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GREENLAND: BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND DEPENDENCE IN THE NEW ARCTIC ORDER

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The article examines Greenland's reconfiguration within the emerging Arctic order, highlighting how its growing autonomy and geopolitical centrality coexist with economic, institutional and external dependencies, thereby shaping the development of substantive autonomy.

Greenland can no longer be understood as a remote periphery of the international system. As the world's largest island, it occupies an increasingly central position in the geopolitical transformation of the Arctic. Greenland forms part of the Kingdom of Denmark but exercises extensive self-government, possesses natural resources of growing strategic importance, and is situated between North America and Europe in a region critical to North Atlantic security. Simultaneously, climate change is reshaping its environmental conditions, accessibility and development prospects. The interaction between political autonomy, strategic resources, environmental transformation and geopolitical competition therefore raises a fundamental question: to what extent does Greenland's growing geopolitical centrality translate into an effective capacity to determine its own future? This article argues that Greenland has acquired greater agency, but that increased autonomy has not eliminated dependence. Rather, it has reconfigured the terms through which economic, institutional and strategic dependencies are negotiated.

An autonomy under construction

The entry into force of the Greenland Self-Government Act on 21 June 2009 marked a turning point. The new framework deepened political and administrative autonomy and formally recognised the Greenlandic people as a people under international law, with the right to self-determination (Government of Denmark, 2009). Subsequent developments nevertheless demonstrate that formal autonomy and an effective capacity for decision-making are not equivalent.

The Self-Government Act substantially expanded the competences that may be assumed by Greenlandic institu-

tions, consolidating the *Inatsisartut* and *Naalakkersuisut* as Greenland's own structures of representation and decision-making. Since then, autonomy has developed gradually, cumulatively and functionally through the transfer and exercise of competences, institutional strengthening and the territory's growing external assertion (Ackrén & Jakobsen, 2024; Jakobsen & Larsen, 2024). Greenland nevertheless remains part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Essential domains of sovereignty remain vested in the Kingdom, while political autonomy coexists with financial, institutional and strategic dependencies. The literature has described this condition as one in which Greenland's room for action

is simultaneously expanded and constrained: Nuuk possesses a growing capacity to formulate its own positions, but operates within an architecture in which Copenhagen continues to perform determining functions (Jacobsen, 2020; Olsvig, 2022).

From this perspective, autonomy ceases to be understood merely as a status and instead becomes a process: one that depends upon institutions, human resources, financial capacity, knowledge, infrastructure and negotiating leverage.

Greenland's own foreign policy reflects this evolution. The strategy "Greenland in the World: Nothing about Us without Us", covering 2024–2033, explicitly sets

NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study combines longitudinal documentary analysis (2009–2025), prospective scenario-building, a population survey and a two-round Delphi panel within a mixed-method triangulation framework (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Denzin, 2012). Documentary findings informed four alternative scenarios for 2035 and 2050, conceived as plausible trajectories rather than predictions (Amer et al., 2013; Börjeson et al., 2006). The survey yielded 738 valid responses from adults born and resident in Greenland, collected online between 23 March and 31 July 2026 through a questionnaire available in English and Greenlandic (Kalaallisut). Non-probability convenience and snowball sampling were used; accordingly, the results indicate patterns of perception rather than statistical representativeness. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and based on informed consent. The scenarios were not presented to respondents, thereby limiting framing effects. The Delphi panel comprised 17 experts selected for relevant Arctic and territorial expertise. Strong consensus required a median ≥ 4 and an interquartile range ≤ 1 (Shang, 2023). Triangulation of documentary evidence, population perceptions and expert judgement provided the basis for interpreting Greenland's territorial reconfiguration.

FIGURE 1. GREENLAND IN TRANSFORMATION: EMPIRICAL AND PROSPECTIVE PROFILE

Source: Author's elaboration.

Indicator	Information
Political milestone	Self-Government Act, 2009
Period analysed	2009–2025
Population on 1 January 2026	56,740 inhabitants
Population of Nuuk	20,298 inhabitants
Survey	738 valid responses
Survey population	People born and resident in Greenland
Delphi panel	17 experts
Prospective horizons	2035 and 2050
Dominant scenario for 2035	Persistent dependence and vulnerability
Dominant scenario for 2050	Sustainable autonomy and selective international integration

out the intention to strengthen Greenland's international presence and participation in decisions that directly affect the territory (Government of Greenland, 2024). The principle “*nothing about us without us*” encapsulates a significant shift: Nuuk is seeking to move beyond being merely the object of strategic decisions concerning the Arctic and to participate actively in shaping them (Nielsen & Strandsbjerg, 2024).

This transformation also challenges a strictly state-centric reading of International Relations. Greenland demonstrates that a territory without full state sovereignty can acquire its own capacity for representation, negotiation and international projection (Ackrén & Jakobsen, 2015; Gad & Kristensen, 2025).

The demographic data reveal an additional challenge: territorial capacity is not evenly distributed. In 2026, Greenland had a population of 56,740, with more than 65% living in the five largest towns. Nuuk accounted for approximately 20,000 inhabitants and has significantly increased its relative demographic weight over recent decades (Statistics Greenland, 2026).

Between 2009 and 2025, Nuuk's share of Greenland's population increased from 27.4% to 35.8%, while the proportion of the population living outside Nuuk and the eight intermediate towns considered in the analysis declined. This concentration strengthens the capital's administrative and economic capacity, but also creates challenges for territorial cohesion, particularly in a territory with no roads connecting towns and which is dependent upon maritime and air transport.

Climate transforms the territory

Greenland's international centrality cannot be separated from climate change. The Arctic is undergoing profound environmental transformations affecting ice, *permafrost*, ecosystems, infrastructure and human activities (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme [AMAP], 2025; IPCC, 2023).

In Greenland, climate has ceased to be merely an environmental variable. It has become a factor in territorial reorganisation. Changes in ice cover and environmental conditions affect fisheries, infrastructure, accessibility, natural-re-

source development, tourism, shipping and community living conditions. Climate adaptation is therefore becoming an integral part of planning and governance processes themselves (Jungsberg *et al.*, 2025).

Climate change increases environmental and social vulnerability while altering access to resources and economic activities. The retreat of ice should therefore not be understood as a straightforward economic ‘opening’ of the Arctic: it generates opportunities, risks and costs that are distributed unevenly across the territory.

Tourism, energy, scientific research and mineral development are presented as potential drivers of development, but each entails different combinations of opportunity, environmental risk and external dependence.

This differentiation is particularly apparent when Nuuk is compared with smaller towns and settlements. The capital concentrates institutions, financial resources, services, infrastructure and human capital, giving it greater adaptive capacity. In settlements, lower logistical redundancy, dependence on local conditions, limited availability of specialised services and isolation may increase vulnerability to environmental or economic disruption.

Adaptation to climate change is therefore inseparable from territorial cohesion. Two communities experiencing similar levels of climate exposure may display markedly different levels of vulnerability depending on their infrastructure, accessibility, financial capacity and available knowledge. This relationship between exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity is central to understanding the territorial impacts of climate change (IPCC, 2023; Sveinsdóttir *et al.*, 2025).

Changing navigability, mineral-resource interest and research needs are strengthening Greenland's integration

into international networks of science, investment and cooperation. Climate change thus amplifies the territory's external centrality.

Resources and dependence

Political autonomy is also constrained by Greenland's economic structure. The Greenlandic economy remains highly specialised: more than 90% of goods exports derive from the fishing industry, while the public sector accounts for a particularly significant share of employment and service provision (Statistics Greenland, 2026). In 2024, of an average monthly employed population of 29,131, 12,733 worked in public administration and services, while fisheries, hunting and agriculture employed 4,411 people.

This specialisation makes economic diversification directly relevant to autonomy. Tourism, energy, scientific research and mineral development are presented as potential drivers of development, but each entails different combinations of opportunity, environmental risk and external dependence.

Critical minerals are of particular significance. The energy and technological transitions have increased international demand for strategic raw materials and placed Greenland firmly on the radar of the world's major economies. Its geological potential in critical raw materials gives the territory an importance that greatly exceeds the scale of its population and economy (Nuttall, 2021; Pachy-tel, 2025).

The European Union (EU) has attached growing importance to the security and sustainability of critical raw-material supply chains, most recently within the framework established by Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 (European Union, 2024). In this context, Greenland has become increasingly relevant to European efforts to diversify suppliers and reduce strategic vulnerabilities.

Possessing resources, however, does not automatically confer the capacity to transform them into development. Large-scale mining projects require capital, technology, infrastructure, labour and access to markets. In a territory with a small population and limited administrative capacity, these requirements may increase dependence on external actors.



The central question is under what conditions resource development can enhance Greenland's territorial capacity without transferring excessive economic control to external investors or generating disproportionate environmental and social costs.

The same principle applies to economic diversification more broadly. If new sectors generate public revenue, skilled employment, infrastructure, knowledge and institutional capacity, they may strengthen substantive autonomy. If they create excessive dependence on a limited number of markets, companies or states, diversification may merely replace previous forms of dependence with new ones.

Between Copenhagen, Washington and Brussels

Greenland's growing strategic importance has multiplied the number of actors interested in the territory. Denmark occupies a distinctive position: it is not simply an external actor, but constitutes the sovereign framework within which Greenland remains embedded, a central source of financial transfers and the institutional interlocutor in matters that remain the responsibility of the Kingdom.

The United States occupies a different position, linked to the island's geostrategic location between the Arctic and the North Atlantic. The American military presence and the strategic importance of Pituffik Space Base embody a long-standing security relationship. At the same time, growing US interest in Greenland has made one fundamental issue increasingly visible: decisions concerning the territory's security cannot be analysed solely as a bilateral relationship between Washington and Copenhagen. Nuuk is seeking to establish itself as a necessary participant in decisions that directly affect it (Government of Greenland, 2024; Olsvig, 2022). The EU constitutes another fundamental pole. Greenland's withdrawal from the then European Communities, which took effect in 1985, did not bring its European relationship to an end. On the contrary, a differentiated association has gradually developed, combining economic cooperation, education, research, the environment, resources and development. The growing importance

of critical raw materials has reinforced this relationship and added a geoeconomic and strategic dimension.

China has likewise introduced a further variable. Chinese interest in mineral resources and infrastructure projects has demonstrated how apparently sectoral economic decisions can rapidly acquire strategic significance. In Greenland, investment, security, resources and autonomy are becoming increasingly interconnected.

This external competition can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it increases pressure on a territory with limited institutional capacity and may generate new dependencies. On the other, it multiplies potential partners and alternatives, enabling Nuuk to exploit greater negotiating leverage than was previously available.

Greenlandic agency lies precisely in this capacity to navigate asymmetric relationships without becoming entirely subordinate to any single one of them. Greenland seeks to articulate its own

positions on natural resources, development, climate change and security, while expanding its room for international action (Jacobsen, 2020; Olsvig & Gad, 2025).

The question is not only who exercises influence over Greenland, but also how Greenland itself seeks to convert external competition into greater decision-making capacity.

What the population and experts say

Greenland's geopolitics does not unfold in an empty territory. Decisions concerning autonomy, natural resources, investment, climate and external relations affect a population distributed very unevenly across coastal towns and settlements. The survey findings therefore provide a territorially grounded perspective against which the institutional and geopolitical transformations identified in the documentary analysis can be assessed.

The responses reveal perceptions of a Greenland undergoing transformation,

FIGURE 2. INTERPRETATIVE MODEL OF GREENLAND'S TERRITORIAL RECONFIGURATION

Source: Author's elaboration based on the triangulation of documentary analysis, population survey and Delphi expert assessment.



in which growing political autonomy coexists with continuing economic and institutional dependencies. Climate change emerges as a directly perceived territorial reality, while increasing internationalisation is associated with external interest, natural resources and development opportunities.

This perspective matters because the legitimacy of future choices does not depend solely on their economic or strategic rationale. Mining, tourism, new infrastructure and changes to the constitutional relationship with Denmark have territorially differentiated consequences. Public participation thus becomes a component of the very capacity to govern transformation.

The expert assessment broadly reinforced these patterns. In the first Delphi round, strong consensus emerged across several structural dimensions: the territorial visibility of climate change, increased autonomy since 2009, continued dependence on external entities, the constraining effect of financial dependence on autonomy, and the growing presence of external powers.

The proposition that financial dependence limits autonomy received agreement from 100% of the experts, while dependence on external entities received 94.1% agreement. In the second round, all nine items reassessed reached strong consensus, with all 17 experts remaining involved throughout the process.

The convergence of documentary, survey and Delphi evidence allows two frequently conflated issues to be distinguished: the existence of a trajectory towards deeper autonomy, and the pace and form that trajectory may take.

2035 is not 2050

The prospective analysis makes this distinction particularly visible. Four scenarios were constructed: sustainable autonomy and selective international integration; persistent dependence and vulnerability; accelerated independence and geopolitical competition; and strengthened multilateral governance and expanded integration.

These scenarios should not be interpreted as predictions. They constitute analytical representations of alternative plausible trajectories arising from different combinations of political autonomy,

institutional capacity, economic development, climate transformation and external relations.

When asked to identify the trajectory they considered most plausible, the experts produced a particularly striking result. For 2035, 14 of the 17 participants, corresponding to 82.4%, selected the scenario of persistent dependence and vulnerability. For 2050, 14 of the 17 experts – again 82.4% – selected sustainable autonomy and selective international integration.

Greenlandic agency lies precisely in this capacity to navigate asymmetric relationships without becoming entirely subordinate to any single one of them.

The reversal between the two-time horizons is more significant than any prediction concerning a date for independence. It suggests that Greenland's transformation is perceived as a gradual process. In the medium term, financial, economic, institutional and strategic dependencies continue to constrain substantive autonomy. Over a longer horizon, however, stronger domestic capacities may alter the nature of those dependencies.

This interpretation is consistent with the evolution observed since 2009. Autonomy has advanced through the progressive accumulation of capacities rather than through a single rupture with the existing structure (Ackrén & Jakobsen, 2024). Recent scholarship similarly draws attention to the coexistence of an expanding capacity for external action and constraints arising from the constitutional framework and relations of dependence (Gad & Kristensen, 2025; Jakobsen & Larsen, 2024).

The scenario results further suggest that legal independence and substantive autonomy should not be conflated. The former constitutes a political status; the latter depends on the capacity to formulate, finance, implement and sustain decisions.

From formal to substantive autonomy

Greenland faces a paradox. It has never occupied such a central position in contemporary international politics, yet that centrality simultaneously increases its exposure to external interests. Climate change may generate new economic opportunities, but it also intensifies territorial vulnerabilities. Critical minerals may contribute to economic diversification, but their development requires external capital and technology. Cooperation with major powers expands the scope for international action while introducing asymmetric relationships that are difficult to eliminate.

The problem does not lie in the existence of interdependencies. Substantive autonomy is therefore understood here not as the absence of external dependence, but as the territorial capacity to select, negotiate and govern interdependencies while retaining an effective capacity to formulate and implement collective choices. In a territory with 56,740 inhabitants, dispersed settlement patterns, no roads connecting towns, high logistical costs and substantial exposure to international markets, interdependence is structural (Statistics Greenland, 2026).

The triangulated findings identify five interdependent conditions for substantive autonomy: institutions capable of exercising the competences assumed; a progressively more diversified economic base; sufficient human capital and technical expertise; territorial cohesion between Nuuk, urban centres and settlements; and the social legitimacy of strategic decisions.

This moves the Greenland question beyond the dichotomy between dependence and independence. Constitutional status will remain politically decisive, but so will Greenland's capacity to implement and sustain its choices.

The strengthening of Greenlandic foreign policy itself points in this direction. The growing capacity to participate in international forums, establish external relations and formulate independent positions does not eliminate non-full sovereignty; rather, it demonstrates that international agency can increase before full state sovereignty is attained (Jakobsen, 2020; Olsvig & Gad, 2025).



The prospective trajectory identified by the experts – persistent dependence in 2035 and sustainable autonomy as the dominant scenario for 2050 – reinforces this interpretation. It does not imply historical inevitability; instead, it identifies a condition: Greenland's future room for manoeuvre will depend upon the capacity built in the present.

For International Relations, Greenland therefore constitutes a particularly revealing case. It demonstrates that transformations in the Arctic order are not produced solely through competition among major powers. Autonomous governments, Indigenous peoples and territories without full sovereignty can acquire agency, establish priorities and participate in reshaping relationships between territory, resources, security and power.

Greenland is no longer merely a strategic location between North America and Europe, a potential reserve of critical raw materials, or a component of the North Atlantic security architecture. It is a territorial actor seeking to translate geopolitical centrality into effective decision-making capacity.

The decisive question is therefore no longer simply whether Greenland will achieve greater autonomy or independence. Rather, it concerns the conditions under which autonomy can be converted into effective territorial decision-making capacity. It is in this transition from formal to substantive autonomy that a significant part of Greenland's political future – and, with it, the evolving configuration of Arctic governance – will be determined. ●

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