A Poleward Storm Track Shift Reduces Mid-Latitude Heatwave Frequency: Insights from an Idealized Atmospheric Model

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Abstract.

Recent decades have seen a global increase in hot extremes, yet the role of changes in the atmospheric circulation in driving this trend remains unclear. While previous studies focused on the amplitude of planetary and synoptic-scale waves for explaining the frequency and persistence of temperature extremes, we here investigate the influence of the storm track position. Specifically, we conduct a suite of idealized model experiments with the dry dynamical core of the ICON model, where thermal forcing in the tropics or the polar regions alters the characteristics of the extratropical storm track. In these simulations, the storm track is associated with a mid-latitude minimum in the frequency of persistent temperature extremes. The underlying relationship between the zonal phase speed of synoptic-scale waves and storm track characteristics is assessed through spectral analysis of upper-tropospheric meridional wind. A poleward-shifted storm track is associated with a strengthened eddy-driven jet, an increase in phase speed, and a reduction in heatwave frequency. Reanalysis data for the Southern Hemisphere, where ozone depletion and greenhouse gas emissions have caused a poleward storm track shift, reveals a mid-latitude minimum in heatwave frequency reminiscent of the idealized model. While the phase speed of synoptic-scale waves has continuously increased from the 1980s to the present, we cannot find evidence that this development has influenced the persistence of Southern Hemisphere mid-latitude temperature extremes, potentially due to differences in the climatological-mean spectrum between the idealized model and reanalysis. The mechanism may, on the other hand, be relevant for the future evolution of extreme events in the Northern Hemisphere under the joint influence of Arctic Amplification and the expansion of the tropics.

1 Introduction

Persistent heat poses a severe hazard to human health (e.g., Ebi et al., 2021). The observed increase in the frequency and intensity of hot extremes in most regions of the world (e.g., Seneviratne et al., 2021; Russo and Domeisen, 2023), therefore, causes great concern and calls for a better understanding of the different drivers of this change. A range of physical processes has likely contributed to the increase in hot extreme weather in response to anthropogenic climate change (Domeisen et al., 2023; Barriopedro et al., 2023). Foremost, there is the greenhouse effect, which is responsible for the general warming trend and contributes to extreme events (Schär et al., 2004; Fischer and Knutti, 2015). The general warming trend is also linked to an increase in the average saturation vapor pressure (O'Gorman and Muller, 2010), which has various implications for temperature

extremes. In a warmer climate, the feedback between low soil moisture and anomalously high air temperature (Miralles et al., 2014; Hauser et al., 2016) is becoming more effective because moisture deficits can build faster (Dai et al., 2018). Furthermore, as more moisture becomes available for cloud condensation (Joos et al., 2023), upstream latent heat release can contribute more effectively to blocking formation and a stable stratification that is characteristic of extreme heat near the surface (Zschenderlein et al., 2019; Papritz and Röthlisberger, 2023). These processes and their impact on weather extremes are studied using complex earth system models (e.g., Wehrli et al., 2019).

In addition to the above thermodynamic effects, it has been hypothesized that changes in the atmospheric circulation might contribute to the tendency in extreme events, most prominently in the context of Arctic amplification (Francis and Vavrus, 2012; Cohen et al., 2014; Coumou et al., 2015; Pfleiderer et al., 2019). As Arctic temperatures are rising twice to four times as fast as the global mean (Rantanen et al., 2022; Screen and Simmonds, 2010a, b), a reduced equator-to-pole temperature gradient is expected to be seen near the surface and a weakened westerly jet stream at height (Harvey et al., 2020). These changes in the zonal mean are believed to influence mid-latitude temperature extremes by altering the strength and the size of the perturbations to the zonally averaged circulation (Geen et al., 2023). Geometry based metrics predict an increase in waviness and, related to potentially more persistent jet meanders, more extreme mid-latitude weather (Francis and Vavrus, 2012; Cohen et al., 2014). Intensity or kinetic energy based metrics predict a weakening; but based on the hypothesis that a weakened circulation will increase persistence, the consequence [...] is again an increase in warm temperature extremes (Coumou et al., 2015; Pfleiderer et al., 2019).

While the near-surface temperature gradient is reducing due to sea ice loss and changing cloud radiative properties in the Arctic, an increased latent heat release in the tropics is strengthening the upper-tropospheric temperature gradient (Shaw et al., 2016). The associated circulation response is described as a poleward expansion of the Hadley cells (Lu et al., 2007; Grise et al., 2019; Grise and Davis, 2020), which is associated with a poleward shift of the extratropical storm tracks and strengthened mid-latitude jet streams (Butler et al., 2010; Chang et al., 2012; Barnes and Polvani, 2013). In the Southern Hemisphere, polar stratospheric cooling due to anthropogenic emissions of ozone-depleting substances reinforces the greenhouse gas-related signal associated with tropical upper-tropospheric warming (Arblaster and Meehl, 2006; Thompson et al., 2011). Consequentially, a significant positive trend in the Southern Annular Mode (SAM) was observed, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s (Thompson et al., 2000; Marshall, 2003). While the ozone-related trend shows signs of having paused (Banerjee et al., 2020), the greenhouse gas-related signal is expected to grow stronger (Shindell and Schmidt, 2004; Arblaster et al., 2011; Watt-Meyer et al., 2019). Moreover, a relationship between tropical mid-tropospheric geopotential height and the interannual variability of the SAM (Ding et al., 2014) builds confidence in the projected change. In the Northern Hemisphere, on the other hand, slowly emerging trends are often regional and strongly dependent on season (Shaw et al., 2024). While reanalysis data points towards a dominance of the tropical warming over Arctic amplification (Woollings et al., 2023), open questions about the strength of certain feedbacks remain (Screen et al., 2022).

Reducing uncertainties in the projection of the strength and position of the mid-latitude storm track constitutes a formidable task for complex coupled climate models. Idealized models, on the other hand, are well suited to build process understanding. Here, we use a simple general circulation model to explore a mechanism that relates the frequency of hot extremes to

the spectral properties of large-scale atmospheric waves for the two scenarios of Arctic amplification and tropical expansion. Specifically, we focus on heatwaves, defined by a minimum number of consecutive hot days at a given location (e.g., Perkins and Alexander, 2013), and link them to the zonal phase speed of upper-tropospheric disturbances (Fragkoulidis and Wirth, 2020). The phase speed of upper-tropospheric disturbances, or Rossby waves, is used here as a persistence metric for dynamically forced subsidence and temperature advection (Wicker et al., 2024). Global coupled climate models project a decrease in the dominant zonal wavenumber in eddy kinetic energy spectra (Chemke and Ming, 2020) and an increase in phase speed in eddy momentum flux spectra (Chen and Held, 2007) in response to anthropogenic climate change. However, we still lack full understanding of these projections.

For the first part of this study (Sec. 3), we follow the modeling setup by Butler et al. (2010) and perform a suite of experiments that produce a wide range of wave characteristics in a dry dynamical model (see Section 2.1) to shed new light on the relation between heatwaves and the strength and position of the storm track. Heatwaves in a dry dynamical model are driven primarily by adiabatic warming due to subsidence and warm air advection (Jiménez-Esteve and Domeisen, 2022), whereas cloud radiative effects and thermodynamic feedbacks are explicitly not simulated. These idealized experiments are therefore well suited to isolate the role of atmospheric dynamics. In the second part of this study (Sec. 4), we compare the idealized modeling results to reanalysis data for the Southern Hemisphere to assess the importance of dry dynamics in the real world. While the Southern Hemisphere mid-latitudes feature a significant positive phase trend and a distribution of hot day persistence similar to idealized experiments, we also discuss limitations of our model and relate them to differences in the climatological-mean spectrum between the model and reanalysis.

2 Data and Methods

2.1 Idealized experiments

Our model experiments are based on the Held and Suarez (1994) configuration of the ICOsahedral Nonhydrostatic atmospheric model (ICON version 2.6.4; Zängl et al., 2015; Giorgetta et al., 2018; Russo et al., 2025) and run for 50 years of 360 days each with six-hourly output after discarding one year of spin-up. Specifically, we use the R2B4 grid configuration, corresponding to a horizontal resolution of approximately 160 km, and we use 47 vertical levels. In the reference simulation, the atmospheric flow is forced by relaxation to an equilibrium temperature profile and damped by linear friction in the lower troposphere as well as horizontal diffusion of temperature and momentum (Held and Suarez, 1994). Note, in particular, that the model forcing is zonally symmetric and features no seasonal or diurnal cycle.

Following the approach by (Butler et al., 2010), we conduct a range of sensitivity experiments where we impose circulation changes by forcing the temperature balance with an additional localized, but zonally symmetric heat source (see Appendix A for details). Mathematically, this is equivalent to adjusting the equilibrium temperature profile towards which the circulation is relaxed. First we compare the reference simulation to two selected sensitivity experiments (i.e., `exp9` and `exp4`, Table A1) with either a tropical upper-tropospheric heat source or an Arctic surface-intensified heat source that produce a 4°N poleward or equatorward storm track shift, respectively (Fig. 1d). To assess potential non-linear effects, we then compare ten

additional experiments with combined tropical and Arctic heat sources or sinks. Finally, we compare the model results to ERA5 reanalysis data (Hersbach et al., 2020) for the satellite era from 1979 to 2022. For computational efficiency, upper-tropospheric meridional wind from ERA5 is regridded to a horizontal resolution of 2°x2° and daily-maximum 2 m temperature is regridded to a resolution of 0.5°x0.5°.

2.2 Diagnostics

Throughout this study, we define heatwaves as events of at least three consecutive hot days. As our numerical model has no seasonal cycle, diurnal cycle, or topography, we can define hot days in the model based on a grid point-dependent but otherwise fixed 90th percentile threshold for daily mean temperature at 1000 hPa. For each experiment, the temperature threshold is set separately. By definition, each model grid point experiences on average 36 hot days per year. The frequency and duration of heatwaves are, therefore, solely a function of hot day persistence. In ERA5 data, we define hot days based on a seasonally varying 90th percentile threshold of daily maximum 2m temperature for a 31-day multi-year rolling window (see, e.g., Russo and Domeisen, 2023; Brunner and Voigt, 2024). The number of hot days per year at any grid point varies significantly between the first and the second half of the time series because we do not detrend the ERA5 temperature data before estimating the 90th percentile from the data from 1979 to 2022.

A key diagnostic to characterize the atmospheric circulation is vertically integrated kinetic energy for 10-day high-pass filtered horizontal wind anomalies obtained by convolution with a 30-day Lanczos kernel. The maximum of zonal-mean eddy kinetic energy can be referred to as the mid-latitude storm track (e.g., Shaw et al., 2016), not to be confused with extratropical cyclone tracks from tracking algorithms of pressure minima (e.g., Sprenger et al., 2017). The spectral properties of Rossby waves are assessed based on power spectra of meridional wind anomalies at 250 hPa in coordinates of zonal wavenumber and phase speed following the methodology of Randel and Held (1991). For the idealized model experiments presented in Section 3 we compute the climatological mean for the entire time series of 1285 individual spectra for 14-day tapered windows. The choice of the window length is a trade-off between temporal and phase speed resolution (Wicker et al., 2024). The spectra for ERA5 data presented in Section 4 are computed as the climatological mean of 1144 spectra, where meridional wind anomalies are computed with respect to a seasonally varying climatology of 14-day multi-year windows. The wave packet diagnostic in Figures 4 and 8 is based on the Hilbert transform of composite-mean temperature anomalies that are zonally filtered in Fourier space for zonal wavenumbers 3-15 (Zimin et al., 2003).

3 Modeling results

3.1 Storm track latitude and phase speed

The first step in this study is to compare our model simulations to the benchmark by Butler et al. (2010). The zonally symmetric forcing (Held and Suarez, 1994) generates a potential temperature profile in our reference simulation that approximates equinox conditions (Fig. 1a). Zonal-mean potential temperature is symmetric around the equator, increases from the surface to the model

top, and features a pronounced meridional gradient in the mid-latitudes. Butler et al. (2011) advocate a simple eddy-diffusive model to understand circulation changes based on changes in baroclinicity, an expression for the slope between surfaces of constant potential temperature and surfaces of constant pressure. The sensitivity experiment with tropical forcing shows a zonally symmetric warming that is largely confined to the tropical upper troposphere (Fig. 1b), enhancing both the meridional potential temperature gradient in the mid-latitudes and vertical stratification in the tropics and subtropics. The response to the tropical forcing is, therefore, a dipole of reduced baroclinicity in the subtropics and enhanced baroclinicity further poleward (Butler et al., 2011). The sensitivity experiment with Arctic forcing shows a surface-intensified warming at the boreal high latitudes reducing stratification and the meridional gradient (Fig. 1c). Mid-latitude eddy heat fluxes are tightly linked to these changes in baroclinicity. The eddy heat flux response to tropical forcing (black contours in Fig. 1b), in particular, mirrors the dipole response of baroclinicity and indicates a poleward shift of the mid-latitude heat flux maximum. The response in eddy heat flux to Arctic forcing, on the other hand, shows an equatorward shift but also a clear weakening of the heat flux maximum (black contours in Fig. 1c). These results obtained with the ICON model generally agree with the benchmark from the Colorado State University general circulation model (Butler et al., 2010). To achieve a quantitative agreement, however, we have reduced the amplitude of the tropical forcing, increased the amplitude of the Arctic forcing, and modified its vertical profile (see Appendix A).

A comparison of the three experiments in terms of eddy kinetic energy and zonal-mean zonal wind delivers measurable insight into the mid-latitude circulation. The eddy kinetic energy response to individual forcings (Fig. 1d) resembles the response in the eddy heat flux with a poleward shift in response to tropical warming and an equatorward shift combined with a weakening for the case of Arctic warming. A sensitivity experiment with combined forcing (exp8, Table A1) shows a weakening in maximum eddy kinetic energy but no meridional shift (red line in Fig. 1d) indicating that the circulation response is approximately additive. The zonal wind response to thermal forcing is strongly dependent on altitude (Butler et al., 2010). Here, we use the mass-weighted vertical average of zonal-mean zonal wind (Fig. 1e) that is determined mostly by the lower troposphere as a proxy for the eddy-driven jet that arises from the stirring of the mid-latitude potential vorticity contrast (Kidston and Vallis, 2012). The location of the eddy-driven jet is closely linked to the mid-latitude storm track. In particular, we find that the maximum of the vertically averaged zonal wind shifts poleward or equatorward by 5°N in response to tropical or Arctic warming, respectively (Fig. 1e). In addition, we find that the poleward shifted jet is strengthened to 18.3 ± 0.3 m/s compared to the reference of 17.6 ± 0.2 m/s while the equatorward shifted jet is weakened to 16.9 ± 0.2 m/s. This finding confirms a previously reported relationship between the latitude and the speed of the eddy-driven jet (Kidston and Vallis, 2012). The strength of the eddies, on the other hand, appears less important for the strength of the eddy-driven jet, as indicated by the experiment with the combined forcing (red line in Fig. 1e) where the magnitude of eddy kinetic energy is reduced while the location of its maximum and the strength of the jet are largely unchanged.

In the following, we discuss a relationship between the the storm track latitude and the zonal phase speed of synoptic-scale disturbances in the upper troposphere. The Hayashi spectra in Figure 2a-c depict the phase speed spectrum of meridional wind variance as a function of zonal wavenumber. In general, the spectra show high variance for wavenumbers 5 to 8 and an increasingly eastward phase speed for increasing zonal wavenumber from less than 0 m/s to roughly 10 m/s. The spectral
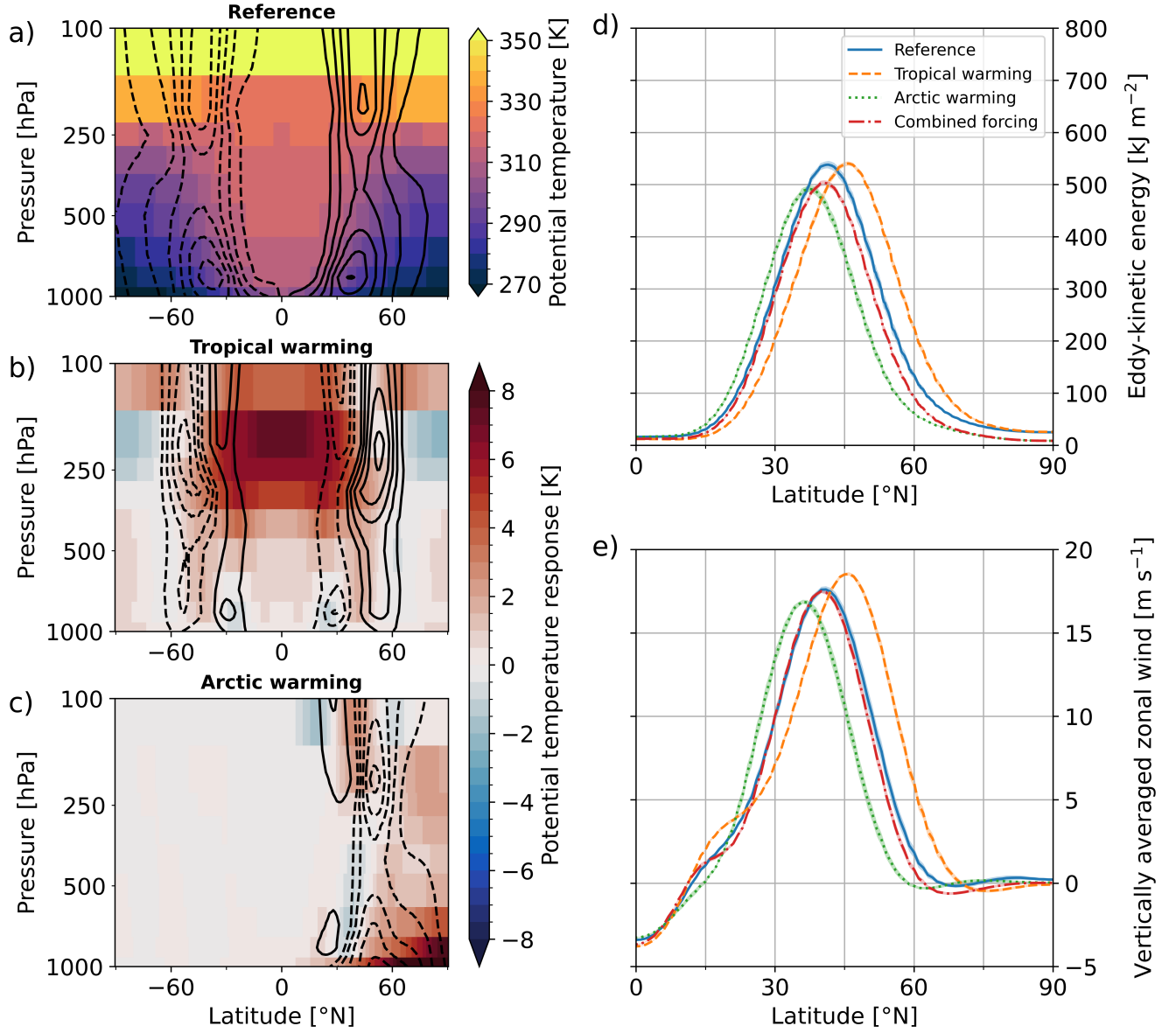
Figure 1. (a) Zonal-mean potential temperature $\bar{\theta}$ (shading) and mean meridional eddy heat flux $\overline{v'\theta'}$ (black contours with spacing of 3 Kms^{-1}, negative values dashed) in the reference simulation and (b)-(c) the response in $\bar{\theta}$ and $\overline{v'\theta'}$ (contour spacing of 1 Kms^{-1}) in the sensitivity experiments with a tropical and a polar heat source, respectively. Lines of (d) vertically integrated eddy kinetic energy and (e) mass-weighted vertically averaged, zonal-mean zonal wind for the reference simulation, the two experiments with a single forcing, and one experiment with combined tropical and Arctic forcing with a color shading that indicates the 95% confidence interval based on a bootstrapping of annual means.

information can be summarized by the centroid (the "center of mass") of the spectrum indicated by black markers in Figure 2a-c. For the reference simulation, the centroid lies at a phase speed of 4.3±0.1 m/s and zonal wavenumber 6.26±0.03 (black circle). Tropical and Arctic warming cause statistically [...] significant, dipole-shaped differences in power spectral density (Fig. 2b, c) in the respective sensitivity experiments. The centroid is shifted to a higher phase speed of 5.2±0.1 m/s and a lower wavenumber of 5.88±0.02 in response to tropical warming (black cross in Fig. 2b), whereas the centroid is shifted to a lower phase speed of 3.1±0.1 m/s and higher wavenumber of 6.62±0.02 in the case of Arctic warming (black cross in Fig. 2c). A baseline for understanding how the phase speed of upper-tropospheric disturbances might be related to the storm track latitude is given by the Rossby wave dispersion relation from linear theory. More specifically, the zonal phase speed c_p of barotropic Rossby waves can be expressed as a function of mean zonal wind $\bar{u}$, the meridional planetary vorticity gradient β, and the zonal and meridional wavenumber k and l.

$$c_p = \bar{u} - \beta/(k^2 + l^2) \tag{1}$$

Both the mean zonal wind $\bar{u}$ and the meridional planetary vorticity gradient β are functions of latitude. Therefore, in Figure 2d-e, we plot the centroid of the Hayashi spectra averaged over smaller meridional bands of 5°N width, compared to the broad meridional range of 35°N to 65°N used for the spectra in Figure 2a-c, against latitude. A local maximum in phase speed around the core of the storm track (Fig. 2d) and a rapid decrease in zonal wavenumber towards higher latitudes (Fig. 2e) are clearly visible. Comparing the experiments with tropical and Arctic warming, phase speed is increased or decreased over the entire range of latitudes as the storm track is shifted poleward or equatorward, respectively. Based on equation (1), this could be explained by a lower β at higher latitudes. More plausibly, however, the relationship between phase speed and storm track latitude is explained by the strength of the vertically averaged zonal-mean zonal wind or eddy-driven jet (Fig. 1e). In particular, we find that the responses in phase speed and jet strength to thermal forcing conform within the limits of uncertainty (Tab. S1). Following the reasoning of Kidston and Vallis (2012), the relationship between latitude and strength of the eddy-driven jet, in turn, is explained by the inverse proportionality between the eddy stirring efficiency and the meridional absolute vorticity gradient β^*. The zonal wavenumber is affected by the thermal forcing mostly equatorward of 50°N (Fig. 2e).

3.2 Persistent temperature extremes

Next, we assess the response in persistent temperature extremes to the idealized thermal forcing. A climatological heatwave frequency has, according to the definition employed in Section 2.2, an upper bound of 36 days/year. In this case, every hot day that exceeds the 90th percentile threshold for near-surface temperature forms part of a heatwave. Our reference simulation shows a heatwave frequency above 30 days/year in the low and high latitudes close to the theoretical maximum (Fig. 3a). In the mid-latitudes, however, about 5°N poleward of the EKE maximum, heatwave frequency reduces to approximately 14 days/year. There, less than 40 % of the hot days form part of a heatwave with a minimum duration of 3 days. The strongest response in heatwave frequency to the idealized forcing is seen between 45°N and 65°N (Fig. 3a). The sensitivity experiment with Arctic warming shows an increase, whereas the experiment with tropical warming shows a decrease in heatwave
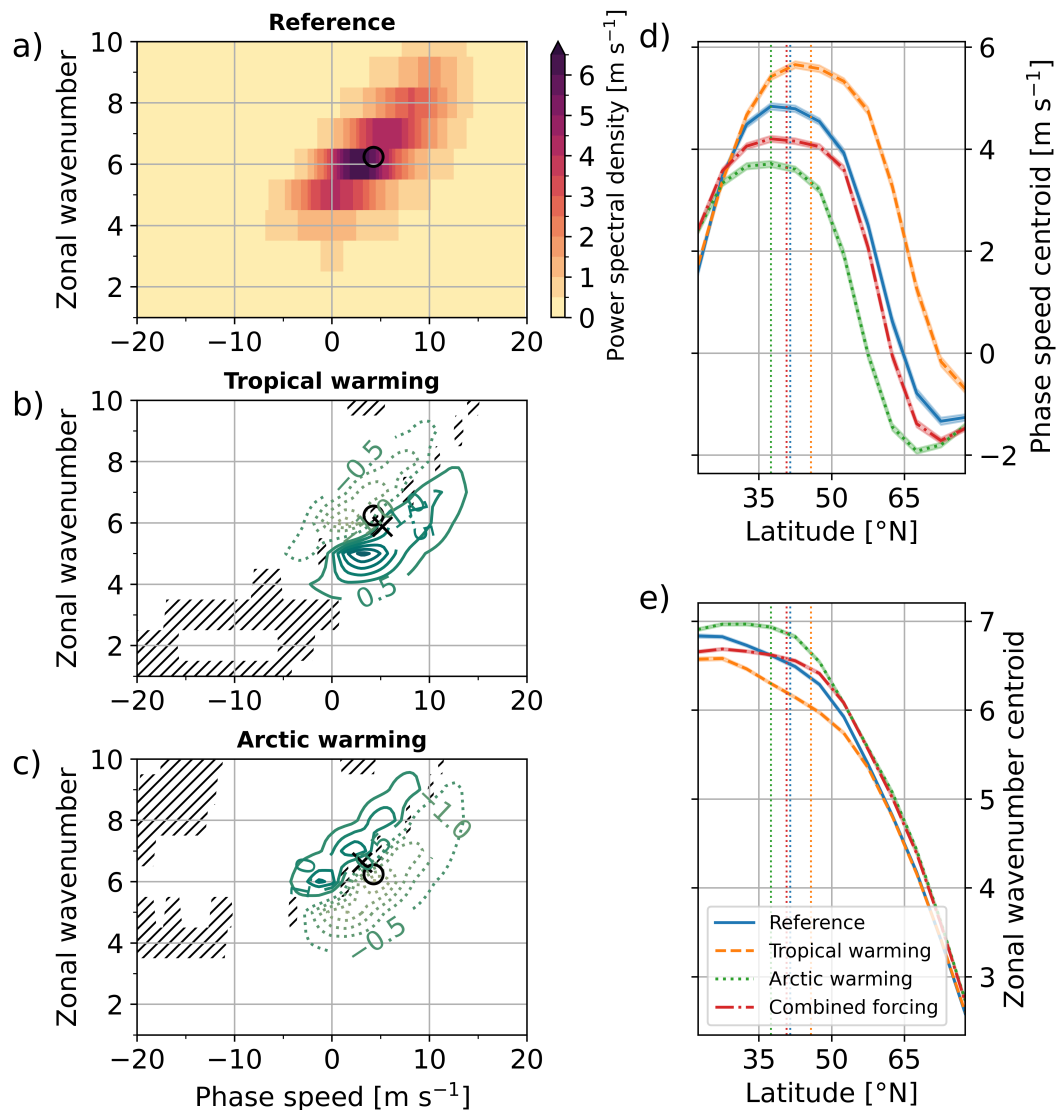
Figure 2. Climatological-mean meridional-mean (35°N to 65°N) power spectral density of meridional wind at 250 hPa for (a) the reference simulation and (b)-(c) the difference in the experiments with tropical and Arctic warming, respectively. The circle indicates the centroid of the meridional-mean spectrum for the reference simulation, the 'x' markers indicate the centroid for the respective sensitivity experiment. Hatching indicates where the spectrum of the reference simulation and the sensitivity experiment are not significantly different at the 99.9% confidence level based on a parametric bootstrap of 14-day windows. The centroid of (d) phase speed spectra and (e) zonal wavenumber spectra averaged over smaller 5°N latitude band widths is plotted as a function of central latitude with the 95% confidence interval (shading). The dotted vertical lines in (d)-(e) indicate the location of the maximum eddy kinetic energy.

frequency. An alternative way to summarize the results is to say that the mid-latitude heatwave frequency minimum shifts in coherence with the EKE maximum between 43°N and 52°N. The magnitude of minimum heatwave frequency is reduced or increased for a poleward or an equatorward shift of the EKE maximum, respectively.

A mid-latitude minimum, similar to the one for heatwave frequency, is also seen for heatwave duration (Fig. 3b). This
195 mid-latitude minimum shifts meridionally in a similar fashion as the frequency minimum. Its magnitude, however, does not change significantly with values for the meridional minimum of mean heatwave duration between 3.71 days and 3.77 days. For a better understanding of the different responses in heatwave frequency and duration, we plot the distribution in hot day persistence as a function of latitude in Figure 3c-d: The black contours depict the frequency density of consecutive hot days that form part of a set with a given length for the reference simulation. Integrating the frequency density over length from
200 one to infinity yields 36 days/year, whereas integrating the density above the magenta grid lines (i.e., days with a persistence longer than 2 days) yields the heatwave frequency plotted in Figure 3a. The distribution of hot day persistence is strongly skewed (black contours in Fig. 3c and d). While, in exceptional cases, the duration of a heatwave can reach two weeks or more, most mid-latitude heatwaves last only as long as the minimum duration of 3 consecutive days. The color shading in Figures 3c-d shows the frequency density difference between the sensitivity experiments and the reference simulation. Integrating that
205 density difference at a given latitude over length yields 0 days/year. In areas where the pivot point between a positive and a negative hot day density response to tropical or Arctic warming lies at a length between 2 and 3 days, any change in hot day persistence imprints strongly on heatwave frequency.

Locally amplified Rossby wave packets are known to generate mid-latitude heatwaves (Jiménez-Esteve and Domeisen, 2022; Fragkoulidis et al., 2018). Based on the analysis in Section 3.1, we hypothesize that the mid-latitude minima in heatwave
210 frequency and duration are linked to the mid-latitude phase speed maximum associated with the storm track. Hence, we seek to assess to what extent the phase speed response applies for heatwave-generating Rossby waves and how phase speed affects heatwave characteristics. Figures 4a-b depict composite-mean temperature anomalies with respect to the 90th percentile in coordinates of time and longitude relative to a heatwave onset, our proxy for the heatwave-generating Rossby wave. Positive anomalies at the center of the Hovmöller plot indicate the occurrence of hot days. Negative anomalies with respect to the
215 90th percentile in the upper-left and lower-right quadrants of the plot indicate close-to-climatological conditions. The key feature in these Hovmöller plots is, however, the succession of more and less negative anomalies indicating the eastward group propagation (solid black line) of a wave packet (amplitude in white contours) as time progresses. Propagating at a much lower pace than the wave packet envelope, closed contours of more or less negative temperature anomalies (blue color shading) represent the cold and warm phases of the wave packet before and after a local amplification that facilitates the
220 occurrence of hot days. [...] Comparing the Hovmöller plots of the two experiments with tropical and Arctic warming at 50°N, we note that, first of all, the amplitude of the wave packet depends strongly on the distance to the storm track maximum (see Fig. S1 and S2 for a comparison at 45°N and 55°N). But given our interest in the persistence of temperature extremes, we highlight the difference in phase speed and wavelength (slope and spacing of dotted lines) in Figure 4c. In agreement with the differences shown by the Hayashi spectra of upper-tropospheric meridional wind (Fig. 2), the experiment with tropical
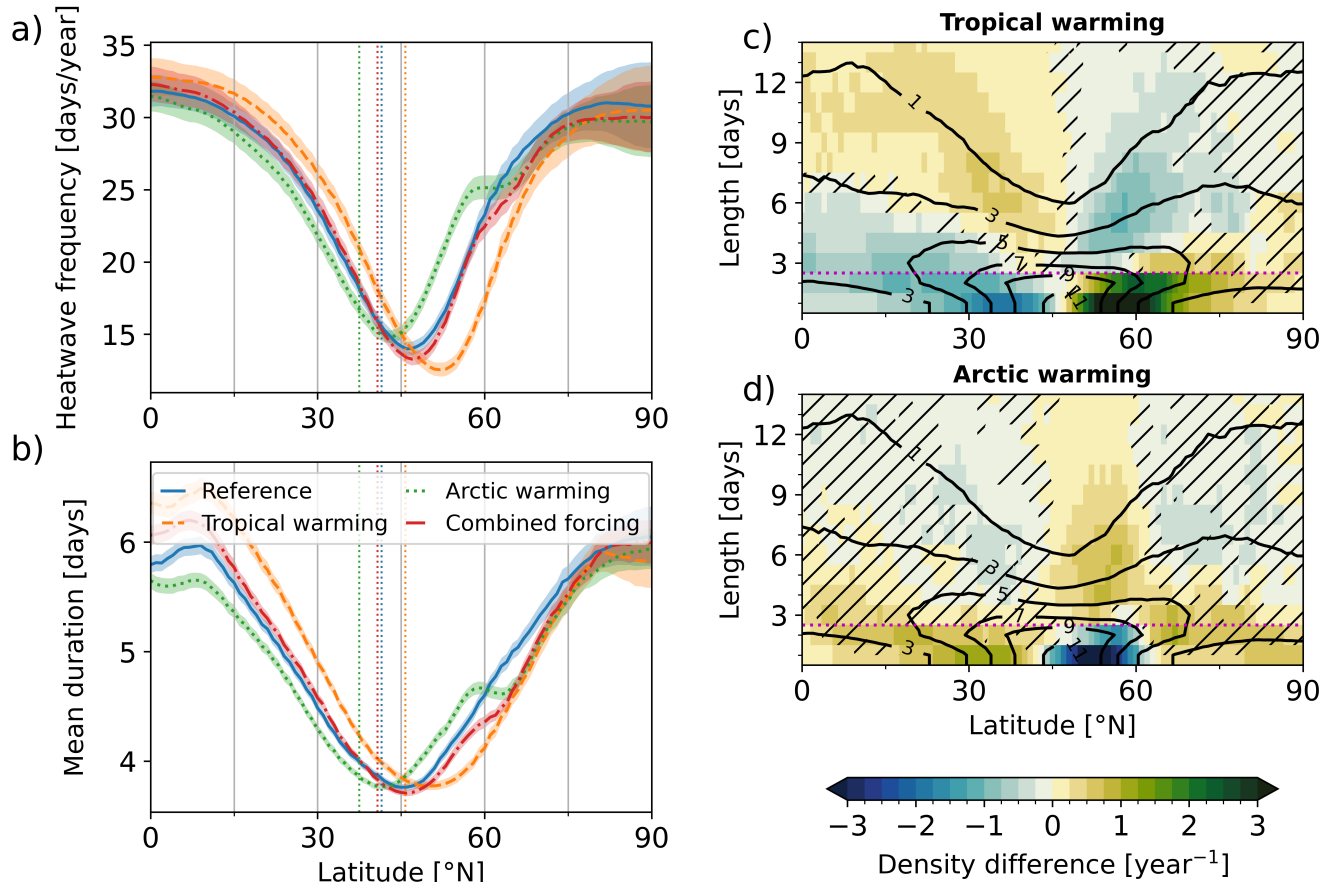
Figure 3. Zonal mean of (a) heatwave frequency and (b) mean heatwave duration. The color shading indicates the 95% confidence intervals. The storm track location in terms of the maximum eddy kinetic energy is indicated by dotted vertical lines for the reference simulation and the three sensitivity experiments. Changes in zonal-mean hot day frequency density with respect to the reference run as a function of latitude for (c) tropical warming and (d) Arctic warming. Hatching indicates where the frequency density in the respective sensitivity experiment is not significantly different from the reference simulation at the 95% confidence level and black contours indicate the frequency density in the reference simulation in units of year^{-1}. The magenta line indicates the minimum length to be classified as part of a heatwave.

warming shows faster phase propagation and higher wavelength than the experiment with Arctic warming. In other words, the response observed in climatological-mean phase speed spectra also applies for heatwave-generating Rossby wave packets.

To better understand how phase speed influences heatwave frequency, we now focus on the positive anomalies in the center of Figure 4a-b where the composite mean exceeds the hot day threshold. One mechanism to limit the duration of a heatwave is the succession by an amplified cold phase of the wave packet. This would be the case for rapid phase propagation when the period of the carrier wave does not support a longer heatwave. A second mechanism is the gradual diminution of anomalies as the duration of wave packet amplification is limited by the width of the wave packet and its group velocity. In our model, mid-latitude heatwave duration is limited by the second mechanism: Most heatwaves last for only 3 days, whereas half a period of the carrier wave amounts to approximately 4.5 and 6.5 days. The similarity in group velocity (thin solid contour in Fig. 4c) for both sensitivity experiments might therefore explain the lack of a significant difference in the minimum of mean heatwave duration (Fig. 3b). Heatwave frequency, however, is limited by phase speed rather than group velocity. This can be seen from the stronger tilt of the hot phase (blue thick solid contour in Fig. 4c) for the case of tropical warming compared to the case of Arctic warming, which increases the longitudinal extent of positive temperature anomalies with respect to the 90th percentile. In other words, a faster phase propagation creates additional hot days upstream and downstream of the central longitude. However, there the occurrence of a warm phase is not synchronized with the amplification of the wave packet. The additional hot days upstream and downstream do not occur in a set of consecutive days that is long enough to be classified as a heatwave, but they are preceded or followed by an amplified cold phase of a wave packet. Since the number of hot days is by definition limited to 10% of the time series, these isolated hot days lead to a reduction of heatwave frequency overall.

3.3 Position overrules strength of mid-latitude eddies

In the previous Section, we explored a mechanism that relates a mid-latitude minimum in heatwave frequency to a phase speed maximum and the position of the extratropical storm track. The final step in this first part of our study is to evaluate this mechanism over a broader range of circulation changes. The strong linear relationship between the storm track position, the eddy-driven jet strength, and the phase speed of upper-tropospheric disturbances across all the 13 performed experiments is confirmed and illustrated by Table S1 and Figure S3. Summarizing the mid-latitude heatwave signature by the position (Fig. 5a, b) and the value (Fig. 5c, d) of minimum heatwave frequency, we find a linear behavior over a range of storm track positions from approximately 35°N to 47°N and storm track magnitudes from approximately $460\,\mathrm{kJ\,m^{-2}}$ to $540\,\mathrm{kJ\,m^{-2}}$. Two experiments, where the storm track is either shifted far poleward to 51°N by strong tropical warming (exp1) or enhanced to $576\,\mathrm{kJ\,m^{-2}}$ by Arctic cooling (exp11), form outliers from that linear behavior.

A very high correlation of $R = 0.98$ between the position of the heatwave frequency minimum and that of the storm track maximum confirms the above-reported behavior across all 13 experiments (Fig. 5a). On average, the latitude of the heatwave frequency minimum lies 5.8°N poleward of the storm track maximum. A significant negative correlation of $R = -0.80$ is found between the minimum value of heatwave frequency and the position of the EKE maximum (Fig. 5c). Specifically, the minimum heatwave frequency is reduced by -0.25 ± 0.12 days per year for every degree of poleward storm track shift. Removing the two positive outliers, the correlation strengthens to $R = -0.93$ and the slope steepens to -0.35 ± 0.11 days per year per degree.
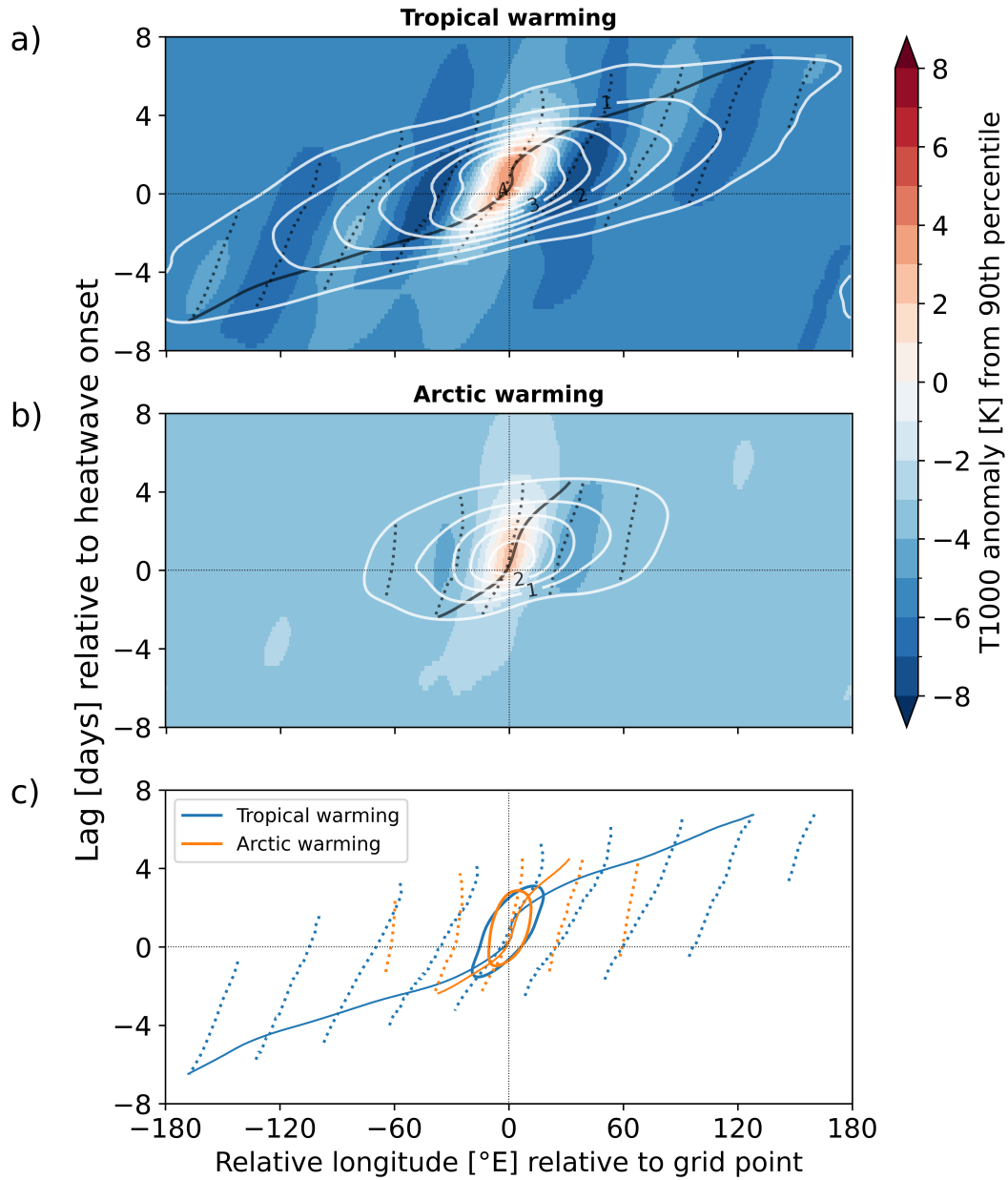
Figure 4. Composite-mean temperature anomaly at 1000 hPa with respect to the 90th percentile at 50°N for heatwaves (a) in the experiment with tropical warming and (b) in the experiment with Arctic warming in days relative to the heatwave onset (y-axis) and longitude relative to the grid point where the heatwave is identified (x-axis). White contours indicate the strength of the wave packet envelope in units of K. Dashed black lines indicate contours of zero phase angle for the carrier wave, while the solid black lines indicate a constant phase angle of the wave packet envelope. The lines of constant phase angle for both experiments shown in (a) and (b) are plotted for comparison in (c) with the solid contour of 0 K composite-mean temperature anomaly.

Fitting a linear model for the logarithm of minimum frequency yields a 2% reduction per degree of poleward shift (Fig. S3c). When averaging heatwave frequency meridionally between 45°N and 65°N, the correlation with the storm track position is strengthened to $R = -0.94$ (Fig. S3d). In comparison, the maximum value of EKE energy has no significant predictive power, neither for the position nor for the value of minimum heatwave frequency (Fig. 5b, d). [...]

4 Clear trends in reanalysis data

Over the past 50 years, the Southern Hemisphere (SH) has experienced a positive trend in the Southern Annular Mode (SAM, e.g., Marshall, 2003) connected to a poleward storm track shift (e.g., Chang et al., 2012). Based on the relationship explored above, we can expect a phase speed increase connected to the observed circulation changes. Indeed, the Hayashi spectra for the SH mid-latitude upper troposphere from ERA5 (Fig. 6a) share the principal characteristics with those from our idealized simulations: a predominantly eastward phase propagation, an increase in phase speed with wavenumber, and a broad peak in power spectral density for synoptic-scale waves. This peak, however, is located at a slightly lower wavenumber and a clearly higher phase speed compared to the ICON reference simulation. In addition, the spectrum for reanalysis is broader than the modeled spectrum, covering a wider range of phase speeds up to almost 20 m/s. Despite these differences between the model and reanalysis, the observed phase speed trend meets the expectation for a poleward storm track shift: The linear trend in power spectral density from 1979-2022 (Fig. 6b) forms a dipole similar to the response of the Tropical warming experiment (Fig. 2b). The centroid of the meridional-mean spectrum is shifted from zonal wavenumber 5.64 and a phase speed of 8.26 m/s in the 1980s to zonal wavenumber 5.60 and a phase speed of 8.61 m/s in the 2010s. The phase speed and wavenumber centroids for the four decades from 1980-2019 displayed as a function of latitude (Fig. 6c) reveal that phase speed increases over time everywhere between 40°S and 65°S, while its meridional maximum is not noticeably shifted. Differences in zonal wavenumber over time are very small compared to its meridional variations. We also note that the increase in phase speed for meridional wind variance is qualitatively in line with trends in eddy flux covariance spectra (Chen and Held, 2007) or Rossby wave packet diagnostics (Fragkoulidis, 2022), and that the increase is not limited to the years of strong ozone depletion in the 1980s and 1990s (Fig. 6c).

Given this phase speed increase over time, we wonder how circulation changes have affected heatwave frequency and hot day persistence in the SH mid-latitudes. To address this question, we start by comparing trends in year-round zonal-mean heatwave frequency in ERA5 from 1979 to 2022 between the Northern Hemisphere (NH) extratropics, the tropics, and the SH extratropics (Fig. 7a). Poleward of about 20°N, the NH has experienced a gradual increase in heatwave frequency from an average of 9 days/year in the 1980s to around 25 days/year in the 2010s. The tropics are marked by pronounced interannual variability where extrema in 1983, 1987, 1998, 2010, 2015-16, and 2019-21 are associated with El Niño events in the tropical Pacific (e.g., McPhaden et al., 2006). The SH, on the other hand, shows a broad mid-latitude minimum in heatwave frequency, where more than 70% of hot days occur isolated or as a set of two consecutive days, and a poleward migration of this minimum by about 12°S from the 1980s to the 2010s (Fig. 7a). While the mid-latitude minimum bears strong resemblance to the idealized experiments, its strong poleward migration exceeds the expectation from the model.
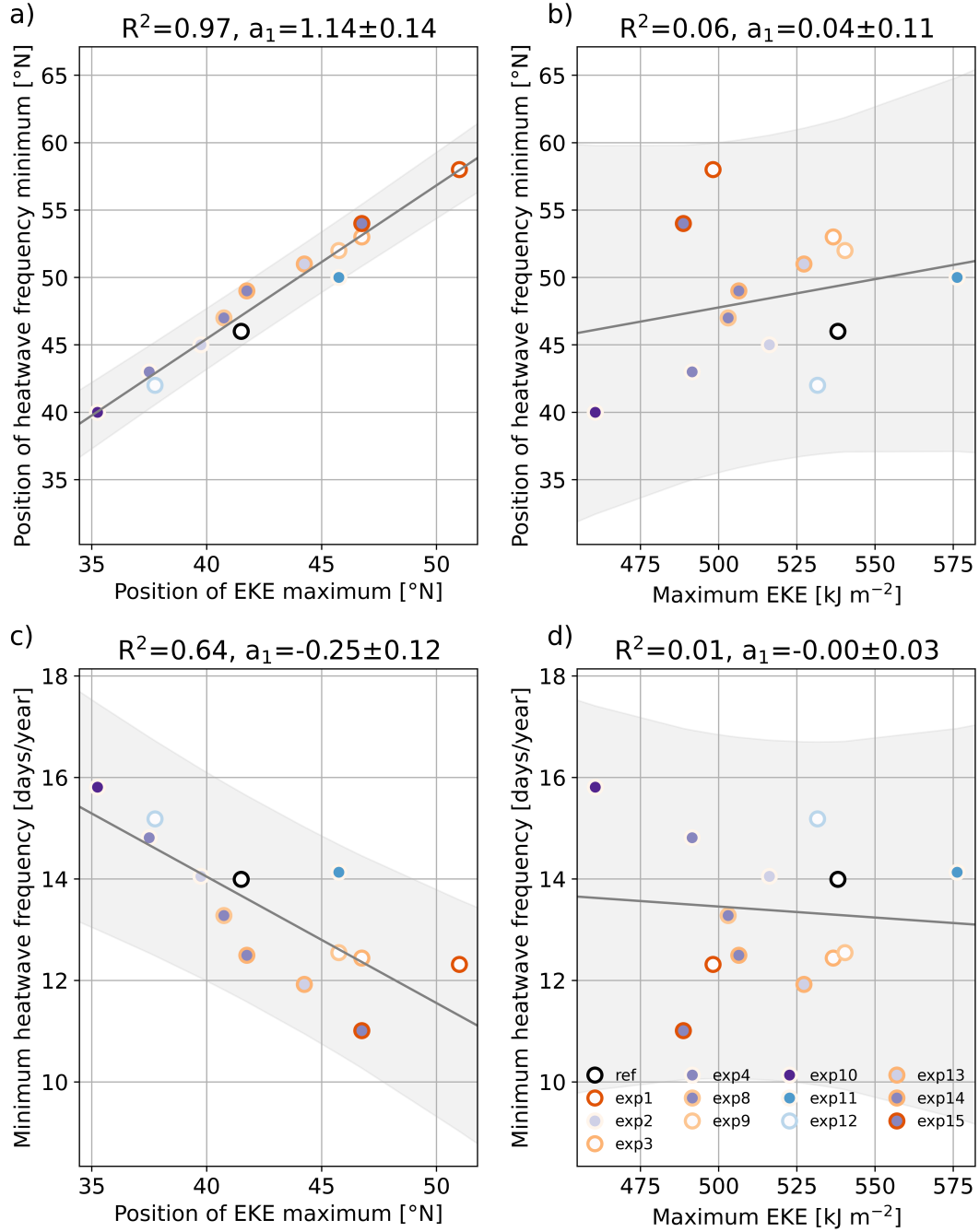
Figure 5. Position of (a, b) the heatwave frequency minimum and (c, d) the minimum value of heatwave frequency plotted as a function of (a, c) the position of the EKE maximum and (b, d) the maximum value of EKE with a least-square linear model fit for 13 model experiments with different heating profiles. The orange color saturation of the marker edge encodes the strength of tropical heating while the purple color saturation of the marker edge encodes the strength of Arctic heating. The coefficient of determination and the slope of the regression line with its 95% confidence interval is shown for each model fit in the title of the respective subplot and the 95% confidence interval of the response variable is indicated by a grey color shading.
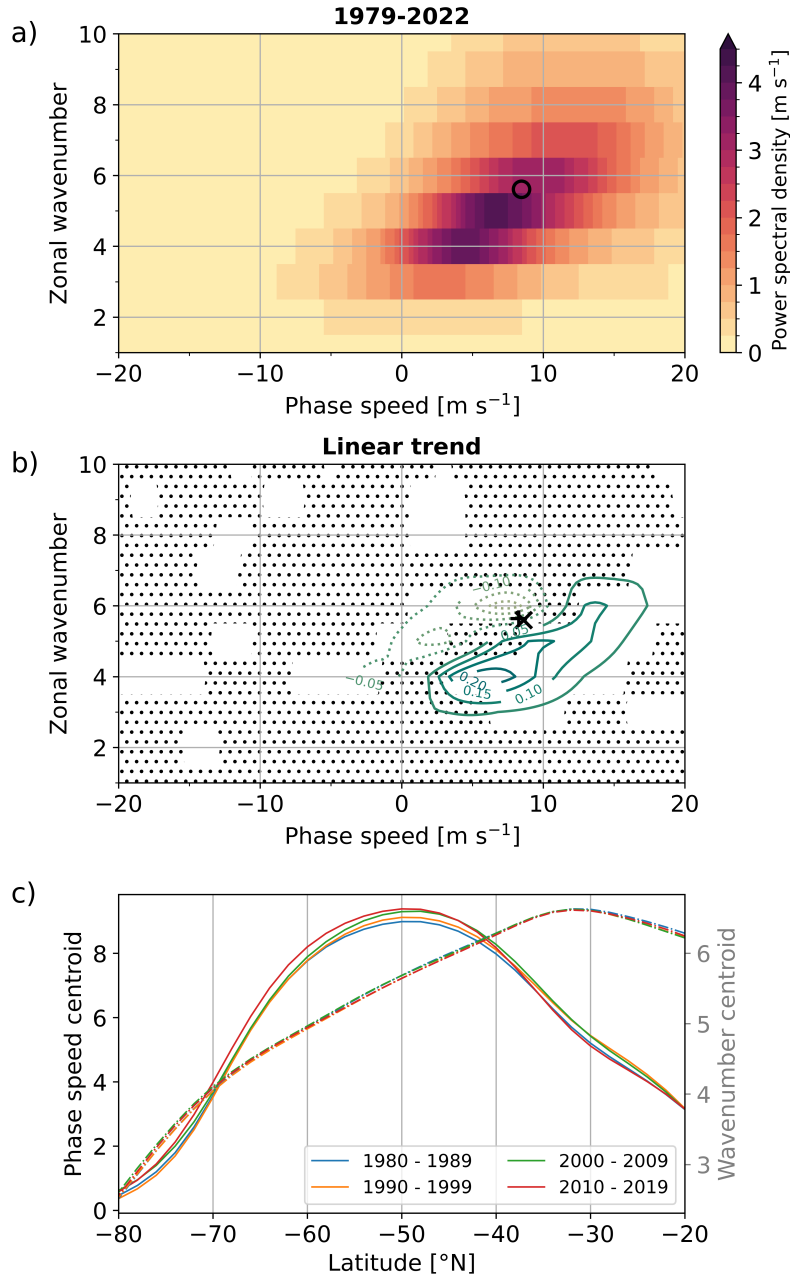
Figure 6. (a) Climatological-mean, meridional-mean (35°S-65°S) power spectral density of meridional wind at 250 hPa and (b) the linear trend in units of m s^{-1} decade^{-1} for the ERA5 time series from 1979-2022. Stippling indicates that the linear trend is not significant at a 95% confidence level based on a Monte-Carlo test (i.e., shuffling the predictor time series). The circular marker indicates the centroid of the climatological-mean meridional-mean spectrum (a). The '+' marker indicates the centroid for 1980-1989 (b), whereas the 'x' marks the centroid for 2010-2019. (c) The zonal phase speed (solid lines) and the wavenumber (dashed lines) of the centroid of 10-year mean meridional wind variance spectra without meridional averaging are shown as functions of latitude.

Related to the observed positive trend in the SAM, sea surface temperatures in the Southern Ocean have experienced opposing trends on either side of the Antarctic Circumpolar Current with a cooling around Antarctica related to anomalous Ekman transport in the surface ocean (Ferreira et al., 2015; Armour et al., 2016). The opposing trends in sea surface temperatures have most likely left their mark in the dipole-shaped hot day density trends (Fig. 7b). Equatorward to 60°S we see an increase in hot day frequency, while the decrease in hot day frequency poleward to 60°S is in line with the reported mean cooling south of the Antarctic Circumpolar Current. This dipole-shaped density trend differs strongly from the quadrupole-shaped response to thermal forcing in the model (Fig. 3c) and provides little evidence for a change in hot day persistence. Therefore, we conclude that the mean temperature trend and ocean processes contribute more strongly to the evolution of the SH heatwave frequency minimum than the change in phase speed of upper-tropospheric disturbances.

[...]

In order to understand the discrepancy between model and reanalysis, we turn again to composite-mean temperature anomalies relative to the grid point and the onset of a heatwave (Fig. 8) and seek to assess whether the above-noted phase speed difference is reflected in heatwave-generating Rossby waves. Similar to the composite mean from model data (Fig. 4), the downstream development of a wave packet is clearly visible. The eastward propagation of the wave envelope (Fig. 8a, black solid lines) is faster than the propagation of individual warm and cold phases (dashed lines). Positive composite-mean anomalies at the central longitude last for the minimum heatwave duration of 3 days, as it is the case in the model. [...] The tilt and the spacing of individual warm and cold phases express the phase speed and the wavelength of the heatwave-generating wave packet. Comparing the four decades from 1980-2019 (dashed lines in Fig. 8b), we find that the phase speed and the wavelength of the heatwave-generating wave packet have barely changed. The absence of change marks a notable contrast to the idealized model experiments. To explain the absence of change, we would like to point to the climatological phase speed spectra and the differences between model and reanalysis noted above. The centroid of the climatological-mean spectrum in reanalysis at 50°S corresponds to a period of only 5.7 days compared to 11.5 days for the ICON reference simulation at 50°N. The anticyclonic phase of a typical wave in the upper troposphere in reanalysis is not long enough to sustain a 3-day heatwave near the surface. The observed phase speed change affects the climatological-mean spectrum but cannot influence the characteristics of the heatwave-generating Rossby wave packets that, by definition, require a minimum persistence. On the Northern Hemisphere, for reference, the centroid of the mean spectrum at 50°N corresponds to 8.7 days year-round (Fig. S4) and 11.0 days during boreal summer (Wicker et al., 2024).

5 Conclusions

In this study, we explore a mechanism that relates the persistence of mid-latitude temperature extremes to storm track characteristics in the context of anthropogenic climate change. Similar to the setup of Butler et al. (2010), we conduct a series of idealized experiments with a dry dynamical general circulation model subject to thermal forcing that approximates the effect of Arctic amplification and the expansion of the Tropics. In these experiments, we identify a pronounced heatwave frequency minimum approximately 6° poleward of the mid-latitude EKE maximum, our proxy for the extratropical storm track. The pri-
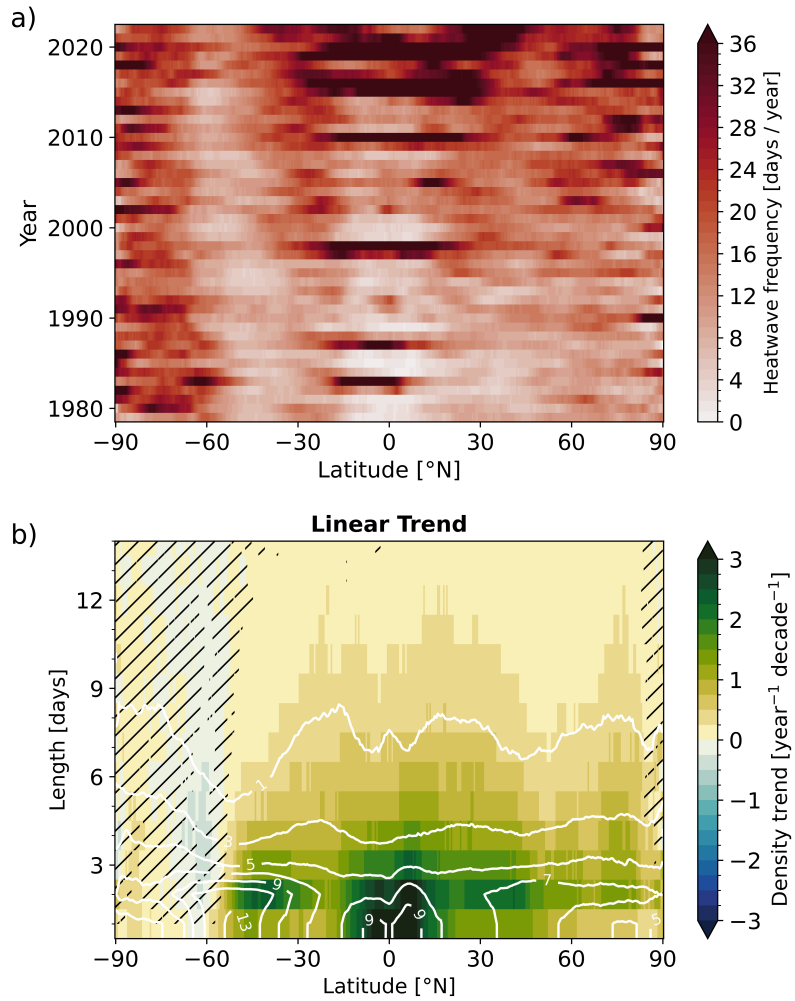
Figure 7. (a) Zonal-mean heatwave frequency in the ERA5 dataset and (b) the linear trend in hot day persistence from 1979-2022. Hatching indicates where the linear trend is not significant at a 95% confidence level based on a Monte-Carlo technique (i.e., shuffling the predictor time series). White contours indicate the hot day density averaged over the entire time series in units of year-1.
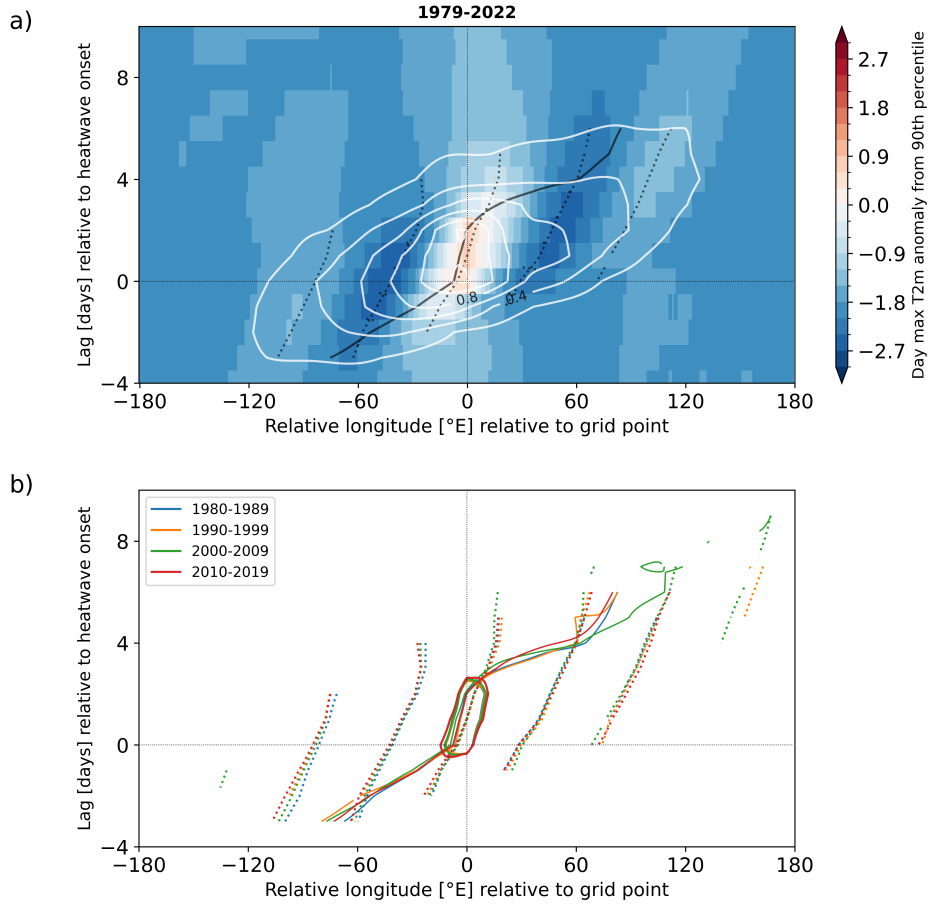
Figure 8. (a) Composite-mean daily-maximum 2m temperature anomalies with respect to the 90th percentile as in Figure 4a for heatwaves at 50°S from the ERA5 dataset. (b) Contour lines of zero phase angle for the carrier wave (dotted lines) and the wave packet envelope (thin solid lines) with thick solid contours of 0 K composite-mean temperature anomaly as in Fig 4c for the four decades 1980-2019 in ERA5.

mary model response to the idealized forcing in terms of temperature extremes is a meridional shift of the heatwave frequency minimum. The magnitude of EKE, a measure of the strength of the storm track, does not show a significant relationship with heatwave frequency or duration. In contrast, we find the latitudinal position of the [...] storm track to be a strong predictor for heatwave characteristics. The experiments with tropical warming show a coherent poleward shift of the storm track maximum and the heatwave frequency minimum, whereas the experiments with Arctic warming show a coherent equatorward shift in both cases. The second important model response is a 2% reduction of minimum heatwave frequency per degree of poleward storm track shift. We find a significant negative correlation of $R = -0.80$ between the minimum heatwave frequency and the storm track position over the broad range of different storm track characteristics in our 13 idealized experiments.

The heatwave frequency reduction in response to a poleward storm track shift can be explained by a significant relationship between the zonal phase speed and the latitudinal position of synoptic-scale waves. Specifically, a poleward-shifted storm

335 track by 4° is linked to an increase in phase speed by approximately $1\,\mathrm{m/s}$ and a reduction of the dominant zonal wavenumber by 0.4 . We hypothesize that this relationship is caused by the previously known connection between the strength and the location of the eddy-driven jet (Kidston and Vallis, 2012). A composite analysis of Hovmöller plots shows that the spectral changes in terms of phase speed and wavenumber apply not only for synoptic-scale waves in a climatological sense but also for heatwave-generating Rossby wave packets. The Hovmöller plots illustrate how an increase in phase speed creates isolated

340 hot days upstream and downstream of a heatwave. These additional hot days, however, do not occur in a set long enough to be classified as a heatwave themselves, and thereby reduce heatwave frequency or hot day persistence overall.

Finally, we assess the relevance of the above-presented mechanism for observed circulation changes in reanalysis data. Over the satellite era from 1979 to the present, the Southern Hemisphere (SH) has experienced a significant trend in the Southern Annular mode and a poleward storm track shift (e.g., Marshall, 2003; Chang et al., 2012). In agreement with an analysis of

345 eddy momentum flux spectra (Chen and Held, 2007) and Rossby wave packet diagnostics (Fragkoulidis, 2022), we find a phase speed increase of upper-tropospheric meridional wind variance in reanalysis data that resembles the model response to tropical warming. [...] Similar to the dry dynamical model, the SH mid-latitudes display a pronounced heatwave frequency minimum and a marked poleward migration of this minimum over time. However, despite this resemblance we have to conclude that the phase speed increase over time did not reduce the persistence of SH mid-latitude hot extremes. The climatological spectrum

350 in the SH is shifted to a higher phase speed compared to the idealized model. The observed phase speed change can, thus, not affect the heatwave generating Rossby wave packets that require a minimum persistence. The Northern Hemisphere (NH), on the other hand, features a spectrum more similar to the model. While we see no clear phase speed trend in the NH yet, a future phase speed change may very well apply for heatwave-generating weather systems and influence the persistence of hot extremes in the NH mid-latitudes. If indeed a poleward storm track shift materializes (Woollings et al., 2023), we can expect a

355 phase speed increase contributing towards a reduced persistence of mid-latitude hot extremes in the Northern Hemisphere.

Code and data availability. The ERA5 reanalysis data can be downloaded from the Copernicus Climate Data Store. The ICON model output is available from the authors upon request. A code repository for the data analysis is available under a BSD license from https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15018094.

Appendix A: Heating profiles

360 The profiles of the tropical and Arctic heat source Q_T and Q_A are zonally symmetric functions of latitude ϕ and the vertical coordinate σ. Note that the Arctic heating profile is slightly modified compared to Butler et al. (2010). The different experiments are defined by the respective heating amplitudes q_T and q_A.

$$Q_T(\phi,\sigma) = q_T \exp\left[-\left(\frac{\phi^2}{0.32} + \frac{(\sigma - 0.3)^2}{0.0242}\right)\right] \tag{A1}$$

$$Q_A(\phi,\sigma) = q_A \cos^{15}(\phi - 1.57)e^{2\sigma - 2} \tag{A2}$$

Table A1. The heating amplitudes for the reference and twelve sensitivity experiments.

Experiment ID	q_T [K/day]	q_A [K/day]
ref	0	0
exp1	0.5	0
exp2	0	0.5
exp3	0.25	0
exp4	0	1.0
exp8	0.2	1.0
exp9	0.2	0
exp10	0	1.5
exp11	0	-1.0
exp12	-0.2	0
exp13	0.25	0.5
exp14	0.25	1.0
exp15	0.5	1.0

365 *Author contributions.* WW and DD have jointly designed the study. ER has performed the model runs. WW preformed the data analysis, made the figures, and wrote the original draft. All authors contributed to editing the manuscript.

Competing interests. One of the co-authors is a member of the editorial board of *Weather and Climate Dynamics*. The authors have no other competing interests to declare.

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