

Islandness and dependence in Greenland's climate paradiplomacy: 2009-2021

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ABSTRACT: Alongside small island states, the Arctic is severely affected by climate change and iconic in its discourse. Arctic territories attend global climate summits, especially Greenland: the world's largest subnational jurisdiction by land area, but a small island by population. This paper examines Greenland's position and participation in UN climate negotiations, drawing on interviews and document analysis. We find that Greenland's climate paradiplomacy is influenced by both its islandness and its dependence. Just like small island developing states, Greenland faces challenges related to disproportionate vulnerability and negligible total emissions, a small population and limited human capacity, as well as the desire for economic development. However, in contrast to other developing (island) states, Greenland is constrained by its status as a subnational entity within the Danish Realm, with substantial differences between Greenland and Denmark. Overall, Greenland is uniquely placed, negotiating from an 'in-between' position: not-yet-independent, between developed and developing countries, between the need for economic development and the devastating consequences of climate change.

Keywords: climate diplomacy, climate negotiations, Denmark, Greenland, paradiplomacy, small island states, subnational island jurisdictions

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Introduction

It has been clear for decades that the climate crisis is particularly severe to small island states (Mycoo et al., 2022; Thomas, Baptiste, Martyr-Koller, Pringle, & Rhiney, 2020), as well as for the Arctic, which is warming faster than any other region in the world (Constable et al., 2022). Both clusters – small island states and the Arctic – have become iconic in climate discourse; and yet, only the former has become notably politically influential: small island developing states (SIDS) have become a key player and voice in UN climate negotiations, through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), despite their limited resources, capacities, and bargaining power (Benjamin, 2011; Betzold, 2010; de Águeda Corneloup & Mol, 2014; Laatikainen, 2020; Ourbak & Magnan, 2018; Ronneberg, 2016). In contrast, the Arctic is less visible in international climate policy. Duyck (2012, p. 588), for example, only counts two mentions of the Arctic in “over 1,500 pages of COP decisions”.

This situation may be related to the subnational nature of many Arctic territories: with the exception of Iceland – a sovereign state – Greenland, Alaska, Svalbard, Siberia, the Northwest Territories, Yukon and Nunavut are indeed entities within larger (non-Arctic) states: Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, the USA. Subnational entities have fewer opportunities to engage in international (climate) negotiations, as the central government is normally responsible for foreign policy, even for the most autonomous subnational entities, such as Greenland¹. Yet, this does not preclude subnational entities from conducting international relations in parallel to the central power. Indeed, over the past decades, the diplomatic engagement of subnational entities, often referred to as “paradiplomacy”, has increased (Lequesne & Paquin, 2017; Cornago, 2010; Dickson, 2014; Lecours, 2002). Research interest in subnational diplomacy has been steadily on the rise, including in the climate realm; but most of this still focuses on federal states in North America and Europe (Chaloux, 2016; Chaloux, Paquin, & Séguin, 2015; Chaloux, Séguin, & Simard, 2022). The paradiplomatic activities of small island states and territories, or of Arctic entities, have so far received scant attention (Bartmann, 2006; Landriault, Payette, & Roussel, 2022). With a few exceptions (Ferdinand, 2018; Montana, 2022), even less attention has been paid to the *climate* paradiplomacy of small island, or Arctic, territories.

We address this gap by examining Greenland’s climate paradiplomacy between 2009 and 2021. Greenland is particularly interesting, as it is both a small island (by population) and an Arctic jurisdiction. Despite its large territory (2,166,000 km²), Greenland has a population of only 56,600, and therefore shares many of the size-related challenges of SIDS. As opposed to these, however, Greenland is a dependent territory within the Danish Realm, and thus has no direct seat at the table in multilateral climate negotiations. Drawing on interviews and document analysis, we analyse Greenland’s participation in (and position) at UN climate summits. In the next section, we review the literature on (climate) paradiplomacy, Greenland in international affairs, and Greenland and climate change. We then turn to our research approach, data and methods. In section 4, we present our findings on Greenland’s participation and position in climate negotiations. We then discuss these findings and conclude.

Literature review

Alongside ‘sinking’ small islands, the Arctic, its ice, and its human and non-human inhabitants – Inuit hunters and polar bears – have become iconic in climate discourse (Bjørst, 2010, 2012b; Eriksen, 2020; Nuttall, 2009). The Arctic countries and territories are also sparsely populated, and therefore share many of the challenges of international diplomacy related to small size (Falzon, 2021; Panke, 2012; Thorhallsson & Bailes, 2016). But, in contrast to SIDS, the Arctic is conspicuously absent in UN climate talks, despite being the world’s fastest warming region (Duyck, 2015a, 2015b). While AOSIS members have made an effort to raise their “island voice” since the start of negotiations, “no actor involved in Arctic governance has played a proactive and continuous role to raise the ‘Arctic voice’ at the climate change negotiations” (Duyck, 2015a, p. 123). In part, this is a result of the specific nature of Arctic jurisdictions, whose capitals often lie far south of the Arctic circle (Duyck, 2015a, p. 122).

Most Arctic players are indeed subnational entities, which, by their nature, have few opportunities to participate in intergovernmental climate negotiations. Subnational entities do not have a seat at the table, but depend on the central (non-Arctic) governments to represent

¹ We use the word ‘Greenland’ throughout the article; however, we acknowledge Kalaallit Nunaat as the Indigenous name for the same island jurisdiction.

them and their interests. Nevertheless, subnational territories often can – and do – pursue international relations alongside, and sometimes independent of, their central government. Such subnational international engagement has increased since the 1970s and has widened in scope, becoming more similar to the diplomacy of sovereign small states (Criekemans, 2020; Lequesne & Paquin, 2017). Subnational diplomacy – also referred to as multi-layered diplomacy, microdiplomacy, paradiplomacy, or protodiplomacy (Cornago, 2010; Dickson, 2014; Kuznetsov, 2014; Lecours, 2002; Lequesne & Paquin, 2017) – thus puts into question sovereignty as a binary status, challenging the mainstream view and praxis of international relations. Instead, paradiplomacy scholars emphasize sovereignty as a spectrum (Adler-Nissen & Gad, 2012; Baldacchino, 2012; Grydehøj, 2016). Indeed: some dependent territories exercise more sovereignty than several independent small states (Alberti & Goujon, 2019).

Despite this growth of paradiplomacy, research has only recently begun to catch up, and has then especially focused on the motivations of subnational governments to “go abroad” (Dickson, 2014; Kuznetsov, 2014). Many questions remain however, including with regard to the legitimacy and qualitative differences between subnational and state level actors (Dickson, 2014). There are also significant geographic and thematic gaps. Neither subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) (Adler-Nissen & Gad, 2012; Bartmann, 2006), nor Arctic subnational governments (Landriault et al., 2022) have received much attention. There are also few studies of climate paradiplomacy, and these focus on North America and, to lesser extent, Europe (Chaloux, 2016; Chaloux et al., 2015; 2022; Gayard, 2020). With the exception of Ferdinand (2018), who examines climate justice from the perspective of French overseas territories, we know of no study that specifically examines the climate paradiplomacy of subnational island territories, Arctic subnational governments, or specifically Arctic subnational island territories.

The situation of subnational island jurisdictions is in fact quite different from that of subnational entities like regions or cities. Most SNIJs differ significantly from their mainland central powers: geographically, politically, socially, and culturally. Most SNIJs are, like Greenland, former – some would say lingering – colonies, located far from the former colonizer; but which, for various reasons, have chosen to remain under its purview (Ferdinand, Oostindie, & Veenendaal, 2020). Legal arrangements differ across SNIJs, with some enjoying extensive autonomy while receiving economic and security benefits. This does however come at the cost of certain freedoms, including to freely and independently govern their own external relations, as well as their defence and security arrangements (Baldacchino, 2004; Ferdinand et al., 2020). Maintaining relations with a former colonizer is always a complex matter; frustration and dissatisfaction with the extant political arrangements are manifest among virtually all SNIJs, though only a few – Greenland amongst them – aspire to independence (Baldacchino, 2010; Ferdinand et al., 2020). Here, international relations can be a tool for the subnational government to negotiate its sovereignty. In this vein, SNIJ paradiplomacy has sometimes been analysed as (postcolonial) sovereignty games (Adler-Nissen & Gad, 2012; Gad, 2016, 2020; Jacobsen, 2020). Such studies show how paradiplomacy constitutes a largely uncharted legal territory, where there may be substantive differences between *de jure* and *de facto* power, and where the actors often define rules ‘on the fly’. In particular, sovereignty game analyses demonstrate how this undefined legal space may be strategically manoeuvred by the subnational governments to either increase or reduce their agency and discretionary space, also using matching language and discourse.

Presumably because of the goal of sovereignty, Greenland has actively and increasingly engaged in foreign relations (Ackrén, 2014, 2019). Yet “[o]nly a few scattered pieces have so far analysed how Greenland navigates the international realm” (Søby Kristensen & Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017a, p. 3). Greenland has gained increasing autonomy from Denmark, through Home Rule in 1979, and Self-Government in 2009, the latter explicitly opening up the way to independence (Folketing, 2009). Home Rule and Self-Government have also expanded the possibilities for Greenland to engage internationally, and Greenland has actively sought to assert itself as an actor in international affairs (Jacobsen & Gad, 2018; Søby Kristensen & Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017b). Importantly, the objective is to gain recognition: “Greenland is essentially asking to be considered a state, or more accurately to be considered a quasi-state, or a state-in-the-making” (Gerhard, 2018, p. 119; also Ackrén, 2014, 2019; Grydehøj 2020; Strandsberg, 2014). Future independence has long been the majority opinion and a central objective of Greenland’s (foreign) policy (Grydehøj, 2016), and also part of Greenlandic identity: “The current Greenlandic identity is transitional: Greenland sees itself on the way from imperial submission to future independence” (Gad, 2014, p. 10; Grydehøj, 2020; Strandsberg, 2014). While still depending on Danish economic support, it is likely that Greenland will eventually become fully independent. The question is not if, but when, this will happen (Grydehøj, 2016).

Climate change has become a central factor in that search for independence, as a warmer climate may open up new sources of income, thereby reducing dependence on Danish aid. Greenland could therefore become “the first country born of climate change”, in direct contrast to the “disappearing” SIDS, such as the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati (Borgerson, 2013). This makes Greenland’s relationship to climate change more complex than for most countries: while it could pave the way for long-desired independence, the warmer and more volatile weather clearly also has many negative effects on Greenlandic society, threatening Inuit cultural heritage as well as local livelihoods. Greenlandic perspectives on climate change reflect this ambiguity (Bjørst, 2008, 2012a; Eriksen, 2020; Minor et al., 2019), as does the Greenlandic government’s (climate) agenda. Until recently, and not least given the negligible total greenhouse gas emissions from Greenland, the government has been prioritising industrial development and avoiding any binding commitments to reduce emissions (Bjørst, 2018; 2022). Following the 2021 elections, Greenland has changed its strategy, now aiming to grow the economy through the development of sustainable energy, especially hydropower.

Research design and methods

In this paper, we analyse Greenland’s climate paradiplomacy in the period 2009–2021. COP15, which took place in 2009 in Copenhagen, makes a good starting point for two reasons: first, the Self-Government Act became effective in 2009, giving Greenland more opportunities to act internationally. Second, the Danish presidency of COP15 meant heightened political and public attention to the issue of climate change in the Danish Realm, but also globally, since this summit was widely expected to deliver – but disappointingly did not – a new international climate agreement (Dimitrov, 2010).

Our case study draws mainly on two types of data: First, we carried out 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Eight of these were with (former) Greenlandic civil servants, who at least on one occasion between 2009 and 2021 had represented Greenland as part of the Danish delegation in a COP. A few had been to the summits also in other roles. In addition, four conversations with experts on Arctic politics, as well as one conversation with a former Danish COP delegate, have informed the analysis. All interviewees were identified through

the authors' networks, COP participation lists, and by references from interviewees themselves. The sample covers the whole time period, with a slightly higher density of interviewees from the first half of the period, which reflects the more active Greenlandic involvement in the period 2009-2015 than 2016-2021. Some interviewees had been involved with the Greenlandic and/or Danish government for longer periods than others; some during the entire period of interest. Interviews lasted around 30 to 75 minutes each. They addressed Greenland's participation in UN climate negotiations, and Greenland's positions and politics in the climate realm more broadly. All interviews were audio-recorded with the respondents' consent and then transcribed. To maintain anonymity, we refer to interviewees by a number (#1 through #13).

In addition, we draw on various written sources, such as relevant legal documents, documentation of side events, speeches and statements from the negotiations. Overall, we used around 100 documents, mostly news articles. Unfortunately, this corpus excludes documents in Greenlandic, although we do consider Greenlandic media outlets that publish in the Danish language. We also consulted the lists of participants to the COPs, which allowed us to identify the number of Greenlandic representatives in the negotiations.

We analysed all data using qualitative content analysis. We used MAXQDA to identify and assign themes to the material in accordance with patterns that emerged across the transcribed interviews and textual sources. We specifically looked for information on Greenland's participation in negotiations, the position(s) and objective(s) it sought to advance during COPs, and the challenges and opportunities of Greenland's specific status as a SNIJ and part of the Danish Realm. We also specifically looked for similarities and differences to other Parties, notably small island states.

Results

Greenland: An iconic, innocent victim of global climate change?

Just like SIDS, Greenland is uniquely vulnerable to climate change impacts, while having itself contributed very little to global greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change has many negative effects on Greenlandic society. Inuit livelihoods and cultural heritage are seriously impacted by global warming, with changing conditions for hunting and fishing strongly affecting the many small coastal communities. Since fishing is Greenland's most important industry and trade, it moreover has serious economic implications, though climate change on the other hand may benefit economic activities such as shipping, farming, tourism and industrial development (Dahllöf, 2021; Ford & Goldhar, 2012; Minor et al., 2019). This ambiguous situation is discussed further below.

Greenlandic representatives at COPs, and elsewhere, emphasize time and again the devastating consequences of a changing climate for Greenland's population (Qujaukitsoq, 2015; Egede, 2021; Schreiber, 2018). At COP21 in 2015, Greenland issued a joint statement with the International Circumpolar Council and its subnational neighbour, the Canadian territory of Nunavut, which emphasized the "acute impacts related to climate change" on the Arctic (Gerhard, 2018, pp. 120-122; Naalakkersuisut, Government of Nunavut, & Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2015).

Greenland's unique vulnerability to climate change has also, and just as for SIDS, generated considerable external attention, which has been conducive to their participation in UN climate negotiations. Denmark in particular has played a central role in Greenland's

presence on the international climate stage, having involved Greenland as “a key element of [its] climate diplomacy” (Desgeorges, 2012). Ahead of COP15 (under Danish presidency), Denmark started arranging diplomatic visits to Greenland “to observe first-hand the effects of climate change and discuss climate negotiations in a creative and more effective way” (Desgeorges, 2012). Thus, Denmark started constructing “the Greenlandic case” as a symbol of global warming, and used it strategically to push for an ambitious climate agreement at the Copenhagen summit (Bjørst, 2018). The Greenlandic government however played little part in this and was in fact rather frustrated with the approach (e.g., #2, #4, #5, #8). Nevertheless, it provided a certain platform, with invitations to events, panels, and showrooms. This remained the case also beyond COP15. As a long-term Greenlandic civil servant notes:

We have a profile that punches above how many people we are in this country. Because of what Greenland has become in the climate debate (#7).

Greenland has become iconic in the climate debate, and in that sense finds itself in a similar position to SIDS. Both these sets of island territories share a high vulnerability to the effects of climate change, despite themselves having contributed very little to global greenhouse gas emissions. As is the case for SIDS, Greenland’s total greenhouse gas emissions are very low: Greenland emitted 511,000 tons of CO₂ in 2021, compared to 30 million tons of CO₂ for Denmark (Ritchie, Roser, & Rosado, 2021). Accordingly, the 2015 joint statement “recogniz[es] that current greenhouse gas emissions are caused by industrialized nations from activities that have taken place outside the Arctic” (Naalakkersuisut et al., 2015).

Given this low contribution but high vulnerability to climate change, Greenland is often portrayed as an “innocent victim”, again like SIDS. This is moreover related to its identity as an Indigenous territory (88% Inuit). Yet, the victim narrative originates from outside Greenland (Bjørst, 2012a; Eriksen, 2020). It can also be found in Danish official statements, which refer to Greenlanders as “walking barometers of climate change” (Lidegaard, 2011; 2012). Just like tropical islanders and other Indigenous peoples, Greenlanders are often frustrated with their portrayal as victims; but they also recognize the strategic and moral significance of the victim narrative. It offers visibility and creates awareness and support from the international community and especially international civil society. At the same time, these discourses have clearly not been powerful enough to really change action, and our interviewees expressed frustration with how attention to climate-vulnerable countries like Greenland is “mostly for show”, rather than actually challenging the status quo (#6, also #2). What is more, while the victim discourse is *a priori* intended to further the climate talks and reach more ambitious agreements, it also takes away agency: a well-known postcolonial pattern (Ferdinand, 2018; Martello, 2004).

Greenland’s double strategy: local development, global climate change

The victim discourse also neglects that Greenland’s per capita emissions are indeed quite high (as is the case for some SIDS): the total emissions of 511,000 tons of CO₂ in 2021 translated into just above nine tons per capita, compared to just above five tons per capita for Denmark (Ritchie, Roser, & Rosado, 2021). In addition, single projects can have a big impact. Developing one mine, for instance, could increase Greenland’s total greenhouse gas emissions by 45% (Sermitsiaq, 2021), even if most of Greenland’s energy is already sustainably sourced from hydro-electric power.

Thus, since the high living standards are not independently sustained, the argument goes, Greenland needs to be allowed to develop, and should be exempt from binding greenhouse gas reduction objectives:

Our argument was, we cannot lower, we have a higher amount of green energy than any other country in the world, and we are not industrialized, we have no industries. You have to see this. You cannot treat us like anybody else (#8).

This insistence on special treatment and the reluctance to commit to binding agreements is also a result of past experiences with the Kyoto Protocol. In 1997, Greenland (through Denmark) became a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol, with a commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 8% compared to 1990 levels between the years 2008 and 2012. Greenland officially failed to reach that target, but this may have been a miscalculation, as some suggest that by 2000, it had already reduced its emissions by the target percentage (Bjørst, 2018). “The mistake” of the Kyoto Protocol (#4, #6, #8) thus could be simply an error, but it meant that Greenland had to pay a large sum of carbon credits to make up for having officially failed to achieve its Kyoto goal. As a result, Greenland subsequently opted out of the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period (2013-2020), as well as the Paris Agreement in 2016 (Bjørst, 2018; Naalakkersuisut, 2016). In fact, part of why Greenland kept attending the climate summits was more or less “to make sure that Denmark didn't sort of involve Greenland in some reduction goals”, as our interviewees explained (#5, also #2, #4).

Given its particular situation, Greenland accepts that it may have to increase its emissions, even as a climate-vulnerable country, if it wants to expand industrial development (Ackrén, 2014). Our interviews similarly highlight this dilemma:

Is it our fault? ... Why should we stop our development because of what rich countries have done? And of course, that is a position, and it's difficult to argue against it. But if everybody has that position, all of the developing countries, we will never solve the climate crisis, because there are so many developing countries. The argument then from Greenland's side is that we are so few people. We are 56,000. We don't mean anything in the broader picture (#7).

And so, Greenland has tried to put forward the message that Indigenous peoples are not only “stewards of nature and ecosystems and what have you” but also want and deserve (industrial) development (#7). At the Paris Summit, the Greenlandic head of delegation, Vittus Qujaukitsoq, explained that, even if Greenland wanted to reduce emissions, its primary aim is to ensure continued growth (cited in Holten-Møller, 2015, online). Similarly, in the joint ICC statement, Qujaukitsoq underscored “Indigenous people's rights to development” as the vital point, and the failure to recognize this in the Paris Agreement was cited as a primary reason for Greenland's opt out (Krogh Søndergaard, 2015; Naalakkersuisut et al., 2015).

Indeed, and maybe paradoxically, Greenland's climate agenda makes a distinction between global climate change, and local carbon-intensive economic development. Greenland views itself as small, exceptional and peripheral to global politics, including COPs, which are “too big, too far away” (#1, #8). There is moreover a deep-rooted scepticism to external influences (#2, #11). This perception helps explain why the national context is prioritized over global responsibilities, and why international commitments are mostly viewed with suspicion. Greenland's own emission-intensive industrial development has thus been considered a “necessary evil” (#7). As long as it does not produce local pollution, it is acceptable, despite its contribution to global climate change (Bjørst, 2012a, 2018; Jacobsen, 2018; #11).

Greenland's position is ambiguous: it admits its high vulnerability and dependence on ambitious climate agreements, while it desires to develop economically despite the growth in emissions this implies. And, contrary to most other places on the planet, Greenland may also gain from climate change, through new shipping routes, new opportunities for farming, tourism or industrial development (Dahllöf, 2021; Ford & Goldhar, 2012; Minor et al., 2019). No wonder then that Greenland's position in the international climate debate has been described as a "double strategy" (Bjørst, 2008) or a "balance act" (Nyvold, 2015). Only recently did Greenland's position shift to "green growth". Under Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA), elected in 2021 on a pro-Paris platform, Greenland now seeks to position itself as more sustainable, "true to its name, Greenland" (Bjørst, 2022). It is in this vein that Greenland also acceded to the Paris Agreement in 2021, having thus far asked Denmark to be territorially exempt. Here, current Premier Muté B. Egede has also emphasised Greenland as part of the global community, which therefore also needs to take responsibility for the global challenge of climate change (Egede, 2021). This shift is also related to the different and more flexible nature of the Paris Agreement compared to the Kyoto Protocol, and the decision to accede was only made after having ensured that Greenland will be able to set its targets completely independently (#1, #7; McGwin, 2021). What this will come to, however, remains to be seen; also because other Greenlandic political parties have remained cautious of any potential implications on Greenland's economic growth, and, by extension, the goal of self-sufficiency and independence.

Participation through Denmark despite tensions

Its desire for self-sufficiency and independence has a strong impact on Greenland's participation in the climate negotiations. Its current status as a dependent but largely autonomous territory within the Danish Realm gives Greenland certain rights, but also limits its participation in UN climate talks. These rights and limits are not entirely clear, since the legal grounds for Greenland's foreign engagements are subject to some degree of interpretation. The Greenlandic government's website declares that Greenland's foreign policy competence is regulated "by the Danish constitution, the Self Government Act, and by *praxis*" (Naalakkersuisut, n.d.; our emphasis), demonstrating a perception that rules are not fixed but may be expanded, in the interest of more sovereignty (Jacobsen, 2020). Copenhagen retains overall responsibility over foreign policy; but the 2009 Act acknowledges and regulates Greenland's rights to function internationally independently of, as well as jointly with, Denmark (Folketing, 2009, §4.11(1)). Whereas Greenland may even "negotiate and conclude agreements" on behalf of the Realm in areas of exclusive concern, this does not apply to negotiations "within an international organisation of which the Kingdom of Denmark is a member" (§4.12(4)). Denmark must, however, involve Greenland in negotiations of international agreements "which are of particular importance to Greenland" (§4.13(4)).

The UN climate process is presumably of "particular importance to Greenland", given its vulnerability as explained above. Unsurprisingly, Greenland has therefore pursued the UN climate negotiations out of interest in taking an active part in and influencing the international climate regime, as publicly underscored by several premiers and ministers (e.g., Dollerup-Scheibel, 2015; Egede, 2021; Kleist, 2009; Sermitsiaq, 2011). Yet, participation in (climate) negotiations is certainly also part of the march towards independence. Participation itself can be viewed as part of a state-building process, providing Greenland "a very obvious place ... to assert itself as a nation, with its own voice, its own identity, its own role, on the global stage" (#2). From its not-yet-independent point of view, participation for Greenland is a "good exercise" to engage externally but also to encourage an internal debate about Greenlandic

climate policy and its role in the world (#1, #2). Upon accession to the Paris Agreement, Greenland has expressed a wish to manage as much of the processes as possible independently, including submitting its own reports and targets (#1).

Yet, Greenland participates through the *Danish* delegation; the Danish Realm may have three constituent parts, but the Kingdom of Denmark is a unitary state, and “at the COPs, it is Denmark that is the member of the Kingdom” (#7). Moreover, Denmark negotiates through the European Union (EU), of which Denmark is a member state since 1973, but which Greenland opted to leave in 1982 (Gad, 2016). Accordingly, Greenlandic participation in climate summits has brought to the fore several tensions in Danish-Greenlandic relations. Throughout most of the negotiations, Denmark and Greenland have had diverging positions and different understandings of what Greenland's participation might entail (see #5, #6, #7; Bjørst, 2012b). This was most clear around the 2009 Copenhagen COP, where relations got “a bit heated” (#4). While Denmark had first encouraged Greenlandic participation (Hedegaard, 2007), it soon became clear that their positions were incompatible. In particular, Greenland's wishes for carbon-intensive industrial development have been met with controversy, not least by Denmark (Aagaard, 2009; Graulund Nøhr, 2016; Ritzau General News Service, 2016). Denmark's discomfort with Greenland's position then both has to do with its incompatibility with the Danish agenda, but moreover, that it comes across as paradoxical for a climate-vulnerable country to want to increase carbon emissions. As an Indigenous (island) people, Greenland is expected to propose testimonies of grievances related to climate change and to be a strong proponent of environmental preservation and sustainable livelihoods (Bjørst, 2012a).

The Greenlandic government was thus excluded from taking part in the presidency, while Denmark at the same time used its iconic position in the Arctic “as a tool” (#5), as discussed above. The Danish presidency did indeed not seem open to Greenland's perspectives: Greenland “didn't really fit in” (#5) and was “a stone in the shoe” for Denmark (#8), creating frustration and even a risk of total fall-out. Headlines like “Greenland threatens to leave the Danish delegation in the climate negotiations” and “Greenland's Self-Government is taken hostage in climate negotiations” (Whyte, 2009a, 2009b) appeared in Danish newspapers during the months leading up to COP15. Here, Denmark was accused of meeting Greenlandic interests with arrogance, “disregarding the tradition of representing all parts of the Realm”, including accounts of how “Greenland has never participated as an equal member of the Danish delegation in international negotiations” (Whyte, 2009a).

Since COP15 did not result in an agreement with any new binding greenhouse gas reduction targets, tensions eased. Mistrust however prevailed: “There was very little, little to no trust” following COP15 (#2, also #4, #5). Consequently, a new agreement between Denmark and Greenland was signed in 2012 to clarify cooperation in the climate realm (Naalakkersuisut, 2012). This agreement specifies how Greenland takes part in the negotiations through the Kingdom of Denmark; but, being responsible for its own climate policy, Greenland can inform about and make its positions public (Naalakkersuisut, 2012; Vestergaard Pedersen, 2012). This reduced tensions considerably, although relationships were still quite strained. Even if the Danish and Greenlandic agendas still diverged, there was more of a mutual understanding and acceptance for this, “because they are totally different countries” (#6; also Aagaard, 2009).

Given stark socio-economic and political differences between Greenland and Denmark, Greenland has sometimes seen itself closer to the group of developing countries:

We have the challenge of saying that a part of the rich country of the Kingdom of Denmark is not a rich country and not an industrialized country. And therefore, there will have to be other conditions, and requirements, that we take upon ourselves, other decisions and goals and initiatives, that are closer to what a developing country has (#7).

In fact, as a result of the tensions with Denmark, Greenland even threatened to potentially join the group of developing countries, G77 & China, which would have been “embarrassing” for the Danish presidency (Børsen, 2009) and could “no doubt [...] have a disruptive effect on the climate negotiations [which were] already very fragile” (Børsen, 2009; Whyte, 2009a). In the end, Greenland remained in the Danish delegation, yet statements like “if we didn’t have the block grant from Denmark, we would definitely be a developing country” (#6) are frequently made more or less explicitly by those involved in Greenlandic politics (Nyvold, 2015a) and sometimes by scholars (Ackrén, 2014). Because of the block grant, however, Greenland’s living standards are high, and identifying as a developing country has therefore come across as counterintuitive, and needed to be explained and justified to the public, including in the Greenlandic press (Kleist, 2009; Nyvold, 2015). The difference in levels of socio-economic development moreover has made it hard for Greenland to fully align and bond with other countries in the developing states bloc (#8).

Small population size and limited capacity

While high living standards may set Greenland apart from other developing countries, Greenland does share one other challenge with some developing countries, especially small islands, and that is its small population and hence limited human resources and limited negotiation capacity. These challenges are well documented for small states (e.g., Corbett, Yichong, & Weller, 2012; Panke, 2012) and also apply to the territory of Greenland, where much of the administration is staffed by ethnic Danes, and not Inuit – although this is slowly changing (e.g., Gad, 2020; #7, #11). With limited financial and human resources, Greenland was “never strong on the technical parts” of climate policy (#2).

Limited capacity also means few representatives – on average two to four delegates – at climate summits, which have struggled to engage fully:

The [COPs] are so huge and complex, that if you are to cover all the negotiation tracks, you need, I don’t know, at least 30-35 people? Just to be in the actual rooms. And you need specialized expertise within a number of areas. Very small administrations such as Greenland’s just don’t have that (#2).

Other respondents similarly highlighted the complexities and technicalities of the negotiations, apart from the challenge of (legal) English, which made participation “extremely difficult” (#4; also #5).

Negotiation capacity did however increase with experience. One interviewee described Greenland’s participation in the negotiations as a “learning process” (#5); others emphasized the importance of building confidence and trust to be able to actively participate (#2, #4). “In those early years, it was a lot about: do we have a right to sit at the table?” one described. But, through individual-level networking in and outside the Danish delegation, attending pre-COPs and other UN climate change related meetings, it became easier to actively participate (#2).

Indeed, participation through the Danish delegation – despite the tensions discussed earlier – helped build capacity: Though the Greenlandic delegates could never fully “draw on the Danish expertise” (#5), our interviews highlight how taking part in briefings, information and materials from the Danes kept them somewhat well-informed (#2, #4, #5), as well as how the close cooperation between the governments in general provides the Greenlandic administration – which has largely consisted of Danish staff – with assistance and advice (#6). This contributed to a political dependency on Denmark (Grydehøj, 2016); but, for the small Greenlandic government, this external support has been pivotal to build its own capacities.

Limited institutional capacity also results in a high dependence on a few individuals and their commitment to and experience with negotiations: a phenomenon well-known to and in small polities (Jones, Deere-Birkbeck, & Woods, 2010; Corbett, Yi-chong, & Weller, 2012). The interviews indicated how individual politicians often have been important for Greenlandic negotiation capacities and shaped Greenland's approach to the climate negotiations. In this context, and perhaps most notably, Premier Kuupik Kleist was central to Greenlandic participation in the negotiations around COP15 (Bjørst, 2012b; #2, #7). His strong international experience and language skills, as well as personal commitment to the issue, help explain Greenland's relatively strong presence around 2009. The subsequent government then followed a similar line to Kleist's, and here the Minister for Finance, Mineral Resources and Foreign Affairs, Vittus Qujaukitsoq, took a key role in maintaining presence, as well as in forming the agenda and rhetoric in what led up to COP21 and then opting out of the Paris Agreement (#11, #12). What is more, the current policy of joining the Paris Agreement and re-establishing Greenlandic presence in the COPs was described as more of a decision by the top political leaders rather than being driven by public demand (#1, #12), since the public seems rather uninterested in foreign policy in general (see Ackrén & Nielsen, 2021). This means however that, upon a change in government, politics could swiftly change again (#4, #6).

Limited capacity, few delegates, but also the constraints of participating through the Danish delegation finally also implied a shift away from formal negotiations to the informal dimensions of COPs. Greenland has focused much of its participation on the informal side of COPs. Side and pavilion events have provided “an excellent place to network and meet potential partners ... to get new ideas, get new inspiration” (#7). This seems to have become increasingly important in the context of the more recent, new Greenlandic strategy of pursuing the Paris Agreement and more sustainable development. A key goal of attending COP26 was to find investors for green energy projects (#1, #7); at the summit, a side event announced that “Greenland is open for business” (pers. obs.). The informal side of the COPs is moreover an arena that allows Greenland to distinguish itself more clearly from Denmark, and to meet with potential partners and other countries. This becomes a way to “test the boundaries” of their dependency: “saying, ok, if we do this, if we talk to them, what will the reaction be” (#5). Clearly, then, while limited by its non-independent status, Greenland makes strategic use of the (para)diplomatic spaces in the COPs to expand its sovereignty and agency.

Discussion

This article has sought to explain how Greenland, as an autonomous, subnational territory within the Danish Realm, participates in climate negotiations, and what positions it seeks to promote. Based on interviews and document analysis, we examined Greenlandic climate paradiplomacy between 2009 and 2021.

Our analysis highlights several tensions and dilemmas of Greenland's climate paradiplomacy, which are related to its unique situation as a constituent part of the Danish Realm; but we also find some noticeable similarities to small island developing states (SIDS). Both Greenland and SIDS are disproportionately affected by climate change, both have limited (total) domestic emissions, and thus have contributed very little to global climate change. As "innocent victims" of climate change, they depend on ambitious climate agreements. At the same time, and like many developing countries, including SIDS, Greenland seeks economic development. It therefore accepts that it may have to increase its greenhouse gas emissions. While paradoxical at first glance, this acceptance of domestic emissions is understandable if we consider Greenland's desire for political, and therefore economic, independence. Also, even if new mining operations may indeed drastically increase Greenland's emissions, its *total* emissions are likely to remain negligible on a global scale. This is a result of its small population size, another feature it shares with SIDS. A small population also means a small government and administration, and limited negotiation capacity, which constrains international participation. Despite some similarities to SIDS, Greenland's political status sets it apart: it is a subnational territory within the Danish Realm, and therefore participates through the Danish delegation. While this may alleviate some of the capacity constraints, the Greenlandic and Danish situation and therefore climate objectives differ significantly, bringing to the fore postcolonial tensions with the central government that are well-known in other areas (e.g., Gad, 2020).

Two features hence influence Greenland's climate paradiplomacy: its "islandness" on the one hand, and its dependence on the other. By "islandness", we here refer to the similarities it shares with SIDS: its disproportionate vulnerability, low total emissions, and small population size, which implies limited negotiation capacity. But the dependence dimension may in fact be more important: Greenland seeks political independence, and in contrast to other SNIJs, has formally obtained the right to become independent from Denmark in the 2009 Self-Government Act. This journey towards independence – even if it may *de facto* never materialize (Grydehøj, 2020) – sets it apart from other dependent territories, including other small, subnational island jurisdictions such as the Faroe Islands, the other entity within the Danish Realm. This may also explain why other SNIJs, including the Faroe Islands, are less active and even less visible in global climate summits (Ackrén, 2019), although their limited engagement is worth examining separately, with Greenland potentially providing important lessons for other dependent island territories.

Conclusion

Greenland finds itself negotiating from an 'in-between' position: it is not-yet-independent, lies between developed and developing countries, and is caught between the need to nurture its own economic development as well as do its part to attenuate the devastating consequences of climate change. This situation is fluid: we have noted several changes in Greenland's climate paradiplomacy in the period under analysis, both with regard to the *intensity* of its engagement and with regard to the *position* it defended. It was particularly around the Danish presidency of COP15 that Greenland was very active in the climate arena, not least as a result of tensions with Copenhagen. While Greenland clarified its role in Danish climate diplomacy after COP 15, it has recently again become more proactive in this field. And here, we observed a change in position, with a shift to "green" development and a commitment to becoming a full member of global climate policy, as evidenced by the decision to join the Paris Agreement. How this plays out in practice and to what extent this will change Greenlandic climate diplomacy remains to be seen.

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