

The crisis over Greenland: Denmark's response to Trump

Piotr Szymański

On 28 January, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin, French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris, and NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte in Brussels. Her diplomatic tour was preceded by consultations with the leaders of the Nordic countries. The Danish government remains in contact with other European leaders and the European Commission. This intensified diplomatic activity is linked to a crisis in Denmark's relations with the United States, its most important ally, which has escalated over President Donald Trump's ambitions to take control of Greenland, an autonomous part of the Kingdom of Denmark. On 15 January, Frederiksen and Trump held a phone conversation which, according to media leaks, was heated.

Denmark's strategy in response to US pressure over Greenland is multi-layered. It includes increasing investment in the island's defence, involving NATO in the Arctic, easing tensions with Washington, demonstrating European unity, and expanding Greenland's competences in foreign and security policy. Alongside this, Copenhagen is preparing for a prolonged diplomatic effort, maintaining a firm stance towards Trump while simultaneously expressing support for Greenland's right to self-determination.

Commentary

- **Trump appears determined to work towards gaining control over Greenland and exerting pressure on Copenhagen.** His first administration had already explored the possibility of acquiring the island from Denmark in 2019 (see '[Wrestling in Greenland. Denmark, the United States and China in the land of ice](#)'). Trump argues that gaining control over Greenland is necessary to counter China and Russia more effectively in the Arctic. However, the United States already maintains a military presence on the island, notably through Pituffik Space Base, which houses a radar station for early warning against intercontinental ballistic missiles. The US can also expand its presence under the 1951 agreement with Denmark on the defence of Greenland. Trump's pressure on Copenhagen may, therefore, suggest other objectives, such as building his political legacy or securing access to Greenland's natural resources. The president has not dismissed the possibility of using economic leverage against Denmark, including tariffs and an import ban on Danish products. There is also media speculation about suspending Denmark's participation in the F-35 fighter jet programme, similar to the US decision regarding Turkey in 2019. Trump's maximalist approach could be part of a long-term strategy aimed at supporting Greenland's independence, combined with an offer of an association agreement with the United States directed at the island's authorities.

- **Prime Minister Frederiksen's diplomatic efforts aim to demonstrate European support for Denmark's territorial integrity while also reassuring the Danish public and opposition of her government's proactive stance.** At the same time, Copenhagen seeks to defuse tensions with Washington and has reportedly urged its European allies to respond cautiously and avoid raising the issue of Greenland publicly. Officially, the Danish government expresses its commitment to closer cooperation with the United States in the Arctic, emphasising America's role in Greenland's security. Denmark also appears to be advocating for greater NATO involvement in the region, possibly through naval patrols and airspace policing. Meanwhile, Copenhagen continues to increase its military presence in Greenland. On 27 January, it approved an additional €2 billion in Arctic defence spending, originally announced in December 2024. This includes the construction of three polar patrol vessels (which were initially to be designed for the Baltic Sea) and the purchase of two additional long-range UAVs, bringing the total to four. The situation surrounding Greenland may also influence Denmark's position on increasing the EU budget for defence. A more ambitious EU budget could also secure larger funds for Greenland. Under the current 2021–2027 financial framework, Greenland, as a territory associated with the EU, receives €225 million, primarily for education. At the same time, Copenhagen is prepared to make concessions on key issues important to Nuuk to maintain the union. In December 2024, it was agreed that the Kingdom's ambassador for Arctic affairs will be appointed by Greenland's government and that Greenland will represent the Kingdom of Denmark in the Arctic Council during the Danish chairmanship, which starts in May.
- **Greenland will attempt to leverage Trump's interest to enhance its economic cooperation with the United States and negotiate further concessions from Copenhagen to expand its autonomy, ultimately aiming for future full independence from Denmark.** Both sides still have significant room for manoeuvre in this regard. For example, a constitutional reform in Denmark could enable Greenland to adopt its own constitution, the draft of which Nuuk presented in 2023. In pursuing independence, Greenland seeks to avoid a binary choice between Denmark and the United States. Despite frequent dissatisfaction with Copenhagen, an overwhelming majority of its residents (85% according to January polls) oppose the idea of joining the US and reject Trump's rhetoric about purchasing the island. Greenlanders are also against the militarisation of the island and large-scale mining projects. In the run-up to local parliamentary election planned for early April at the latest, the Greenlandic campaign will certainly involve discussions on a possible independence referendum, as well as the benefits of remaining in union with Denmark. However, the increasingly unstable international environment decreases the likelihood of holding such a referendum in the near future.