCh) and a three-fold increase as far as ∼7 km upstream of the grounding line (CUp) by the following year. It appears this onset of thinning may be unique to the central channel, as there is no similar pattern upstream of the grounding line along the northern subglacial drainage route (NCh; there is insufficient data to construct an elevation time series along the southern drainage route), nor is there any detectable change in the rate of thinning at a typical ”background” point (BG).

3.2 Dynamics of N79

The NW-SE lateral dichotomy may be due to rheological heterogeneity in the ice tongue. N79 contains both ice from NEGIS, which originates in a region of elevated geothermal heat (Rogozhina et al., 2016), and from a tributary that merges from the west very near the outlet, which is likely to be colder and less plastic. Thus, stress may be more prone to build up in SEIS, being accommodated more sporadically and explosively than in NWIS. The inferred surface strain rates (Figs. 4, S7) seem to confirm this. Entering the confines of the fjord imposes along-flow compressive strain on the ice tongue. In NWIS, the compression is fairly uniform, but in SEIS it is specifically concentrated along the flow-perpendicular channels, perhaps explaining their complex morphology and narrowing over time. More worrisome is the fact that shear strain has recently manifested along the central channel, suggesting the NWIS and SEIS halves of the ice tongue may be de-

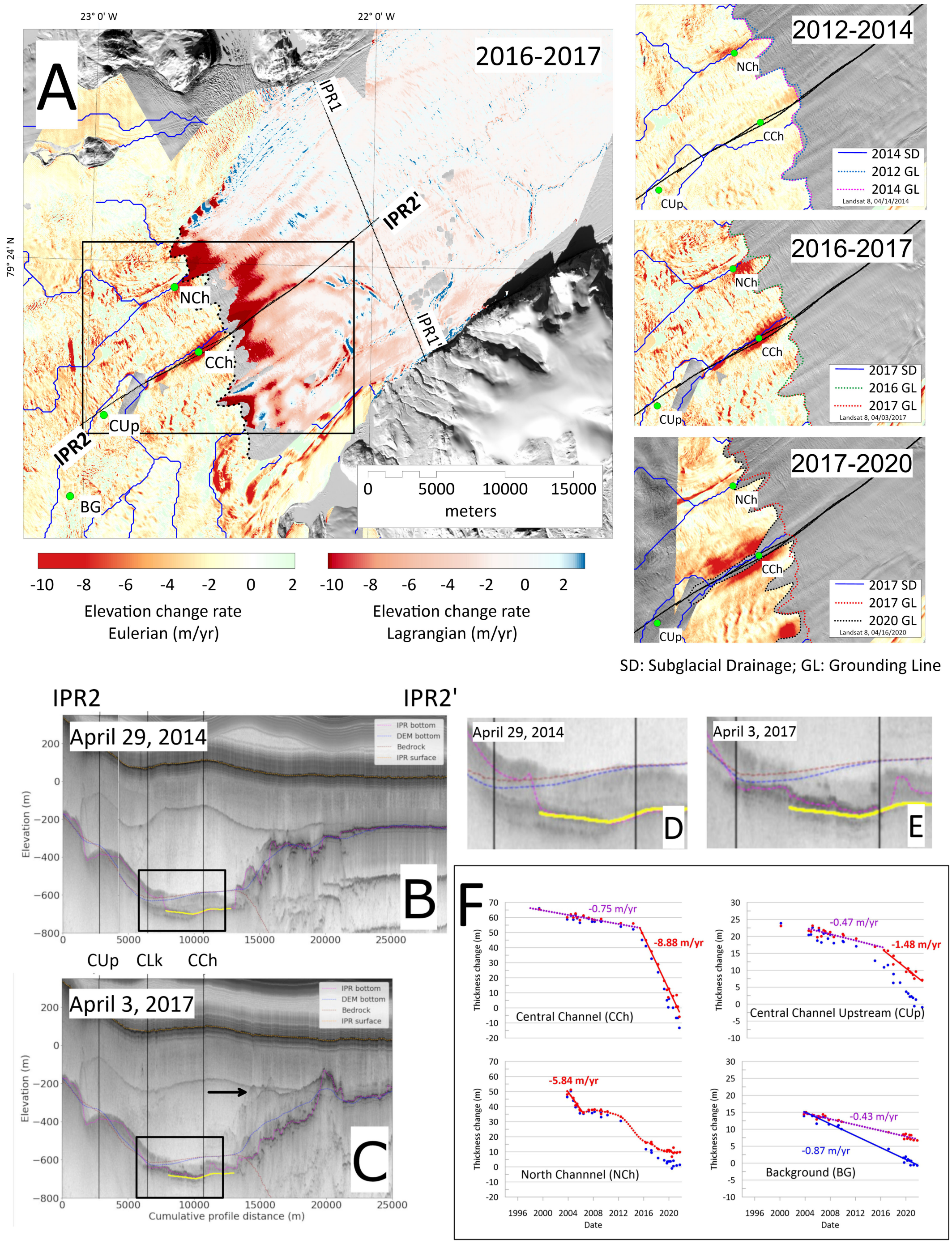

Figure 3. (A) Surface elevation change rate from 2016-17 showing the Eulerian difference on grounded ice and the Lagrangian difference on floating ice, with inferred major subglacial hydrologic pathways. Small maps on the right show the Eulerian annual elevation change rates near the grounding line for 2012-2014, 2016-2017, and 2017-2020. (B) Along-flow radar returns near the center line from 2014. (C) Radar returns from the same flight path on April 3, 2017. Note the thinning and increase in reflectivity (over the yellow line marking the 2014 ice bottom), and the side echo indicated by a black arrow. (D-G) Time series of elevation change for selected locations on grounded ice (green-filled circles in Fig. 3A). Total elevation change is shown in blue, and the dynamic component in red.

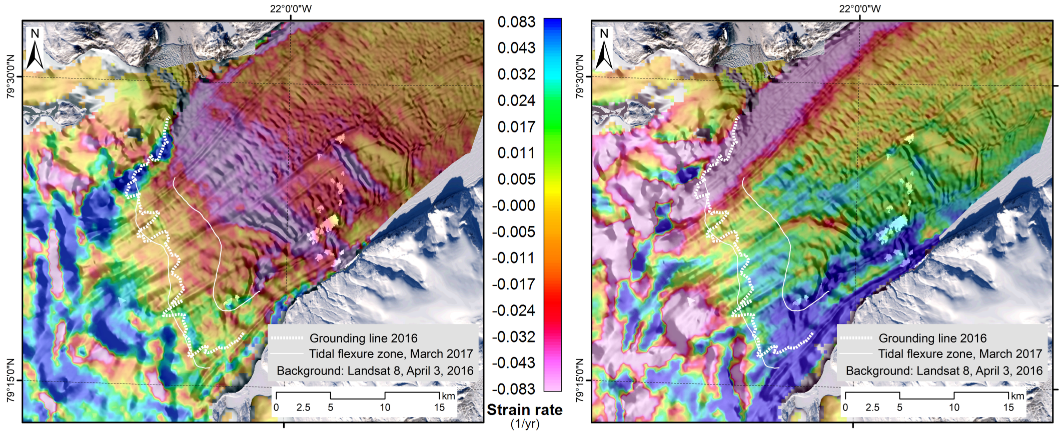

Figure 4. (A) Along-flow strain rate component inferred from the yearly average velocity 2016-17. (B) The corresponding shear strain rate component.

coupling as the channel becomes more incised. What effects this could have on the ice sheet's stability are not immediately obvious.

Yet, this regime of stress distribution and channel formation has existed since at least 1978 and does not appear to have caused thinning of this magnitude in the middle of the ice shelf until recently. The likely causes of this severe localized thinning are several-fold. It is probable that infiltration of warm AIW has increased, leading to more intense meltwater plume activity at the ice-ocean interface. Runoff rates have also continued to rise over the past few decades (Fig. S9), with 2012, when the most recent flow-perpendicular channel formed, being a year of particularly intense melting (Nghiem et al., 2012), with significant calving events across northern Greenland (Ochwat et al., 2022). Moreover, the non-perpendicular angle of the attached flow-perpendicular channel and the shift in basal drainage patterns could make the central channel a particularly conducive conduit for housing an active meltwater plume

4 Conclusion

Despite its complicated system of subglacial channels, we find that N79 was relatively stable for many years (at least from 1978-2012). A flow-perpendicular channel/central channel complex would appear and grow modestly for 5-10 years, but that growth would significantly diminish when a new flow-perpendicular channel appears and the old one begins to stagnate. One might liken this to the configuration of Jakobshavn Glacier prior to the disintegration of its floating icetongue in 1998 (Thomas et al., 2003). Like N79, Jakobshavn is sourced from two tributaries and had a large basal channel near the grounding line along the seam between these two branches. This channel began to grow, likely as a result of thickening of the warm water layer at the bottom of the fjord (Motyka et al., 2011). However, disintegration did not occur until the channel drew close to the calving front, and for the central channel of N79 this is decades away. There is also a resemblance to recent events at Petermann Glacier, which has a similarly long ice shelf, where grounding line retreat has been facilitated by rising ocean temperature (Washam et al., 2019) and fractures causing sections of the ice to become decoupled from one another (Millan et al., 2022).

While the impact of these developments on the ice sheet may not be felt for many years, there are still several insights to be gained. Firstly, the importance of continued high-density data collection must be stressed. Such observations cannot be made without a high spatiotemporal density of altimetry, DEMs, and surface velocities. Ideally, there would also be a greater density of radar observations, as there are presently no more effective methods of determining the true shape of the ice shelf bottom, and the available data was insufficient to meet the full needs of this research. Furthermore, the observed changes occur so quickly and are so localized that they would be very difficult to detect without processing such as that described here of combining datasets to improve their collective accuracy.

Perhaps more significantly, the results also hint at the weaknesses of our current fundamental ability to model ice sheets. The channels of N79 and their varied behavior are too small-scale and temporally variable to be easily incorporated in a model, yet the effects are rather dramatic. Simply turning up the ocean temperature beneath a generalized model of the N79 ice shelf is unlikely to result in the shelf being nearly split in two so close to the grounding line; and generalizing from localized data could be misleading. Consider Mayer et al. (2018), which reconstructs the mass loss of N79 largely based on observations of a single feature near the NWIS margin. We conclude that such an approach is misleading, given the non-uniformity in the pattern of thinning of N79. It is our hope that other researchers will continue to strive for greater density and accuracy of data, and increased model complexity. The tools developed for this research, once made publicly available, should assist in this regard, as they allow for more accurate elevation reconstruction of floating ice, and areas where adequate ice-free control surfaces are unavailable.

5 Open Research

The software used to generate the elevation reconstructions is the Mosaic Utility and Large Dataset Integration for SERAC (MOULINS) (Narkevic, 2021), which is still in development for public release. It includes spline-based curve fitting based on (Shekhar et al., 2021), and tidal correction based on software available at (`https://github.com/tsutterley/pyTMD`). The altimetry data used come from the Airborne Topographic Mapper (ATM; `https://nsidc.org/data/ilatm2/versions/2`), ICESat (`https://nsidc.org/data/glah12/versions/34`), and ICESat-2 (`https://nsidc.org/data/atl06/versions/4`). Uncorrected DEMs from 2012-2020, generated from WorldView imagery by the ArcticDEM project and are available at `https://data.pgc.umn.edu/elev/dem/setsm/ArcticDEM/strips/s2s041/2m`). The 1978 DEM is from `https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/metadata/landing-page/bin/iso?id=gov.noaa.nodc:0145405`. Surface elevations outside the reconstructed region are from BedMachine v4 (Morlighem et al., 2017), available at `https://nsidc.org/data/idbmg4/versions/4`, and the bed elevation is from (An et al., 2021), available `https://datadryad.org/stash/dataset/doi:10.7280/D19987`. Subglacial drainage reconstructions are made with Topo Toolbox (Schwanghart & Nikolaus, 2010), available at `https://topotoolbox.wordpress.com/`. The velocities used can be found at `https://datadryad.org/stash/dataset/doi:10.7280/D11H3X`. N79 calving fronts are from (Goliber et al., 2022) and available at from `https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6557981`. All Landsat imagery is courtesy of USGS and obtained from `https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/`. All new data sets generated by this study (surface elevation mosaics, corresponding ice bottom elevation, Lagrangian elevation change, and select partitioned time series), are accessible through Zenodo `https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7518206`.

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