



Winter 2022

Greenland at the Center of a Changing Arctic

– Prime Minister Múte B. Egede

From addressing climate change to Indigenous rights, and more, Greenland is poised to lead the new Arctic and take a more prominent position on the world stage.

The Arctic and Greenland are inseparable entities; each comes to mind when thinking of the other. We Greenlanders make our lives and homes in the Arctic. But our home is changing. The Arctic is rapidly transforming when it comes to security, climate change, and economic development. As a resilient nation, Greenland is well equipped to take on the challenges and opportunities in an evolving Arctic.

We saw this during the Second World War, when Greenland's historic connection to the colonial power of Denmark was cut due to Germany's occupation of Denmark. This allowed for new ties to North America, bringing distinct opportunities and a fresh outlook for Greenland. Before the war, Greenland was a closed country, with all economic activity controlled by the Danish colonial authorities. During the five years the war lasted, the U.S. supplied Greenland not only with the basic goods that we needed, but also Sears mail order catalogs, and other cultural influences, thus opening Greenland and Greenlanders to the World, welcomed both by the people and the nation.

Greenland Rising

After the war, Greenland's status evolved from a Danish colony to a Danish county, and in 1953 we gained our constitutional rights, becoming an integrated part of the Kingdom of Denmark. But we Greenlanders are a people in our own right, and there was a yearning for more autonomy. **Greenland wanted to define its own future, and not be controlled by Copenhagen. This process has involved increasing levels of autonomy.** The people of Greenland obtained Home Rule in 1979, and in 2009 Greenland became a self-governing country within the Kingdom of Denmark – finally recognized as a people, pursuant to international law with the right to self-determination, and paving the way for a future independent Greenland. We have since established representative offices – or embassies – abroad, further contributing to the strengthening of our visibility and position internationally.

Greenland's status is rising alongside the Arctic's, with increasing recognition that what happens in the Arctic today will affect the world tomorrow. The effects of climate change, for example, are seen most clearly here. In the Arctic, **we are experiencing warming roughly three times faster than the rest of the world.** The Arctic sea ice and the Greenland ice sheet are retreating at an alarming pace, and the effects of climate change – happening just outside our door – have a direct impact on our everyday lives, our way of life, and our culture.



U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, center, walks with Greenlandic Prime Minister Múte B. Egede, right, after he arrived at Kangerlussuaq Airport in Greenland, Thursday, May 20, 2021. Saul Loeb/Pool Photo via AP.

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My vision for a future Greenland is a diversified and resilient economy. **The melting ice caps, and the opening of shipping routes, are drawing new attention to the region, bringing investments in infrastructure and telecommunications networks. Although we are still largely dependent on natural resources, we no longer rely solely on the export of fish. We will see more mining activity, including mining of rare earth elements, that are vital for the green transition. We will also see a growing tourism industry, as the new airports being built in Nuuk,**

Ilulissat, and Qaqortoq will make our country more accessible to foreign visitors. International partners will also utilize our vast hydropower resources and unique climate for server farms, or as input to [Power-to-X processes](#), making green energy an export commodity.

All of this should be a source of optimism for the Arctic, and for the world. Development and improved international relations are normally associated with trade, cultural exchange, research, and other activities that lead to still greater progress and growth. But if this process is to be successful, everyone involved must remember that the people of Greenland, and our Arctic neighbors, have a natural right to determine the direction of regional development. The Arctic may be the object of increased international attention, but it is, first and foremost, home for those of us who live here. The days when far-away governments and firms could make decisions without consulting the Arctic peoples are long gone. Tomorrow's relationships in the Arctic must be built on a foundation of respect.

Taking its Place on the World Stage

Greenland is one of the world's largest landmasses. It is the third-largest NATO area (behind Canada and the U.S.). The Inuit are not boastful people, but people who understand the power of nature, accepting that there will always be something greater than themselves. But make no mistake: Greenland is ready to take its place on the world stage and stake its rightful claim to lead developments. As an open market economy, we seek new partnerships with any country, organization, and commercial partner who abides by our laws and engages to the benefit of the people of Greenland.

The main goal of The Government of Greenland's foreign policy is to translate foreign interest in the Arctic and Greenland into sustainable, socioeconomic development. Our government defines Greenland's overall trade policy, which guides the Greenland Foreign Ministry as it establishes bilateral and multilateral relations, participates in trade negotiations, and represents Greenland at the World Trade Organization. Not a part of the Danish or EU market, Greenland has a separate customs area; our largest trade markets today are the EU, China, Japan, the UK, and North America.



Saputit farm in Tasermiut fjord, close to the southern tip of Greenland. Photo by Kenneth Høegh.

The importance placed on prioritizing cooperation with these countries and regions is especially reflected in the diplomatic representations that we have established. We have five representations, located in Copenhagen, Brussels, Washington, D.C., Reykjavík, and Beijing. Each representation plays a crucial role in developing Greenland's international partnerships and exploring new and existing avenues for collaboration.

Although Greenland voted to leave the European Community (today's European Union) in 1982, the relationship between Greenland and the EU has remained good. As an [Overseas Country and Territory \(OCT\) of the EU](#), Greenland engages in comprehensive political dialogues with the EU, its member states, and other OCT's. It also receives advantageous access to the EU market for many of its products. The EU and Greenland have extensive partnership agreements on education and fisheries, two immensely important areas for Greenland, with other areas of cooperation open for expansion. The EU is a natural and important partner for Greenland, and the reciprocity of this relationship was reflected in 2021 when the EU announced plans to open an EU office in Nuuk in 2022.

Even as the EU undergoes its own changes, as seen with [Brexit](#), Greenland's relationship with both the EU and the UK remains strong. This was most recently reflected in the launch of [negotiations between Greenland and the UK on a free trade agreement](#), Greenland's first such trade agreement.

Greenlandic interests in North America, which include areas such as education, research, tourism, energy, minerals, infrastructure, and trade, are developed and secured through our representation in Washington, D.C., which is also accredited to Canada. Establishing trade between Greenland and North America is one of the central priorities. The eastbound trade has long been a main market for Greenlandic trade in terms of fisheries, yet trade with North America in the West is lagging – a situation that may seem abnormal considering the proximity and commonalities between Canada, the U.S., and Greenland.

During the U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's visit to Greenland in the spring of 2021, I emphasized that Greenland does not want to *increase trade* with the U.S., but to *begin trade* with the U.S. As one of the first countries Mr. Blinken visited since becoming Secretary of State, his visit highlighted the importance of a Greenland-U.S. partnership, underscoring Greenland's importance when it comes to security in the Arctic and the North Atlantic, a point which was also underscored in June 2020, when the U.S. reopened its consulate in Nuuk, reestablishing diplomatic ties after almost 70 years.

Greenland and Iceland have a long history of collaborating on issues like fisheries, healthcare, tourism, commerce, air traffic, and veterinary issues. More recently, the relationship has come to include environmental issues, maritime research, and information exchange. The ties between Greenland and Iceland go back over a thousand years, as they are described in the [Icelandic sagas](#), and they can still be seen today among the many Norse ruins in my native South Greenland. The sites are now part of the [Kujataa UNESCO World Heritage](#).



Prime Minister Egede of Greenland with an official from the UK embassy in Denmark as they agreed to formally launch negotiations on a free trade agreement between Greenland and the UK.

Photo courtesy Office of the Prime Minister.

Today, Icelanders and Greenlanders live, work, and study in each other's countries, enjoying a lively cultural exchange. We also share a history of being former Danish possessions. With Iceland gaining its independence from Denmark in 1944, in many ways, we look to the successes of our Icelandic neighbors as a fellow Arctic nation with a small population that has achieved a strong economy. Internationally, neither of us is satisfied with being an on-looker to the changes that are taking place in the Arctic. We are both deeply involved internationally through organizations such as the West Nordic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the Arctic Council. That involvement, and our shared values, have led to the development of a unique fellowship and relationship as neighbors.

East Asia is among Greenland's most important markets when it comes to fisheries. [Royal Greenland](#), [Polar Seafood](#), and other Greenlandic firms, export more than 230 mil USD worth of fish to China, and 130 mil USD to Japan. For this reason, the efforts from Greenland must also be further intensified, which is the primary motivation for the decision to establish a representative office in Beijing.

While the areas of cooperation within the Arctic take many forms, and the representations focus on specific bilateral relationships with important partners, one area of collaboration remains a priority for all: climate change.

Joining the Paris Agreement

The world's eyes are looking north, as decision makers at lower latitudes try to sort out what the changing climate will mean for their populations. In no other place is the climate changing as fast, or with as much impact, as it is in the Arctic.

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We know that climate change is not a problem that can be fixed by a handful of countries, but one that requires a global effort. My message at COP26 in Glasgow focused on Greenland's strong commitment to counter climate change, reinforced by my announcement that the Government of Greenland would remove its territorial reservation from the Paris Agreement, and fully join the accord. The ratification process will move forward this spring in our Parliament.



Last year at COP26 the Prime Minister announced that Greenland would be joining the Paris Agreement. Photo from the Prime Minister's office.

The territorial reservation was put in place by the former government due to concerns over what a commitment to reducing carbon pollution might mean for the economic development of Greenland. However, my government believes that climate action and economic development is not mutually exclusive, and that a green transition provides opportunities.

With a population of fewer than 57,000 people, Greenland accounts for less than a drop in the ocean when it comes to CO₂ emissions. We know that we need the big emitters onboard to stand a chance. Yet, as the “face” of climate change, Greenland wants to lead by example. We want to be known for our commitment to renewable resources and live up to our international name – Greenland.

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The government's decision to join the agreement goes hand in hand with Greenland's domestic efforts in the green transition, where we have initiated several action points. This summer, we officially issued a moratorium for oil and gas exploration, making the decision to fully focus on developing and promoting our available renewable energy resources. I am also proud that we recently adopted Greenland's first 10-year strategy on biodiversity, which sets the framework for sustainable management of biodiversity and natural resources.

Nukissiorfiit, our national utility company, is on the frontline of the discussion about climate change in Greenland. Ultimately, decisions about the company's direction are made by the Government of Greenland, and it has long been responsible for keeping the water running and the lights on without the use of fossil fuels. More recently, however, it has been included in the national goal of phasing out all forms of fossil fuel. Currently, much of the power Nukissiorfiit delivers, and most of its renewable energy, comes from the five hydroelectric power stations it operates. In fact, our parliament recently approved a decision to expand the hydropower plant close to Nuuk,

while building a new power plant that will supply the towns of Aasiaat and Qasigianniguit with renewable energy. This expansion has the potential of increasing the proportion of renewable energy it provides to homes and businesses to 90% – a 20% increase – connected to people converting from oil-fired furnaces to electric heat. This could reduce Greenland's consumption of heating oil by 6.6 million gallons annually over a 20-year period. Carbon pollution would fall by 60,000 tons every year.

Greenland's Role in the Green Transition

Apart from contributing to the global reduction of carbon pollution, the renewable energy sources in Greenland are a business opportunity. Greenland has significant untapped hydropower resources, which exceed our domestic demand multiple times. We are currently in the process of opening for investors who can help us develop these areas. Our ambition is to become a net exporter of renewable energy within a decade or two.

Companies are interested in renewable energy sources, and [Greenland receives great interest in its vast deposits of critical minerals](#), which are crucial for the global green transition. Please, let me be very clear: Greenland is open for the development of mining for greener solutions, including our vast rare earth deposits. As a free market economy we are open to engage in partnerships with anyone who will abide by our laws, and in projects that will benefit the people of Greenland.

In 2021, our parliament adopted a new law banning any mining with a uranium concentration higher than 100 parts per million (ppm) to ensure clean and safe mining and effectively protect the environment and abundant natural resources found in Greenland. At the same time, we remain a pro-mining nation and welcome mining projects that keep within the limits of the established thresholds for uranium.

There should be no question that Greenland is at the center of these important changes, and that to have an impact in the Arctic, Greenland must be engaged.

It is a broadly shared vision in Greenland that minerals will constitute a significant part of the future economy, and this will benefit not only the local population, but also the global community. The world has become increasingly focused on the need to facilitate a green transition, which for many countries and companies, requires greater dedication to produce wind turbines, electric networks, and electric cars, all of which require a variety of critical minerals. With some of the largest critical mineral deposits in the world, Greenland is a natural partner in the green transition.

The Arctic, a Low-Tension Area

As Arctic ice melts at a rapid pace, the region is becoming increasingly accessible. This situation brings many positive opportunities for economic development, while also creating security challenges in a region that for many years has been known as a low-tension area.

The five Arctic coastal states signed the [Ilulissat Declaration](#) in 2008, and the eight Arctic Council States reaffirmed it in 2018, committing themselves to dialogue and negotiations to settle disputes in the Arctic. We are proud to be a part of this declaration, and we believe it will contribute to the Arctic remaining a low-tension area.



Melting glacier ice in the South of Greenland. Photo by Kenneth Høegh.

The U.S. is a country that long has had a military presence in Greenland, dating back to the Second World War. Today the U.S. has one base in Pituffik (Thule) in Northern Greenland, with an early warning system. In 2020, Greenland, Denmark, and the U.S. managed to successfully renegotiate the requirements for submitting tenders for the management contract for the air base. The new agreement will ensure that a firm in Greenland wins the tender, allowing Greenland to obtain a fair share of the commercial operations for the U.S. operating on Greenlandic territory.

The negotiations for this agreement had been ongoing for several years, and serves as an important example of how activities that involve Greenland in any way, must – and can – benefit the people of Greenland, even regarding security and defense measures.

The Arctic Future is in Greenland

Greenland is a team player when it comes to navigating a changing Arctic, and the future will no doubt continue to bring opportunities and challenges. However, there should be no question that Greenland is at the center of these important changes, and that to have an impact in the Arctic, Greenland must be engaged. The potential for cooperation is great, and Greenland stands ready to expand existing partnerships and establish new ones that will benefit the people of Greenland and the world.

Múte B. Egede is the seventh Prime Minister of Greenland.

Cover photo: Northern Lights over Sisimiut. Photo by Mads Pihl - Visit Greenland.

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