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Greenland's Widening Arctic Strategies How Canada Can Respond

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Greenland's publication in February 2024 of an updated foreign policy and security agenda marked another step in the island's moves towards greater sovereignty and enhanced engagement with the wider Arctic region. While the 2009 *Self Government Act* between Copenhagen and Nuuk specifies that the Danish government retains oversight of Greenlandic international relations and defence,¹ the government of Greenland has nonetheless taken steps over the past two decades to develop its own distinct foreign policies. The 2003 Itilleq Declaration, for example, allowed Nuuk to assume equal status to the Danish government in talks with the United States regarding the then-Thule US Air Force Base, and the 2004 US-Danish Igaliku Agreement included an acknowledgement of "Greenland's contribution to the mutual security interests and its consequent sharing of the associated risks and responsibilities."² Since that time, Greenland further expanded its diplomatic reach by continuing to open representative offices abroad, with the most recent opening in Beijing in November 2021.

Disagreements between Denmark and Greenland over foreign affairs, including over Greenland's status in the Arctic Council, are nothing new. Aleqa Hammond's Greenlandic government controversially boycotted Council deliberations during 2011-13 in protest of then-chair Sweden's decision to exclude separate Greenlandic representation from the group's Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) meetings. A dispute over whether the Danish Kingdom's Arctic ambassador should have "Greenlandic roots," a stipulation strongly supported by Prime Minister Múte B. Egede in Nuuk, hit media headlines in late 2023.³ As Denmark prepares to assume the chairship of the Council next year, differences have resurfaced over the degree to which Greenland should take the policy lead.

Representation has also been at the heart of a current dispute between Nuuk and the Nordic Council after Prime Minister Egede announced that his government would not participate in the next Council meeting in the autumn. This was a response to the exclusion of Greenland (as well as Faroe Islands and Åland) from consultations organised for this summer by the Nordic Council on regional defence and foreign affairs issues, an event referred to by Prime Minister Egede as a "Nordic mini-NATO meeting." A 2018 controversy appeared over bids for the expansion of Greenland airports, which resulted in the Danish government stepping in with its own funding to prevent the contract being potentially awarded to a Chinese firm, leading to the coalition government in Nuuk losing a member when Partii Naleraq (now Naleraq) withdrew

in protest over what it saw as policy overreach by Copenhagen.⁴ This further illustrated differences over what should be constituted domestic versus international policies.

The strategy document *Greenland and the World: Nothing About Us Without Us*⁵ reflects Nuuk's interest in widening and deepening its distinct foreign policy at a time when the Arctic faces growing environmental and military challenges. The priorities detailed in the paper also reflect a growing interest in closer alignments with North America, building on links with the United States which included the reopening of the US Consulate in Nuuk four years ago.

The document identifies Canada as Greenland's closest neighbour and lauds the successful conclusion in June 2022 of boundary talks between Nuuk and Ottawa over the demarcation of Hans Island / Tartupaluk, (thus giving Greenland its one and only land border), and the Labrador and Lincoln Seas.⁶ The strategy paper added that the Greenlandic government seeks to open a representative office in Ottawa, and encouraged the opening of a Canadian representative office in Nuuk. Other proposed initiatives included enhancing substate cooperation with Canadian Indigenous peoples as well as with governments on the provincial and territorial level, and building on the August 2022 memorandum of understanding between the governments of Greenland and Nunavut seeking to strengthened cooperation in education, arts and culture, environmental affairs, and the fisheries sector. There were also proposals for further overall cooperation in these areas between Greenland and Canada, as well as communication, transportation, mining, and wider trade.

Nuuk's commitment to Arctic paradiplomacy was also illustrated in the strategy document via a call for the development of a sub-regional regime involving Greenland, the Northwest Territories, Nunavik, Nunavut, Yukon, and Alaska. The proposed Arctic North American Forum would address mutual socioeconomic concerns which have become magnified in recent years, with climate change threats but also education and combatting the problem of "brain drain," economic and trade diversification, and sustainable development. This initiative further demonstrated Greenland's interest in pivoting to North America as the island widens its diplomatic interests, and Nuuk's concerns with engaging political actors on both the state and substate levels.

So how should Canada respond? First and foremost, opening a Canadian representative office in Nuuk should be a priority for Ottawa, given several factors. The [April 2024 update to Canada's defence policy](#) left no doubt that the Arctic is a core strategic concern in Ottawa, pointing to the challenges associated with an Arctic Ocean more accessible to civilian and military traffic, and heightened NATO attention to the Atlantic-Arctic subregion. With Canadian Arctic security requiring enhanced cooperation and communication with allies across the Atlantic, Greenland should be included in that dialogue given its location in the middle (in some cases literally) of the myriad security concerns now affecting the far north, as well as its potential as a future source of strategic materials to facilitate a green transition.

Beyond hard security concerns, Canada has a window of opportunity to build upon recent diplomatic agreements, along with the planned restoration of air links between Iqaluit in Nuuk later this month, to

demonstrate its ongoing commitment to addressing mutual northern concerns. With the Danish Kingdom set to chair the Arctic Council in 2025, the circumpolar forum faces the most pressing challenge to its existence since its founding. This makes on-the-ground dialogue with Nuuk as well as Copenhagen even more imperative. Canadian initiatives of importance to Greenland include mutual concerns affecting Inuit populations in areas of economic development, education, health, food security, and reconciliation. More regular engagement would help to advance the Greenlandic government's interest in developing a more North American approach to its foreign policy, as well as Northern Canadian interests in economic diversification and stronger east-west Arctic linkages.

The additional scope for consultations on jointly developing local economies offers the promise to enhance the “connectivity” highlighted in the Greenlandic statement. With Greenland seeking to diversify its economy, how can the Canadian North better factor into those initiatives, including ways to improve overall trade levels? Canadian and Greenlandic markets can become more compatible, with an eye to developing a more robust sub-regional export economy. Mutual environmental concerns, and how security on the local community and regional levels could be strengthened, could also emerge as pillars for cooperation. While this move will take time and much discussion, a Canadian office in Nuuk would act as a nexus for these initiatives and signal Ottawa's commitment to broadening and deepening North American Arctic partnerships, affirming the importance of relationships with its eastern Arctic neighbour to advance a more cooperative circumpolar agenda.

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Notes

¹ 'Act on Greenland Self-Government (Self-Government Act), 21 June 2009), *Prime Minister's Office – Denmark*, June 2009, <<https://english.stm.dk/media/10522/gl-selvstyrellov-uk.pdf>>.

² 'Fælles principerklæring mellem Regeringen og Grønlands Landsstyre om Grønlands inddragelse i udenrigs- og sikkerhedspolitikken,' ['Joint Declaration of Principle between the (Danish) Government and Greenland's National Government on Greenland's Involvement in Foreign and Security Policy,'] *Naalakkersuisut*, May 2003, <https://naalakkersuisut.gl/-/media/departementer/udenrigs_erhverv_handel/9_itilleq.pdf>; 'Agreement between the United States and Denmark Amending and Supplementing the Agreement of April 27, 1951. Signed at Igaliku, August 6, 2004 with Joint Declarations,' *US Department of State*, August 2004, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/04-806-Denmark-Defense.done_.pdf>.

³ 'Fortsat diskussion om arktisk ambassadørpost,' ['Continuing Discussion on Arctic Ambassador Post,'] *Sermitsiaq*, 6 October 2023, <<https://www.sermitsiaq.ag/samfund/fortsat-diskussion-om-arktisk-ambassadørpost/670703>>.

QUICK IMPACT



⁴ Marc Lanteigne, “And Then There Were Three: Greenland’s Government Loses a Partner (And Its Majority),” *Over the Circle*, 18 September 2018, <<https://overthecircle.com/2018/09/10/and-then-there-were-three-greenlands-government-loses-a-partner-and-its-majority/>>.

⁵ “Greenland in the World: Nothing About Us Without Us, Greenland’s Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033— an Arctic Strategy,” *Naalakkersuisut / Government of Greenland Ministry for Statehood and Foreign Affairs* (February 2024), <https://vivian.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/greenlands_foreign_security_and_defense_policy_2024_2033.pdf>.

⁶ See P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Rasmus Leander Nielsen, “‘Close, Like-minded Partners Committed to Democratic Principles’: Settling the Hans Island/Tartupaluk Territorial Dispute,” *Arctic Yearbook* (2022), <https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2022/Briefing-Notes/3BN_-_AY2022_Lackenbauer_Nielsen.pdf>.