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Poleward shift of the North Pacific storm track driven by springtime East Asian dust heating

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Abstract. The North Pacific storm track shapes precipitation and temperature patterns over the Arctic and western North America, yet how its sensitivity to springtime East Asian dust remains poorly understood. Based on the Modern-Era Retrospective analysis for Research and Applications, Version 2 (MERRA-2) reanalysis data from 1980 to 2022, we find that anomalously high springtime East Asian dust loading is robustly associated with a systematic poleward shift of the North Pacific storm track on interannual timescales. The physical mechanism proceeds through a clear causal chain. In details, shortwave absorption by the trans-Pacific dust plume warms the mid-troposphere between 850 and 400 hPa, exciting an anomalous anticyclonic circulation over the North Pacific. This thermal perturbation restructures the meridional temperature gradient and shifts the zone of maximum Eady growth rate poleward, thereby relocating the preferred region for baroclinic eddy development to higher latitudes. The Weather Research and Forecasting model coupled with Chemistry (WRF-Chem) sensitivity experiments reproduce both the spatial pattern and sign of the storm track response, confirming that dust shortwave absorption is sufficient to drive the observed displacement. These findings demonstrate that natural dust aerosols can modulate large-scale North Pacific atmospheric dynamics and suggest that springtime dust variability should be considered in regional climate assessments.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

1 Introduction

Storm tracks are regions where extratropical cyclones preferentially form, develop, and dissipate (Shaw et al., 2016). They are largely characterized by transient eddy activities that drive midlatitude atmospheric circulation (Chang and Lee and Swanson, 2002). The North Pacific storm track is a major branch of the Northern Hemisphere storm track system. It originates near the East Asian coastal stationary trough (Blackmon, 1976) and is sustained by baroclinic instability that converts mean-flow available potential energy into eddy kinetic energy through the equator-to-pole temperature gradient (Simmons and Hoskins, 1978; Chang and Lee and Swanson, 2002). The North Pacific storm track plays a key role in the climate system. It accounts for much of the poleward transport of heat, moisture, and momentum across the North Pacific basin, delivering them into the Arctic and western North America (Trenberth and Stepaniak, 2003; Salathé Jr., 2006). Through this transport, it heavily influences regional weather patterns and midlatitude extreme events, including severe winds and heavy precipitation over both the North Pacific and western North America (Salathé Jr., 2006; Pfahl et al., 2014; Chemke and Yuval, 2026). Therefore, it is essential to understand its variability for regional weather forecasting and climate prediction (Shaw et al., 2016).

East Asia is one of the world's major source regions of mineral dust aerosols(Kok et al., 2023). Every spring, intense dust plumes originate from the Taklimakan and Gobi Deserts and are transported eastward by mid-latitude westerlies, forming a extensive aerosol belt over the North Pacific (Huang et al., 2014; Yu et al., 2019). Unlike predominantly scattering aerosols, mineral dust exhibits substantial shortwave absorption due to its iron oxide content (Sokolik and Toon, 1999), producing notable radiative heating within the atmospheric column (Chen et al., 2017). This dust radiative heating can significantly modulate large-scale atmospheric circulation, weather systems and air pollution, such as the Indian summer monsoon (Lau and Kim and Kim, 2006; Jin et al., 2021), Atlantic hurricanes (Sun and Zhao, 2020; Xian et al., 2020), Mongolian cyclones (Chen et al., 2023), and Particle and Ozone Pollution in East China (Wang et al., 2019). Observational records also show a recent increase in severe dust storms over East Asia (Yin et al., 2026; Yin et al., 2022), leading to substantial perturbations on radiative energy balance (Gui et al., 2022). The increasing frequency of these extreme events underscores the need to evaluate the climatic impacts of springtime dust variability.

Although the influence of aerosols on the North Pacific storm track has received increasing attention, most previous studies have focused on wintertime anthropogenic aerosols. Modelling studies demonstrate that East Asian anthropogenic emissions induce an equatorward shift of the subtropical jet and the North Pacific storm track primarily by cooling the surface through aerosol–radiation interactions (Ming and Ramaswamy and Chen, 2011; Zhou and Deng, 2013; Wang and Jiang and Su, 2015; Liu et al., 2019). Furthermore, through aerosol–cloud interactions, anthropogenic aerosols that act as cloud condensation nuclei enhance deep convective clouds and intensify mid-latitude cyclones, resulting in approximately 7% more precipitation within the Pacific storm track(Zhang et al., 2007; Wang and Zhang and Saravanan, 2014; Wang et al., 2014). However, during spring, when the East Asian–North Pacific aerosol regime transitions from anthropogenic-dominated to dust-dominated (Zhu et al.,

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

2007; Bao and Wen and Wu, 2009), the storm track response to springtime dust remains largely unexplored. Notably, satellite-based analyses reveal that wintertime East Asian aerosols significantly enhance deep convective clouds in the North Pacific storm track. Interestingly, this signal disappears in spring, even though the aerosol optical depth (AOD) reaches its annual maximum during this season (Bender and Ramanathan and Tselioudis, 2012). This seasonal contrast suggests that springtime dust aerosols may exert fundamentally different effects on the storm track compared to wintertime anthropogenic aerosols.

This study investigates the interannual impact of springtime East Asian dust aerosols on the North Pacific storm track by using reanalysis data from 1980 to 2022, along with modelling sensitivity experiments. Specifically, this research aims to determine how East Asian dust aerosols affect the North Pacific storm track during spring on an interannual timescale and to identify the underlying physical mechanisms. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the data and methodology. Section 3 presents the observational evidence and physical mechanisms, which are further verified by modelling simulations. Finally, Section 4 provides the conclusions and discussion.

2 Methodology

2.1 Data

The primary dataset used in this study is the Modern Era Retrospective analysis for Research and Applications, Version 2 (MERRA-2). It is provided by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Global Modeling and Assimilation Office (GMAO) (Gelaro et al., 2017). We utilize MERRA-2 for both aerosol and meteorological fields to ensure dynamic consistency. The data are provided on a 0.5° by 0.65° spatial grid with 72 vertical levels. The MERRA-2 aerosol data are generated using the Goddard Chemistry Aerosol Radiation and Transport (GOCART) model coupled with the GEOS-5 data assimilation system. The GOCART model simulates five aerosol species: dust, black carbon, organic carbon, sulfate, and sea salt. Furthermore, GEOS-5 assimilates bias-corrected AOD from various observation platforms. These include the AVHRR instrument over oceans (Heidinger et al., 2014), the MODIS instrument from Terra and Aqua satellites (Levy et al., 2010), the MISR instrument over desert regions (Kahn et al., 2005), and ground-based AERONET stations (Holben et al., 1998).

We use the monthly mean dust column mass density from MERRA-2 to represent the atmospheric dust loading over East Asia and the North Pacific. Recent evaluations indicate that MERRA-2 slightly underestimates absolute dust concentrations compared to ground-based retrievals. However, it exhibits a high temporal correlation with station observations (Zhang et al., 2024). Because MERRA-2 accurately captures the spatiotemporal variability of dust aerosols, this product is widely used in climate analyses (Wang and Lau and Wang, 2021; Li et al., 2023; Fu et al., 2026). We also use the AOD from the 1° MODIS Terra Level-3 monthly product (MOD08_M3) (Gupta et al., 2016) to evaluate the model's simulation of dust aerosol spatial distribution. Alongside the aerosol data, we utilize MERRA-2 atmospheric variables, including geopotential height, air

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

temperature, vertical velocity, and horizontal winds. Additionally, we obtain monthly precipitation data on a 2.5° by 2.5° grid from the Climate Prediction Center Merged Analysis of Precipitation (CMAP) dataset (Xie and Arkin, 1997).

2.2 Storm track definition and statistical methods

We define storm track activity using two metrics. The first is the upper-tropospheric transient eddy geopotential height variance at 300 hPa ($Z'Z'_{300}$). The second is the lower-tropospheric transient eddy meridional heat flux at 850 hPa ($V'T'_{850}$). Together, these two metrics provide a comprehensive three-dimensional representation of storm track activity (Chang and Lee and Swanson, 2002). We calculate the transient variance and heat flux using daily MERRA-2 data. A 2.5–6-day bandpass filter is applied to these daily data to isolate synoptic-scale fluctuations. To quantify atmospheric baroclinicity, we compute the maximum Eady growth rate (EGR) defined as:

$$\sigma_{EGR} = 0.31 \frac{f}{N}\left|\frac{\partial U}{\partial z}\right|,$$

where f is the Coriolis parameter, N is the Brunt-Väisälä frequency, and $\left|\frac{\partial U}{\partial z}\right|$ is the vertical wind shear (Lindzen and Farrell, 1980).

All datasets used in this study span the period from 1980 to 2022. To isolate interannual variability, we apply Fourier analysis to remove the first four harmonics from the time series. This procedure effectively filters out interdecadal background signals (Awan and Bae, 2016; Zhu et al., 2021). On interannual timescales, the variability of the North Pacific storm track is closely linked to the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO). During El Niño events, the Pacific storm track typically shifts equatorward and extends downstream (Seager et al., 2010; Jiang and Deng and Li, 2013). To explicitly isolate the physical impacts of dust aerosols from these ENSO-driven circulation changes, we employ partial regression methods (Cai et al., 2011; Liguori et al., 2022). Specifically, we use the Niño 3.4 index as the ENSO indicator and linearly regress out its concurrent spring signal from all variables prior to the dust-storm track regression analysis. Furthermore, we use empirical orthogonal function (EOF) analysis to extract dominant variability patterns. Finally, the statistical significance of all correlation and regression results is evaluated using a two-tailed Student's *t*-test.

2.3 Model and experimental design

We use the Weather Research and Forecasting model coupled with Chemistry (WRF-Chem) version 3.9.1. This model simulates meteorological processes and dust activities over East Asia and the North Pacific during the boreal spring. The simulation domain spans from East Asia to the central North Pacific. It employs a regular latitude and longitude projection with 381 by 131 grid points centred at 50°N and 160°E (Figure S1). The horizontal resolution is 0.5° by 0.5°, which corresponds to approximately 55 km. The vertical grid contains 45 levels from the surface up to 50 hPa. Initial and boundary meteorological conditions are derived from the National Centres for Environmental Prediction (NCEP) Final Analysis (FNL)

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

data (Ncep, 2000). These data have a 1° spatial resolution and update every 6 hours. Additionally, we incorporate sea surface temperature data from the NCEP real time global sea surface temperature analysis.

We configure the model with a comprehensive suite of physical and chemical parameterization schemes. Table 1 summarizes these specific options. For cloud and precipitation processes, we select the Lin microphysics scheme (Lin and Colle, 2011) and the Grell-3D ensemble cumulus scheme (Grell, 1993; Grell and Dévényi, 2002). The Rapid Radiative Transfer Model for General Circulation Models (RRTMG) calculates both shortwave and longwave radiation while accounting for aerosol radiative effects (Iacono et al., 2008). Planetary boundary layer processes are parameterized using the Yonsei University (YSU) scheme (Hong and Noh and Dudhia, 2006). This is coupled with the MM5 Monin-Obukhov surface layer scheme and the Unified Noah land surface model to represent surface physics and land atmosphere interactions (Pahlow and Parlange and Porté-Agel, 2001; Chen et al., 2010). For atmospheric chemistry, we employ the second generation Regional Acid Deposition Model (RADM2) for gas phase reactions (Stockwell et al., 1990), alongside the Fast-J photolysis scheme. The GOCART module simulates aerosol chemistry (Chin et al., 2002). Aerosol optical properties are computed using the Maxwell Garnett approximation (Bohren and Huffman, 1983). Finally, we adopt the Shao 2004 dust emission scheme (Shao, 2004). Previous studies demonstrate its excellent performance in simulating dust emissions and the spatiotemporal variability of dust mass concentrations over East Asia (Tang et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2020; Idrissa et al., 2024).

Table 1. WRF-Chem modeling parameterization option settings

Option name	Scheme
Longwave radiation	RRTMG
Shortwave radiation	RRTMG
Microphysics	Lin
Boundary layer	YSU
Cumulus	Grell-3D
Land surface	Unified Noah
Surface layer	MM5 Monin-Obukhov
Aerosol chemistry	GOCART
Gas chemistry	RADM2
Photolysis	Fast-J
Dust emissions	Shao2004

We design two sets of simulations to investigate the radiative and dynamical impacts of dust aerosols on the North Pacific storm track. The control experiment (CTRL) incorporates full dust emissions. In contrast, the sensitivity experiment (NoDust) completely disables dust emissions. We attribute the atmospheric differences between the CTRL and NoDust simulations

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

directly to the effects of dust aerosols. We select the year 2018 as our study period because the East Asian dust loading during this year significantly exceeded the climatological mean (Figure 2b). To enhance the statistical robustness of our results, we conduct seven ensemble members for each experiment. These ensemble members are initialized one day apart from 19 to 25 February 2018. All simulations conclude on 31 May 2018. We treat February as the model spin-up period and exclude it from the final analysis. Consequently, our analysis focuses strictly on the boreal spring season from March to May 2018. We acknowledge that this single-year simulation cannot fully capture the interannual variability present in the reanalysis. The WRF-Chem experiments are therefore designed as a process-level verification of the proposed physical mechanism rather than as an independent confirmation of the interannual statistical relationship.

3 Results

3.1 Observational link between dust and the storm track

As shown in Figure 1, Asian dust loading peaks over the Taklimakan and Gobi deserts and extends eastward over the North Pacific, spatially overlapping with the storm track region characterized by $Z'Z'_{300}$ and $V'T'_{850}$. This spatial collocation suggests the potential for dynamical interactions between dust aerosols and storm track activity, motivating the present investigation. To further characterize the spatiotemporal variability of East Asian dust loading, we apply EOF analysis to the spring dust column mass density anomalies over 1980–2022, with spring defined as March–April–May (MAM). The leading EOF mode (EOF1; Figure 2a) explains approximately 46% of the total variance and is characterized by same-sign loading across East Asia, with the largest amplitude over the Taklimakan and Gobi deserts. This pattern is consistent with the known structure of dust variability, in which the most pronounced fluctuations are concentrated over the major source regions (Guo et al., 2019).

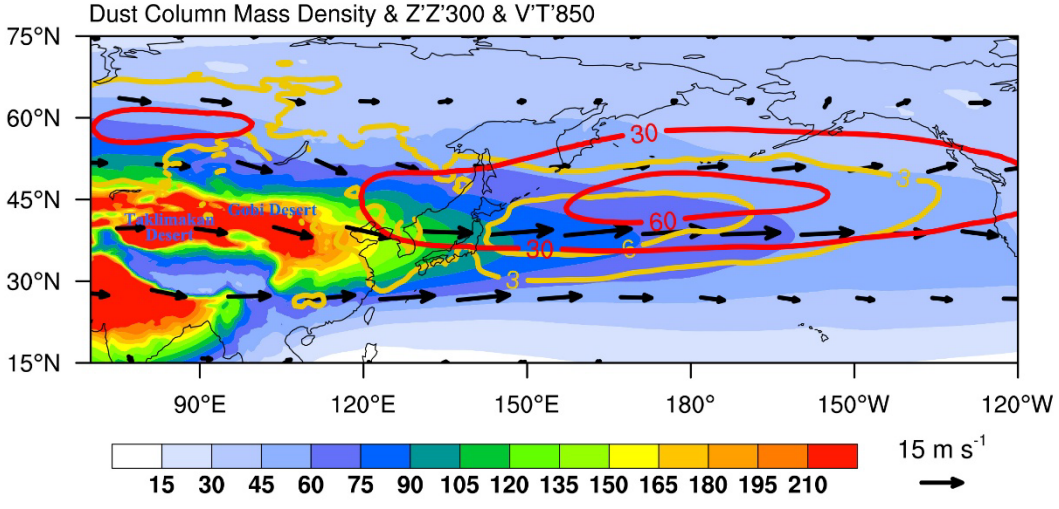

Figure 1. Spatial distribution of climatological spring (March-April-May, MAM) mean dust column mass density (shading; mg m^{-2}), 500 hPa wind (vector; m s^{-1}), transient eddy meridional heat flux at 850 hPa ($V'T'_{850}$, EMHF; orange contour with interval of 3

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

K m s^{-1}) and transient variances of geopotential height at 300 hPa ($Z'Z'_{300}$, EGHV ; red contour with interval of 30 dagpm^2) averaged over 1980–2022.

Based on this spatial pattern, we define an East Asian dust index (EADI) as the area-averaged dust column mass density over the key region (35°–47°N, 76°–118°E; black box in Figure 2a) where the variance is largest. The resulting EADI is highly correlated with the EOF1 principal component (PC1), with a correlation coefficient exceeding 0.97 (Figure 2b), confirming that the EADI effectively captures both interannual and interdecadal variability of spring East Asian dust loading. The temporal evolution of EADI reveals two distinct timescales of variability. On the interdecadal timescale, an abrupt increase occurs around 1999, coinciding with a phase reversal in PC1 from negative to positive, which has been linked to changes in 10-m wind speed over dust source regions (Guo et al., 2019). On the interannual timescale, the EADI exhibits substantial year-to-year fluctuations, reflecting the large variability in dust emission and transport processes (Yu et al., 2019). Given that interannual variability constitutes an important component of total dust variability, this study focuses on the North Pacific storm track response to the interannual dust variability over East Asia. Unless otherwise stated, all variables discussed hereafter refer to their interannual components.

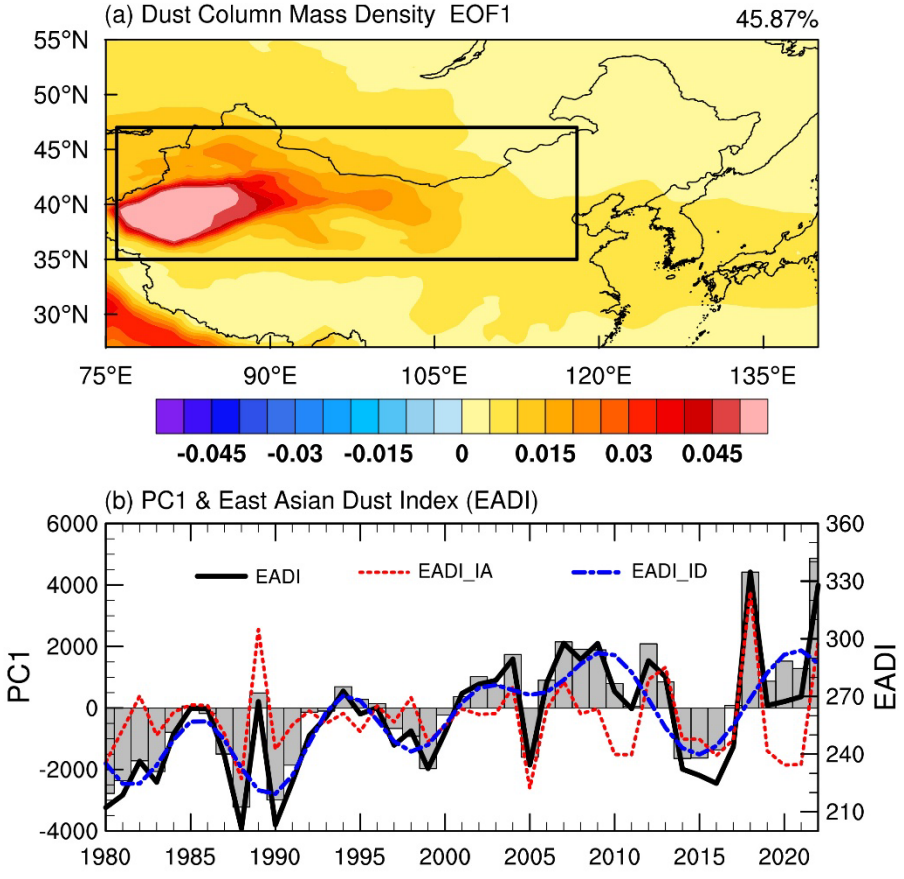

Figure 2. (a) Spatial pattern (shading) and (b) principal component (gray bars) of the first EOF mode of MAM mean dust column mass density over East Asia during 1980–2022. The spring East Asian dust index (EADI; black solid line) defined as dust column

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

mass density averaged over East Asia [76°–118°E, 35°–47°N; the black box in (a)] is also plotted in (b), together with its interannual component (EADI_IA; red dashed line) and interdecadal component (EADI_ID; blue dashed line).

To investigate the interannual relationship between East Asian dust loading and the North Pacific storm track, Figure 3 presents the regression of anomalous $Z'Z'_{300}$ and $V'T'_{850}$ onto the interannual component of the EADI. Both fields exhibit a meridional dipole pattern that is approximately symmetric about the climatological storm track axis, suggesting a systematic poleward displacement of storm track activity during high-dust springs (relative to low-dust springs). Specifically, significant negative $Z'Z'_{300}$ anomalies appear over the East China Sea and the east-central North Pacific, with the largest reduction reaching approximately 7.5 dagpm2 (~15% of the climatological mean). Meanwhile, significant positive anomalies exceeding 2.0 dagpm2 (more than 8% of the climatological mean) emerge over eastern Siberia and the Bering Sea (Figure 3a). A similar dipole structure is evident in $V'T'_{850}$: negative anomalies extend zonally along the southern flank of the climatological heat flux maximum, with the reduction more pronounced over the downstream region of the storm track. Concurrently, prominent positive anomalies cover eastern Siberia, the Kamchatka Peninsula, and Alaska (Figure 3b), indicating enhanced poleward eddy heat transport driven by East Asian dust outflow. These results suggest that increased springtime East Asian dust loading is associated with a poleward shift of the North Pacific storm track and a strengthening of poleward eddy heat transport on interannual timescales. The precipitation response corroborates this poleward shift, with reduced rainfall along the southern flank and a slight enhancement near the Bering Sea (Figure S2).

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

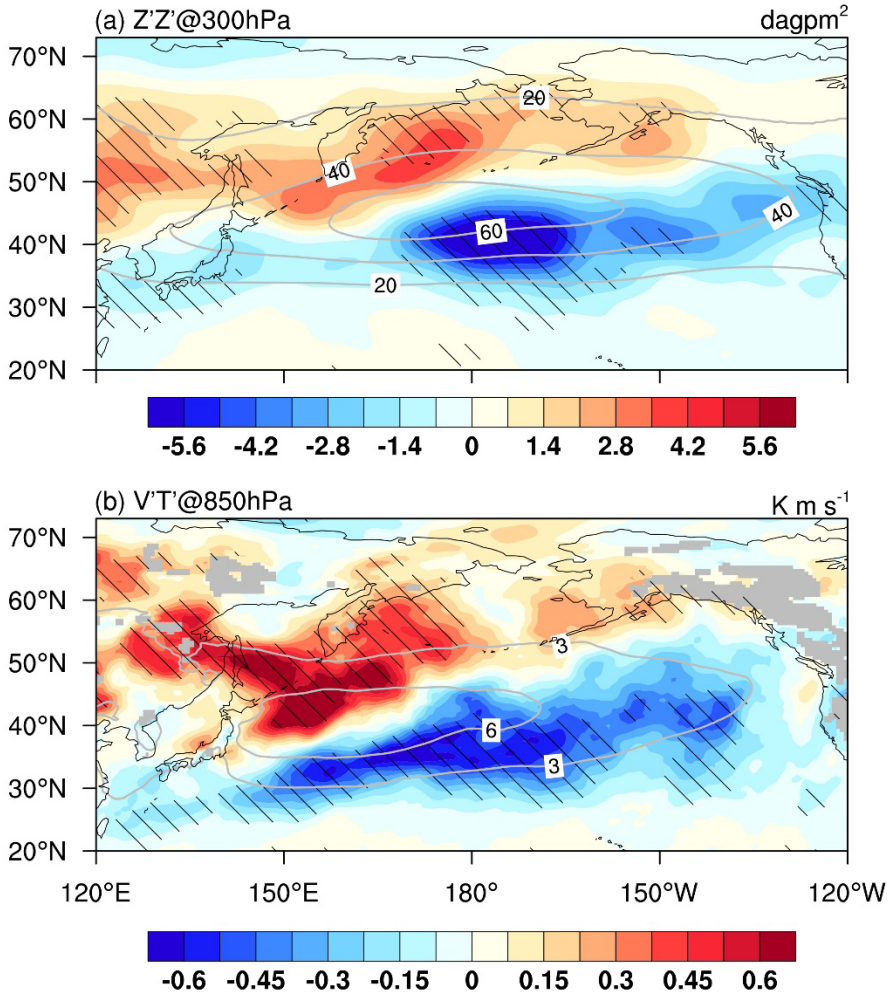

Figure 3. Regressions of anomalies in (a) transient variances of 300 hPa geopotential height ($Z'Z'_{300}$; shading; dagpm^2) and (b) 850 hPa transient eddy meridional heat flux ($V'T'_{850}$; shading; K m s^{-1}) onto the standardized EADI_IA. Grey contours denote the climatological spring mean of (a) $Z'Z'_{300}$ and (b) $V'T'_{850}$. Hatching denotes the anomalies statistically significant at the 95% confidence level based on the Student's *t* test.

3.2 Possible physical mechanism underlying the dust aerosol–storm tracks relationship

Having established the statistical association between East Asian dust loading and the poleward shift of the North Pacific storm track, we then examine the possible underlying physical mechanisms. Given dust aerosols perturb the radiative energy balance through scattering and absorbing solar radiation, thereby redistributing radiative energy, and modifying the large-scale circulation, we first examine the shortwave (SW) radiative flux anomalies associated with East Asian dust loading (Figure 4). Under clear-sky conditions (Figure 4a–c), dust aerosols transported over the North Pacific backscatters a fraction of incoming solar radiation, reducing the net downward SW flux at the top of the atmosphere (TOA) by approximately 1 W m^{-2} over the dust polluted region (Figure 4a). Simultaneously, absorption of solar radiation by mineral dust induces a significant positive

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

radiative forcing of 0.3–0.6 W m^{-2} in the atmosphere (Figure 4b), leading to direct heating the atmospheric column. The combined effects of scattering and atmospheric absorption generate a pronounced dimming effect at the ground surface, reducing the net SW flux by 1.0–1.5 W m^{-2} over regions with high dust loading (Figure 4c). These magnitudes of dust-induced SW radiative perturbations are broadly consistent with previous estimates over the North Pacific (Zhu et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2019).

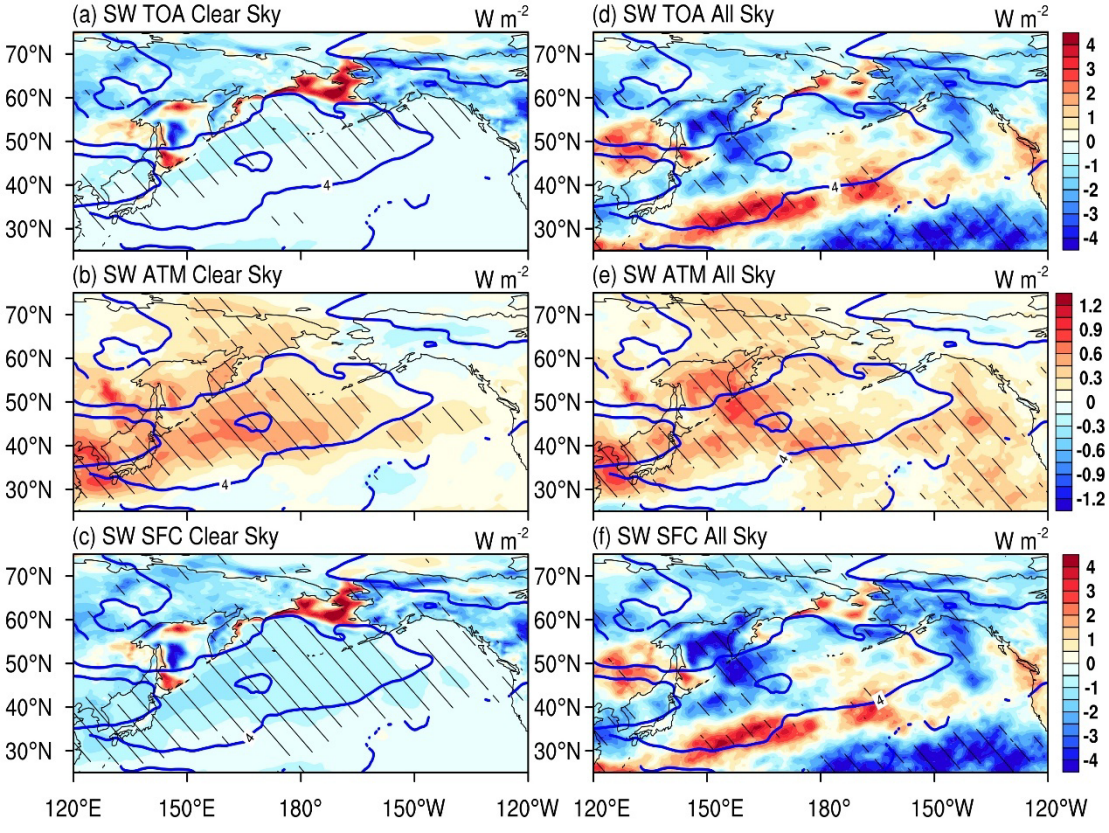

Figure 4. Regressions of anomalies in shortwave radiative fluxes (shading; W m^{-2}) at (a, d) the top of the atmosphere (TOA), (b, e) in the atmosphere (ATM), and (c, f) at the surface (SFC) and dust column mass density (blue contour with interval of 2 mg m^{-2}) onto the standardized EADI_IA. The left column (a, b, c) represents clear-sky conditions, and the right column (d, e, f) represents all-sky conditions. Downward radiation is defined as positive at the TOA and the SFC; therefore, positive (negative) value means absorb/warming (irradiate/cooling) effects in the ATM. Hatching indicates that the regressed anomalies in shortwave radiative fluxes are statistically significant at the 95 % confidence level based on a Student's *t* test.

Under all-sky conditions (Figure 4d–f), cloud cover substantially modulates these radiative effects. Over the Sea of Okhotsk and the region south of the Kuril Islands, increased cloudiness (consistent with the enhanced precipitation shown in Figure S2) reflects additional solar radiation, amplifying the negative TOA forcing relative to clear-sky conditions (Figure 4d). Furthermore, when dust resides above cloud layers, the underlying clouds provide as a bright reflective surface that enhances the multiple scattering between the aerosol and cloud layers, thereby amplifying both the atmospheric absorption and the

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

surface cooling effects (Figure 4e–f). This amplification phenomenon is consistent with the satellite-based analysis of Xu et al. (2017).

The enhanced shortwave absorption documented above is expected to warm the mid-troposphere and subsequently modify the large-scale circulation. Figure 5a shows the 850–400 hPa averaged temperature and 500 hPa wind anomalies regressed onto the interannual EADI. A zonally elongated band of significant positive temperature anomalies extends from East Asia across the North Pacific between approximately 30°N and 60°N, closely matching the spatial distribution of the dust plume. The warming maximum exceeds 0.6 K over the central North Pacific near 45°N, 170°E, where dust loading is most concentrated. This spatial collocation strongly suggests that the mid-tropospheric warming is largely induced by dust aerosol absorption. In response to this robust diabatic heating, the atmospheric column expands, thereby exciting an anomalous high-pressure system. This thermodynamic adjustment is clearly characterized by a large-scale anticyclonic circulation anomaly in the 500 hPa wind field over the North Pacific basin. Furthermore, the anomalous southerly winds near 165°E (Figure 5a), embedded within the western flank of this anticyclone, may advect warmer subtropical air poleward, providing a supplementary positive temperature tendency.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

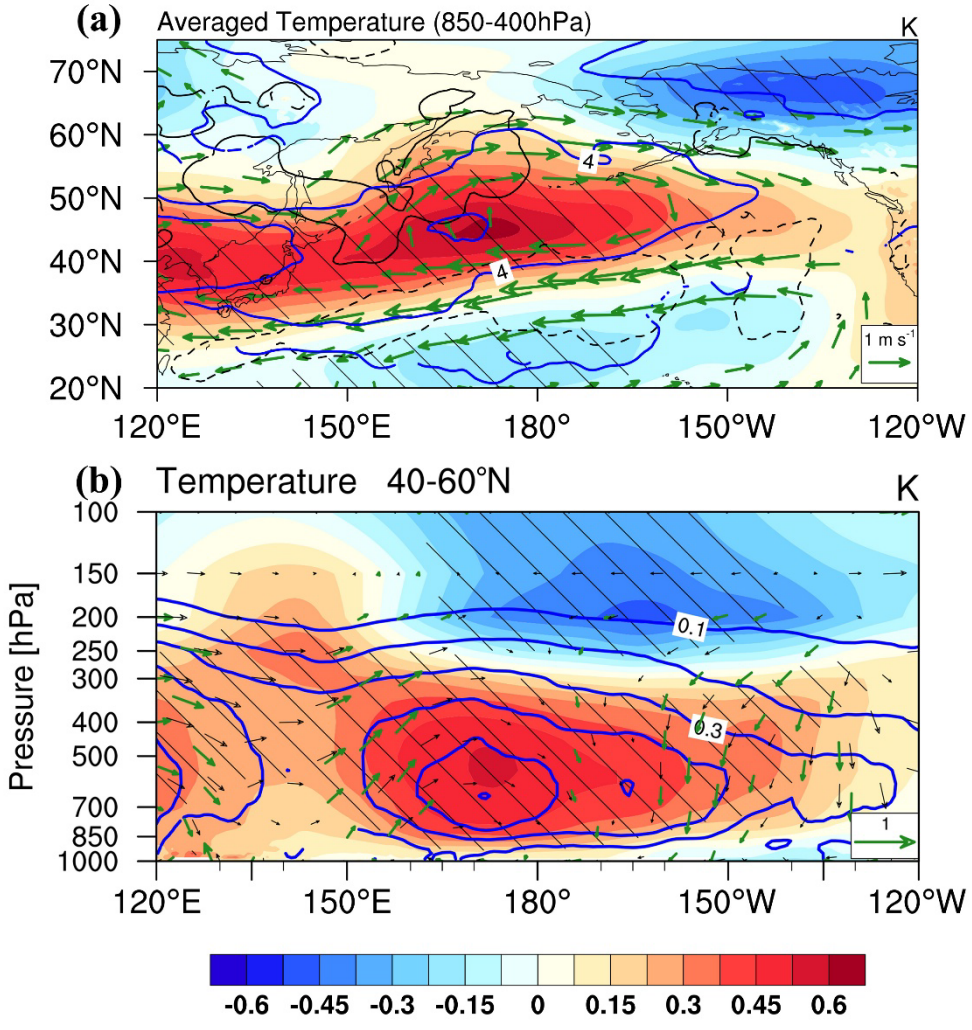

Figure 5. (a) Regressions of anomalies in averaged temperature between 850 and 400 hPa (shading; K), 500 hPa wind (vector; m s^{-1}), and dust column mass density (blue contours with an interval of 2 mg m^{-2}) onto the standardized EADI_IA. (b) Pressure-longitude cross section of the regressed anomalies in temperature (shading; K), zonal and vertical winds (vectors), and dust mass concentration (blue contours with an interval of 0.1 ug m^{-3}) averaged over the latitudinal band of 40° to 60°N. Black contours in (a) denote the statistically significant regions of the regressed $V'T'_{850}$ anomalies shown in Figure 3b. Hatching and green vectors indicate that the regressed anomalies in temperature and wind are statistically significant at the 95 % confidence level based on a Student's *t* test, respectively.

The vertical structure of the temperature response is further examined in Figure 5b, which shows the regression of meridionally averaged (40°–60°N) temperature and dust mass concentration anomalies onto the interannual EADI. The eastward-transported dust plume is primarily confined below 300 hPa level. This vertical distribution aligns well with previous satellite-based studies of individual trans-Pacific dust transport events (Guo et al., 2017; Voss and Evan, 2020). Correspondingly, the dust-induced atmospheric heating is highly concentrated in the middle and lower troposphere. A significant warm layer is collocated with the dust mass concentration anomalies, featuring a maximum warming center between 850 and 400 hPa.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

Beyond direct shortwave absorption, large-scale dynamical feedbacks may further reinforce this mid-tropospheric warming. The anomalous anticyclonic circulation established over the central North Pacific (Figure 5a) is associated with subsidence to its east (east of ~180°E, Figure 5b), which likely contributes additional adiabatic warming through descending motion.

The dust-induced mid-tropospheric warming is concentrated in a zonal band over the central North Pacific (Figure 5a), which is expected to modify the meridional temperature gradient (MTG) and, through thermal wind balance, the atmospheric baroclinicity. As shown in Figure 6a, the 700 hPa MTG significantly increases along the northern flank of the North Pacific and decreases on the southern flank. This dipole pattern is a thermodynamically consistent consequence of the localized dust heating center identified above. The vertical cross-section averaged between 135°E and 135°W (Figure 6c) further confirms this structure, revealing a robust positive MTG anomaly north of 45°N and a negative anomaly to the south. These MTG anomalies are closely collocated with the northern and southern boundaries of the dust-induced warming center.

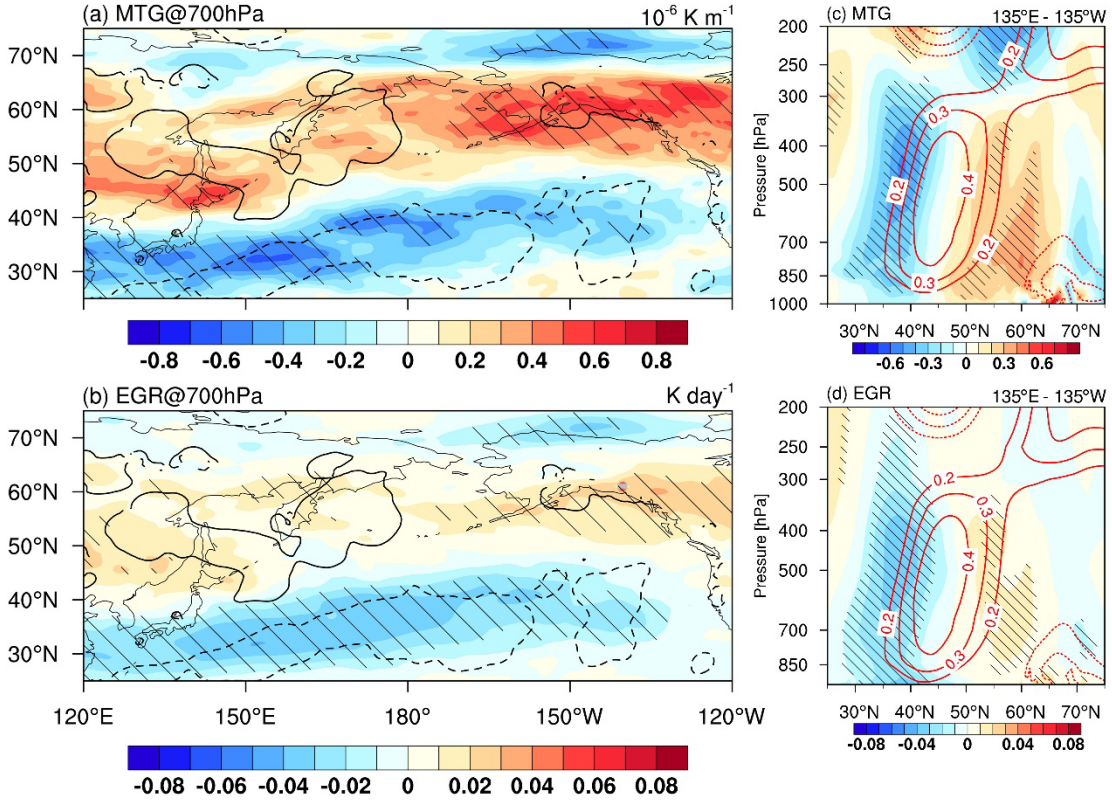

Figure 6. Regressions of anomalies in (a) the 700 hPa meridional temperature gradient (MTG; shading; 10^{-6} K m^{-1}) and (b) the 700 hPa maximum Eady growth rate (EGR; shading; K day^{-1}) onto the standardized EADI_IA. Panels (c) and (d) display the meridional vertical cross sections of the regressed (c) MTG and (d) EGR anomalies averaged from 135°E to 135°W. Black contours in (a) and (b) denote the statistically significant regions of the regressed $V'T'_{850}$ anomalies shown in Figure 3b. Red contours in (c) and (d) represent the regressed temperature anomalies (K), with solid and dashed lines indicating positive and negative values, respectively. Hatching indicates that the regressed MTG and EGR anomalies are statistically significant at the 95 % confidence level based on a Student's *t* test.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

Because baroclinic instability is fundamentally governed by the MTG, the EGR exhibits an almost identical spatial response (Lindzen and Farrell, 1980; Simmonds and Lim, 2009). At 700 hPa (Figure 6b), the baroclinicity strengthens in the north and weakens in the south. The vertical profile of the EGR anomalies (Figure 6d) closely mirrors that of the MTG throughout the lower and middle troposphere. Importantly, the spatial distribution of these EGR anomalies matches the regions of significant storm track changes, indicating that the baroclinic adjustment directly shapes the optimal zone for transient eddy growth (Chang and Lee and Swanson, 2002).

The preceding observational analysis outlines a consistent physical pathway for the dust effect on the North Pacific storm track. Springtime East Asian dust absorbs shortwave radiation, warming the mid-troposphere. This heating restructures the meridional temperature gradient and alters atmospheric baroclinicity. As a result, the favorable zone for baroclinic eddy growth shifts to higher latitudes. To futher to explicitly investigate and quantify this physical mechanism, we therefore employ targeted numerical simulations in the next section

3.3 Quantitative analysis on the effect of dust radiative forcing

To isolate the causal role of the storm track response to dust radiative forcing, we conduct two sets of WRF-Chem ensemble simulations for the spring of 2018. Before examining the specific aerosol effects, we evaluate the baseline model performance. Figure 7 compares the spatial patterns of key variables between the observations (MERRA-2 and MODIS) and the CTRL simulation. The CTRL experiment reasonably reproduces the spring mid-tropospheric circulation, including the East Asian trough and the westerly stream at 500 hPa (Figures 7a and 7e). For AOD, the simulated magnitude is naturally lower than the MODIS total aerosol retrievals because the CTRL run includes only dust emissions. This simulated magnitude nevertheless remains quantitatively comparable to the observed dust AOD (Voss and Evan, 2020). The model also successfully captures the spatial distribution and the trans-Pacific transport pathway of the dust plume (Figures 7b and 7f). Furthermore, the spatial patterns of both the upper-tropospheric ($Z'Z'_{300}$) and lower-tropospheric ($V'T'_{850}$) storm track metrics are reasonably well captured (Figures 7c, 7d, 7g, and 7h). These results demonstrate that the WRF-Chem model is suitable for investigating the subsequent interactions between dust aerosols and the storm track.

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Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

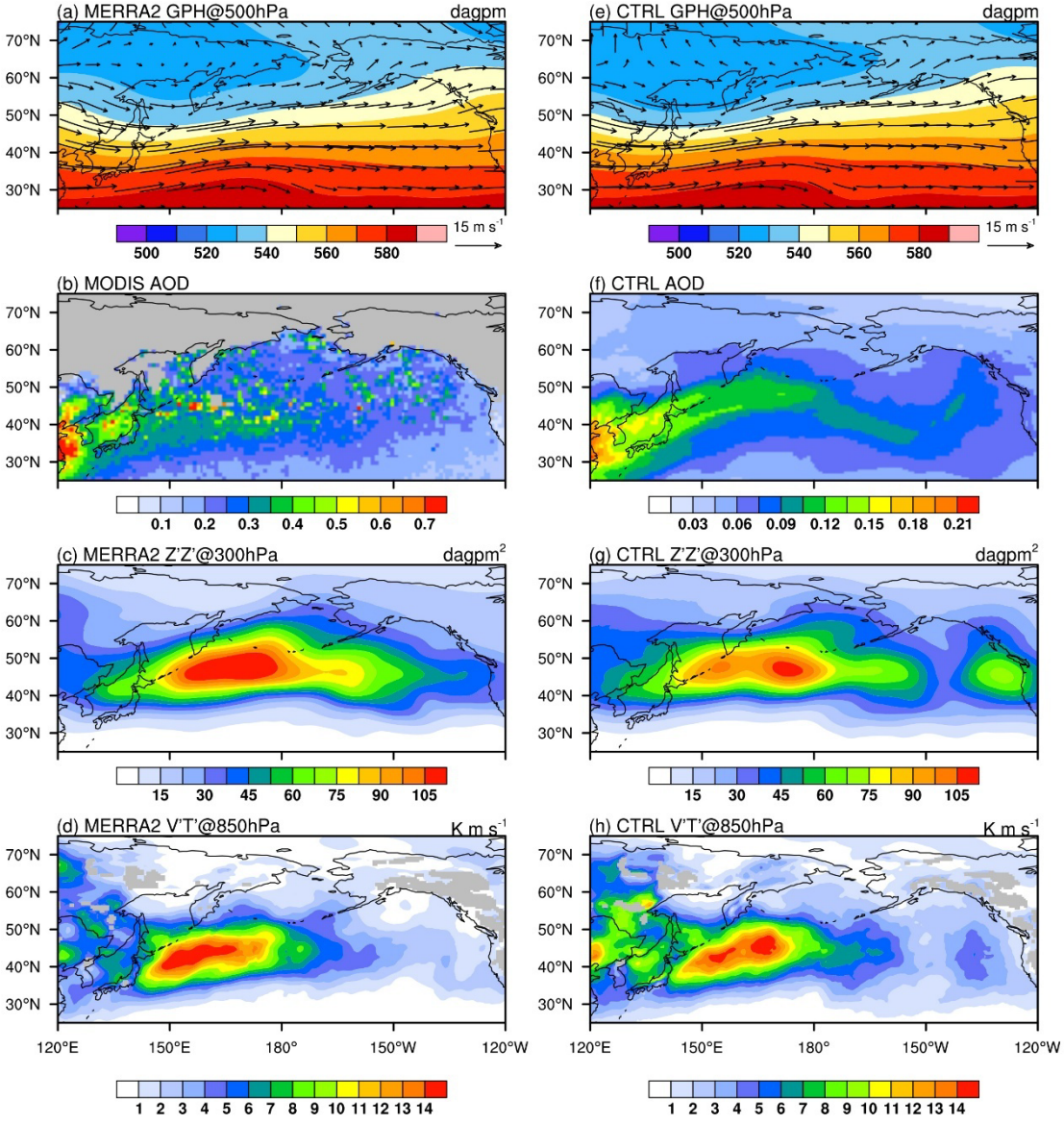

Figure 7. Spatial distributions of (a, e) 500 hPa geopotential height (shading; dagpm) and wind (vectors; m s^{-1}), (b, f) aerosol optical depth (AOD; shading; unitless), (c, g) $Z'Z'_{300}$ (shading; dagpm2), and (d, h) $V'T'_{850}$ (shading; K m s^{-1}) averaged over spring (MAM) of 2018. The left column (a, b, c, d) represents the observational and reanalysis data (MERRA-2 for meteorological fields and MODIS for AOD). The right column (e, f, g, h) shows the corresponding ensemble mean of the WRF-Chem CTRL experiment.

The model results corroborate the physical mechanism inferred from the observational analysis, reproducing both the spatial pattern and the sign of the storm track anomalies. As shown in Figure 8c, the dust radiative forcing induces a pronounced warming in the mid-troposphere (850 to 400 hPa) over the North Pacific, accompanied by an anomalous anticyclonic circulation at 500 hPa. The spatial pattern of this warming aligns well with the simulated dust AOD. This localized heating alters the environmental thermal field, thereby modifying the atmospheric baroclinicity. Consequently, the EGR at 700 hPa

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Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

increases on the northern flank of the climatological storm track and decreases on the southern flank (Figure 8d). In response to these changes in baroclinic instability, both the upper-tropospheric ($Z'Z'_{300}$) and lower-tropospheric ($V'T'_{850}$) storm track metrics exhibit a clear poleward displacement (Figures 8a and 8b). Ultimately, the WRF-Chem sensitivity experiments provide causal evidence that dust-induced radiative heating shifts the North Pacific storm track poleward.

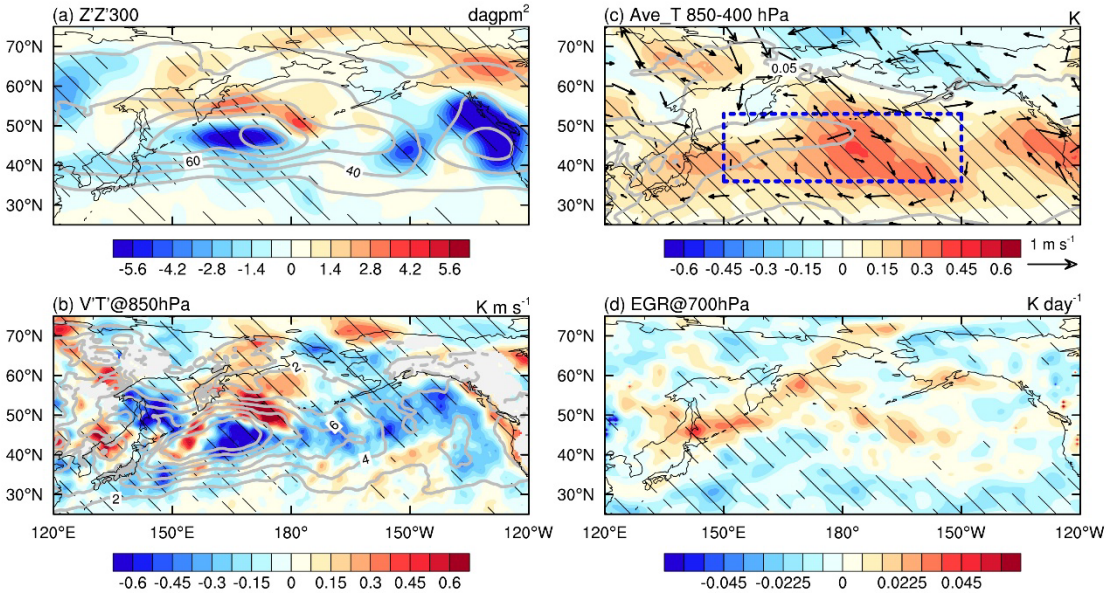

Figure 8. Differences (CTRL minus NoDust) in (a) $Z'Z'_{300}$ (shading; dagpm^2), and (b) $V'T'_{850}$ (shading; K m s^{-1}), (c) averaged temperature between 850 and 400 hPa (shading; K), 500 hPa wind (vectors; m s^{-1}), and AOD (grey contours), and (d) 700 hPa EGR (shading; K day^{-1}). Grey contours in (a) and (b) represent the corresponding values in the CTRL experiment. Hatching indicates that the differences are statistically significant at the 95 % confidence level based on a Student's *t* test.

To further examine the physical processes responsible for the mid-tropospheric warming shown in Figure 8c, Figure 9 presents the vertical profiles of temperature and atmospheric heating rate differences (CTRL minus NoDust) averaged over the main warming region in the North Pacific (150°E to 150°W, 35° to 53°N; blue dashed box in Figure 8c). The temperature profile shows a pronounced warming throughout the troposphere below 200 hPa, with a slight cooling above this level. This vertical structure is consistent with the observational regression results shown in Figure 5b. Among the contributing heating processes, shortwave radiation is the sole positive heating term, with its maximum at near 400 hPa. Longwave radiation and latent heating both make modest negative contributions throughout the column. As a result, the net heating profile closely follows the shortwave radiative heating, confirming that the dust-induced atmospheric warming is primarily driven by shortwave absorption.

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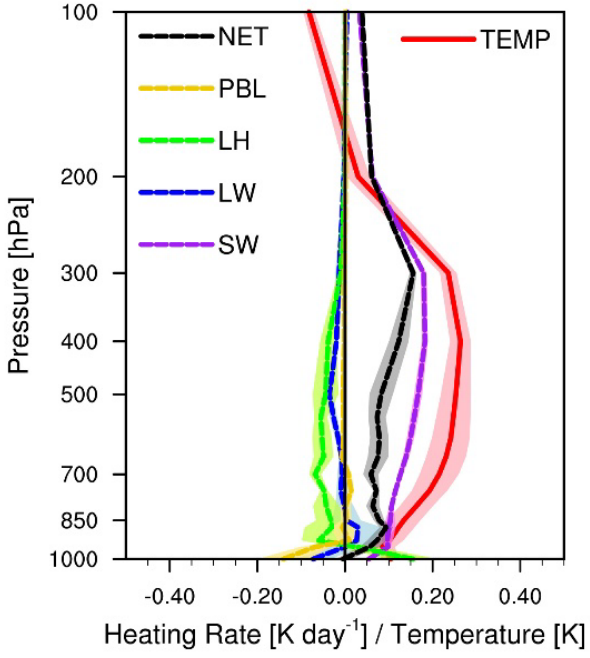

Figure 9. Vertical profiles of differences (CTRL minus NoDust) in temperature (solid red line; K) and atmospheric heating rates (dashed line; K d^{-1}) averaged over the North Pacific (150°E–150°W, 35–53°N, as outlined in Figure 8c). Here, atmospheric heating rates include shortwave (SW) and longwave (LW) radiation heating, latent heating (LH, i.e., heating from the microphysics and cumulus scheme), and heating from the planetary boundary layer (PBL) scheme. Net heating rate (NET) = SW + LW + LH + PBL.

4 Conclusions and discussion

This study demonstrates that springtime East Asian dust aerosols exert a systematic poleward influence on the North Pacific storm track on interannual timescales. Using MERRA-2 reanalysis data spanning 1980–2022, we identify a statistically robust association between anomalously high East Asian dust loading and a meridional dipole pattern in storm track activity, characterized by weakening on the equatorward flank and strengthening on the poleward flank. The underlying mechanism follows a coherent physical pathway (Figure 10). Specifically, shortwave absorption by the trans-Pacific dust plume heats the mid-troposphere (850–400 hPa), which excites an anomalous anticyclonic circulation. This circulation restructures the meridional temperature gradient into a north-positive/south-negative dipole pattern, and consequently shifts the zone of maximum Eady growth rate poleward, favoring baroclinic eddy development at higher latitudes. Model sensitivity experiments for spring 2018 reproduce both the spatial pattern and the sign of this response, confirming that dust shortwave absorption is sufficient to drive the observed poleward displacement of the storm track.

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Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

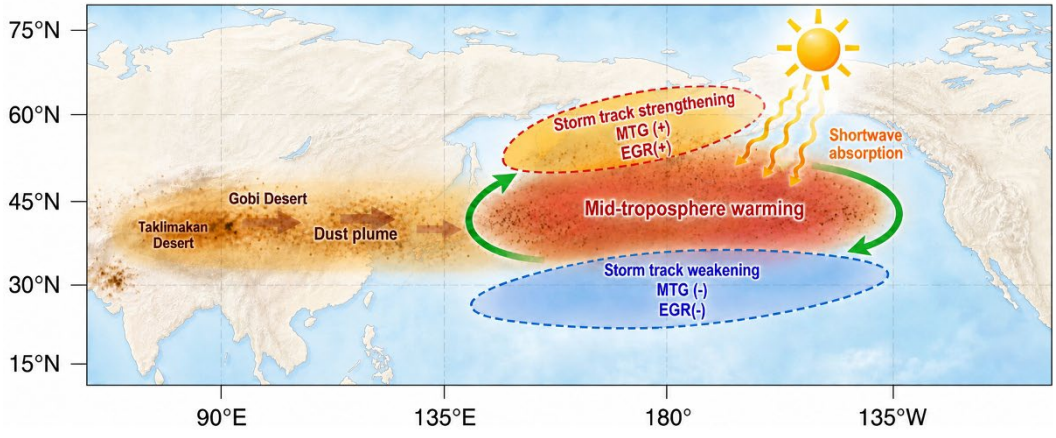

Figure 10. Schematic diagram illustrating the physical mechanism by which springtime East Asian dust aerosols drive a poleward shift of the North Pacific storm track. Dust emitted from East Asian sources is transported eastward across the North Pacific by mid-latitude westerlies. Shortwave absorption by the dust plume warms the mid-troposphere, enhancing (reducing) the meridional temperature gradient (MTG) on the poleward (equatorward) flank. The resulting dipole in the maximum Eady growth rate (EGR) favours storm track strengthening at higher latitudes and weakening at lower latitudes, producing a net poleward displacement.

It is important to distinguish the effects of dust aerosols from those of anthropogenic aerosols on the North Pacific storm track. Previous studies have shown that East Asian anthropogenic emissions predominantly intensify the storm track through aerosol-cloud interactions and associated latent heat release (Wang et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2007). In contrast, our findings highlight that dust aerosols mainly alter the latitudinal position of the storm track via aerosol-radiation interactions. This distinct response is driven by the direct radiative heating of the dust layer. Furthermore, mid-latitude transient eddies play a critical role in the poleward transport of heat, moisture, and momentum (Shaw et al., 2016; Tamarin-Brodsky and Kaspi, 2017; Hoskins and Hodges, 2019). The dust-induced poleward shift, particularly the enhanced transient meridional heat flux near the Bering Sea (Figure 3b), may substantially accelerate springtime Arctic-sea ice melting and trigger subsequent climate feedbacks (Overland and Pease, 1982; Huang et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2021). These potential impacts warrant further investigation.

It is worth noting that the WRF-Chem simulated responses in both temperature and storm track metrics are weaker than those inferred from the observational regression analysis. Several factors may contribute to this discrepancy. First, the dust loading over East Asia and the North Pacific originates not only from local East Asian sources but also from long-range transport from the Middle East and North Africa (Creamean et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2025). Our regional model domain does not fully capture these remote contributions, which would lead to an underestimation of the total dust burden and the associated radiative heating over the North Pacific. Second, the shortwave absorptive capacity of dust is likely underestimated in our simulations. Observational studies have shown that East Asian dust readily mixes with anthropogenic aerosol species during long-range transport, and such internally mixed dust aerosols can be more than 50% more absorbing than pure dust(Tian et al., 2018). Since our WRF-Chem experiments excluded anthropogenic emissions by design, this absorption enhancement associated with mixing was not represented. Third, the four-band shortwave radiation scheme used

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-3180
Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

in our WRF-Chem configuration tends to underestimate dust shortwave heating rates relative to schemes with finer spectral resolution (Feng et al., 2025), which would further weaken the simulated thermal response. Nevertheless, the primary purpose of the WRF-Chem experiments in this study is to provide a process-level verification of the physical mechanism identified from the observational analysis, rather than to achieve precise quantitative agreement.

Beyond direct radiative heating, dust particles can also act as ice nucleating particles and alter the atmospheric energy budget through aerosol-cloud interactions (Uno et al., 2009; Zeng et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Our current model configuration did not account for these indirect microphysical effects. Therefore, achieving a more precise quantitative assessment of the storm track response will require future studies to incorporate refined dust optical properties, realistic aerosol mixing representations, and these complex aerosol-cloud interactions.

Code and data availability

The source codes of WRF-Chem model are available at https://www2.mmm.ucar.edu/wrf/users/download/get_source.html (UCAR, 2022). The FNL data are available at https://rda.ucar.edu/datasets/ds083.2/ (Ncep, 2000). MERRA-2 reanalysis data are available at https://disc.gsfc.nasa.gov/datasets (GMAO, 2015). The MODIS AOD are available at https://ladsweb.modaps.eosdis.nasa.gov/missions-and-measurements/products/MOD08_M3 (Platnick, et al., 2015). CMAP precipitation are available at https://disc.gsfc.nasa.gov/datasets (Xie and Arkin, 1997).

Author contributions

XH, HX and AZ conceptualized the research goals and developed the methodology, including the experimental setup. AZ carried out the investigation, performed the formal analysis, and visualized the results. JD and AD also contributed to the supervision of the work. LX, ZW, KD and TL contributed to data curation. AZ prepared the manuscript with contributions from all co-authors, and all authors contributed to the writing (review and editing) of the final article.

Competing interests

The contact author has declared that none of the authors has any competing interests.

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Preprint. Discussion started: 17 June 2026

diagram presented in Figure 10, while emphasizing that the scientific concepts and physical mechanisms depicted therein remain entirely the work of the authors.

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Review statement

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