

US-Denmark-Greenland: current state of play and future scenarios

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On 14 January, the United States, Denmark, and Greenland held trilateral consultations in Washington, attended by Vice President J.D. Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and the foreign ministers of Denmark and Greenland, Lars Løkke Rasmussen and Vivian Motzfeldt, respectively. According to the Danish–Greenlandic side, the discussions proceeded in a positive and constructive atmosphere but failed to resolve the fundamental differences. The Trump administration continues to pursue control over the island, while respect for territorial integrity and Greenland’s right to self-determination remains a ‘red line’ for the Kingdom of Denmark. The parties agreed to continue negotiations within a dedicated working group. The US has not commented on the meeting; however, President Trump, in a social media post, reiterated his view that the country needs to acquire Greenland, citing threats posed by Russia and China. The trilateral talks followed an escalation of US rhetorical pressure concerning the acquisition of Greenland in the immediate aftermath of the successful US operation in Venezuela.

The talks in Washington may temporarily ease tensions surrounding the island. However, the issue of its future is very likely to remain on the president’s agenda and further strain Danish-US and European-US relations, sustaining a sense of uncertainty in Europe. Following recent tensions, European allies are expected to increase their military activity in Greenland in 2026, with the aim of demonstrating to the United States that the island is adequately defended.

United States: the Greenland odyssey

During his first term (2016–20), Trump intensified US engagement in the Arctic. This policy was partly reflected in actions concerning Greenland, such as blocking a Chinese bid to invest in local airports in 2018, proposing the purchase of the island in 2019, and opening a consulate in Nuuk in 2020. Moreover, between 2019 and 2021, the US Department of Defense and individual branches of the US armed forces adopted dedicated Arctic strategies. During Trump’s second term, the United States has launched a programme to expand its icebreaker fleet in cooperation with Finland and Canada, while increasing its rhetorical pressure regarding Greenland. This approach stems from the belief held by the president and his inner circle that competition with Russia and China in the polar regions is intensifying, and that the Arctic will play a growing role in global maritime trade and resource extraction as the Arctic ice continues to melt.

Under the current Realm's arrangement, Denmark is responsible for the island's defence policy. Greenland is an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, similar to the Faroe Islands, and its public sector is subsidised through the central government budget. The United States effectively enjoys freedom to shape its military presence in Greenland under a 1951 defence agreement with the Kingdom of Denmark, which was amended in 2004. At present, the US maintains a single military installation on the island: the Pituffik Space Force Base.

Possible scenarios

It cannot be entirely ruled out that current US pressure is intended to motivate Denmark, Europe, and Canada to increase their military activity in the Arctic, aimed at monitoring Russia's Northern Fleet, particularly its strategic submarines, and perhaps the Chinese Navy in the future. Vice President Vance's remarks on 8 January calling for greater involvement by European allies in Greenland, align with this interpretation.

However, if Trump's statements are taken literally, his team aims at gaining control of the island. This appears to reflect the president's ambition to build a political legacy through US territorial expansion and also aligns with his administration's strategic objective of asserting US dominance in the Western Hemisphere. One of the most vocal 'hawks' advocating this approach is Stephen Miller, White House Deputy Chief of Staff and Homeland Security Adviser. In December 2025, Trump appointed Louisiana Governor Jeff Landry as his special envoy for Greenland, tasking him with 'drawing' the island closer to the United States.

Washington could work towards this outcome by supporting Greenland's pursuit of independence through measures such as developing bilateral cooperation, encouraging US investment, particularly in the mining sector, fostering a pro-American political bloc in Nuuk, and presenting an attractive offer for an association agreement with the United States. Denmark would be unable to block this process, having granted Greenland the right to self-determination in 2009. However, this strategy would extend well beyond the timeframe of Trump's second term and should therefore be considered politically unsatisfactory.

A forcible takeover and *de facto* occupation of the island appear less likely, as such an operation would entail significant reputational costs for the United States and trigger a major crisis within NATO and in transatlantic relations. A military intervention would also carry serious domestic implications: it lacks public support (even among Republican voters, only 8% of respondents expressed approval for such a move in a recent Ipsos poll) and would face opposition in Congress, which – as in the case of the operation in Venezuela – would seek to defend its authority to declare war and authorise the use of military force.

The US narrative also includes a proposal to purchase the island. The last transaction of this kind occurred in 1916, during the colonial era, when Denmark sold the Virgin Islands to the United States. Today, however, the Greenlanders' right to self-determination excludes the possibility of Denmark ceding the island in exchange for payment, particularly given that Greenland, which enjoys broad autonomy, has unequivocally rejected any prospect of joining the United States. Moreover, Congress would most likely vote to block any attempt to turn the island into a US territory, following a fierce internal debate over the legitimacy of such a move. In an election year dominated by cost-of-living issues and broader economic concerns, a discussion about the financial burden of administering Greenland would be

politically damaging for the Republican party.

Denmark: the Commonwealth at a crossroads

Faced with mounting US pressure over Greenland during Trump's second term, Denmark has expanded its existing strategy for managing crises in its relations with Washington. Initially, following its refusal to enter talks on selling the island in 2019, the Danish government opted to maintain close allied cooperation with the United States and sought to meet US expectations by tightening controls on foreign investment in Greenland, bolstering its military presence in the Arctic, and increasing expenditures for Greenland's defence. This included upgrading military infrastructure, enhancing capabilities for maritime patrol and airspace surveillance, and introducing voluntary military training for Greenlandic residents.

Simultaneously, in an effort to strengthen ties with the island, the Danish government began addressing Greenland's long-standing demands for greater authority in foreign and security policy – areas managed by Copenhagen. It established new consultation mechanisms and granted Greenland a leading role in the Kingdom's Arctic policy, while also taking steps to resolve sensitive issues in bilateral relations. During Trump's second term, this strategy has been complemented by efforts to mobilise diplomatic support in Europe in defence of the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Denmark and to encourage allies to increase their military presence on the island. On 15 January, Denmark deployed an additional group of soldiers to Greenland, joined by officers from seven other NATO countries (Sweden, Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, and Finland), totalling several dozen personnel. Their task is to familiarise themselves with conditions on the ground and to develop plans for an enhanced programme of military exercises and activities in Greenland for 2026, codenamed Arctic Endurance. In 2025, Denmark also sought to defuse the Greenland issue through diplomatic efforts aimed at President Trump's inner circle and key figures within the Republican Party, partly through the use of lobbying firms.

In addition, Denmark is likely to pursue a strategy of 'playing for time' until the end of Trump's presidency, coordinating its position more closely with the Greenlandic government while emphasising national unity and signalling a strong willingness to accommodate US interests on the island. At present, Danish–US military cooperation continues as usual. Last October, the US Air Force conducted exercises in Greenland; in late September and early October, US troops joined a coalition of allied forces tasked with securing the EU leaders' summit in Copenhagen against drone threats. In 2025, Denmark decided to purchase an additional 16 F-35 fighter jets. In December, the US Department of State issued four separate approvals for Denmark's acquisition of US-made military equipment, including the P-8 maritime patrol aircraft designed for anti-submarine warfare.

Greenland: no place like home

While the Kingdom's foreign and security policy *remains* a prerogative of Denmark, Greenland holds certain powers in this area and manages its external relations within the scope of its autonomy, for example by negotiating trade and fisheries agreements. For the local government, foreign policy has traditionally served as a means of advancing the goal of independence – diversifying the island's dependence on Denmark by developing international ties, primarily with the United States. Greenland's policy of leveraging Danish

and American interests to expand its autonomy and secure economic benefits has now run its course, in light of repeated US statements about acquiring the island. Over the past year, the local political majority has coalesced around support for closer cooperation with Copenhagen and the unity of the Kingdom, adopting a more pragmatic approach to independence, perceived as a long-term process. This shift stems from public opposition to US proposals to purchase or annex the territory, as evidenced by protests that took place in March 2025 and January 2026. At the same time, in seeking to reduce its economic dependence on Denmark, Greenland continues to express its openness to cooperation with Washington, hoping to attract investment in the mining sector, tourism, and connectivity.

From Nuuk's perspective, Greenlandic-US relations to date have been marked by a disconnect between Washington's narrative of the island's strategic importance and its limited interest in acquiring local extraction licences, developing maritime and air connections, or increasing the number of US troops on the ground. Greenland is unlikely to object to an increased US or allied military presence on the island, even if such a move provokes socio-political controversy, given that the island's residents remain opposed to the militarisation of the Arctic. Rising US pressure on Greenland could trigger a domestic debate about joining the European Union. The island is currently associated with the EU as an overseas territory. After gaining home rule in 1979, it withdrew from the European Communities in 1985, primarily to pursue an independent fisheries policy and assert its distinct identity from Denmark.

Note: for more information and analysis on the most recent developments over Greenland see '[Trump escalates dispute over Greenland by targeting European allies with tariffs](#)'.