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Denmark or Greenland in the Arctic Council chair?



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Abstract

The Kingdom of Denmark consists of three countries, Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, the latter being located in the Arctic and the reason why the Kingdom has a seat in the Arctic Council. According to the Constitution, Denmark is responsible for foreign policy on behalf of the Kingdom. On this basis, Denmark has led the Kingdom's presence in the Arctic Council, including the previous chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2009 to 2011. Greenland is in a process towards full independence and has gradually gained more autonomy in several policy areas, including many addressed by the Arctic Council. In these areas, Greenland has also been granted the right to negotiate and conclude international agreements on behalf of the Kingdom. Greenland believes that its natural interest in the Arctic has not been translated into sufficient influence on the Kingdom's Arctic policy. In the run-up to the Kingdom's Arctic Council in 2025-2027, the Greenlandic demand is not just for more influence, but to take the lead in the Arctic Council for the Kingdom. This is demonstrated by the insistence that a Kingdom Arctic Strategy can only be concluded after a Greenlandic Arctic Strategy has been adopted, and that the Kingdom's Arctic Ambassador shall be Greenlandic and appointed by Greenland. With the Arctic chairmanship very close, Greenland is in a favorable position, and the Danish government is now likely to accept the Greenlandic demand, which implies that Greenland will take the lead in running the chairmanship. However, Greenland will not be able to handle this difficult task alone. There is a lack of resources in Greenland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Arctic Council is currently in a difficult situation with international political repercussions after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The chairmanship will therefore have to be carried out with the support of and in close cooperation with Denmark.

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1. Background

A web search seems to leave little doubt about the headline question: Different web sites will tell you that Denmark will take over the rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council from Norway in 2025.¹ However, this information is not quite accurate. The holder of the chairmanship will rightly be the Kingdom of Denmark consisting of three equal entities: Denmark, Faroe Islands and Greenland.

Of these, Greenland is the only reason why the Kingdom of Denmark has a seat in the Arctic Council. As the world's largest island, Greenland occupies a large part of the Arctic land area and generates a large part of the Arctic marine area under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom. 90% of Greenland's population is Inuit, with close ethnic, linguistic and cultural ties to Inuit in other parts of the Arctic. The effects of climate change in other parts of the world are being felt strongly in Greenland, with diminishing sea ice, thawing permafrost and the melting of the huge Greenland ice cap. These factors give Greenland an obvious interest in participating in and actively contributing to the work of an Arctic regional forum such as the Arctic Council.

However, Arctic policy is a challenging element in the construction of the Danish realm. According to the Constitution, Denmark has the authority to enter into obligations under international agreements and the responsibility to conduct foreign policy on behalf of the Kingdom. In this capacity, Denmark has led the Kingdom in the Arctic Council, including the previous chairmanship of the Kingdom from 2009 to 2011. At the same time, over the years, Greenland has gained extensive autonomy and thus political and legal control, both internally and externally, over many areas, including those addressed by the Arctic Council. With the understanding of Denmark, Greenland is in the process of achieving full independence. In parallel with this process, Greenland's self-confidence has grown seeing itself as the leading part of the Kingdom in the Arctic.

How has this complex situation played out in terms of Greenland's participation and influence in the Arctic Council? And what role might it imply for Greenland in the exercise of the upcoming "Danish" chairmanship of the Arctic Council, which comes at a very critical time for the Arctic Council? These are the questions to be discussed in this report.

¹ See for example: [Denmark will chair the Arctic Council in 2025 – what is it up against? - The Copenhagen Post](#)

2. Greenland in the Kingdom of Denmark

The Kingdom of Denmark - also known as the Danish Realm - is not a federation but a unitary sovereign state encompassing three autonomous legal systems united under its monarch: Denmark in Northern Europe, the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic and Greenland geographically located as part of North America.

Greenland has gone through several stages of autonomy: From 1721 to 1953 Greenland was a Danish colony. The 1953 constitution de-colonised Greenland by integrating it into the Danish realm as a county of Denmark. A decisive moment came with the 1972 referendum on whether the Kingdom should join the European Communities (EC). A large majority of Greenlanders voted against EC membership, but Greenland had to join anyway because a large majority in Denmark voted in favour. This led to demands for more political autonomy for Greenland, so that Greenland's membership of the EC could be voted on in a new, separate referendum. Based on the work of a Home Rule Commission, a Greenland Home Rule Act was adopted in Denmark and Greenland and came into force in 1979.²

In 2009, a new autonomy act changed the Greenlandic model to self-government.³ The legal model is flexible and has allowed the degree of autonomy to be gradually increased by transferring responsibility for many issues from Danish to Greenlandic authorities.⁴

A few policy areas are still not allowed to be devolved to Greenland, such as constitutional matters, citizenship, monetary policy, defence and security policy and - most importantly in the context of the Arctic Council - foreign policy. However, there are exceptions: The Greenland Home Rule Government has the right to negotiate and conclude agreements under international law on behalf of the Kingdom, if such agreements relate solely to matters for which internal competences have been transferred to Greenland. This means that there is legal scope for Greenland to engage in paradiplomacy on a number of issues, including most of those dealt with by the Arctic Council.

The Home Rule Act recognises the people of Greenland as a people under international law with the right to self-determination. The Act also implicitly recognises Greenland's right to independence by stating that a decision to this effect must be taken by the people of Greenland.⁵ The road to independence for Greenland (and the Faroe Islands) is legally paved, but it is still a long one. Greenland's previous economic and political institutions were based on Danish models, and its economy is still heavily subsidised and dependent on Denmark through block

² Jakobsen, U. and Larsen, H. (2024). [The development of Greenland's self-government and independence in the shadow of the unitary state](#). *The Polar Journal*, 14(1), 9-27.

³ [Act no. 473 of 12 June 2009 on Greenland Self-Government](#)

⁴ The Greenlandic Self-Government now has responsibility for the following policy areas: central and local government affairs, taxation, The Greenlandic church, fisheries and hunting, conservation, landscape planning, competition law, social affairs, labour market regulation, culture and education, business affairs, health, housing, supply of goods, internal transport, protection of the environment, offshore environmental protection and mineral resources.

⁵ Act no. 473 of 12 June 2009 on Greenland Self-Government, section 21.

grants. This heavy reliance on financial support from the Danish government reduces the de facto autonomy of the Greenland Home Rule Government.⁶

3. Greenland in the Arctic Council

Statements by Greenlandic politicians and government representatives over the years leave no doubt that Greenland sees itself as having a natural and important role in the Arctic Council. In 2019, the then Prime Minister of Greenland, Kim Kielsen, stated that *'Greenland should - naturally - take the seat that Denmark currently holds in the Arctic Council'*.⁷ This has not been the case, and Greenland's appearance and role in the Arctic Council has been irregular and somewhat haphazard over time.

It began with a high level of recognition and participation. Greenland played an active role in the negotiations that led to the establishment of the AC in 1996, and before that in the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), the Council's predecessor.⁸ As an important symbolic act, the Prime Minister of Greenland, Lars Emil Johansen, signed the Ottawa Declaration on behalf of the Kingdom of Denmark at the inauguration of the Arctic Council. Moreover, in the early years of the Arctic Council, Greenlandic ministers often served as heads of delegation for the Kingdom, and Arctic Council declarations referred to 'Denmark/Greenland' when Greenland was directly involved (e.g. hosting the Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat).⁹

Throughout the years, Greenland has been an active participant in the Arctic Council's working groups, including chairing them.

The Danish delegation to Arctic Council meetings and Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) meetings later consisted of all three parts of the Kingdom, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Denmark, on equal terms, including equal speaking time, and with their respective flags at the table. The country label was 'Denmark/Faroe Islands/Greenland'. This arrangement was not a deviation from the membership status of the Kingdom of Denmark as set out in the Ottawa Declaration, but a tacit agreement between the Arctic states on how the Kingdom of Denmark represented itself. This tacit agreement came to an abrupt end in 2011, when Sweden took over the chairmanship of the AC and removed two chairs from SAO meetings, thus excluding Greenland and the Faroe Islands from the meeting table. As a result, Greenland boycotted the 2013 Arctic Council meeting.

One can only speculate why Sweden took such a step, which even from a strictly formal perspective appears to be a state-centric overreaction. The Arctic Council is not a treaty-based arrangement with the authority for sovereign states to enter into legally binding agreements. Its character as a looser intergovernmental arrangement is emphasized by the strong role given to Arctic indigenous peoples, represented by the Permanent Participants in the Arctic Council.

⁶ Jakobsen, U. and Larsen, H. (2024).

⁷ Naalakkersuisut/Government of Greenland, Prime Minister Kim Kielsen's Speech at the Arctic Circle Assembly, October 10, 2019. <https://naalakkersuisut.gl/en/Naalakkersuisut/News/2019/10/101019-Arctic-Circle-Assembly>

⁸ Olsen, I., H. (2020). Greenland, the Arctic, and the issue of representation: What is the Arctic? Who has a Say. *The Arctic and World Order*; Spohr, K., Hamilton, DS, Eds, 2020, 77-95.

⁹ Ibid.

Moreover, the exclusion came after Greenland and the Faroe Islands had taken over from Denmark the competence to enter into international agreements on issues affecting them.

During the subsequent Canadian chairmanship, all three political bodies of the Danish delegation regained full participation rights in the Arctic Council meetings. However, another form of exclusion was introduced, which again led to dissatisfaction and protest: The three small flags representing the Kingdom of Denmark were removed from the meeting table and replaced by one full-size Danish flag.

Since the 'chair and flag crises', Greenland's role in the AC has largely been an internal matter within the Danish realm. Here, Greenland has expressed growing dissatisfaction with Denmark automatically leading the Kingdom's delegation to the AC and other Arctic meetings, sometimes with limited knowledge or understanding of Greenland's concerns. This lack of representation in relevant international forums has been seen as a 'democratic deficit'. As Greenland's level of autonomy increases and the 'Danish' chairmanship in 2025 approaches, the Greenlandic demand has shifted from increased influence on the Kingdom's policy in the Arctic Council to acting as the Kingdom's leader in the Council.

4. Greenland and/or Kingdom Arctic Strategy?

Arctic strategies have become important policy documents for Arctic states as well as for a growing number of non-Arctic countries. However, the Kingdom of Denmark, which will chair the AC from 2025, does not currently have an Arctic strategy.

The last strategy for the Kingdom expired in 2020, and it is said that a complete draft for a new strategy for the Kingdom has been ready for a long time.¹⁰ However, Greenland demanded to prepare and submit its own Arctic strategy before a Kingdom strategy could be submitted. Denmark accepted this demand, but the length of the Greenlandic preparation process seriously tested the patience of Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, who declared in March 2023 that an Arctic strategy for the Kingdom was 'urgently' needed.¹¹

Finally, in February 2024, Greenland's Arctic strategy was published under the slogan 'Greenland in the world - nothing about us without us'.¹²

The document is described as a strategy on foreign, security and defence policy - policy areas that the Constitution considers to be the responsibility of the Kingdom, not Greenland. On international cooperation, the strategy states:

¹⁰ Gad, U.P. (2024). [Ventetiden på Grønlands udenrigsstrategi har udstillet dansk magtesløshed](#). DIIS. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). (The wait for Greenland's foreign strategy has exposed Danish powerlessness).

¹¹ [Løkke: Vi har desperat brug for en arktisk strategi](#). Altinget, 15 March 2023. (Løkke, we desperately need an Arctic strategy).

¹² [Grønland i Verden "Intet om os, uden os". \(Greenland in the World - Nothing about us without us\)](#). Greenland's foreign, security and defense strategy for 2024-2033

'When the Arctic is on the agenda, Greenland will actively participate in relevant multilateral forums, as far as possible in its own name or as a central or leading member of the Kingdom of Denmark's delegation'.

Greenlandic member of the Danish Parliament, Folketinget, and chair of the Arctic Parliamentarians, Aaja Chemnitz, believes that Greenland should be the main author of the Kingdom's Arctic strategy, implying thereby that the already submitted Greenlandic strategy should form an important basis. Aaja Chemnitz has also described the Greenland strategy as a 'power shift' from Denmark to Greenland.¹³

Greenland's insistence on preparing its own Arctic strategy, the painfully slow process (from the Danish point of view) with now very limited time to finalize the Kingdom's overall strategy before the start of the Arctic Council chairmanship, and Greenland's strategy dealing with 'sensitive' foreign policy, has put Denmark under serious pressure. Conversely, it has put Greenland in a strong position in the power struggle over who shall conduct the Arctic Council chairmanship and, as Ulrik Pram Gad stated, *'made it painfully clear that Denmark has no legitimacy in the Arctic without Greenland, and that Greenland is the only reason why Denmark has a role to play in the Arctic'*.¹⁴

5. Greenlandic or Danish Arctic ambassador?

The current Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, has repeatedly stressed the need for equal and respectful cooperation between Denmark and the other two parts of the Kingdom. She has started a new practice of holding annual 'kingdom meetings' between the three prime ministers to resolve issues of common concern. However, this has not prevented a serious conflict between Denmark and Greenland over who should be the Arctic ambassador for the Kingdom and under what authority he/she shall act. Here, Greenland is challenging Denmark even more than in the case of the Arctic Strategy.

The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs had prepared the appointment of a new Arctic ambassador in the traditional way used for previous appointments to the post: Picking a Danish career diplomat in the annual diplomatic rotation, in this case the former ambassador to South Africa, Tobias Elling Rehfeld, with no previous Arctic experience. Rehfeld was due to take up the ambassadorship on 1 September 2023, and although he is often referred to as the Arctic ambassador, that is not his title. Officially, he is 'only' head of the Arctic and North America division. This is because Greenland rejected the appointment and demanded that the post be filled by a Greenlander and appointed by Greenland.

At first, this demand was flatly rejected by the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lars Løkke Rasmussen stating that *'we do not have ethnicity as criteria for our employment in the Danish foreign service'*.¹⁵ The minister seemed to forget that the Arctic ambassador is not just any

¹³ [Greenland's Arctic Strategy: "It Is A Power Shift from Denmark"](#). High North News, March 2024.

¹⁴ Gad, U.P. (2024).

¹⁵ Politiken, 22 April 2023. [Løkke skaber vrede i Grønland](#). (Løkke creates anger in Greenland).

ambassador in the Danish Foreign Service, and that Greenland had actually argued why the ambassador should be recruited from Greenland and report to Greenland. This statement, and the generally dismissive Danish attitude, led to strong reactions from Greenlandic politicians, who spoke of a 'colonial power mentality'.¹⁶ The Greenlandic Prime Minister Mute Egede stated that *'the procedure shows what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs thinks of us and how it does not include us, even though we are the Kingdom's Arctic country. The picture speaks for itself.'*¹⁷

The tough Greenlandic statements clearly had an impact on the Danish government. For a long time, government representatives kept a very low profile and in no way pursued the original line that the Arctic ambassador was a Copenhagen and not a Nuuk responsibility. The Danish Foreign Minister even assured that the previous procedure for appointing an Arctic ambassador would not be repeated.¹⁸

Since the harsh exchange of views in 2023, negotiations between Denmark and Greenland have been quiet. In the meantime, observers have speculated on possible ways out of the dispute. These include making it compulsory for the ambassador to live in Nuuk, Denmark and Greenland alternating the post, or a partnership arrangement with two ambassadors, one from Denmark and one from Greenland.¹⁹

An agreement was expected at the annual meeting of the Kingdom's prime ministers in September 2024, but according to the official statement from the meeting, the matter is still under discussion. Remarkably, however, Greenland's foreign minister, Vivian Motzfeldt, came out with a different version of the confidential meeting: It had indeed been agreed that the next Arctic ambassador would be Greenlandic and appointed by Greenland.²⁰

It is likely that the sensitive negotiations have now reached a decisive moment and that the Greenlandic Foreign Minister is using the opportunity to put further pressure on Denmark. It is also likely that Denmark is not yet ready with the official announcement of the new situation and how it fits in with Danish constitutional law.

In any case, Greenland has put itself in a very favorable position in the fight for the Arctic ambassadorship and thus the chairmanship of the Arctic Council. Time is running out on the Norwegian chairmanship, and Denmark is no longer in a position to overrule Greenland on the issue of the Arctic ambassador. A Danish chairmanship which Greenland will turn its back on will have little credibility and will be widely seen as illegitimate. The unresolved case of the Arctic strategy adds to Denmark's weak position: It is unlikely that Greenland will join a common strategy of the Kingdom if the negotiations on the Arctic Ambassador are not concluded with a satisfactory result for Greenland.

¹⁶ Altinget, 23 August 2023. [Rigmøde i Aalborg: Her er de største knaster mellem Grønland, Færøerne og Danmark.](#) Kingdom meeting in Aalborg: Here are the biggest differences between Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Denmark.

¹⁷ Euronews 25 May 2023. [Greenland premier laments tensions with Copenhagen over new minister.](#)

¹⁸ Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa

KNR. Greenlandic Broadcasting Corporation 8 June, 2024. [Løkke om arktisk ambassadør: Det kommer til at ske anderledes fremover.](#) (Løkke about Arctic ambassador: It will be different in the future).

¹⁹ Sermitsiaq, 6 June 2023. [Professor: Udnævnelse af arktisk ambassadør er en fejl.](#) (Professor: The appointment of an Arctic ambassador was a mistake).

²⁰ Politiken 15 September 2024. Overraskende melding fra Nuuk: Nu er det aftalt, at den arktiske ambassadørskal være grønlandsk. (Surprising news from Nuuk: It has now been agreed that the Arctic ambassador shall be Greenlandic).

6. Challenges

The question, however, is to what extent Greenland will be able to live up to its own ambitions. The likely assumption of the "Danish" chairmanship will be a challenge for Greenland in many respects, not least in terms of human resources. While the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has 27 staff working exclusively on Arctic issues, Greenland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has only 13 staff in Nuuk, in addition to 10 staff in representations in Brussels, Beijing, Washington, Reykjavik and Copenhagen.²¹

At the same time, the chairmanship comes at a critical time for the Arctic Council, which has become embroiled in international politics that extend beyond the Arctic region and threaten the very existence of the Council. In March 2022, under the Russian chairmanship, the Arctic states, except for Russia, decided to put the Arctic Council on a pause as a direct consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Cooperation was partially resumed in June 2022 on projects that did not require Russian participation. In May 2023, the Russian chairmanship was taken over by Norway, which faced an unenviable task: Keeping the Arctic Council alive as a relevant regional forum without the participation of by far the largest Arctic state, Russia. This situation is likely to continue and, as Marc Jacobsen points out, there are good reasons for the Kingdom to seek close cooperation not only with its predecessor as chair, Norway, but also with its successor, Sweden, to find a coordinated approach under the difficult circumstances.²²

Even with a significant increase in human resources within the Greenland government, the unusual situation currently affecting the Arctic Council, with wider international policy implications, will require diplomatic work of a kind that Greenland would not be able to undertake without close involvement and cooperation with Denmark.

7. Closing remarks

The Kingdom of Denmark holds its place in the Arctic Council because of Greenland, a country on the way to full independence, which has taken responsibility for many policy areas dealt with by the Arctic Council. Greenland therefore naturally has a strong role in shaping the Kingdom's Arctic policy. Greenland has played its card wisely in the power struggle with Denmark, leaving little doubt that Greenland will play the leading role in the Kingdom's upcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council.

However, the complex situation for the Arctic Council that has arisen in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not a matter for Greenland alone, neither legally in relation to the Kingdom's constitution, nor in the Kingdom's foreign policy. The official announcement of a Greenlandic Arctic ambassador is expected soon. Hopefully, there will also be an announcement of an agreement between Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Denmark on the close cooperation

²¹ [KNR - Innuttaasunik kiffartuussineq / Grønlands public service](#). 30 August 2024.

²² Mark Jacobsen. [Forsker: Kongeriget Danmark bør koordinere sit formandskab af Arktisk Råd med Norge og Sverige - Altinget: Arktis](#) (Researcher: The Kingdom of Denmark should coordinate its chairmanship of the Arctic Council with Norway and Sweden). Altinget, 10 November 2023.

that is needed between them in order to successfully carry out the upcoming chairmanship in the interests of both Greenland, the Kingdom and the Arctic Council.



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