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Denmark, Greenland, and the Arctic

Emma N. Chiusano

As a constituent of the Kingdom of Denmark, Greenland provides Denmark with a claim to the Arctic. Independence has been long debated in Greenland, posing a continuing risk for Denmark. With geopolitical strife intensifying in the Arctic, Denmark must invest in its relationship with Greenland or risk losing its status as an Arctic nation. This article examines the relationship between Denmark and Greenland, specifically as it pertains to the Arctic.

Introduction

Because Greenland is a country within the Kingdom of Denmark, certain aspects of the Greenlandic government are controlled by the sovereign nation of Denmark, namely foreign, defense, and security policies. Greenland's lack of total autonomy is not well received by its citizenry, which resents Denmark using Greenland as their sole claim to the Arctic. A call for independence has existed in Greenland for decades, and having little say in Arctic affairs amplifies the movement, leaving Denmark in a quandary: trying to delegate as much power as necessary without giving up total control.

It is essential to examine this complex relationship in the context of the Arctic, as a "race for the Arctic" has existed for decades but recently intensified. The current remilitarization of the Arctic has sparked competition between Arctic nations and ignited the interest of non-Arctic countries, such as China, that desire power in the region. The Arctic is also increasingly studied because of climate change leading to melting Arctic ice, opening new shipping routes and creating access to unmined materials. As security councils are formed, claims to Arctic land and waters are disputed, and valuable resources are discovered, Denmark must be an active player in the Arctic and gain as much control as possible.

The independence movement in Greenland, paired with collaborations with outside powers such as the United States and China, leaves Denmark in a precarious position. The former nation is important because Denmark considers the US an invaluable strategic ally and bases policy decisions around the relationship. The latter is important, since it can potentially increase the risk of Greenlandic independence. Danish self-interest points to the necessity of formalizing an acceptable collaboration with Greenland, thereby ensuring the country remains within

the Kingdom's formal orbit. Failure to do so means Denmark would lose its claim to the Arctic and any accompanying relevance on the world stage.

The Denmark–Greenland relationship

The relationship between Denmark and Greenland can be characterized by a lack of trust. Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) is the world's largest non-continental island, boasting an area of 836,300 mi². The first settlers to arrive in Greenland were Inuits from what is now known as Canada. They utilized the narrow straight formed by the freezing of Baffin Bay to arrive in present-day Thule around 2500 BCE. Between then and the ninth century CE, six subsequent migrations of Inuits arrived. Norse settlers, led by Erik the Red, arrived in 982 CE. The Greenlandic Inuits lived in peace until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when expeditions from England and Norway arrived in Greenland. Among the most prominent of these was in 1721, when Hans Egede, a missionary from the joint Kingdom of Denmark–Norway, arrived in what is now known as Nuuk and successfully converted Inuits to Christianity (Visit Greenland., n.d.). In 1729, Greenland formally fell under Danish rule. The two coexisted off the world stage until 1941, when the US established air and navy bases in Greenland after the start of World War II. Denmark fell under Nazi occupation during that time and temporarily lost contact with Greenland (Lambert, 2022).

After World War II, meaningful political and economic changes occurred, which shaped the Denmark–Greenland relationship into what it is today. In 1953, Greenland became a province of Denmark rather than a colony, and in 1966, the Bank of Greenland was founded. In 1973, Denmark and Greenland joined the European Union (EU). However, after Greenland was granted home rule in 1979, it quickly

voted to leave the EU. In 1985, Greenland established its flag. Greenland was given more autonomy through the Self-Government Act Referendum, which established Kalaallisut as the official language (Lambert, 2022).

Even though Greenland has experienced advances in its home rule, Denmark retains exclusive sovereign control over foreign policy, defense policy, and security policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). The lack of authority in these areas contributes to most Greenlanders favoring independence. To date, no decision has been reached about when or how sovereignty should be obtained, mainly because Greenland receives a grant of 3.9Bkr (\$614M) annually (International Trade Administration, 2022), a large sum to overcome before Greenlandic politicians can move toward independence, as it is commonly accepted that economic and political independence must go hand-in-hand (Grydehøj, 2020). Today, Greenland's most important financial sector is fishing, which cannot sustain as many jobs as in the past due to climate change and sustainability concerns. Consequently, the government of Greenland is trying to augment the economy in other sectors, such as the island's mineral resources and tourism. Since 2000, foreign overnight visitors have increased by 50%, and visiting cruise line passengers have grown by 150%. The government hopes to attract foreign investments to these sectors to boost GDP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Similarly, mineral resources found in northern Greenlandic mines, such as lead and zinc, have the potential for use in green technologies (Frederiksen, 2019). The history of Denmark in Greenland has been long and complex; however, maintaining the relationship will prove vital as Denmark attempts to leverage Greenland in the race for the Arctic.

The race for the Arctic and its strategic relevance

The race for the Arctic is a phrase coined in the late 2000s to describe the geopolitical strife caused by untapped resources, climate change, unsettled borders, and power interests in the Arctic regions of the world (International Trade Administration, 2022). There has been peaceful development in the Arctic thus far, yet numerous factors point toward a quiet militarization of the Arctic. One of the most prominent contributing factors to this is the Arctic paradox, which states that the more rapidly humans burn fossil fuels, the sooner the population will have access to new oil, gas, and mineral resources, a result of global warming accelerating the melting of Arctic ice, which would open new oil and gas reserves

(Hilde, 2013). In the Arctic, the search for these resources has already begun. The US estimates that the Arctic contains up to 25% of the world's undiscovered oil and gas. This projection is backed by Russia, which has announced \$41B worth of tax incentives for oil field development over 30 years and approved a \$300B government incentive program for Arctic infrastructure (Rumer et al., 2021).

As the ice melts, the Arctic map will be redrawn. New transport routes are opening, and the potential for ownership of new energy resources in the Arctic poses national security issues. For example, the northwest passage in Canada has yet to be navigable year-round. However, with climate change, the season in which the route can be used for shipping is expanding and is expected to be navigable throughout the summer in upcoming decades. These new routes have cut shipping distance by 40% in some cases, as calculated in Russia's Northern Sea by the shipping company Mærsk, which could lower fuel costs and benefit the environment (Frederiksen, 2019). This expansion has caused debate within Canada regarding the government's ability to maintain surveillance in the Arctic and ensure that only authorized vessels cross the passage (Hilde, 2013).

Other ways in which the Arctic Sea ice melting can increase business in the region are through fiber cables, data centers, fishing, and extraction of raw materials. Fiber cable installation across the Arctic Ocean has already been agreed on by the Finnish company Cinia and the Russian company MegaFon. Installing data centers can create new jobs in the Arctic and help data storage become more sustainable. In terms of the fishing industry, as the ice melts, more territories will open. At present, unregulated fishing has been prevented in the Arctic, but the potential remains. Finally, once ice thaws, previously inaccessible land and sea will be available to mine valuable minerals (Frederiksen, 2019).

The benefits of an open Arctic are promising, although the potential for tension exists. For example, the Kingdom of Denmark has already experienced security issues in the Arctic, namely an altercation with Canada over claims to Hans Island, located in the Nares Strait between Canada and Greenland. This issue has since been resolved, but the conflict was rampant in the late 2000s, with both nations planting flags on the island and defending their claims with warships. Canada and Denmark claimed that "time-saving sea lanes in the Arctic could transform the shipping industry the way the Suez Canal did in the 19th century" (Palosaari, 2012). National security flareups are especially concerning because the Arctic Council—one of the largest cooperating bodies

in the Arctic, composed of the Arctic Five (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the US) as well as Finland, Iceland, and Sweden—does not have authority on security threats (Arctic Portal, n.d.).

The race for the Arctic in Greenland

Two-thirds of Greenland is above the Arctic Circle, reaching as close as 500 miles to the North Pole (International Trade Administration, 2022). This makes it a significant area regarding Arctic affairs. To discuss the race for the Arctic in Greenland, it is essential to appreciate the relationships between Greenland and key Arctic players, such as Denmark, the US, and China, all desirous of access for logistical and resource reasons.

Danish involvement

Denmark plays an intriguing role in the Arctic, in that it is deemed an Arctic state only through its sovereignty over Greenland (Jacobsen, 2020). However, Denmark rarely entrusts Greenland with fair representation in exercising political influence on Arctic policies. Through Greenland, Denmark has been able to stake a claim to more than 550,000 mi² of landmass and, through the continental shelf project, has extended its claim to include additional territory in the Arctic Ocean. This extension claim is possible through the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Article 76, which states that coastal Arctic states can extend their continental shelves, thereby gaining more control in the region beyond 200 nautical miles if they can document bathymetric proof of the base of their continental shelf to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark, et al., 2015). The Kingdom of Denmark has obtained a seabed stone from the slopes of the Lomonosov Ridge, which crosses the polar ocean from Greenland to Russia, that it claims originated from Greenland. Scientists have partially confirmed this, but more samples are needed to prove it with certainty. However, if more testing confirms Denmark's territorial extension claims, it can claim the right to exploit resources in the region (Brix, 2017).

Denmark is the only entity involved in all international councils regarding the Arctic, which include the following: the Arctic Council, the Ilulissat Declaration, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, NATO, the UN, and the EU (F. Viltoft Mygind, remarks to Martindale Center, October 24, 2022). The Ilulissat Declaration was a first-of-its-kind political statement, signed in Ilulissat, Greenland, in 2008, by the Arctic Five. The declaration signified that the Arctic Five would act peacefully and responsibly in

the Arctic, settling claims through negotiation and cooperation. Denmark's Arctic strategy from 2011 to 2020 reflected the sentiments of this declaration by working toward "a peaceful, secure and safe Arctic...in close cooperation with [its] international partners" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark, et al., 2015). Clearly, respecting the Arctic and its stakeholders is important to the Kingdom and all Arctic governing bodies.

The Kingdom's newest foreign and security policy, released in January 2022, offers further insight into exactly how this will be accomplished. Notably, the Arctic is the fourth priority of this strategy behind a strengthened focus on migration, promoting exports and economic diplomacy, and strengthening European policy, thereby demonstrating the gravity with which the Kingdom regards this issue. One way in which Denmark will increase its presence in the Arctic is through the Arctic Capacity Package. This 1.5Bkr (\$219M) commitment will increase the presence of the Danish Armed Forces in the Arctic and North Atlantic via long-range drones, radar, and satellite monitoring. It will also include civil society support through rescue operations, fishery inspections, research, and environmental and climate monitoring (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2022).

As with the 2011–2020 Arctic strategy, the 2022 foreign and security policy will promote low tension in the Arctic, peaceful and sustainable development, and cooperation within the Kingdom (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2022). Moreover, the Arctic Capacity Package will focus on increasing collaboration within the Danish Realm and contributing to NATO's overall Arctic initiative. The foreign and security policy also names the US as "an unrivaled and crucial partner for Denmark [and its] most important security policy ally" (Olsvig & Pram Gad, 2021). Thus, the Kingdom will aim to stand alongside the US in handling Arctic and worldwide tensions.

Denmark emphasizes cooperation within its foreign policy, but not all Kingdom members believe it is fully realized. Shortly after the Arctic Capacity Package was released, parliamentarians from Greenland and the Faroe Islands (the third territory within the Danish Kingdom) claimed that neither nation was "adequately involved in the deliberations on the package." Moreover, Greenland in foreign and security affairs, even within the Arctic, has been characterized as responsive—accepting initiatives by Denmark and the US—rather than directive (Olsvig & Pram Gad, 2021). In 2016, Vittus Qjuakkitsoq, Greenland's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, crit-

icized Denmark's foreign and security affairs report for not considering Greenlandic interests (Jacobsen, 2020). Outside of policy considerations, Greenland and the Faroe Islands are not always used to their fullest potential on the world stage. Initially, the two nations played a prominent role in foreign affairs. The former Premier of Greenland, Lars-Emil Johansen, signed the Ottawa Declaration on behalf of the Kingdom of Denmark; and, until 2011, Denmark, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands were represented equally at the Arctic Council. Subsequently, this shared representation changed when Greenland and the Faroe Islands lost their seats at the table.

Although this decision was subsequently reversed, their respective flags were replaced with one large, symbolic Danish flag. Greenland can participate with Denmark in informal meetings; however, as mentioned previously, Greenlandic politicians are often overlooked. Contrastingly, Greenland manages the coordination and executive role of the Sustainable Development Working Group on behalf of the Kingdom of Denmark. Moreover, Greenland can participate in the Arctic Council through the Inuit Circumpolar Council; however, this is outside the delegation of Denmark (Jacobsen, 2020). The role of Denmark in Greenland is clearly complicated and cries out for resolution. The relationship can further be analyzed through the relationship between Denmark, Greenland, and the US.

American involvement

The US involvement in Greenland is defined first and foremost by its security interests. The US first established a presence in Greenland in 1941 with the development of Thule Air Base, the largest air force base in the Arctic region, creating a security relationship between the US and Denmark. The US expanded this presence in the 1950s with the construction of the Distant Early Warning Line and the Ballistic Early Warning System. These systems are vital to the US presence in the Arctic—they act as a missile defense system, a satellite operations hub, and part of the US Air Force network. The activity of these systems peaked at the height of the Cold War, but their strategic relevance is once again being discussed amidst the race for the Arctic. During the Cold War, a US plane with four nuclear bombs on board accidentally crashed, which contaminated a fjord forcing a number of Greenlanders to resettle. Denmark's "nuclear-free zone" policy further complicated this situation. To ensure that this did not happen again, the Itilleq Declaration of 2003 put into writing that Greenland would be involved in relevant foreign policy decisions by requiring the Danish government to

consider the perspectives of Greenlandic politicians. The declaration was a precondition for the negotiations of Thule Air Base as a missile defense shield (Takahashi et al., 2019), laying the groundwork for a three-way symbiotic relationship between the US, Denmark, and Greenland.

A renewed interest in the relationship between the US and Greenland was highlighted in 2019, when President Trump broached the idea of purchasing Greenland from the Kingdom of Denmark. The White House's increased interest in the military importance of Greenland prompted this offer. A year prior to this announcement, a declaration of intent was signed by John Rood, the US Secretary of Defense, in which the US stated its intention to pursue investments in airport infrastructure in Greenland for the purpose of military and civilian purposes such that the US can increase military response and surveillance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Iceland, 2020).

The relationship between the US, Denmark, and Greenland was reaffirmed in the US National Strategy for the Arctic Region 2022–2032, which aims to deepen relationships with allies and partners, including Denmark and Greenland. As previously noted, Denmark often bases foreign policy decisions on those made by the US, so understanding American positions can help inform decisions made by Denmark in the Arctic. The US approach comprises security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable and economic development, and international cooperation and governance (Fleener, 2013). Security is the first pillar of the US Arctic plan since there are no security protections within the Arctic Council.

Chinese involvement

As is the case with the US, there exists a triangular relationship between Denmark, Greenland, and China. This relationship has existed since the 1950s, when Denmark and China formed a diplomatic relationship. That relationship fell under scrutiny in 2013, when China's interest in the Arctic peaked, and Greenland's interest in China did the same. In 2014, Kai Holst Andersen, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Greenland, declared Greenland's interest in investments from China (Sørensen, 2017).

Although China is not an Arctic state, the country is interested in the region. For years, China has claimed to be a "near-Arctic state" and has been pushing to move away from letting Arctic states determine legislation in the region and toward internationalizing Arctic affairs, which would make the country an influential stakeholder in the Arctic.

China could influence international treaties and regulations by making Arctic affairs a global issue rather than a matter governed by the Arctic Council (Mohr, 2020). To further assert its intentions in the Arctic, China has released an Arctic policy driven by polar research relating to melting ice and climate change, energy and mineral resources, governance, and sea routes (Sørensen, 2017). In the policy, China declares a Polar Silk Road, an extension of its belt and road initiative: a global development strategy (Goodman & Maddox, 2018). This policy concerns all Arctic states, which consider China the country they are the least comfortable with regarding regional affairs (Mohr, 2020). However, this has not stopped China from participating in the region. In 2013, China signed a free trade agreement with Iceland. The country also has many research centers in the Arctic, including the Yellow River Station in Svalbard, Norway. Moreover, China has already made many trips through the Northeast Passage with its icebreakers, *Snow Dragon* and *Snow Dragon 2*, and determined that it is 30% shorter to navigate through this passage than through the Strait of Malacca or the Suez Canal (Sørensen, 2017). This is still not a more economically viable option; however, as travel in the Arctic intensifies, the cost of navigating it will decrease with advancing technologies.

China has also been able to interject itself in the Arctic through Greenland. China is actively involved in four mining projects in Greenland, and as Camilla Sørensen points out, Chinese enterprises have not initiated these projects. Instead, they were undertaken by the Greenlandic government or other western countries. Denmark initially favored this relationship, wanting to grow the Greenlandic economy and strengthen its ties with China. However, tension grew regarding whether Chinese involvement in the Greenlandic economy would further the independence movement in Greenland. China's interest in Greenland has seemingly tapered off, both because of the country's interest in not harming its relationship with Denmark and the price of investing in Greenland is a considerable hurdle to overcome for an uncertain payoff, which has frustrated Greenlanders (Sørensen, 2017).

Greenland's attitude and its relevance

Understanding Greenland's political system, its politicians' reactions to Danish Arctic relations, and why the Arctic is significant in terms of independence is essential to comprehending the perspectives of Greenland with regard to the race for the Arctic and the nation's part in it. The Greenlandic political system is based on the Danish government model, with

a strong central government in the capital city, Nuuk, and five municipalities spread throughout the island. Today, the government is composed of 31 representatives across seven political parties. Of these parties, the three most prominent are the Siumut, Atassut, and Inuit Ataqatigiit.

The Siumut party is a social democratic party that was at the forefront of the Greenlandic Independence movement in the late 1970s. This party is the largest in Greenland and has maintained a majority for most of the island's autonomous reign. The Atassut party was a conservative union for the first 20 years of Greenland's autonomy; however, around 2000, the party changed stances in favor of independence. This party was a significant rival for the Siumut party until recently, when the Inuit Ataqatigiit, a socialist, pro-independence party, overtook it. Although there are seven parties currently active in government, the fact that the three largest parties share similar goals demonstrates that the objectives of the Greenlandic government have remained steady since 1979 and that independence is at the forefront of this movement (Grydehøj, 2020).

A key component in the battle for influence in Greenland among Denmark, the US, and China is that Greenland cannot make foreign policy decisions. It can make business and trade decisions that reflect its response to the Arctic race. To the dismay of Denmark and the US, Greenland has yet to rule out the possibility of future negotiations with China, which would give that country a foothold in the Arctic. The general sentiment of Greenlandic politicians is that Denmark already dominates the island, so choosing to partner with China may not cause any profound changes: a foreign government would exert control over its economy. This fear escalated in 2018, when there was tension between the governments of Greenland and Denmark; Denmark and the US anticipated that Greenland would partner with China in contracts for the island's airport expansion. However, these tensions were put to rest when Greenland partnered with Denmark after all (Grydehøj, 2020). The Greenlandic government choosing to partner with Denmark can be taken as a positive sign that the government of Greenland intends to continue strengthening its relationships with the Kingdom of Denmark. This sign is supported by a foreign policy poll in Greenland showing that the Greenlandic people favor cooperation with the US and Denmark rather than with China (Bülow, 2018). It is yet to be seen how these relationships will develop, especially in the light of an independence movement. Still, for now, Greenland is backing Denmark in the race for the Arctic.

While Greenland is not the only Indigenous Arctic territory that desires independence, its unique status within the Kingdom of Denmark makes Greenland the only one with a roadmap to sovereignty. More importantly, with that roadmap, Greenland can choose precisely when it wants to become independent, allowing it to lay down political, economic, societal, and any other necessary groundwork before making the decision to become an independent nation. However, this unique situation poses challenges to Greenland in that once it improves one aspect of its society on its roadmap, other elements change, or new factors are added, making it difficult to choose an exact path to take. Greenland's desire for independence is of the utmost importance to the Kingdom of Denmark; its Arctic strategy depends upon Greenland remaining within the Kingdom. In a 2016 poll, 34% of Greenlandic residents indicated that independence was crucial to them and 25% that it was somewhat important, whereas it was partly or not very important to 24% (Grydehøj, 2020). These figures skyrocketed in a 2019 poll, showing that 67.7% of the population supports independence, and of those, 43.5% believe that independence will strengthen the Greenlandic economy. Many advocates of independence are calling for change within the next 20 years (Spadetto, 2021). There is an overwhelming drive for independence in Greenland, and although politicians are not rushing to seek it immediately, the people may prefer otherwise. Therefore, if Denmark wants to keep Greenland within its reign in the long term, it needs to emphasize the needs of the Greenlandic people in its foreign strategy.

Recommendations

Denmark and Greenland have had a tumultuous relationship at times, with Greenland feeling slighted in international and intra-realm spaces as well as in its call for independence. At the moment, Greenland's hopes for independence are dampened by the substantial contribution of Denmark's block grant to the nation's GDP, along with the fact that it is currently very costly to begin a project in Greenland, with an uncertain payoff for potential investors, such as the US and China. If Greenland's economy can overcome this monetary hurdle through tourism, mining, or other sources of income, independence may be close. Therefore, Denmark must strengthen its relationship with Greenland due to its geopolitical and economic stakes, which can be accomplished on three levels of the world stage.

To bolster this relationship publicly, Denmark can grant Greenland and the Faroe Islands greater autonomy on the world stage. As detailed in this

article, Greenland makes its most significant contribution to the Arctic Council through the Inuit Circumpolar Council, not on behalf of the Danish Realm. If Greenland were offered more substantial responsibility at these meetings, it would signify to Greenland and the world that Denmark values the nation's input and respects Greenland providing the Kingdom of Denmark a claim to the Arctic in the first place.

To enhance the intercountry relationship, Denmark should emphasize the Greenlandic perspective when drafting foreign and security policies, specifically regarding the Arctic, due to the need for Greenlandic representation. Denmark could allow Greenland to craft and present an Arctic Policy to the Danish government before legislators even consider working on a policy for the whole Kingdom. As Arctic affairs are a lived experience for the people of Greenland, they have the most vital perspective for the Kingdom and deserve to have their voices heard with greater significance.

Finally, Denmark can socially foster its relationship with Greenland by creating initiatives to integrate Danish and Greenlandic culture and society. With more than 2000 miles between them, it is no wonder that the two countries can experience a disconnect. By including the Greenlandic culture more in Danish society and having open and honest discussions about colonialism and the impact of Danish sovereignty, the two nations can progress toward healing old wounds and potentially establishing a new, more amicable relationship than ever before. Whether or not Greenland becomes independent, an improved relationship can lead to increased Danish investments in Greenland, strengthening the intercountry bonds.

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