

TIMES EVOKE

GREENLAND: BREAKING THE ICE

Once upon a time, many imagined Greenland as a magically remote place. Covered in ancient ice, with freezing temperatures all year round and two months of constant, unblinking 'midnight sun' daylight, Greenland evoked mystical and mythical mysteries. Today, however, as Earth's largest island is in the eye of a global storm, modern similarities between Greenland and other locations are emerging.

It sits on top of the world but despite that, Greenland has not been spared any of history's ordeals. Starting with the Vikings in the 10th century, followed by Danish missionaries and traders massacring whales for blubber, Greenland's indigenous people suffered waves of colonisation. In the mid-20th century, the island was occupied by the United States in alliance with Denmark. After WWII, the Cold War saw the US and former USSR eyeball-to-eyeball in the Arctic, Washington using Greenland for strategic powerplay — in 1968, an 'Operation Chrome Dome' plane, carrying nuclear bombs, crashed, one of the bombs never being found. As militarisation expanded, indigenous people were forced off their lands, many unfairly removed, for instance, when the US expanded Pituffik Base in 1951 as part of its drive to protect freedom. Today, in Cold War II, Greenland has strategic importance — Washington's desire to 'get' Nuuk is seen as an effort to freeze out China, while, ironically, warming up to Russia.

Greenland faces another challenge — climate change, perhaps its deadliest yet, for its phantasm-like presence can neither be fully predicted, nor entirely prevented. Global heating, caused by humans burning fossil fuels, impacts the whole world — but it burns the Arctic most. As Earth warms, ancient ice in Greenland and Antarctica, which holds two-thirds of our planet's freshwater, is melting — Greenland is losing 267 billion tons annually. This meltwater has made global seas rise by eight inches, one-third coming from Greenland's thaw. This transformation of its ice to water links everyone to Greenland now, tied together in the tides of the Anthropocene, the era of uncaring human impacts on Earth. TE uses 'uncaring' thoughtfully, dear reader, for what else glimmers in the new race after Greenland's minerals but a frenzy for more extraction which will enrich a few and destroy many.

However, as Times Evoke's global experts emphasise, there is hope — this comes from empowering indigenous society. Holding tremendous reverence for nature and all beings, Greenland's First Nations are increasingly speaking for their ecosystems and beliefs. As they confront huge rapacious powers, it is vital the world hears their view, which is far more sustainable for all life. Join Times Evoke in exploring Greenland — it is much closer to you than imagined.

# 'Climate change is driving a new arms race, impacting Greenland and the US'

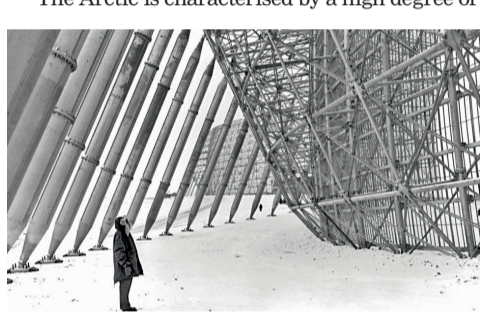
**Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen** is Associate Professor, Strategy Department, at the Danish Defence Academy. Speaking from Copenhagen to Srijana Mitra Das at Times Evoke, he explains Greenland heating up:

**What is the historical relationship between Denmark, Greenland — and the US?**

Greenland has been part of the kingdom of Denmark since the 14th century. It was effectively colonised in the 18th century by Danish missionaries and whalers. For a long time, Greenland was used for resource extraction by Denmark — it was a very isolated place. All that changed with World War II — Denmark was occupied by Germany. The United States took charge of Greenland — the Americans realised Greenland had strategic value and established Thule, renamed the Pituffik Space Base, where they have satellite receiver installations and a ballistic missile early warning radar. They didn't leave even after WWII though as in the Cold War, Greenland could be a staging ground against the Soviet Union for long-range bomber flights with nuclear weapons. The Arctic is characterised by a high degree of

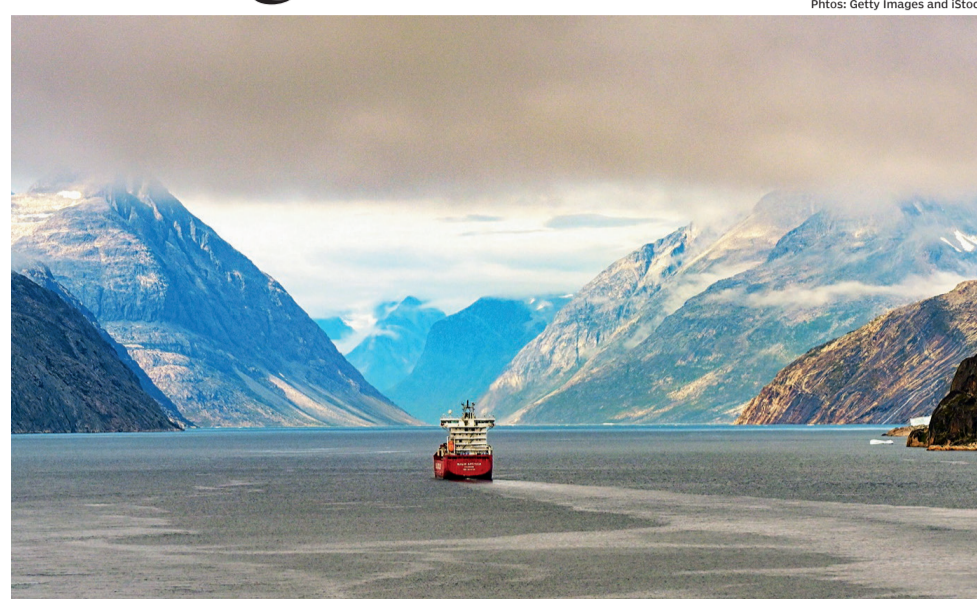


great power competition and the US had to maintain its presence — it de facto held control of the island, even though this was officially returned to Denmark after WWII. Today, Greenland is important also because of its mineral resources — and the US desire to prevent a Chinese presence there.



**COLD WARS:** Radar antennae at Thule/Pituffik Base

Could you elaborate on China's Arctic role? China doesn't have a military presence yet but it has Arctic investments and diplomacy — like India, China has observer status in the Arctic Council and scientific collaborations with Arctic states. The big fear in Washington is this leading towards a potential Chinese military presence. The US has tried to corral western Arctic states into limiting China's footprint but in Greenland, many Chinese have invested in mining, airports, satellite infrastructure, real estate, etc. That lasted until 2019 — since then, there hasn't been much effort by China here. China



**NOT SO ICE-OLATED NOW:** Once, ensconced in snow, Greenland remained cut-off for most — today, as global heating melts its ice, it faces opportunities like shipping (see below) as well as threats over its minerals

is possibly more interested in the Russian Arctic now as the Ukraine war makes Russia more willing to collaborate, which opens the door wider to Beijing.

**Are material interests involved?**

Greenland is home to a large amount of minerals — most importantly, it has many rare earth elements used in microchips, electric batteries, high-tech gadgets, etc. China holds a near-monopoly on the global supply of many of these. Hence, there is growing interest in Greenlandic mining. Thus far, it hasn't taken off since there is virtually no infrastructure and the climate makes it very expensive to establish projects.

Interestingly, while President Donald Trump talks about the 'mineral potential' in Greenland, US companies can already invest — the government is very open to outside investments, particularly from the US. These haven't come so far as local conditions

**THE HEAT IS ON**

and world market prices haven't allowed for profitable mining in Greenland — but, if the US wanted to encourage investments, the Greenlandic government will likely encourage that. Currently, all the Trump administration's goals — military access, mining opportunities and keeping the Chinese out — can be achieved by collaborating with Denmark and Greenland. The current arrangement is also beneficial for Washington as it doesn't have to pay for Greenlandic infrastructure — it costs upto \$1 billion a year to keep Greenlandic society afloat, which is covered by the Danish government. If the US were to take control of the island, it would have to pay this, while not gaining much that is new.

**Can you explain the role of shipping here?**

The Arctic is quite important for the shipping industry as it contains several lanes (see left) which can connect north-eastern Asia with Europe and the east coast of North America. There are three key passages — the first is the Northern Sea Route, sometimes called the Northeast Passage, which runs north of Russia. There is the Northwest Passage which runs through Canadian waters, down to North America. And there is the Transpolar Passage which runs between Europe and Asia, through the Bering Strait, right across the North Pole.



Currently, the Northeast Passage is the most viable — however, the amount of shipping going through here is small compared to the volumes travelling through the Suez Canal or the Strait of Malacca. The climate is harsh and only very particular ships can manage it — also, there is almost no transport infrastructure. So, shipping has some potential — but it likely won't overtake existing major routes.

**What is the role of climate change here?**

This is like a background variable — which is now altering some of the key dynamics in the region. Climate change is felt far more powerfully in the Arctic — studies show temperatures are rising here at four times the speed other regions are experiencing. This is making sea ice shrink — that opens sea links for part of the year, making the region more accessible. This poses opportunities for shipping, oil and gas drilling, mineral extraction, commercial fishing — and military expansion, both enabling the dispersal of forces while creating new vulnerabilities. To illustrate, the sea north of Russia has been opening over the last few decades — that has forced Russia to invest in more military presence as any great power cannot allow an ocean above it to yield and not put down more control. So, for defensive reasons, Russia has been increasing its bases, radar installations and landing strips into the Arctic — but this also has an offensive potential, enabling Russia against Western nations here. This forces them to react, creating an arms race in the region.

**What are the aspirations of Greenland's own people?**

The vast majority want to be independent from



**UP ABOVE THE WORLD:** US at its northernmost base

Denmark. Almost all members of the Greenlandic Parliament have independence as their goal — but they disagree on how fast they want this and what sacrifices to make to get there. Greenland doesn't have the administrative and economic capacities to become an independent state today. The majority want independence when the Greenlandic state develops this. That is clear from the recent election — parties favouring the status quo won.

Importantly, most Greenlanders say they don't want to become part of the US. Yet, the US government seems adamant on control. If America uses force, Denmark could do very little — but that would shatter the Western alliance completely. However, through consultations, if Greenland were to give the US greater presence, and Denmark were to invest more in Arctic military capabilities, President Trump could count that as a victory — currently, that is the best-case scenario for this region.

Photos: iStock

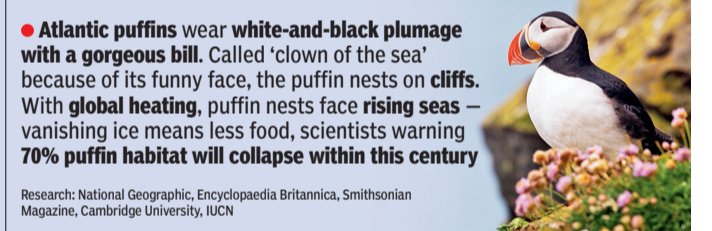


**ONCE, EARTH WAS A GREEN LAND...**

We think animals have been cruelly exploited only in our age — but Greenland's walrus were commercially hunted in the mid-12th century. Vikings attacked walrus for their ivory tusks, trading these with Western Europe which used them as ornaments and chess pieces. The Vikings were so relentless, walrus nearly went extinct — without them, the Vikings perished



Today, Greenland's animals face human-caused climate change. The Arctic fox has a wondrous white winter coat — turning grey in summer — which camouflages it in its icy habitat. However, as the region warms, Arctic tundra is retreating and trees are moving north, bringing red foxes. Twice the size of the Arctic fox, these outcompete them for prey — and often even kill the shy white fox



Atlantic puffins wear white-and-black plumage with a gorgeous bill. Called 'clown of the sea' because of its funny face, the puffin nests on cliffs. With global heating, puffin nests face rising seas — vanishing ice means less food, scientists warn 70% puffin habitat will collapse within this century

Research: National Geographic, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Smithsonian Magazine, Cambridge University, IUCN

## 'Arctic indigenous life and cosmologies face ice loss — and green colonialism'

**Klaus Dodds** is Executive Dean for the School of Life Sciences and Environment at Royal Holloway. He tells Srijana Mitra Das at TE about global heating in the Arctic:

Given how our conversation with Klaus Dodds progresses, it is perhaps fitting that the Royal Holloway professor sits in front of a dazzlingly white board. He is in a college room but he takes TE to the vast ice around Greenland, sheeting the entire Arctic — which is under existential threat today. When asked how climate change is impacting the top of Earth, Dodds states, 'The best way to start is to say the Arctic is no longer reliably frozen — earlier, we could say this region had short, intense summers and long, cold winters where ice was permanent. That became a reliable platform for humans and animals — this is no longer true and the implications are incredibly wide-ranging. First, if ice is no longer as stable, humans and animals, like polar bears and seals, can no longer travel over it safely or use it to find food or give birth, as seals do on ice platforms, if the ice is thinner.' It doesn't stop there. Dodds elaborates, 'Second, permafrost is no longer 'permanently frozen' — as it thaws, terrain subsides and buildings and infrastructure collapse. Alongside, coastal communities, which had a buffer of sea ice protecting them from storms, now confront violent waves and winds — in some cases, it's no longer possible to live in certain spots.'



The loss of ice is profound. But the same ice is imagined very differently in diverse narratives. TE asks Dodds about his writing



**IM-PERMAFROST:** Permafrost, spread over the Arctic, is ancient frozen ground — climate change is now making much of this terrain thaw, releasing massive amounts of both buried carbon as well as far more deadly methane, dangerously increasing global warming

**THE GREAT MELTDOWN**

a very special place — it is not considered an obstacle but an enabler. During winter, ice allows indigenous peoples to travel all over the Arctic. Secure ice was integral to

dog sledging — there were almost ice highways, trails running across the Arctic, where indigenous peoples could move from one part to another and retain community networks. That contrasts sharply with Westerners, who tend to think of ice as a problem, something that needs to be removed to make the Arctic 'better.'

Dodds pauses and resumes with an ironical expression, 'Now, it's interesting how all this Western interest in the Arctic pivots around ice loss. Suddenly, Westerners are going, 'Isn't it tragic that we're losing all this Arctic ice and the region is imperilled?' Before TE can feel some relief at this belated recognition, Dodds warns, 'I think this leads to the idea that Westerners are going to 'save' the Arctic and indigenous peoples need 'saving' — while, in fact, indigenous peoples have shown over millennia that they're able to adapt to the Arctic when its ice varied. Their cultural frameworks contain an extraordinary ability to live seasonally with ice and think of this as intimately connected with land, sea, air and all the living things that depend on it.' Studying relationships with ice, says Dodds, who predicts the growth of 'ice

humanities', reveals a lot. 'You discover this is far more than scientific. It's linked to histories, food and water security, identity, sport, culture — even cosmology.'

What about the ground beneath land ice? TE asks Dodds about what he terms 'the material geopolitics of frozen soils' in the Arctic. He explains, 'This largely means permafrost — again, indigenous and Western views on these soils vary. I'd include Russia in this. For the former Soviet Union, permafrost was seen as a mysterious obstacle, frustrating the plans of Stalin in particular to industrialise the Russian North and expand agriculture there. An idea formed that the Russian Arctic needed to be warmed, so permanently frozen ground could be thawed and used more 'productively'. Again, a big difference between indigenous and Western — including Russian — views is this idea of making the Arctic a 'more productive space'. Indigenous worldviews see productivity in the seas and ice there. Frozen land is considered invaluable because you can establish temporary settlements. In contrast, for Westerners, frozen ground has always been seen as an obstacle, something



**SUSTENANCE:** Inuit dry and store fish

that must be changed to become more advantageous.' Dodds adds this casually but it encompasses an entire world of history. 'There is this constant desire within Western worldviews to somehow make the Arctic something else.'

However, certain groups try to study the Arctic as it is. TE asks Dodds about scientific research in the most remote part of Earth. 'Until the recent breakdown between Russia and the West following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Arctic was fairly renowned for international scientific collaboration — Western scientists, for example, got access to the Russian Arctic which is 50% of the region. They could do important circumpolar studies with long-term environmental monitoring. This has helped our understanding of the changes affecting the Arctic. However, such collaboration is much harder now.' Dodds adds, 'But I predict China, India and Middle Eastern countries will become increasingly important scientific powers in this region.'

Science is intricately bound with technology though and the world is now hearing about how the Arctic — and Greenland — offers technological breakthroughs via mineral resources. Getting those minerals will involve the same drilling, mining and extractions which have denuded other parts of Earth. Can this region develop its own idea of sustainability? Dodds replies with alacrity, 'We must ask — who gets to define 'sustainability'? And what are we trying to sustain? Indigenous understandings of sustainability will look very different to what Arctic states might envision. For example, in Finland today, the indigenous Finnish Sami want to retain their autonomy over reindeer herding, etc. However, the government in Helsinki might say, with the Ukraine situation, Europe must end its dependency on Russian energy and increase mining and renewable energy production — and what better place than the Nordic Arctic with suitable weather? Hence, indigenous peoples are complaining these countries are conducting 'green colonialism', where environmental reasons are used as a proxy to exert control.'

As the whiteboard behind him remains resolutely icy, Dodds underlines his words verbally, 'Sustainability can therefore never be divorced from politics.'

**AS HOME CHANGES:** Global warming impacts reindeer



**READERS WRITE**

Dear Times Evoke, I deeply appreciated TE's Women's Day edition (8th March). Lori Gruen's interview, emphasising the importance of ecofeminism, truly broadened my horizons. It is remarkable how deeply speciesism and sexism are related, reflecting how the dominance of one over others is detrimental for Earth as a whole. Elise Pearlstine's evocative article instilled a new respect for nature's fragrances in me. I'm so grateful to TE for coalescing such insightful research!

— Riya Srivastava, Grade 12, Bengaluru

TE's insightful Women's Day edition illuminated how we should educate all about equal pay and equity of rights. As Mao put it, 'Women hold up half the sky'. Everybody on this planet holds equal rights and patriarchal hegemony should end. Further, raising ecocritical consciousness in heavily polluted urban contexts is essential. Thanks, TE and Lori Gruen, for explaining ecofeminism in simple, lucid terms.

— Sahil De, Kolkata

TE, all your interviews are treasures of knowledge! Sexism and speciesism are so powerfully linked, as explained by Professor Lori Gruen. Elise Pearlstine's insights were a real treat to read, discussing Cleopatra's Mendesian perfume, containing myrrh, cinnamon and dates. We readers could know about this only through this prodigious TE interview! Kudos for such beautiful pages, TE!

— MK Goel, Delhi

I read TE on women's bonds with nature's fragrances with interest and wondered if men respond similarly. A keen horticulturalist, till now, I've planted diverse kinds of fruit trees in my garden but after reading TE, I'll plant fragrant flora like jasmine, lavender, etc. Let me share my experiment's results with TE in one year from now!

— Sudeep Sharma, Jaipur

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