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A geopolitical gem
How Greenland can be
a test case for a more
ambitious EU

Discussion Paper

C279
2023

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A geopolitical gem

How Greenland can be a test case for a more ambitious EU

1. *Greenland, mining and independence*

The European Union (EU) will soon have four people representing it in one of the smallest capitals of the world: Nuuk in Greenland. And the EU is not alone in its interest in this remote, sparsely populated and mineral-rich island. Greenland is ‘warming’ fast along with the rest of the Arctic. This is true of the literal temperatures measured around the north pole, due to climate change. But the recession of sea ice slowly thrusts the Arctic into geopolitical focus - not only for the EU but also for Russia, China and the United States.

With this article, I argue that the Arctic region – and Greenland in particular – is the major test case for a European Commission that wants to be more ‘geopolitical’. The EU admits that the Arctic is supremely geopolitical in its new Arctic policy, published in 2021.

The main research question is whether the EU is ready to face all these players - plus its own member states – competitively in a region that, up until now, is mostly characterized by cooperation. I will argue that the EU has a good starting point – the Arctic Policy – but that the path to success is fraught on multiple sides, as we will see in regards to competences, duties towards member states and simply a lack of Arctic territory. Russia and China are ready to sabotage the EU’s efforts in keeping the Arctic a peaceful and cooperative area. Especially

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the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has shown that the EU has no time to lose to become ‘geopolitical’.

Currently, Greenland is a country within the Kingdom of Denmark and one of the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) of the European Union. The warming of the globe may offer opportunities towards independence for Greenland, through the fields of shipping, mining and tourism. There is even a direct line to be drawn from the original colonizing priest Hans Egede (1686-1758) to US president Donald Trump’s impolite proposal to simply buy Greenland:

‘Just as controversial as Egede’s statue in the capital Nuuk was US President Donald Trump’s offer to purchase the island from Denmark. His arrogance angered Greenlanders, but also unsettled them by exposing the shaky foundations of their independence ambitions. In the absence of governmental and economic preconditions, leaving the Realm of the Danish Crown would appear to be a decidedly long-term option.’¹

But does this long-term option come closer for Greenland with the warming of the Arctic? The rising temperatures are predicted to bring an ‘economic boom’ to the whole region. Does Greenland stand to benefit from this sufficiently to end its dependencies on Denmark and Europe?

Greenland has wide-ranging autonomy over most fields of economy and society: Copenhagen only retains discretion on foreign and defense policy, monetary policy and the judicial system. Up until 1953, Greenland was a colony, when Denmark changed its status to that of a province. The route to Self Rule in 2009 was a fairly steady one, starting with Home Rule established in 1981 and Greenland leaving the European Economic Communities in 1985, opting to become an OCT². With its status as a country, Greenland is however entitled to negotiate directly with governments of other countries. As we will

- 1 Paul, Michael: Greenland's Project Independence, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, 2021.
- 2 Ackrén, Maria: Referendums in Greenland - From Home Rule to Self-Government. In: *Fédéralisme* 19 (1): 1-11. Université de Liège, 2019.

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see further on, this division of tasks is not always clear-cut and leads to tension between Nuuk and Copenhagen.

1.1 The Greenland economy: a collection of dependencies

The most-cited obstacles to Greenlandic independence are economical ones: subsidies from Denmark and the EU, a dependency on fisheries and a large government sector. This section dissects these issues one by one, so they can be analyzed in relation to the role the EU plays in them.

Financially, the Greenlandic government is dependent on an annual subsidy from the Danish government amounting to around €500-600 million. In case Greenland votes to become an independent nation, the expectation is that this grant would no longer be paid out by Copenhagen. For this reason, the debate around independence generally focuses on how to create the same government income in Greenland itself. In most yearly budgets the grant constitutes around half (or sometimes more) of the government's total budget and up to 20% of the total GDP of Greenland³.

Aside from the annual block grant, the Greenlandic government is the largest employer on the island: of the 26.808 people working in Greenland, no less than 11.527 work in the public administration and service⁴. This has led researchers to conclude Greenland comes close to an actual 'planned economy', since so many sources of production originate with the government⁵. This is even true of the fishing industry, as the largest company, Royal Greenland, is owned by the government along with its processing capacity and several trawlers. It achieved a revenue of no less than 5,6 million Danish crowns (€757.000) in

3 See: note #1

4 Naatsorsueqqissaartarfik (Greenland Statistics Bureau): Greenland in Figures, Nuuk, 2022.

5 Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon: Denmark in the Arctic: Bowing to three masters. Stichting Atlantische Commissie, Den Haag, 2011.

2021 and employs nearly 1.400 people in Greenland⁶ - no less than 5% of Greenland's entire workforce.

Which brings us to the main income source for the Greenlandic economy: shrimp and other fisheries products. The country is highly dependent on fisheries for its export earnings. In 2021, 97% of exports (with a value of €643 million) were in the category of 'provisions and livestock'⁷. Even though the trade balance resulted in a deficit for Greenland in the last three years, the economy actually did not shrink during the Covid-pandemic.

1.2 Dependence on EU funding

Although the EU does not spend nearly as much as Denmark, it does support Greenland with a considerable annual grant - representing another dependency. The largest amounts of money end up in crucial sectors: fisheries and education.

For 2021-'27, the EU funds are expected to sum up to an annual €45 to €50 million, or nearly 5% of Greenland's budget. Firstly, the EU and Greenland concluded a new fisheries agreement worth an annual €21,6 million over six years. Secondly, Greenland is set to receive close to half of the funding for all OCT regions under the EU's multiannual financial framework, summing up to €225 million in the framework period. Education (90%) and so-called 'green growth' (10%) related to climate change mitigation and the energy transition are the main two goals. In short, as Ludger Kühnhardt has argued, Greenland and the other Overseas Countries and Territories of the EU are stuck in a 'development trap'. They cannot finance their own independence but also are continuously accusing the old colonizer of neglect on 'human, social and political' fronts⁸.

6 Royal Greenland: About Royal Greenland, Facts and Figures. <https://www.royalgreenland.com/royal-greenland/about-royal-greenland/facts-and-figures/>

7 See note #3.

8 Kühnhardt, Ludger: The European Archipelago: Rebranding the strategic significance of EU overseas countries and territories. ZEI, Bonn, 2019, p. 71.

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1.3 Independence and euroscepticism

Even if the path to independence for Greenland is fraught, despite a lot of uncertainty and especially a lot of unclear consequences, it does seem like the political class and society are set for it at some point in the twenty-first century. Independence is a topic that finds its way into all other political discussions on Greenland, as specialists on the island's politics Kristian Søby Kristensen and Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen have argued:

Greenlandic identity is caught between aboriginality and modernity, between a specific culture (and practices) and modern, Western concepts like democracy, welfare and market economy. Independence ties these seemingly contradictory notions together by creating a political horizon that has not been reached yet, but is always argued as reachable at some future point.⁹

The matters of independence from Denmark and Euroscepticism in Greenland are therefore very much intermingled. And yet, the Greenlanders see opportunities from Denmark or the EU in slightly different ways.

Legally speaking, Greenland and Denmark have agreed on a pathway to potential independence. In the 2009 Self-Government Act, the steps are laid out. First, Copenhagen and Nuuk would negotiate with each other. Greenlanders would then vote on the result of these talks, with the referendum outcome ratified by both the Greenlandic parliament and the Danish one¹⁰.

Politically, one of the most influential voices in the Greenland independence debate is the social-democratic Siumut (Forward) party, which has supplied

9 Søby Kristensen, Kristian and Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen: Greenlandic sovereignty in practice: Uranium, independence and foreign relations in Greenland between three logics of security.” In *Greenland and the International Politics of a Changing Arctic: Postcolonial Paradiplomacy between High and Low Politics*, 1st ed. Routledge, Abingdon, 2018, p. 38-53.

10 Poppel, Birger: *The Path Toward Independence*. In: *The Arctic in World Affairs: A North Pacific Dialogue on Global-Arctic Interactions: the Arctic Moves from Periphery to Center : 2019 North Pacific Arctic Conference Proceedings*, edited by Yoon H. Kim, Oran R. Young, Robert W. Corell, Charles E. Morrison, David L. VanderZwaag, Arild Moe, and Jong D. Kim. Korea Maritime Institute, Busan, 2019, p. 120-130.

most of the island's prime ministers. This party rather considers independence a 'concept' than a clear set of conditions. Another view is taken by the liberal-conservative Attasut, which prefers to remain in the Danish Realm and sees independence as a risk towards Greenland's security because it would jeopardize its relationship with all current allies like Canada, the US and Europe¹¹. In the last few years, a slight radicalization can be noticed around the independence question. Two parties, Partii Naleraq (PN) and before that Nunatta Qitornai are advocating a much faster departure from the Danish Realm.

Polls on the question of Greenlandic independence are not conducted on a regular basis, but often yield comparable results. Roughly between 62 and 70% of Greenlanders will favor independence. Usually, the question is framed in the distant future. For instance, a poll for newspaper *Sermitsiaq* in 2016 found that 64% of respondents said independence is 'very important' or 'somewhat important' to them¹². A poll from 2019 puts the pro-independence camp at 67,8%. Not immediately, however: rather at some point in the next twenty years. Support for independence within 10 years (so before 2030) is a lot lower, at 46% and further declines if a referendum would have been held 'tomorrow': 38%¹³. Not unimportantly, a 2017 poll found that no less than 78% of Greenlanders would not want to become independent if it meant a drop in living standards¹⁴.

Interestingly, a broad 2019 survey into how Greenlanders view climate change actually showed that the inhabitants doubt whether climate change would

11 Ahlness, Ellen: Nunatta Qitornai: A party analysis of the rhetoric and future of Greenlandic separatism." In: Separatism and Regionalism in Modern Europe. Logos Verlag Berlin, Berlin, 2020, p. 157-176

12 McGwin, Kevin: Solid majority favours Greenland independence." High North News, Bodø, December 7, 2016.

13 Breum, Martin: Her er den egentlige forskel på dansk og grønlandsk syn på fremtiden. In: Altinget Arktis, København, 9 January 2019.

14 See note #11

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actually make independence easier¹⁵. This puts the climate change-induced economic boom of Greenland (and the wider Arctic) in a different perspective. But if the population does not see climate change as an opportunity for shipping and mining as the governments of Greenland have done, will they sooner or later protest large-scale mining in their country, or vote pro-mining parties out of office?

One could say that Euroscepticism pushed Greenland towards Home Rule, Self Rule and potentially even independence. When Denmark, in the seventies, wanted to leave the EFTA behind and join the European Economic Community (EEC), it organized a referendum on the matter. Greenland, still a province at the time, was also asked for its opinion but not as a separate constituency. Even though the Greenlanders voted 70,8% against entering the then EEC, they entered the bloc in 1973 anyway because the more numerous Danes voted in favor.

This resulted in somewhat of a renewed awakening of Greenlandic political ambitions for autonomy and the realization that the island has opinions of its own that may differ from Copenhagen and Brussels. Several political movements started striving for Home Rule, which would enable a new and Greenland-only referendum on EEC membership. And this is exactly what happened. Six years after entering the EEC, the Greenlanders asked Copenhagen for Home Rule, which was granted in 1981. A year later, 52% of Greenland voters say they no longer want to be an EEC member.

Fishing rights are, unsurprisingly, at the center of this discussion. But, contrary to popular held beliefs, the resistance against Brussels-decided quotas and rules for fishermen has little to do with the economic argument (the fish and the value they represent). Rebhan convincingly argues it is rather a political argument:

15 Minor, Kelton, Gustav Agneman, Navarana Davidsen, Nadine Kleeman, Ununguaq Markussen, David Dreyer Lassen, and Minik Rosing: *Greenlandic Perspectives on Climate Change 2018–2019: Results from a National Survey*. Kraks Fond Institute for Urban Research, København, 2019, p. 64.

the ability to exert sovereignty over one's own resources decides the debate in all North Atlantic countries: Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

1.4 Denmark's balancing act

Copenhagen plays a multi-faceted role towards Greenland. It has been criticized for often 'pretending to know what was good for the "poor Greenlander" and what was not'¹⁶.

Greenland's NATO affiliation through Denmark may of course change if Greenland seeks independence and would henceforth be free to establish its own preferences on defense matters - including the US Thule Air Base in the distant northwest of the country. However, an independent Greenland would need to seek assurances from another power to defend its vast territory. This goes both ways: Denmark has a strong security-based interest in keeping Greenland within 'the Realm' for as long as possible. Copenhagen is aware that it needs Greenland's strategic territory to uphold its seat on the Arctic Council^{17 18}.

Even more significant on a geostrategic point of view is the fact that Copenhagen has continuously used the presence of the Thule Air Base on Greenland to 'buy political clout in Washington', as it is aware of how valuable the air force and early warning rocket systems base is for the United States. It's all part of Copenhagen's awareness of how fragile its hold on Greenland really is in a changing Arctic:

'Copenhagen knows that in a politically unstable Arctic, the risk of an external power taking possession of Greenland is a real possibility. Unlike the great

16 Rebhan, Christian: North Atlantic Euroscepticism: The Rejection of EU Membership in the Faroe Islands and Greenland. Fróðskapur/Faroe University Press, Tórshavn, 2016.

17 Nuttall, Mark: Greenland Matters: In the Crosscurrents of Arctic Change. In: The Arctic in World Affairs: A North Pacific Dialogue on Global-Arctic Interactions: the Arctic Moves from Periphery to Center: 2019 North Pacific Arctic Conference Proceedings, edited by Jong D. Kim, Yoon H. Kim, Oran R. Young, Robert W. Corell, Arild Moe, Charles E. Morrison, and David L. VanderZwaag. Korea Maritime Institute, Seoul, 2019, p. 89-107.

18 See note #1

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powers – who are still hesitant to build up regional institutions – Denmark is therefore dedicated to most types of regional cooperation, as long as they do not directly counteract American interests or Danish sovereignty over Greenland. Denmark is one of the key proponents of common shipping rules and surveillance systems in the [International Maritime Organization]. The country is a strong advocate for regional cooperation through the Arctic Council.’¹⁹

Arctic states like Canada and the US have much less worries about losing their ‘Arctic status’ and as such view cooperation as nice-to-have rather than the Danish approach of need-to-have. This also pertains to the minerals in Greenland.

The European Union, a cooperative organization at its core, voices this wish for Arctic cooperation as well because it is similarly ‘dependent’ on Greenland for an Arctic role as Denmark. The Special Envoy for Arctic Matters Michael Mann puts it thus:

‘The EU has a fundamental interest in supporting multilateral cooperation in the Arctic and in working to ensure that it remains safe, stable, sustainable, peaceful and prosperous.’²⁰

1.5 Greenland’s opportunities

In the context of a heating-up Arctic, Greenland has been framed as a potential economic winner. It would stand to receive more shipping traffic, would be able to receive tourists during a longer period of the year and - most importantly - will be able to export mined minerals easier and cheaper.

Mining and politics are intimately intertwined in Greenland, because of the potential income mineral extraction can bring for the island - politicians favoring independence look towards mines as an income source that can replace Denmark’s block grant and thereby enable the much-coveted statehood.

The most recent elections in Greenland, in 2021, actually occurred because a mine had caused a stir in Greenland: it was close to opening after no less than

19 See note #5

20 EU External Action Service: Arctic: Remarks by Commissioner Sinkevičius following the adoption of the new Arctic Policy” EEAS, Brussels, 2021.

ten years of development. The Inuit Ataqatigiit party (IA) leader Múte Bourop Egede won the election by opposing the Kuannersuit (Kvanefjeld) mine in the south of Greenland because it would yield not only the coveted rare-earth elements (REE), but also radioactive uranium. IA and Egede's coalition are not against mining in general, but did reinstate a ban on all radioactive mining operations²¹, one that had been withdrawn by a previous government to help the Kuannersuit development.

Along with 'sustainable mining' for resources like aluminum-base anorthosite, Egede highlighted Greenland is also looking for investments in green energy - both hydropower and offshore wind – and hopes to export power sources like hydrogen or clean electricity in the future. This ties into the ban on oil and gas exploration that Greenland announced in June 2021. It is what NGO openDemocracy calls the 'indigenous revolt against extractive capitalism'²².

But with the Kuannersuit mine unlikely to ever open (even though the license owner has started an arbitration process against the government), the math of mining for independence looks bleak. According to EU documents, the open pit mine could have produced some 10 to 20.000 tons of 'total rare earth oxides' per year. To put that in perspective: the project that is the second closest to starting operation, Killavaat Allannuat (Kringlerne), would only produce 3.250 tons annually²³. The potential financial windfall would therefore also be much smaller. Without Kuannersuit, many more mines would be needed.

What do Greenlanders themselves want? With all the international attention for Greenland on the rise, of course researchers became interested in the public opinions on geopolitics. 65% of Greenlanders want to cooperate more with the EU and only 22,8% want less of it. That said, the EU only manages the sixth

21 Jamasmie, Cecilia: Greenland bans uranium mining, blocks rare earths project. *Mining.com*, 10 November 2021.

22 Ramsay, Adam, and Aaron White: Greenland's government bans oil drilling, leads indigenous resistance to extractive capitalism. openDemocracy, London, 10 November 2021.

23 Annex 1 of 'Study on EU Needs with Regard to Co-operation with Greenland', July 2015.

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spot after Iceland, the Arctic Council, Canada, the US and – perhaps surprisingly – Denmark. An interesting observation is also that more Greenlanders want to scale back cooperation with Denmark (23,8%) rather than with the EU, though this 1 percentage point falls within the margins of the survey²⁴. When it comes to China, Greenlanders have a broad range of opinions. They are split on whether it is good (53%) or bad (47%) that China is becoming more influential in the world²⁵. However, as soon as it might come closer, Greenlanders are more wary: ‘67,8% say no thanks to foreign investments from China’.

2. The geopolitics of a warmer Arctic

The Arctic region, while characterized by interstate cooperation, is not impervious to spillovers from conflicts elsewhere. Both Russia and China have been ramping up their capabilities and rhetorics when it comes to the high north. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may happen far away from any Arctic place, it still influences the region in several ways.

2.1 Russia’s Arctic headache

On the diplomatic front, Russia’s chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2021-’23) was rendered meaningless when the seven other countries – Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway and the United States – decided to boycott a meeting scheduled to take place in Arkhangelsk²⁶.

Perhaps the largest and most unexpected repercussion for Moscow - except for not occupying Kyiv after three days - has been the swift process through which Finland and Sweden applied for NATO after the invasion of Ukraine started. Even though Sweden and Finland do not border the Arctic Ocean themselves,

24 Ackrén, Maria and Rasmus Leander Nielsen: the First Foreign and Security Policy Opinion Poll in Greenland. Ilimatusarfik, Nuuk, 2021

25 Ibid, p. 8.

26 Bove, Tristan: Countries boycott Arctic cooperation with Russia after Ukraine invasion. *Fortune*, 9 March 2022.

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the Russian navy will have less freedom to maneuver in the Baltic Sea once Russia is left as the only non-NATO country in the region.

Tied in with the diplomatic repercussions against Russia, Western countries have set up unprecedented sanctions against Russia. These actually do work – contrary to popular belief – because Russia is so dependent on many Western technologies. Sanctions on trade and logistics will significantly delay LNG projects if not derail Russia’s entire gas-based Arctic strategy. Even if the Western sanctions don’t (yet?) target Russian gas exports or the related industry directly, they do hit them through trade sanctions. This is because shipping companies from the west are no longer allowed to take on contracts under the increased US and EU sanctions. For instance, both Germany’s Linde and France’s TotalEnergies have stopped investing in the Arctic LNG 2 project, which was set to be the second pillar of Russia’s LNG strategy – along with the operational Yamal LNG terminal nearby. Unfortunately for Russian president Vladimir Putin, he has not diversified his country’s economy away from fossil fuels in the previous twenty years:

‘The paradox is that the very changes that have improved Russia’s economy over the past two decades ultimately make it more vulnerable to—and less able to adapt to—the challenges of climate change.’²⁷

While the opening of Arctic shipping traffic is the only positive side of climate change and the energy transition for Russia, the Kremlin shows no signs of abandoning fossil fuels. The future of LNG exports both west and eastward seems shaky and building and maintaining infrastructure in an Arctic region affected by permafrost thawing means Russia is economically stuck: it barely has other options than exploiting hydrocarbons in the Arctic, but will find it both more difficult to access and to export at viable prices. Russia will likely keep trying to become ‘more Arctic’ but, ironically, therewith lose its ability to actually regain power in the wider region.

27 Gustafson, Thane: *Klimat: Russia in the Age of Climate Change* (ePub edition). Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 2021.

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As a matter of fact, Putin is doubling down on liquified natural gas (LNG) in the Arctic and hopes to pivot to China as his main customer. Which brings us to ‘near-Arctic’ China.

2.2 *China’s near-Arcticness*

Even though China has no border on the Arctic Ocean, it has stretched its own spin on why it should be taken seriously in the Arctic region. In its 2018 Arctic Policy Beijing called China a ‘near-Arctic state’:

‘China is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs. Geographically, China is a “Near-Arctic State”, one of the continental States that are closest to the Arctic Circle.’²⁸

In short: China wants to be taken seriously in the Arctic, both for geo-economic reasons related to trade directly and geopolitical dreams of setting the world’s new era of standards. Greenland features prominently in this plan, much more so than for the Russians. Some scholars argue that the invention of ‘near-Arctic’ states allows China to play up its concerns for environmental and climate issues while it is in fact more worried about ‘distrust of Arctic states, namely, that they will lock Beijing out of the region’s resources and opportunities’²⁹.

China does not only look at the Arctic as a chance for faster (and cheaper) shipping to Europe, the Arctic in Beijing’s view is particularly essential for its global ambitions – whereas Russia views it more in light of its own survival. Dams et al., in a report on China’s presence in Greenland and Iceland, write:

‘The Arctic, in the understanding of Beijing, is: ‘one of the geostrategic arenas in which its fate as a rising superpower will be decided. Building a legitimate

28 The State Council Information Office: China’s Arctic Policy White Paper, January 2018

29 Doshi, Rush, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Gaoqi Zhang: Northern expedition: China’s Arctic activities and ambitions. In: Security, Strategy & Order. Brookings, Washington, D.C., 2021, p. 3-72.

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Arctic presence is a long-term project, with long-term goals pursued by short- and medium-term methods.³⁰

More so than the EU and the US, China looks towards, the Arctic as an area where it can make or break its future as a superpower. This does put all Chinese efforts and attempts at gaining footholds – of any kind – into a different perspective.

The Chinese Arctic interests constitute a ‘gray rhino’ for the West³¹, meaning a very likely but still underappreciated threat. China wanting to be a stakeholder in the Arctic is such a long-running trend that will have major strategic implications in the future for the EU. Greenland is the main focus of this. A gray rhino is a tricky challenge to face, ‘as it is not likely to prove contentious or urgent in the short term, European countries will struggle to protect their interests accordingly’. China, the authors argue, is very willing to prepare for gray rhinos. And while doing so, Beijing is also getting ready for so-called ‘black swans’: more random sudden events that surprise nearly everyone around the globe, like the Covid pandemic or economic shocks. Where these two come together, a void of opportunity opens up that the West is generally not ready for. Think, for instance, of the shortages of simple items such as face masks during the Covid pandemic. Summing up:

‘China has systematically used voids in the European geostrategic imagination – Greenland and Iceland in particular – to build presence and be seen as a legitimate near-Arctic power.’³²

Indeed, China has created for itself a chair at the ‘Arctic table’ simply by investing in small-scale projects in willing nations. Beijing has allocated Silk Road Fund money – related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – to assist Russia with LNG projects in the high north and built several icebreakers capable of operating in the Arctic year-round. When it comes to research, China has

30 Dams, Ties, Adája Stoetman, and Louise van Schaik: Presence before power, China’s Arctic strategy in Iceland and Greenland. Clingendael Institute, Den Haag, 2020, p. 38.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid, p. 39.

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opened two stations: one in Iceland (for environmental and climatological research³³) and on Norway's Svalbard (for ecological and geographic observations³⁴), smartly maximizing the rules of the Svalbard Treaty for its own purposes. For a few years, China was able to use satellite receiver stations in Sweden's high north Esrange test facility and spaceport (plus other Swedish facilities for satellite communications in Australia and Chile). Contracts China had with the Swedish Space Corporation were, however, not renewed after 2020^{35 36}, citing security considerations. Something similar is happening in Finland, where the Finnish Defense Force blocked the Chinese development of an airport in Kemijärvi, north of the Arctic Circle, because it was too close to the firing range and training area of Rovajärvi^{37 38}.

By slowly investing and interjecting all over the Arctic region, China is making its own 'near-Arcticness' soon a fact. At the same time, Western actors in particular have grown more suspicious of China's tactics and are calling a halt to its expansion in even the smallest projects. In Greenland exactly this happened with the expansion of two crucial airports and the development of a new one.

The idea of the Greenlandic government is relatively simple: we are too isolated in the world and need to have more capable airports to connect with it. The trip from Nuuk to Copenhagen takes the better part of a day because of a required transfer in Kangerlussuaq, the only airport capable of handling larger jet airliners and with the most stable weather. The political and economic hub of

33 More information on the Kárhóll research station can be found on karholl.is

34 The Chinese Svalbard station is called Arctic Yellow River Station. More information: <https://en.pric.org.cn/>

35 Barrett, Jonathan, and Johan Ahlander: Exclusive: Swedish space company halts new business helping China operate satellites. Reuters, 21 September 2020.

36 Jáma, Sharon, and Diana Olofsson: Swedish Security Experts: We're too naive about China. SVT Nyheter, 15 January 2019.

37 Lino, Marissa R.: Understanding China's Arctic activities. The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2020.

38 Kopra, Sanna, and Matti Puranen: China's Arctic Ambitions Face Increasing Headwinds in Finland. The Diplomat, 18 March 2021.

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Greenland, Nuuk, is therefore not easily reached and the same is true for the main potential tourism destination at the ice fjord Disko Bay near Ilulissat. Airport modernization and expansion has therefore been presented as a crucial step for Greenland on the way to the diversification of its economy³⁹. Both Nuuk and Ilulissat airports will get a runway extended to 2200 meters by 2024, capable of handling jet aircraft - if the weather allows it. The southern town of Qaqortoq is set to get a completely new airport to unlock the region with the most mining potential⁴⁰.

China was more than ready to invest in these three airports. But as soon as fears of ‘debt diplomacy’ mounted⁴¹, Copenhagen stepped in and reframed the airport investment – not unjustifiably – as a matter of national security and therefore under the remit of Denmark. Pushed by the US – which earlier prevented China from buying a former military base – Denmark now funds the airport projects and receives a 30% stake in the resulting operations.

So far, Denmark has not objected to Chinese involvement directly in mining projects in southern Greenland. But there is an important difference with the airports: transportation infrastructure might see roads and runways serving dual purposes both to serve the public but also a foreign military power⁴². The airport struggles also highlight Greenlandic frustrations with the division of ‘competences’ (to use an EU term out of its context) between Nuuk and Copenhagen. Denmark lets Greenland have its autonomy for as long as possible but may ‘revoke’ it whenever necessary. It does not hesitate to wield its authority over defense, foreign relations or security matters even in cases where it had up until a certain point allowed Greenland to conduct the project fully⁴³

39 Verhelst, Koen: Groenland moet supermachten inpalmen om vrij te zijn. Het Financieele Dagblad, Amsterdam, 14 May 2020.

40 For a more in-depth overview of the airports planned in Greenland, please check the website of Kalaallit Airports at <https://kair.gl/en/>

41 Bennett, Mia: The controversy over Greenland airports shows China isn't fully welcome in the Arctic - yet. Arctic Today, Anchorage, 13 September 2018.

42 Ibid.

43 See note #5

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⁴⁴. The airports are a prime example of this: Greenland sees them as ‘a question of infrastructure rather than security’⁴⁵, while Denmark blocked the Chinese airport investment on the grounds of foreign and security policy.

Aside from the strategic position Greenland enjoys in the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans, China’s main interest in Greenland seems to lie in the field of rare earth metals. This is evidenced by several high-level visits between both countries and a Memorandum of Understanding in 2014, signed not between the governments but by Australian company Greenland Minerals and the China Non-Ferrous Metal Industry’s Foreign Engineering and Construction Company (NFC)⁴⁶. At the moment, China is the world’s largest producer of these critical minerals, which are essential for the development of electronic products, electric cars, batteries and lasers. Their properties make them extra coveted in the context of the energy transition and for hightech products. Greenland is projected to hold the second largest of the world’s reserves in rare earth metals, with a lot of these deposits becoming accessible due to climate change.

The Kuannersuit mine in the south of the country was - until the latest elections in 2021 – the furthest-developed mining site (as mentioned above). The Chinese involvement is small but not insignificant: Greenland Minerals is owned for 9,3% by the Chinese company Shenghe Resources Holdings – which is a major producer of REE in China. But Chinese efforts on Greenland have hit a wall with neither the airports, nor the largest mine progressing in a positive direction.

Would China and Russia perhaps work together on Arctic matters to stand stronger versus the West? Already long before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, worries were forming about ‘Russian support serving as a force multiplier for China’s regional ambitions’⁴⁷. The most acute risks involved include a faster militarization of the Arctic – with no feasible diplomatic platforms to de-

44 See note #9

45 See note #1

46 See note #30

47 Wishnick, Elisabeth: Will Russia Put China's Arctic Ambitions on Ice? The Diplomat, 2 June 2021.

escalate – and Chinese assistance to Russia’s territorial claims in the region if they could benefit China.

The problem for both Russia and China is simple: their short-term goals versus the West may align, but ultimately, they have very different ideas on what the Arctic – and Greenland in particular – should look like or how it can be useful. Especially after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Kremlin’s ‘pivot to Asia’ has become a necessity rather than just another option. China certainly has the upper hand in any Sino-Russian cooperation project. While they are of course tied to their geographic realities and geo-economic limitations, the Russian economy and political elite is so much more dependent on oil and gas exports, that China certainly is the more agile and ‘futureproof’ of the two.

Russia and China seem – for now – unlikely to cooperate on Greenland-related issues. But in a time when ‘gray rhino’s’ and ‘black swans’ may create unprecedented geopolitical opportunities (or tensions) in the Arctic, this alliance of convenience is one to keep an eye on from Nuuk, Copenhagen and Brussels.

3. Europe’s geopolitical test

How does Europe and its upcoming small office in Nuuk fit into this geopolitical posturing? The EU is aiming to become more geopolitical, as evidenced in the much-discussed declaration of President Ursula von der Leyen that her cabinet would be a ‘geopolitical Commission’. I argue that this ambition is the clearest and most prescient in the Arctic, especially after the EU presented a Joint Communication on the Arctic Policy. Brussels sees a lot of urgency in making sure the Arctic remains a region of cooperation and peace.

For a long time, the EU seemingly subscribed to the idea of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’, that it would be a region without much strife and rather characterized by cooperation among countries that elsewhere would perhaps not see eye-to-eye. Ever since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, this notion has been

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under pressure. China's Arctic interests are another factor. The Arctic is now rather seen as an area that sees significant spill-overs of conflicts elsewhere (see Chapter 1). Climate change will only exacerbate this trend and expand the ongoing 'Arctic stress test'^{48 49}.

Greenland fulfills a special place in the EU's strategy. The Commission both wants to assist Greenland with areas that are relevant for the small Arctic country, like education and fisheries. But Brussels also has its own goals. Firstly, it wants to make its contributions to Greenland (and the wider Arctic) more visible and appreciated and, secondly, it hopes to establish a framework for accessing Greenland's deposits of critical minerals.

Even though the EU's most recent Arctic Policy boasts a lot of geopolitical talk, Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius (Environment, Oceans and Fisheries) ensured at the presentation that Brussels was not trying 'to prove our importance in the geopolitical field'⁵⁰. Regardless, the Arctic – as we have seen above – is supremely geo-economical and becoming increasingly geopolitical. The EU's Special Envoy for Arctic Matters, Michael Mann, mentioned the two in one breath:

'The Arctic is a perfect illustration of the geopolitical commission and the green deal.'⁵¹

So what kind of Arctic does the EU prefer? Aligning with both Denmark's and Norway's idea, it wants a peaceful and stable region. Ideally, it should be predictable.

'[The EU will contribute] to maintaining peaceful and constructive dialogue and cooperation in a changing geopolitical landscape, to keep the Arctic safe and stable, by raising Arctic matters in its external contacts, intensifying regional

48 Soare, Simona R.: Arctic stress test. European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris/Brussels, 2020.

49 See note #30

50 See note #20

51 Canova, Emilie, Aleksis Oreschnikoff, and Mayline Strouk: Exclusive interview with Michael Mann, EU's Ambassador at large for the Arctic/Special envoy for Arctic matters. Groupe d'études géopolitiques, 18 January 2021.

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cooperation and developing strategic foresight on emerging security challenges.’⁵²

While the Arctic Policy acknowledges that the region is seeing a ‘sharp increase in military activity’, it rather focuses on cooperation on other fields and stresses that the Arctic countries and NATO are responsible for the defense component. The Commission does express its intention to ‘enhance its strategic foresight capabilities’ to counter the uniquely Arctic mix of geo-economics, military posturing, climate change and environmental fragility. Furthermore, the EU wants to focus on civil protection, safety and search-and-rescue and scientific research capacity through several bodies⁵³.

The European Commission seems to want to tackle everything that is not connected to direct military fields. Partially, this reflects the complexities of the Arctic and the broad nature of challenges in the area. But this presents a pitfall for the EU: angering other actors by overstretching its competences in the region.

The EU is aware of the weight it can put behind decisions and the influence it has – even despite its slow bureaucracy – on sensible, science-based policy choices. This so-called Brussels effect may have a positive impact on how other actors in the Arctic guide their own policies. One example – at least according to the EU itself – in this vein is the Agreement to prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the central Arctic Ocean, which was signed in 2018 and entered into force in June 2021⁵⁴. The nine signatories promise to police unregulated fishing in the Arctic Ocean. This is not yet relevant as no fishing takes place in the ‘high seas portion’ of the Ocean, but it may become economically viable when the sea ice retreats increasingly in the coming decades.

52 European Commission: A stronger EU engagement for a peaceful, sustainable and prosperous Arctic. Brussels, 13 October 2021.

53 Ibid.

54 Announcement of the entry into force:
https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/news/arctic-agreement-prevent-unregulated-fishing-enters-force-2021-06-25_en

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There are several areas in which the EU can play a similarly decisive international role: maritime navigation, protection of biodiversity beyond national jurisdictions (BBNJ), long-range pollution. The messy nature of both the 2021 Arctic Policy and the divergent results of EU projects so far can symbolize the narrow path Brussels has to navigate in the Arctic. Despite aiming for well-intended relevance in very different regulatory areas, the EU is clearly aware that it often lacks competences and therefore legitimacy to act on these areas in a region where the Arctic nations have already a long history of cooperation.

What may work in fisheries – because member states and other countries recognize the EU’s capabilities and legal competences in this field – would result in resistance if Brussels would try to lead on foreign policy in the Arctic. Besides, individual member states as far south as Italy and Spain have Arctic policy documents as well, which form both an inspiration and limitation for the Commission’s autonomy on Arctic foreign and security policy⁵⁵.

Unfortunately, with its broad scope, the Arctic Policy does not manage to present a coherent and on-the-ground policy that can be used as a touchstone for the many DGs that will work on Arctic-relevant policy. And it also – in many instances – fails to be sufficiently clear about which Arctic regions it wants to apply which policy or reverts to vague language too often. In short: even though it states no pretensions on how all-encompassing and influential it wants to be, the EU’s Arctic Policy might be a reasonable communicative (even marketing-driven) document but it is not per se a route map for any Arctic engagement. I would argue it reads more as a document about Brussels’ intentions rather than concrete targets.

Presumably, the concrete targets of the EU vis-à-vis the Arctic will follow in actual legislation, for instance through Green Deal-related laws. A statement of

55 Canova, Emilie, Andreas Raspotnik, Camille Escudé-Joffres, and Florian Vidal: *European Policies in the Arctic: National Strategies or a Common Vision?* In: *Arctic Fever: Political, Economic & Environmental Aspects*. Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2022, p. 305-332.

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intention like the 2021 Arctic Policy already comes a long way from a many-headed beast like the EU bureaucracy, both for internal agenda setting and external communications.

Interestingly, the EU does not let its ‘claim’ to Arcticness depend much on geographic factors (two member states, an OCT and two EEA countries) but rather focuses on the fact that ‘what happens in the Arctic affects us all’. I would argue that this more policy-preparatory approach for a very geographically defined area is what causes the vague nature of the EU’s Arctic Policy. While it is understandable, it does expose a weakness in a strategy document that wants to be geopolitical on the one hand and hopes to prevent confrontations in the Arctic on the other.

The EU’s acknowledgment for its partial responsibility for pollution and climate change in the Arctic is another positive side to the new Arctic Policy. Perhaps Brussels hopes here, too, that its pioneering will inform the policies of (Arctic) states. Several authors have signaled a potential clash with Norway when it comes to aiming for a ban on oil and gas extraction in the Arctic (and its neighboring areas), but acknowledge that the EU deserves praise for ‘such a bold discursive step’⁵⁶. Not unimportantly: it also aligns with Greenland’s recent ban on further oil and gas exploration.

A paradoxical situation originates because other Arctic actors are suspicious about the EU’s efforts to ‘interfere in Arctic affairs’⁵⁷. The implementation of the Arctic Policy could be a way to alleviate these fears. While the EU exhibits ‘fragile confidence’ through the 2021 Arctic Policy⁵⁸, it finds itself somewhat stuck between ambition and implementation. Clearly, the EU needs to look for added value (not try to be a replacement for member states) to overcome this internal complexity and convince both EU Arctic states and other players in the

56 Stępień, Adam, and Andreas Raspotnik: *Continuity with Great Confidence: The European Union's 2021 Arctic Policy Update*. The Arctic Institute, Washington D.C., October 2021.

57 See note #55

58 See note #56

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region that it means well. Brussels should leave space to individual member states to allow them to grant the EU more legitimacy through national policies. Engaging with Greenland because the country is an OCT is indeed an example of finding that added value. Not many member states would be interested to dedicate manpower to a national office in Nuuk, and the EU presents one of the larger investors in the island.

Wanting to know more about the staffing, timeline and tasks of the office, I emailed the Commission with a few questions. I received the following response from the Directorate General of Foreign Affairs and Security Policy:

‘A permanent presence of the EU in Greenland would indeed provide new impetus to enhancing our already strong partnership and *increase the visibility of EU actions on the ground*. The Office will facilitate the management of the substantial EU support to Greenland foreseen under the Decision on Overseas Association including Greenland.

According to the Multi-Annual Programming (MIP) document approved by the Commission end 2021, *a continued support to education and a new contribution to green growth* will be the two priorities of our partnership with Greenland for the coming years. The MIP for Greenland is €225 million, of which €202.5 million is allocated for education and €22.5 million allocated to Green Growth.

The Office will contribute to deepening our partnership, including through policy dialogue and cooperation in existing and new areas of interest, in cooperation with the Special Envoy for Arctic Matters. The Office will be *staffed initially by DG INTPA (4 persons)*. This does not preclude any additional staffing by other Commission Directorates-General or services in the future.

The Commission is working on all the technicalities to allow for the *opening of the Office still this year or early next year.*’

(Emphasis added)

These answers are interesting for a number of reasons. First of all, it shows that the EU is scrambling to set up a presence in Nuuk after the US re-opened a consulate in 2020 and Russia instated the CEO of the largest private company on Greenland as its honorary consul in 2021.

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Secondly, the office not only aims to establish direct diplomatic connections with Greenland, but also ‘increase the visibility of EU actions’. As recently as February 2021 – a mere eight months before the announcement of the office – Rasmus Leander Nielsen (University of Greenland) argued that the EU is not ‘good enough at drawing attention to its contribution to Greenland’:

‘[A] new Greenlandic EU membership is not currently on the agenda. It is not something that dominates the debate up here either, but increased cooperation under the OCT framework is desirable for both parties.’⁵⁹

Leander Nielsen points out the US is already working on ‘winning hearts and minds’, while the EU brings in significantly more money but remains absent. The Commission recognizes this weakness and will now hope to address that lack with the new office. Opening an office in Nuuk will also re-balance a reality that has been uneven since the early 90s: Greenland opened a representation office in Brussels no later than 1992!

Critical minerals are the main draw for the US, China and also the EU to engage more with Greenland. The most recent update of the EU’s relation with the OCTs⁶⁰ reserves a separate article for raw materials which is clearly aimed at Greenland (Article 23). And it should come as no surprise, since the EU is working on becoming less dependent on other corners of the world for its resources. It also fits well with Greenland Prime Minister Egede’s talk about presenting a win-win situation for investors in the island who also want to green their own economies.

The EU’s Arctic Policy mentions ‘critical materials’ quite extensively and with a certain tone of enthusiasm⁶¹.

The main question therefore is: can the EU play the role China has already tried to play in Greenland? Greenland wants to be less dependent on Denmark with

59 Leander Nielsen, Rasmus: The EU isn’t good enough at drawing attention to its contribution to Greenland. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Nordics, Stockholm, 5 February 2021.

60 Council Decision (EU)2021/1764 of 5 October 2021.

61 See note #52

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broader and deeper investments into a more diversified economy. The EU seems to be the partner to bet on, because the policy documents and talking points align so neatly on both the Greenlandic and EU side meaning the partnership could indeed prove to be fruitful. One issue is probably that the EU will mostly see itself as a facilitator, while Greenland is eager to receive investments as soon as possible.

Whether EU engagement in Greenland could create such a wave of investments that it would really bring the country closer to full-blown independence, is actually not entirely relevant at this stage. If the EU can access critical minerals while Greenland manages to diversify its economy, the win-win that prime minister Múte Egede refers to might already be on the horizon. Pitfalls to avoid for the EU would be to steer clear of encroaching on competences (and preferences) of Arctic member states, EEA partners or obviously Greenland itself. Luckily, Micheal Mann also here seems aware of the thin path Brussels can choose to achieve its goals:

‘[It] is not the place of the EU nor its Arctic policy to say “we should stop digging up rare minerals in Greenland”, that is not our business. But we should be able to provide a framework for businesses that want to do that, and could perhaps be able to do it, but also to do it in the most environmentally sustainable way possible.’⁶²

Greenland’s government realizes more than before that it needs to deal with its nearby allies – not with the further away (non-)Arctic players who might be ready to spend lots of cash. Both the Chinese airport investment affair and the Russian invasion of Ukraine make this clear in Nuuk.

An opportunity thus arises for the EU plus mining or tourism companies from the member states to invest in Greenland – a vacuum that will now not be filled by Russia, China or players from those states. The EU seems ready to take on the challenge with its 2021 Arctic Policy and an outspoken Special Envoy for Arctic Matters. The path to success is narrow and wide at the same time. First of all, Brussels will need to avoid stepping on any Arctic toes to avoid

62 See note #51

accusations of competence overstretch. Secondly, it will need to take initiative in as many policy areas as possible to prove its value for an Arctic that is rapidly changing and heating up.

4. Conclusion

The increased interest of Brussels in Greenland – and the Arctic in general – is no coincidence and aligns with the efforts of other global powers. It also puts Greenland's fast development during the twentieth century into perspective: as recently as 1953 the island was still an official colony of Denmark and not even seventy years later it is hoping to establish a hightech mining industry and diversified green economy. Dreams of independence may often be paired with a qualification that it will not happen 'in the near future', but this may also underestimate the resilience and innovative nature of Greenlandic politicians.

Independence for Greenland is hard to imagine at this moment, as it would compare unfavorably to a small Danish municipality with a too expensive need for infrastructure and a widely dispersed population dependent on subsidies and fishing as their main economic activity. From Europe's perspective, Greenlandic independence may present the EU with security headaches – this is another reason to have an ear close to the ground in the form of the soon-to-open Commission office in Nuuk.

The EU faces two opportunities in Greenland. First of all, it can attempt to secure a source for critical minerals that are essential for the energy transition in Europe and would also enable Greenland to diversify its fish-dependent economy. Secondly, it can work together with Greenland to increase its legitimacy as an Arctic actor. As Special Envoy for Arctic Matters Michael Mann has said, the EU can create a framework for the extraction of these critical minerals, Brussels may indeed lead policy on this field that will only grow in importance.

As a more legitimate 'Arctic actor', the EU could play somewhat of a referee role in the Arctic – provided the other Arctic actors are convinced this role

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would not hurt their interests in the long run. Predictably, Russia will be the first to dislike any overtures of the EU in this direction. Probably also others like Norway and the United States would not be automatically content with such a leading role for a non-state actor. However, some examples like the Agreement to prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries suggest that there are clear areas where the EU's leadership is accepted and appreciated though a meaningful result.

As so much in the Arctic, the EU's maneuvering space will depend on what happens elsewhere. Not only conflicts spill over towards the north pole, but so does all kinds of policy. Centuries of greenhouse gas emissions are the prime example. In other words: the EU could indeed become a more powerful Arctic player if the Green Deal turns out successful within the Union itself. If Brussels policymakers can indeed become 'thought leaders' and 'first movers' on climate change action and a meaningful energy transition, this may provide the opportunity to 'lead by doing' in the Arctic as well. There are many areas where concluding international treaties would serve the EU interest broadly: hydrocarbon exploration and production, biodiversity, shipping, rescue operations and indigenous people's rights. Again, Greenland is the supreme test case for this.

A lot will depend on how China, Russia and the US interpret EU actions in the years ahead. Will they see Brussels and the member states as reliable partners or as a bloc playing superpower in an area where it has no clear role to fulfill. Along with Copenhagen, Brussels will need to walk the Arctic tightrope in calling for ever-increasing cooperation while also identifying crucial opportunities to allow itself to shine and be visible in the contributions it brings to both Greenland and the Arctic.

Greenland, in short, presents a serious but well-placed test case for the EU's Arctic Policy and through that – by Brussels' own admission – a place where the Green Deal, economics and geopolitics come together. It actually strikes me as ironic that the political awakening of Greenland started with unwanted EEC

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membership while the EU's geopolitical dreams are now being shaped around that same strategic island in the Arctic.

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ISSN 1435-3288

ISBN 978-3-946195-24-5