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THE ARCTIC GREENLAND CAUGHT IN THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN MAJOR POWERS

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Denmark, an Arctic Power, but for How Much longer?

Whether President Trump likes it or not, Greenland is not “for sale”, but while Greenlanders are dreaming of their independence from Denmark, the island is the focus of strategic competition between major powers.

Despite the distance between Greenland and Denmark - about 3532 km between their respective capitals - Greenland has been politically associated with Denmark (and the kingdom of Norway) for more than a millenium. The first humans to set foot on Greenland arrived some 4,000-5,000 years ago from the North American continent via Canada, after the sea freeze in the narrow strait at Thule in Northern Greenland. No less than six different Inuit cultures have migrated in separate waves. Greenland’s current population is descended from the last migration, the Thule culture, beginning from AD 1200s.



The Danish Realm (Kingdom of Denmark) consists of three constituent geographically dispersed territories: the metropolitan Denmark (Copenhagen, 55° North), the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic (Tórshavn, 62° North) and Greenland in the Arctic (Nuuk, 64° North). *Credit: Wikimedia Commons.*

‘Denmark is an Arctic State but the arcticness of the Danish Realm rests solely with Greenland’.

At the same time, Norsemen led by the Norwegian Viking, Erik the Red, settled in Southern Greenland. This Norse population disappeared around AD 1500 for reasons that have never been fully explained. Today’s Denmark – including its North Atlantic and Arctic parts – is internationally recognized, free from factual or legal challenge as to what comprises “The Danish Realm” (the Kingdom of Denmark): Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Denmark proper. Greenland became officially part of the kingdom following a new constitution which Denmark adopted in 1953. In 1954, Greenland was removed from the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories by the United Nations General Assembly after receiving a constitutional status for Greenland within the Kingdom of Denmark. Greenland was no longer a colony. At that time, there were, however, some UN member States that were uncomfortable with the fact that Greenlandic people had not been consulted on the new constitution. Yet, as early as in 1916, the United States’ government formally had recognized Danish sovereignty over Greenland through the handover (sale) of the Danish Virgin Islands to the US in 1917.



| Part | Area km ² | % | Population | % | Density |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Denmark | 42.926 | 1.94 | 5,998,205 | 98.18% | 135.74 per km ² |
| Faroe Islands | 1.396 | 0.06 | 54,684 | 0.89% | 39.17 per km ² |
| Greenland | 2.166.086 | 98 | 56,542 | 0.93% | 0.03 per km ² |
| Entire realm | 2.210.408 mio km² | 100% | 6,109,431 mio | 100% | 2.76 per km² |

Fig. 1: Area and population of the Danish Realm (March 2025). *Source: The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021), updated by the author.*

As shown in fig. 1, there are vast differences between the three nations when it comes to size and population density. As well, the nations of the Realm are greatly distanced from one another; Denmark is part of the European continent, the Faroe Islands are a community in the North Atlantic and Greenland is an Arctic nation. The climatic conditions also vary dramatically, making movements in, around and above Greenland challenging and highly weather dependent.

Both Greenland and the Faroe Islands are entitled to a high degree of autonomy regarding many policy areas. The legal framework respectively allows the Faroese and Greenland authorities to assume all fields of responsibility apart from the Constitution, Supreme court, exchange rate and monetary policy, citizenship matters, foreign policy and – most importantly for the subject at hand - defence and security policy. These fields remain under

the auspices of the central government in Copenhagen. This also means that neither Greenland nor the Faroe Islands hold any national defence forces; instead, Denmark provides all security and defence capabilities and perform all such tasks in, around and above the two nations. Denmark supports both nations financially via so-called “annual block grants”. In 2024, the support for Greenland measured approximately 576 million Euros. In addition to the block grant there is the value of services like defence and justice that amounted to more than 150 million Euros in 2024. The block grant alone constituted approximately 1/3 of Greenland’s public income in 2024.

Both the Faroe Islands and Greenland have the right to obtain full independence. This requires a simple majority by a national referendum in the nation as well as the subsequent approval by the Danish Parliament. So far it is generally accepted that the Danish Parliament would not object to a Greenlandic or Faroese vote for full independence. However, in the case of independence, the block grants from Copenhagen would be phased out.

Russia’s unprovoked and illegitimate attack on sovereign Ukraine has shown that the possibility that Russia might act violently elsewhere can no longer be excluded. Russia’s rearmament of its Arctic capabilities, which began well before 2022, as well as the strengthening of its Arctic bases and infrastructures, have heightened concerns over Russia’s intentions. While no one disputes Russia’s rightful status as a true Arctic power, it’s behavior calls for increased vigilance regarding security in and around Greenland. This is why Denmark has decided to dramatically increase its military capabilities in the Arctic. In January 2025, Denmark Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen clearly stated: *“We must face the fact that there are serious challenges regarding security and defence in the Arctic and North Atlantic”* followed by Greenland Minister (*Naalakkersuisoq*) of Foreign Affairs Vivian Motzfeldt statement: *“Greenland is facing a changing security landscape”*.

Military presence in the Arctic is also necessary for reasons other than defence. Due to vast distances and rough weather, military assistance is frequently required in search and rescue operations, fishery inspections, border control, medical evacuation etc. Climate change and sea ice retreat generate increased commercial and touristic traffic around the island, and a more hazardous everyday environment for the Greenlandic population. A potential increase in the extraction of natural resources in Greenland, such as minerals, rare earths etc., is also on the agenda. Both weather and geology in and around Greenland are extreme and it will require huge investments in infrastructure to search for and potentially exploit such resources. Most importantly, it is Greenland and its population who own the full rights to their own underground and its potential resources. Although the Greenlandic government,

the Naalakkersuisut, has clearly indicated its openness to foreign – including US – investments and cooperation, this will be held within the frames of what is deemed environmentally, financially and socially sustainable for the Greenlandic people.

Security and defence of Greenland is an integral mandate for the Danish armed forces, primarily carried out by units of the Royal Danish Navy and the Royal Danish Air Force, led from the Joint Arctic Command headquarters in the Greenlandic capital, Nuuk. Historically, the military tasks have focused on claiming and demonstrating national sovereignty in, around and above Greenland. The Greenlandic landmass is so vast that no one – not even the US - would be able to provide a 360-degrees and 24/7 “bullet proof” defence around it. The fact is, however, that trying to invade, conquer and hold the entire Greenlandic landmass would be not only impossible, but also useless for any attacker.



Fig. 2: The Danish Defence Current Mission. *Source: The Danish Ministry of Defence (2025).*

Figure 2 shows the Danish armed forces general approach. The composition of different capacities may vary over the year, but all year round there will be armed icebreaking vessels in the waters surrounding Greenland, dog sled patrols surveilling vast parts of the uninhabited North-East Greenland as well as surveillance of the air and surface conducted by aircraft and radar stations. In addition, there are intermittent deployments of F-35 combat aircrafts and non-Arctic frigates in the region. Facing the increased risks in the region, Denmark – in cooperation with the Greenlandic and Faroese governments - decided on two major additional investments in the security and defence of Greenland. The first capability investment package was adopted in 2021, the second in January 2025. Altogether, the value of both packages amounts to approximately 2 billion euros. As shown in fig. 3, the investments include a broad variety of capabilities, among others but not limited to, a replacement of the Arctic inspection vessels, new long-range drones, radar

installations, satellite surveillance etc. Among these initiatives already successfully implemented, is basic military training of voluntary Greenlandic men and women (Greenlandic and Faroese men are exempt from general conscription as opposed to Danish men). However, the material investments take time to implement – in some cases many years. Therefore, the investments are not expected to be fully implemented until 2033. That said, no one can claim that Denmark is not investing in its Arctic responsibilities.



Fig. 3: The Arctic Capability Package 2021-2025. Source: *The Danish Ministry of Defence (2025).*

For several reasons, Greenland is vital to the US. Greenland is considered a part of the North American continent yet, as we saw previously, in 1916 the US formally acknowledged Danish sovereignty over Greenland. Further, the Danish-Greenlandic unity was established many centuries before the US even existed. However, the Monroe doctrine makes it clear that the US will not allow a handover of territories in the US sphere of interest, which is basically the Western hemisphere, from one State to another, without US acceptance. This doctrine was created to counter European colonialism, but it is still of valid use to the US regarding threats from China and Russia. Consequently, the United States would never accept another power to take control over Greenland. This is undoubtedly why they are concerned by Greenland's ambitions to break free from Denmark and become independent. In addition, the US has greatly benefited from its military bases in Greenland since World War II. In 1941, the Danish Ambassador in Washington, Henrik Kauffmann who acted without a mandate from Denmark which was occupied by Germany at the time, signed an agreement with the US Government allowing it to establish military bases on

Greenland in order to facilitate and sustain the ongoing war in the North Atlantic and Europe.

In 1951, the agreement was turned into a proper Defence Treaty between Denmark and the US, providing the latter, *“for its public vessels and aircraft and its armed forces and vehicles, the right of free access to and movement between the defence areas through Greenland, including territorial waters, by land, air and sea”* (Art. V-3). By virtue of the Defence of Greenland Agreement, *“the Government of the United States of America is entitled within such defence area and the air spaces and waters adjacent (...) to construct, install, maintain, and operate facilities and equipment, including meteorological and communications facilities and equipment, and to store supplies »* (Art. II, 3.b.ii). To note that, the 1951 agreement was renewed and amended in 2004, expanding the cooperation from defence to a diverse range of policy areas including energy and mining sector, tourism, trade and investment, etc. One of the US bases is the Pituffik Space Base, formerly known as “Thule Air Base” (Fig. 2). From here the US operates a huge intercontinental ballistic missile detection radar. Pituffik is the only remaining US-operated military base in Greenland. Over the years, the US has chosen to decrease its military presence dramatically from approximately 10.000 troops during the Cold War to nearly 200 remaining at present.

An important point is that the US has all necessary formal rights to increase its military presence in Greenland within the framework of the existing agreement. It does not have to “own Greenland” to do so. As well, over the past 84 years, collaboration between the Danish, Greenlandic and US authorities – not only regarding the security forces - has worked very smoothly and constructively together. In addition, both the Danish and the Greenlandic governments have clearly declared their willingness to maintain their continued cooperation with the US on security and defence matters. So why, in spite of this, has the new US administration been so offensive through their comments on a possible “takeover of Greenland”? The two explicit US objectives – security and natural resources – are already available to the US within the current relations between the countries.

Greenland has a strong and clear vision of one day achieving full independence. The people of Greenland, the majority being Inuit, is culturally and linguistically different from the population of Denmark proper. In addition, over many years, Denmark has neglected to pay proper attention to Greenland; not in terms of economy, but in terms of not properly handling the “clash” between two highly different cultures and not creating a better understanding of Greenland in the mindset of the Danes. And like the US, Denmark has neglected to sustain and adapt its defence capabilities in Greenland to the required level. This is about to change with the new defence capability packages adopted by the Danish

government, but such steps take time to implement. It is therefore understandable that the Greenlandic people have an ambition to one day stand on their own feet. How realistic is this ambition? While Greenland is the world's largest island and constitutes 98% of the territory of the Danish Realm, its population is only some 56.500 and is sparsely dispersed. This in itself would not necessarily be an obstacle for full sovereignty – as there are independent states elsewhere on the globe with even smaller populations. Greenland is not only geographically immense, above all, it finds itself in a highly geo-strategically prominent position: the island is a focus of geopolitical competition and growing confrontation between major rival powers – the United States, Russia and China. Greenland has high strategic importance, due to its proximity to the emerging Arctic shipping routes, its strategic location in relation to security and defence activities, and its vast untapped natural resources. In the case of full independence, Greenland could not hide under the radar. Greenland would have to generate the full spectrum of capabilities to maneuver within the fields of foreign and domestic policy, diplomacy, economy and perhaps, most importantly, defence and security. A challenge for a country of this size, would be to generate enough well-educated and experienced talents to occupy all the vital positions for public service, international diplomacy, politics, military, police, justice, healthcare, banks, finance, science, universities, schools, etc. Particularly for a country in a region surrounded by competing powers all with their greedy eyes on you. Consequently, the US will never accept an entirely independent Greenland, because it would constitute a defence and security vacuum that would lie unprotected against Russian or Chinese expansion of interests. This would decisively violate the Monroe doctrine. Hence, Greenland will always need a partner – or more partners for that matter. So, if Greenland should choose to no longer have Denmark as its partner, then who should step in? It is neither surprising nor unreasonable that shifting US administrations maintain an interest in securing influence in Greenland. But the highly offensive approach of the new US administration is like kicking in an open door since they already have the formal rights to step up their military presence in Greenland as much as they deem needed. Secondly, the Greenlandic government has openly declared its interest in cooperating with the US in a variety of areas, including the development of mutually beneficial and environmentally sustainable extraction of resources. So why this brutal US approach and particularly against a loyal ally? I can think of several reasons. One would be President Trump's desire to appear as a strong leader in the eyes of his voters. One way of doing so is to wave the imperialistic flag against weaker neighboring nations like Greenland, Canada and Panama. Another reason would be an attempt to divert focus away from interior problems in the US society by constructing exterior problems instead. This is a classic strategy by some State leaders, for example, the

one applied by President Putin in the case of Ukraine. A third reason would be that the new US president dislikes alliances. Sticking to the existing defence agreement with Denmark and Greenland would imply that the US had to coordinate and negotiate with Denmark/Greenland in a mutually respectful way. Apparently, it is more convenient “to own” and to answer to no one. A fourth reason seems to be that of a vendetta against Denmark. President Trump has not forgotten what he saw as a humiliation in 2019 when, during his first term in office, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, a Social Democrat, abruptly turned down Donald Trump’s proposal to “buy Greenland”. Ms. Frederiksen – who is still in office in Denmark – retorted with the statement that in our time, States no longer “buy” other countries and that in any case, Greenland was not “for sale”. This position was and is still fully supported by the Greenlandic government: “*We are open for business, but we’re not for sale*”, said the Greenland's foreign minister Ane Lone Bagger in 2019.

So far, the un-charming US campaign to “takeover” or “own” Greenland has been counterproductive. In fact, the Greenlandic population and the new Greenlandic government formed after the election in March this year, have sent strong messages that under no circumstances does Greenland wish to become an US State or territory. In actuality, the undiplomatic and brutal approach by the new US administration has only caused Denmark and Greenland to now stand closer together than before. Who knows? Perhaps it was the aim of the US administration that Denmark take on a more responsible role as Greenland’s partner. The answer is blowing in the wind, but as it happens, this seems to be what Denmark is about to do. Although President Trump has not excluded the use of military force, I still find it difficult to imagine the US invading old faithful allies. After all, they should understand that it is completely in their best-interest to have a friendly and stable Western world. A truly elegant solution would be if NATO took on more responsibility regarding the High North, setting up proper force objectives and making proper plans for the defence of Greenland. This should satisfy the US legitimate concerns for Arctic security. Besides these security interests, President Trump may instead be attempting to secure US access to Greenland's natural resources and the island itself. But this as well would have a much greater chance of success if the US administration would approach the issue in a diplomatically and friendly way.

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