

China is in the Arctic to Stay as a Great Power: How China's Increasingly Confident, Proactive and Sophisticated Arctic Diplomacy Plays into Kingdom of Denmark Tensions

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As demonstrated by China's first and long-awaited Arctic Policy White Paper released in January 2018, the Arctic is assigned increasing strategic importance in Beijing. The central priority behind China's intensified diplomatic and economic activities in the region is to establish strong and comprehensive relationships with all the Arctic states and stakeholders and gradually increase China's presence and influence in Arctic multilateral institutions. This is the context in which to analyze recent developments in the Chinese approach to the Kingdom of Denmark constellation and, more specifically, in the Chinese engagement in Greenland. The article contextualizes and examines the increasingly confident, proactive and sophisticated Chinese diplomacy in the Arctic with a focus on exploring how Greenland fits into this. The main argument is that there is more to China's growing interests and activities in Greenland than ensuring Chinese access to potential Greenlandic resources. Rather, the main driving force is Beijing's long-term aim to ensure great power influence in the Arctic. The article further explores the complex triangular relations between Beijing, Nuuk, and Copenhagen with Washington on the side underlining how further developments in relations between Nuuk and Copenhagen, on the one hand, will be influenced by "the China factor" but also, on the other hand, will set the parameters for how China's role in Greenland further develops.

Introduction: China Enters the Kingdom of Denmark

The opening up of the Arctic and the growing presence and involvement of non-Arctic states as well as the evolving role and ambition of Greenland itself as a foreign policy actor is challenging and gradually changing the internal dynamics of the Kingdom of Denmark. Nowhere are these complex and interlinked developments more clearly in play than in relation to the question of China's interests and activities in Greenland. There are different, and increasingly conflicting, assessments developing in Greenland and Denmark of promises and risks associated with large Chinese investments – and a growing Chinese presence – in Greenland. While Greenlandic

politicians are keen to attract Chinese investments and companies, especially within the sectors of resource and energy as well as infrastructure, there is growing skepticism in Copenhagen (Sørensen, 2017). This has only come more to the forefront with the intensified Chinese efforts since 2017 to establish a research station and a satellite receiver station in Greenland as well as with the potential involvement of the Chinese state-owned construction company, China Communication Construction Company Ltd., in the construction of airports in Greenland (e.g. Breum, 2018b; Sørensen, 2018). Washington is closely following how China – increasingly assessed in the U.S. as its biggest great power rival – seeks to intensify its presence in Greenland. This was underlined in May 2018, when the Danish Minister of Defense, Claus Hjort Frederiksen, following a meeting with the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, stressed that Washington would rather not see Chinese involvement in the construction of airports in Greenland, because it could be the first step in establishing a Chinese military presence on the island (e.g. JP, 2018). The U.S. is Denmark's closest strategic ally with longstanding security interests and military presence in Greenland, e.g. at the Thule Air Base (*Pituffik*) in Northwestern Greenland (Olesen, 2017: 70-73).

China's advancement in the Arctic, including in Greenland, will continue in the years to come. In order to counter misunderstandings and overreactions in both Copenhagen and Washington and to promote a more united Kingdom of Denmark response, a thorough analysis of the development in how China assesses and approaches the Arctic is required. This article therefore sets out to contextualize and examine the increasingly confident, proactive and sophisticated Chinese diplomacy in the Arctic with a focus on exploring how Greenland fits into this. The main argument is that there is more to China's growing interests and activities in Greenland than ensuring Chinese access to potential Greenlandic resources. Rather, the main driving force is Beijing's long-term aim to ensure great power influence in the Arctic, where the central Chinese priority is to establish strong and comprehensive relationships with *all* the Arctic states and stakeholders.

This article presents its analysis in three steps. The first section situates China's recently released Arctic Policy White Paper in the wider context of an increasingly assertive and ambitious Chinese great power diplomacy further discussing how to expect Chinese interests and activities in the Arctic, specifically in Greenland, to evolve. The second section takes a closer look at how "the China factor" plays into ongoing developments and negotiations between Nuuk and Copenhagen. This section further scrutinizes the Danish and Greenlandic assessments of – and reactions to – the increasingly confident, proactive and sophisticated Chinese diplomacy in the Arctic and specifically to the growing Chinese interests and activities in Greenland. The third and last section puts the parts together and concludes with some reflections on how to approach the complex triangular relations underlining how further developments in relations between Nuuk and Copenhagen, one the one hand, will be influenced by "the China factor" but also, on the other hand, will set the parameters for how China's role in Greenland further develop.

In terms of theory and analytical approach, the analysis draws on realist foreign policy analysis, so-called "neoclassical realism" (Rose, 1998). It combines the neorealist emphasis on how the structure of the international system, i.e. the distribution of relative power capabilities among the great powers, sets the overall room of manoeuvre for states' foreign policy, with the classical realist emphasis on the importance of specific domestic circumstances and considerations, e.g. individual state leaders, certain domestic power constellations, economic priorities and needs. The key point is that states confront different systemic opportunities and constraints depending on their relative

power capabilities and geostrategic position, which goes a long way in explaining differences and developments in their foreign policies. However, in order to further specify *how* and *why* states deal and react as they do within the systemically derived overall rooms of manoeuvre, the “black box” of the state is opened and domestic drivers and constraints are included.

China’s Great Power Ambitions Extending to the Arctic

In late January 2018, China released its first and long-awaited *Arctic Policy White Paper* (State Council, 2018). It represents the culmination thus far of the development of an increasingly confident, proactive and sophisticated Chinese diplomacy in the region in line with how China on the international scene appears as a more and more assertive and ambitious great power.

The Development of and Drivers behind an Assertive Chinese Foreign Policy

President Xi Jinping has recently put forward the concept of a “new era” for China as a great power (Xi, 2017). This clearly marks the official end of Deng Xiaoping’s “keeping a low profile” guideline (e.g., Sørensen, 2015). The “new era” is primarily the result of the impressive growth in China’s relative economic and military capabilities since the start of the economic reform process in the late 1970s. China today is quickly narrowing the gap to the U.S., which makes it impossible for Beijing to protect and promote its national interests conducting a “low profile” and predominantly reactive foreign policy.

However, the development of an assertive Chinese foreign policy is also driven by strong domestic concerns and considerations. Especially China’s increasing dependence on imports of energy and resources to keep a high economic growth has been a main factor causing Beijing to enter into economic agreements and strategic partnerships to an unprecedented degree with countries in e.g. Africa. The ongoing restructuring of the Chinese economy, where Chinese-driven innovation and technological development are at the top of the agenda, also drives the expansion of Chinese investments in and acquisition of foreign companies.

Another driver relates to President Xi Jinping himself, who, as an unusually visionary and risk-taking Chinese leader, is more willing than his predecessors to use economic and military tools to demonstrate and secure what Beijing considers legitimate Chinese spheres of interest. With President Xi Jinping, China has begun to present Chinese ideas and solutions on the international stage and to launch new comprehensive foreign policy initiatives. The most ambitious of these is the so-called “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which seeks to position China in the lead of intensified efforts to generate regional and global economic growth and development by funding and establishing large-scale infrastructure projects. In the BRI-context, infrastructure is defined broadly. It is not only high-speed railways, modern roads and ports but also oil and gas pipes, communication networks and cables, scientific and industrial zones as well as cultural and financial links and coordination. Beijing’s overall aim is to enhance overall connectivity, so people, goods, services, information and ideas move faster and better, especially between China and Europe, and in the process improve and export Chinese industrial base, designs and standards, e.g. within high-speed railways and telecommunication (e.g., Cai, 2017).

The Arctic is of Growing Strategic Importance to Beijing

The “assertive turn” in Chinese foreign policy is also reflected in the development in China’s Arctic

diplomacy, and Beijing increasingly presents itself as an Arctic great power. The Arctic Policy White Paper thus starts out by underlining that China, due to its status, size and proximity to the Arctic, has legitimate interests in the region and therefore should be respected and included as an important stakeholder. Furthermore, it emphasises that the Arctic should not be regarded as a demarcated region. The Chinese main argument is that climate changes in the Arctic have global implications and international impacts, and therefore it is not up to the Arctic states solely to establish the rules and norms for the future development of and access to the region and its resources. Non-Arctic states like China have a role to play and legal rights to engage in Arctic research, navigation, overflight and a series of economic activities such as resource extraction, fishery, cabling and piping. Making this argument, it refers specifically to China's legal rights as a signatory to the Spitsbergen Treaty and the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (State Council, 2018).

These are new tones. Previous Chinese official speeches and documents on the Arctic have taken a more modest and reluctant stance and underplayed China's ambitions in the region. This has played an important role in reducing concerns among the Arctic states leading up to China's membership of the Arctic Council as an observer state in 2013 (e.g. Brady, 2017: 57). With the Arctic Policy White Paper, it seems that Chinese worries about causing "China threat" fears are no longer so pronounced, which also underlines the growing Chinese confidence and points to how the Arctic has moved up the Chinese leaders' foreign policy agenda and is assigned increasing strategic importance.

Evolving Chinese Interests and Activities in the Arctic

What does the Arctic Policy White Paper indicate about the further development in Chinese interests and activities in the Arctic and in particular when it comes to Greenland? In the white paper, Beijing provides assurances to the Arctic states stressing that China will respect their territorial sovereignty and rights as well as international law and regulations. Similarly, the paper contains a series of promises of Chinese contributions to the Arctic in a number of areas, from strengthening scientific research into climate changes over sustainable extraction of resources to the establishment of regulations and institutions to ensure continued stability and security in the region. Throughout, the paper stresses that China guarantees "win-win" cooperation that will benefit all those involved. Especially scientific research is highlighted with strong emphasis on the fact that China will continue to increase its research collaborations, presence and activities in the Arctic, which entails the establishment of additional Chinese research stations and the launch of new Chinese ice-breaking vessels (State Council, 2018).

The Arctic Sea Routes as Part of the "Belt and Road Initiative"

Scientific research has long been the core element of China's Arctic diplomacy, and the Arctic Policy White Paper does not add significantly. However, in one related area, Beijing clearly has increased its priority and activities. This concerns the Arctic sea routes and China's contribution in the development of these reflecting that Beijing expects the Arctic sea routes to be ready for commercial use sooner than what seems to be the general expectation (Hong, 2018: 7-10). For China, the Arctic sea routes represent an attractive alternative to the longer and strategically vulnerable routes through the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal, which the country is dependent on today (Brady, 2017: 62). In June 2017, Beijing officially declared the Arctic sea routes part of

the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) and has since then prioritised establishing BRI-cooperation with the Arctic states and stakeholders (NDRC/SOA, 2017). This has now been formalised and further elaborated on in the Arctic Policy White Paper under the heading of “Polar Silk Road”.

Intensified Chinese “Polar Silk Road” Activities

As mentioned above, the BRI is President Xi Jinping’s most ambitious initiative and therefore it is given high strategic priority in the whole Chinese system to make progress on the realisation of the BRI with new projects and activities. This is also the case in relation to the Arctic after the Arctic sea routes have become part of the BRI. That is, the BRI will in the years to come continue to make its entry in the Arctic led by Chinese state-owned companies and banks accompanied by Chinese high-level diplomatic and scientific delegations. China’s Arctic Policy White Paper has made that clear as it directly encourages Chinese companies to assign priority to the construction of infrastructure linked to the Arctic sea routes and emphasises that China is ready to cooperate with anyone interested in the development of the “Polar Silk Road” (State Council, 2018).

There are several proposals for large-scale Chinese investments and projects in the Arctic. The fact that these are tied to the realisation of the “Polar Silk Road” means that the involved Chinese companies, banks etc. have better chances of obtaining financing, e.g. from the Chinese state-owned investment fund, the Silk Road Fund, and furthermore can largely count on political support. The Chinese have in recent years especially strengthened their dialogue and cooperation with Russia on developing infrastructure related to the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which is central to the large Russian-Chinese natural gas project on the Yamal Peninsula (Sørensen and Klimenko, 2017: 33-35). Furthermore, in relation to Iceland and Finland, China has intensified its dialogue and cooperation within the area of infrastructure, and especially Iceland is trying to promote itself as a logistical hub on the “Polar Silk Road” (Conley, 2018: 8-9). In Finland, preliminary negotiations are currently taking place on the establishment of a 10,500-kilometre cable through the Arctic, which according to plan will be able to secure the fastest data connection between Europe and China as early as in 2020 (SCMP, 2017). Finland and Norway have initiated cooperation on the so-called “Arctic Corridor” – a railway line from Rovaniemi in Finland to Kirkenes in Norway – which is positioned as the possible end station of the “Polar Silk Road” (BT, 2018; Tsuruoka, 2017). Sweden is also experiencing growing Chinese interest e.g. in Lysekil on the west coast, north of Gothenburg, where Chinese companies seek to invest in the expansion of the port as well as in the necessary surrounding infrastructure with roads, railroads and bridges (Olsson, 2017).

Change of Chinese Interests and Activities in Greenland?

The increasingly confident, proactive and sophisticated Chinese Arctic diplomacy and the growing strategic significance assigned by China to the Arctic region constitute an important context for the analysis of developments in China’s approach to Greenland (Sørensen, 2018). Central to realising China’s ambitions in the Arctic is that China establishes substantial and extensive relations with *all* the Arctic states and stakeholders including Greenland. The underlying Chinese rationale is that if all Arctic stakeholders are tied to China through “win-win” agreements on scientific research, resource extraction, infrastructure development etc., China is better positioned to manage unforeseen developments and future attempts to marginalise China in the region. Such reasoning is behind recent developments in the Chinese approach to the Kingdom of Denmark constellation and, more specifically, in the Chinese engagement in Greenland. It has undoubtedly also been central to China’s decision to restore the frozen diplomatic relations with Norway in December 2016

after six years following the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the Chinese political activist Liu Xiaobo (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2016). The strong potential for cooperation between China and Norway on polar issues is stressed in the four-point joint statement normalising diplomatic relations (China-Norway Joint Statement, 2016).

A careful Chinese diplomatic offensive in Greenland has been undergoing in recent years simultaneous with intensified Chinese efforts to launch various activities on the island, e.g., the establishment of a Chinese research station, a Chinese satellite receiver station and most recently the potential involvement of the Chinese state-owned construction company, China Communication Construction Company Ltd., in the construction of airports in Greenland (e.g. Breum, 2018b; Sørensen, 2018). The Chinese involvement in the Greenlandic mineral sector has also gained new momentum recently with both the Citronen Fjord zinc project in Northern Greenland and the Kvanefjeld (*Kuannersuit*) Rare Earth Element (REE)-uranium project in Southern Greenland moving ahead. It is in both projects large Chinese state-owned companies that are committed (e.g. Andersson, Zeuthen & Kalvig, 2018). Furthermore, when China in the summer of 2017 carried out its eighth research expedition to the Arctic, the Chinese icebreaker, the “Snow Dragon” (*Xue Long*), sailed through the Northwest Passage (NWP) and anchored outside Nuuk en route (Turnowsky, 2017).

China is still cautious and wary of being dragged into the complex relationship between Greenland and Denmark and therefore continues to seek out support in Copenhagen for Chinese activities in Greenland. Nevertheless, there are indications that China assigns establishment of direct relations with the Greenlandic government and Chinese presence in Greenland an increasingly important role and is willing to take more risks in order to achieve this. This is supported e.g. by the recent agreement – a so-called “Memorandum of Understanding” (MoU) – between the Chinese State Oceanic Administration (SOA), which is part of the Chinese Ministry for Land and Resources, and the Greenlandic Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Church. The agreement, which became effective in May 2016, aims to increase research networks and exchange between China and Greenland (Petersen, 2016; Sørensen, 2017: 86). In addition, the visit by the then Greenlandic Minister for Independence, Foreign Affairs and Agriculture, Suka K. Frederiksen, to the Chinese Ambassador in Copenhagen in the beginning of January 2018 is also noteworthy. According to the subsequent press release from the Chinese Embassy, the Ambassador first stressed that the meeting concerned “local exchanges” and then encouraged the two parties – China and Greenland – to increase their exchanges and cooperation within areas such as culture, tourism and the unspecified “Arctic affairs”, which seems to complicate limiting the meeting to “local exchanges” (Chinese Embassy, 2018; Sørensen, 2018).

In China, as in many other countries, there is uncertainty and confusion in relation to how the Kingdom of Denmark constellation works and how best to approach it (e.g., Zhang, 2018). This especially because the distribution of responsibilities on various policy areas between Nuuk and Copenhagen is under constant development and negotiation these years. It is therefore understandable that Chinese diplomats, companies, scholars etc. have difficulties determining with whom – Nuuk or Copenhagen – to enter into agreements and apply for permission concerning Arctic collaborations and projects. However, even if this creates some frustration on the Chinese side, they will carry on tirelessly and undoubtedly show more willingness to take risks in the future. The message from Beijing is that the Arctic takes high priority.

Recently, several Chinese Arctic scholars have argued for prioritizing Greenland in Chinese Arctic diplomacy as an independent Greenland could come to serve as a foothold for China in the region (e.g., Xiao, 2017). There are so far no indications of such prioritization. That is, there are no indications that Greenland is given an extra strong or special importance in China's Arctic strategy compared to China's interests and activities in relation to other Arctic states and stakeholders. The point is that Greenland is in the Arctic and Beijing's central priority is to establish strong and comprehensive relationships with *all* the Arctic states and stakeholders. It does not want to leave Greenland out especially because of the uncertainties about the future status of the island. Therefore – rather than because of potential Greenlandic resources – China has intensified its diplomatic and economic activities in relation to Greenland as in relation to other Arctic states and stakeholders. The core of the matter is that Greenland is different due to the Kingdom of Denmark constellation that even without China is under pressure and due to the U.S. security interests and military presence in Greenland and the close strategic alliance between Denmark and the U.S.

How “The China Factor” Plays into Ongoing Developments and Negotiations between Nuuk and Copenhagen

The relationship between Denmark and China is comprehensive and wide-ranging with many high-level visits and dialogues on a broad range of political and strategic issues. Denmark has since 2008, as one of the few European countries and the only Nordic country, had a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with China (Sørensen & Delman, 2016). However, the Arctic has played a limited role in Danish China-policy. The word “Arctic” is not mentioned in the extensive *China-Denmark Joint Work Programme* signed in May 2017 even though the programme has as its stated objective to chart the course for stronger cooperation between Danish and Chinese authorities towards 2020 and touches on no less than 58 different areas of cooperation and involves 80 (35 Danish and 45 Chinese) authorities (MFA DK, 2017). Various explanations and factors play into this with the complex relationship between Denmark and Greenland being one of the most important ones. It is no longer possible, however, for Copenhagen to keep Arctic issues out of Danish China-policy, and the pressure comes from both China and Greenland. That is, over the next few years, the Arctic will be higher on the Chinese agenda, when Danish ministers and diplomats meet with their Chinese counterparts. Similarly, there will be more outreach initiatives and proposals from various Chinese state and non-state actors to both Danish and Greenlandic authorities, e.g., on scientific exchanges, potential “Polar Silk Road” projects and investments in Greenlandic infrastructure. As mentioned above, Greenlandic politicians look to China for economic commitment and investments and therefore will likely welcome such a development and will seek to play a more independent role reflecting also a high level of mistrust in Greenland about whether Copenhagen takes enough care of Greenlandic interests in meetings and negotiations with the Chinese. As the Greenlandic politician and former Premier, Aleqa Hammond, recently stated

Greenland has no trouble including Chinese companies in the development of our infrastructure. If it results in high quality, delivery on time and price and perhaps even more Chinese tourists in the future, it is only to be welcome (Hammond, 2018).

Growing Danish Concerns about China's Interests and Activities in Greenland

Copenhagen has been rather supportive of Greenland's outreach activities and commercial diplomacy in China and has encouraged China's engagement with Greenland even to the point of giving reassurances to the Chinese side that it is fine to deal with Greenland directly – that does not offend Denmark in any way (Sørensen, 2017: 91). This follows from a narrow Danish focus on China as an emerging market that Danish economic and commercial interests could benefit from. The broader foreign and security policy implications of China as a great power have not played a strong role in Danish China-policy (Sørensen, 2016). However, this is gradually changing. China's Arctic ambitions and its growing interests and activities in the region, in particular in Greenland, go a long way in explaining this.

Copenhagen acknowledges the potential benefits for Denmark – and Danish relations with China in general – in supporting that China has a role in Arctic multilateral institutions and in engaging China on Arctic issues. Furthermore, the Danish overall position favors inclusiveness regarding the participation of non-Arctic states in the region (MFA DK, 2011: 55). However, there is also a fear in Copenhagen of China getting too much influence and too large a foothold in the Arctic and especially in Greenland. Such growing Danish concerns about the political and security implications of prioritizing and promoting a Chinese role and Chinese investments in Greenland have been clearly reflected in the annual risk assessment reports from the Danish Defense Intelligence Service in recent years. The reports have increasingly come to stress in more and more direct language how large Chinese investments in Greenland could bring certain dependencies and vulnerabilities, e.g. the 2017-report warns

As a result of close connections between Chinese companies and China's political system, there are certain risks related to large-scale Chinese investments in Greenland due to the effect that these investments would have on an economy of Greenland's size (FE, 2017: 45)

The recently released report from the Danish Ministry of Defense on the developments in the security situation in the Arctic also specifically mentions how Chinese commercial and strategic interests traditionally are closely linked and China's growing economic engagement in the Arctic is therefore likely to be accompanied by growing political attention and influence (MD DK, 2016: 54).

Consequently, “the China factor” plays into ongoing developments and negotiations between Nuuk and Copenhagen in complex ways. There are different – and increasingly conflicting – expectations, assessments and concerns evolving both internally in Greenland and Denmark and in relations between them regarding the increasingly confident, proactive and sophisticated Chinese diplomacy in the Arctic and specifically the growing Chinese interests and activities in Greenland (e.g., Sørensen, 2017; Gad et al., 2018). As evident in the lead up to the most recent election in Greenland in April 2018, there are strong desires and calls from Greenlandic politicians for a more independent Greenlandic foreign policy (e.g., Krog, 2018). Overall, it is not the question about Greenlandic independence or not that divides the different Greenlandic political parties and politicians – they more or less all agree that Greenlandic independence is the end goal. Rather it is questions of how fast and at what price as well as future international political and security affiliations of an independent Greenland that take up space (e.g., Gad & Jacobsen, 2017). This clashes with Denmark's emphasis on Copenhagen representing the Kingdom of Denmark as one

unitary foreign policy actor (Kristensen & Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017; KNR, 2016). The result is increasing tension and awkward episodes as Nuuk and Copenhagen struggle. The key point here is that questions related to China's involvement in Greenland have played a central role in such Greenlandic-Danish arm-wrestling in recent years and likely will continue to do so.

One example of how “the China factor” plays into ongoing developments and negotiations between Nuuk and Copenhagen is the process following the suddenly announced decision by the Danish government in December 2016 that it no longer wanted to sell the former Danish naval base “Grønnedal” in Southern Greenland (e.g., Sørensen, 2017: 92-93). The reason given was that the base – which had not been in use for years and did not figure in the comprehensive analysis from the Danish Ministry of Defense of the future tasks and activities of the Danish Defense in and around Greenland that came out earlier that year – would still be of use in Denmark's Arctic defense. Such re-assessment was also the official explanation given to the Greenlandic government. However, there were soon convincing leaks indicating that the main reason for why the Danish government no longer wanted to sell “Grønnedal” was that the large Chinese business conglomerate, General Nice Group, already active in relation to the iron mine project at Isua, had shown an interest in buying it. The Greenlandic government was informed by the Danish government that there had been a Chinese offer, but it was not presented as an important factor playing into Copenhagen's decision. Nuuk got very upset when information reaching them through leaks in the Danish media indicated that it was mainly in order to prevent a Chinese take-over that the Danish government decided against selling the base. It only further strengthened the Greenlandic mistrust towards Copenhagen and the Greenlandic suspicion that the Danish government does not trust Greenlandic politicians and takes decisions regarding Greenland without involving the Greenlandic government. Aleqa Hammond – the Greenlandic politician and former Premier – specifically points to the Danish government's handling of “Grønnedal” as a case of Danish efforts to prevent China from getting a foothold in Greenland in order to stall Greenlandic moves towards independence (Hammond, 2018).

The ongoing case regarding the potential involvement of the Chinese state-owned construction company, China Communication Construction Company Ltd., in the construction and expansion of the airports in Nuuk, Ilulissat and Southern Greenland – the most expensive infrastructure project in Greenland's history – have given cause to similar Danish and Greenlandic reactions and hence mistrust and tension between the two sides (Hammond, 2018; Breum, 2018a). It seems, however, to be a high priority for the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, to turn such a development around. In mid-June 2018, Løkke Rasmussen and the Greenlandic Premier, Kim Kielsen, after a meeting jointly announced

The current airport project is such size that it – depending on funding and choice of external partners – can have foreign and security policy perspectives (STM, 2018)

This is a carefully chosen formulation reflecting a new understanding and compromise between the two sides. Kielsen – while stressing that legally the Greenlandic government holds the authority – has acknowledged that there potentially is a role for Copenhagen to play as well. In return, he has received Løkke Rasmussen's promise that the Danish side is ready to look into whether Denmark can contribute to the financing of the airport project and more generally the possibilities of establishing a joint Greenland-Denmark development fund (STM, 2018). In mid-September 2018, Løkke Rasmussen during a visit to Nuuk presented a more detailed plan for how Denmark

will invest 700 million Danish kroner in the airport project and provide credit worth 450 million Danish kroner as well as state guarantee for another 450 million Danish kroner from the Nordic Investment Bank (Breum, 2018c). The importance of this agreement remains to be seen. It will be put to a tough test as the airport project moves forward. It has already caused the pro-independence party Partii Naleraq to quit Kielsen's coalition government arguing that they will not support an agreement that increases Danish influence in Greenland (Breum, 2018c). To complicate matters further, the U.S. Embassy in Copenhagen a few days after Løkke Rasmussen's visit to Nuuk, released a statement notifying that the U.S. Department of Defense "intends to analyse and, where appropriate, strategically invest in projects related to the airport infrastructure in Greenland" (e.g., Turnowsky, 2018).

The Changing Greenlandic Room of Manoeuvre and the Danish Balancing Act

As the melting ice in the Arctic increases the geostrategic importance of the region, several non-Arctic states are interested in increasing their role and influence. This, in many ways, increases the Greenlandic room of manoeuvre – there are more opportunities for Nuuk to forge new relationships and pursue its own independent foreign policy causing growing Greenlandic confidence and ambition. On the other hand, the increasing geostrategic importance of the Arctic causes Copenhagen to pay more attention to the region and pursue a foreign policy line that gives less room for Nuuk, which then results in Greenlandic frustration and protests directed towards Copenhagen.

Specifically in relation to "the China factor," the Danish government has to deal with at least four considerations – avoid that China gains political influence in Greenland; not disturb Denmark's successful relationship with – and especially Danish economic and commercial interests in – China; avoid offending and pushing Greenland further away; and finally meeting its obligations in relation to the U.S. military presence in Greenland, which benefits Copenhagen in its overall strategic alliance with Washington. It is not easy to balance these considerations, especially not when Danish domestic politics interferes and various Danish politicians in opposition openly use growing Chinese interests in Greenland to criticize and put pressure on the government. For example, the foreign policy spokesperson from the influential oppositional party, the Danish Peoples Party, Søren Espersen, who recently called on the Danish government to stop Chinese involvement in Greenlandic airports now "to avoid the humiliation, when the Americans demand it to be stopped" (Kehlet & From, 2018). It also likely caused some shambles in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when an English-language article from Reuters titled "Greenland's courting of China for airport projects worries Denmark" cited an unnamed high-ranking Danish government official for stating "We [the Danish government] are deeply concerned. China has no business in Greenland" (Matzen & Daley, 2018). Quickly responding with a written statement, the Danish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Anders Samuelsen, strongly rejected that this was the position of the Danish government also giving reassurances – to both Nuuk and Beijing – that Copenhagen would not seek to interfere in any way (e.g., Politiken, 2018).

Conclusion: How to Approach the Complex Triangular Relations?

How the complex triangular relations will further unfold is difficult to predict as both the interests and concerns of Greenland, Denmark and China are changing in these years and so is the scene on which their relations play out – the Arctic. Moreover, the U.S. is adjusting its Arctic strategy

seemingly strengthening its military presence in the region. There are therefore many uncertainties and unknowns. What is certain, however, is that “the Chinese are coming” to the Arctic and to Greenland. It is a growing strategic priority in Beijing to be present and ready to explore and exploit as the region further opens up. This is not surprising in any way as also pointed out by Aleqa Hammond – the Greenlandic politician and former Premier – “Of course, China as a leading global economy and global superpower has an interest in actively placing itself in the Arctic” (Hammond, 2018). It is not realistic – or helpful – if Copenhagen sets out to prevent this. The point is, however, that Greenland and Denmark need to work together in order to best prepare and establish the necessary legal and institutional frameworks. Greenland – the Kingdom of Denmark – needs to be ready to handle Chinese and other countries’ growing interests and intensified efforts to establish relationship with and set up activities in Greenland. It is not easy to come afterwards – when e.g., Chinese companies have invested and opened a mine or when a Chinese university has set up a research station or a satellite receiver station – and try to impose rules and regulations and enforce limits. It is difficult for the Greenlandic government to set up such legal and institutional frameworks alone – it is simply a question of lack of time, resources, and highly specialised expert knowledge. It is very complex, e.g., to thoroughly understand and foresee the potential challenges and implications – within the technical, legal, foreign and security policy, and military areas – involved when an actor from a foreign country, e.g. China, sets up a satellite receiver station on one’s territory.

The problem, however, is that the deep mistrust in relations between Nuuk and Copenhagen makes coordination and cooperation difficult. The launch of China’s Arctic Policy White Paper is a good starting point for an intensified dialogue between Denmark and Greenland on a more proactive way of addressing China’s increasing presence and activities in the Arctic (Sørensen, 2018). A way to begin is to focus jointly on identifying where to bid on and actively seek cooperation with China and in this way including Arctic issues and Greenland authorities much more actively in Danish China-policy e.g. within Arctic research, where there is a keen Chinese interest in establishing research cooperation and network with Danish and Greenlandic scholars. However, a first necessary step is that both Nuuk and Copenhagen acknowledge the need for talking and working together. This also implies that Copenhagen is willing to share information with Greenlandic authorities and to involve them early on in sensitive discussions and decisions avoiding awkward episodes and damaging processes as the one related to “Grønnedal” discussed above. Whether Greenland and Denmark manage to do this is vital. That is, the further developments in relations between Nuuk and Copenhagen, one the one hand, will be influenced by “the China factor” but also, on the other hand, will set the parameters for how China’s role in Greenland further develops.

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