

Reinventing the wheel: the US–Denmark–Greenland agreement

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On 22 September, after eight months of negotiations, the governments of the United States, the Kingdom of Denmark and Greenland concluded an arrangement supplementing the 1951 Agreement on the Defence of Greenland between Denmark and the US. The document confirms unimpeded US military access to the island, including the right to expand and modernise Pituffik Space Base and establish additional defence areas (bases) in Narsarsuaq and Mestersvig. The parties may propose the development of new military infrastructure, although any such projects will require trilateral consultations. The agreement formally prohibits non-NATO countries from maintaining a persistent military presence or constructing military installations in Greenland. Military bases will be subject to enhanced counter-intelligence safeguards. Foreign direct investment in particularly sensitive sectors, including critical infrastructure and mining, from countries outside NATO (with the exception of NATO partners) and the EU will require special screening and authorisation. The agreement will enter into force following its approval by the Danish and Greenlandic parliaments.

The agreement is a compromise that all three sides can present as a success and is likely to bring an end to transatlantic tensions over Greenland. Washington has reaffirmed its control over the island's security at a time of growing international interest in the Arctic, although this already follows, both *de jure* and *de facto*, from existing agreements and the way they have been implemented. Copenhagen has safeguarded the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Denmark. For Nuuk, the key provisions concern the right to self-determination.

Commentary

- **For the US, the agreement confirms Greenland's place within the North American security space amid growing Russian and Chinese activity in the Arctic.** It also secures a role for Greenland in the future multi-layered missile defence system known as the Golden Dome. The planned expansion of the US military presence on the island, although far more limited than during the Cold War, is consistent with Donald Trump's personal interest in the Arctic, which is also reflected in the investments in the US icebreaker fleet. Ahead of the US midterm elections, Trump is likely to present the agreement as evidence that he has achieved his objectives for Greenland without having to purchase the island. The president also needed a foreign-policy success that could at least partly shift attention away from the protracted war with Iran. According to the latest CNN poll, only 29% of Americans approve of his handling of foreign policy.

- **The United States has suffered significant reputational damage in Denmark and Greenland, as well as among its other allies.** Any attempt by Washington to pursue Greenland's association with the US would face strong opposition from Greenlanders. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's pragmatic approach most likely helped secure a deal that largely reaffirms the existing status quo on Greenland and established practice of trilateral cooperation within NATO. The document was framed as an update to the 1951 accord to avoid a vote in the Senate. Under the US Constitution, the president negotiates treaties, but their ratification requires the consent of at least two-thirds of senators present. Given that Trump's policy towards Greenland and Denmark has been criticised by both Democrats and some Republicans, putting a new treaty to a Senate vote could have jeopardised the potential political gains ahead of the midterm elections.
- **For Copenhagen, resolving the dispute over Greenland means above all preserving the Kingdom's territorial integrity and its status as an Arctic state. Denmark has demonstrated that a small state, through skilful use of diplomatic and military instruments, can safeguard its core interests in dealing with a major power.** From Copenhagen's perspective, defusing the crisis with its most important ally also removes a source of tension within NATO. Given the limited strength of Denmark's land forces, maintaining a battalion-sized force in remote Greenland to demonstrate to the US its commitment to the island's defence – at the expense, for example, of its ability to reinforce its contingent in Latvia – would have been difficult to sustain in the long term. The tensions over Greenland also brought Copenhagen and Nuuk closer together, an important development given their often difficult relations in the past. Without close cooperation between Denmark and Greenland, the Trump administration would have had greater scope to play them off against each other in trilateral negotiations.
- **Greenland hopes the accord will ease tensions with the US and bring an end to pressure from the Trump administration.** The new framework includes a number of provisions favourable to Nuuk concerning environmental protection and the preservation of the traditional Inuit way of life, as well as the prospect of economic benefits from an expanded US military presence on the island. Of fundamental importance to Nuuk is Washington's unequivocal recognition of Greenland's right to self-determination. At the same time, the Greenlandic government has committed to honouring the accord – including its restrictions on foreign investment – and to remaining in NATO should the island become independent, a prospect that currently appears unlikely. Greenland also expects the heightened interest in the island to encourage new mining projects and boost tourism.