

## Between Trump's symbolic claims, Denmark's Arctic quest and Greenland's fight for full independence: Who does Greenland belong to?

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On 27 August, tensions arose between the US and Denmark when the US Charge d'affaires was summoned.<sup>1</sup> This followed a Danish intelligence report found US-linked personnel engaged in influence operations in Greenland. These operations reportedly aimed to promote secession from Denmark and its accession to the US. Denmark's Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen condemned the move, calling it a violation of international norms and stating that it was "unacceptable" to interfere in Denmark's internal affairs. In response, the White House urged Denmark to "calm down," and the US government said that it does not have direct control over the actions of private individuals and that it respected the right of Greenlanders to choose their future.<sup>2</sup> The event shows the increasing tension between the US and Denmark over

Greenland since US President Donald Trump reiterated a controversial claim to buy Greenland after the 2024 reelection.<sup>3</sup> Greenlanders remain caught between the aspiration for full independence and the realities of Arctic geopolitics dominated by great powers. The paper analyses the geopolitical background and legal context of Greenland, and examines the interests of the US and Denmark in order to answer the question: Who does Greenland really belong to?

### **Geostrategic and geopolitical background**

Greenland borders were established before World War II through physical demarcation rather than colonial claims, arbitration or geopolitical changes. In 1814, after the Treaty of Kiel, Denmark

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian. (2025). Denmark summons U.S. diplomat over alleged Greenland influence campaign. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/27/denmark-summons-us-diplomat-over-alleged-greenland-influence-campaign>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P. 1

<sup>3</sup> The Arctic Institute. (2019, August 22). *Trump sparks renewed interest in Greenland: Greenland belongs to the people of Greenland.* <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/trump-sparks-renewed-interest-greenland-greenland-belongs-people-greenland/>

retained sovereign control over Greenland after Norway's separation. However, continued exploitation of Norwegian settlers and subsequent capture of a part of East Greenland prompted Denmark to contest the issue before the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ). The ruling assured full sovereign control to Denmark which has been ruling since 1933.<sup>4</sup> This established Greenland's territorial integrity bordered by the Arctic and North Atlantic oceans and ended the competing claims among European states. While the legal sovereignty had gained ground, the maritime borders were growing significantly especially for the Atlantic power. During the interwar period (1918-1939), the US began to view the Arctic as not a distant border but part of "Arctic Mediterranean." It was seen as a link between the North Atlantic and polar regions. This was vouched by two American geopoliticians, Nicholas Spykman and William H. Seward who argued for acquiring Alaska and

Greenland as key for project power (to control aviation and maritime routes) through the Arctic.<sup>5</sup> By the end of 1930, Denmark controlled Greenland via de jure sovereignty while Greenland's strategic borders were expanding according to the US. The dual status of legal hold by a European state along with the US strategic access became the start point for Greenland's prewar boundary.<sup>6</sup> In World War II, this strategic area became the point of North Atlantic defence and in the 1950's under a defence agreement with Denmark, US established the Thule Air Base (now called Pituffik Space Base).

Greenland's extensive natural resources and strategic location between the Atlantic and the Arctic Ocean has made it centre to geopolitical rivalry between Denmark, the US and Russia. The 1979 Home Rule and 2009 Self-Government Acts helped Greenland gain more autonomy while Denmark retained its control and its influence in the Arctic

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<sup>4</sup> Jakobsen, U., & Larsen, H. (2024). *The development of Greenland's self-government and independence in the shadow of the unitary state*. *The Polar Journal*, 14(1), 9–27.; Lynge, A., & Gad, U. P. (2022). *And then move on: The context and intentions behind the Greenland reconciliation commission*. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 13, 148–169. <https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v13.3918>

<sup>5</sup> Marco Ghisetti (2025) *Buying Greenland: Is it foolish—or is it?*. The Arctic Institute. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/buying-greenland-is-foolish-or-is-it/>

<sup>6</sup> Asim, M. (2025). *Greenland territorial dispute between Denmark and US and its implications on Russia*. *Social Science Review Archives*, 3(2), 2029–2039. <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i2.823>; Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. (2023). *Explainer: The geopolitical significance of Greenland*. Harvard Kennedy School. <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/explainer-geopolitical-significance-greenland>

through NATO.<sup>7</sup> The 21st century became the game changer with melting ice sheets. Climate induced changes meant expansion of sea routes (Northern Sea Route and Northwest Passage) and more opportunities to extract natural resources thereby making Greenland more strategic than ever.<sup>8</sup> Intensifying Arctic geopolitics and increasing access to rare earth minerals and hydrocarbons have attracted global powers, including external actors like China, who view Greenland as central to its “Polar Silk Road”.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from China, Russia’s militarisation of the Arctic and expansion of its Northern Fleet has pushed NATO and the US to rethink its strategy in Greenland.<sup>10</sup> In this geopolitical scenario, the Greenland government announced the Foreign, Security, and Defense Policy 2024–2033, calling for self-determination with “strategic cooperation” with Denmark and the West to maintain its foreign investments and influence

within.<sup>11</sup> Greenland is now in the crosshairs of climate change, geopolitical rivalries, economic challenges and independence.

### **Legal context of Greenland’s governance**

Greenland’s legal framework has been a gradual evolution of constitutional reforms within Denmark. Its trajectory to self-govern is a unique example of power transfer that balances domestic autonomy while Denmark maintains its sovereignty. Greenland was a Danish colony until 1953, when integration into Denmark’s constitution ended its colonial status, although colonial legacies persisted through the end of twentieth century. The Home Rule Act of 1979 was the first milestone to establish self-governance providing the Greenlanders the authority over social affairs, health, education, labour market regulation, environment protection and mineral resources, yet defence and foreign policy was controlled

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<sup>7</sup> Garde, A. A., et al. (2002). The geology of Greenland. *Policy Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(2), 45–67. <https://policyjournalofms.com/index.php/6/article/view/823/837>

<sup>8</sup> Dingman, M. (2014). The Arctic in world affairs: The geopolitics of a changing region. *Arctic Yearbook*, 2014, 1–12. [https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2014/Scholarly\\_Papers/11.Dingman.pdf](https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2014/Scholarly_Papers/11.Dingman.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. P.3.

<sup>10</sup> Government of Greenland. (2024). Greenland’s foreign, security, and defense policy 2024–2033. Nuuk: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Business, and Trade. [https://paartoq.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Greenlands\\_Foreign\\_-Security\\_and\\_Defense\\_Policy\\_2024\\_2033.pdf](https://paartoq.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Greenlands_Foreign_-Security_and_Defense_Policy_2024_2033.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Nordic Institute for Studies. (2023). Greenland’s strategic outlook and international partnerships. NIS Publications. <https://nis.gl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/english-book.pdf>

by Denmark.<sup>12</sup> This was followed by Self-Government Act 2009, which furthered the powers and identified Greenlanders as per international law and allowed control over subsurface and natural resources. More importantly, the Act laid the legal path for independence through negotiations with Denmark which insisted on a referendum.<sup>13</sup> This framework designates Greenland as a “self-governing territory” within Denmark, rather than a federation, which creates ambiguity in shaping Denmark-Greenland relations. According to Lynge and Gad, the legal framework was seen as progressive; however, it still retained post-colonial structures. This was mainly pointed at Denmark retaining its monetary and defence authority.<sup>14</sup>

In 2013, the Greenland Reconciliation Commission was established to address the colonial asymmetries and formulate national identity. Reconciliation in Greenland’s case was not just a cultural project but an entire political machine to rethink

governance and claim legitimacy while maintaining relations with Denmark.<sup>15</sup>

The Commission’s role was to link indigenous identity to the larger Greenland question of sovereignty. This means not just legal autonomy along with self-governance but also social and cultural liberation from the colonial past. In legal terms, Greenland comes under Denmark’s constitution, although in practice it functions with higher independence. Denmark, while controlling the foreign policy and defence sectors, Greenland has slowly begun to use strategic diplomacy and has increased its involvement in Arctic governance forums to influence those two areas. However, the legal sovereignty continues to be centralised while the political legitimacy is scattered between Denmark and Greenland. This ambiguity continues to challenge Greenland’s boundary, sovereignty and representation.

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<sup>12</sup> Jakobsen, U., & Larsen, H. (2024). The development of Greenland’s self-government and independence in the shadow of the unitary state. *The Polar Journal*, 14(1), 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2024.2342117>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* P. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Lynge, A., & Gad, U. P. (2022). And then move on: The context and intentions behind the Greenland reconciliation commission. *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 13, 148–169. <https://doi.org/10.23865/arctic.v13.3918>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* P. 11.

## US and Denmark's pursuit of Greenland

The global power competition between the US and Denmark showcases both strategic interest and political symbolism. US interests in Greenland have been driven by its strategic importance and natural resources. The US's ambition to annex Greenland did not begin with Trump, but rather dates back 150 years. Greenland, located between North America and Europe, overlapping the Arctic and North Atlantic, has military significance in hosting allied aircraft during World War II and the Cold War. Greenland's natural resources, such as rare earth minerals, hydrocarbons and fisheries, continue to interest international powers as resource competition over the Arctic grows.<sup>16</sup> The intensifying climate change, melting ice sheets and opening of new shipping routes have given more scope for Greenland in international shipping and energy sectors. However, the threat rising from China and Russia is most concerning for the US. For the US, Greenland's<sup>17</sup> goals for self-determination were undermined earlier, while the

present administration focuses on the strategic importance and respects autonomy.

Denmark's interests are more intertwined with the colonial legacy and geopolitical dynamics. Modern colonialism began in 1721 when religious conversion and trade were established. Greenland was a Danish colony till 1953, but the integration process involved intense "Danization policies" which were more disruptive and continue to influence the relations till today. Greenland's resistance began in 1979 to recognising Greenlanders as citizens under the Self-Government Act 2009.<sup>18</sup> Its key intention is to maintain national unity within Denmark and to safeguard its Arctic identity. Giving up on Greenland would mean losing its Arctic power and its voice in the international forum in resource negotiations or maritime laws. To ensure this, the government provides an annual block grant of 25% to maintain the economic dependency and trade with the US over Pituffik Air Base in exchange for

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<sup>16</sup> Sciences Po, Centre de Sociologie des Organisations (CSO). (2024, March 11). *The meaning of the colonial past to the ongoing dynamics between Greenland, Denmark, and the U.S.* <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cso/en/news/the-meaning-of-the-colonial-past-to-the-ongoing-dynamics-between-greenland-denmark-and-the-us/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. P. 3.

<sup>18</sup> The Arctic Institute. (2023, May 4). Denmark's interests in the Arctic: The Greenland connection. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/denmark-interests-arctic-greenland-connection/>

reduced NATO responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> However, this rapport has only triggered more anger among Greenlanders demanding for greater control over foreign investments and resource policy.<sup>20</sup>

### **Who does Greenland belong to?**

#### **Implications and Pathways**

The question of “who Greenland belongs to” cannot be explained just through legal perspective but it is rooted in geopolitics, colonial history, and the struggle for identity and power. Legally, under Denmark’s constitution, Greenland forms part of the Kingdom of Denmark, but the 2009 Self-government Act recognises the Greenlanders as a separate state giving the right to self-determine under international law.<sup>21</sup> This polarity between Denmark’s sovereignty and Greenland’s statehood has led to a hybrid status of blurred boundaries between dependency and autonomy. In the lens of international law, Greenland has a legitimate claim for full independence and may pursue through a referendum, as provided for in the Act. However, the complexity arises in the economic and security aspects as Greenland is dependent on Denmark and

a full sovereignty would further militarise the Arctic.

Geopolitically, the ownership extends to the US after Denmark through its Thule Air Base thereby giving de facto influence over Greenland’s affairs and expanding its security interest without legal sovereignty claims. US’s increasing interest shows its objective to project its power in the Arctic though Greenland to ward off Chinese and Russian influence in the Arctic in terms of logistics, resource extraction and installing infrastructure. This means Greenland is not just seen as a strategic territory but a centre for larger global power competition to acquire Arctic dominance.

Within Greenland, the leadership have proved their diplomatic ability and aim to assert their independence through diversifying partnerships. This can be seen from the 2024-33 defence policy, which reflects their emphasis on balancing between the west security structure and goal for indigenous-led governance.<sup>22</sup> Considering Denmark’s legal hold, US’s military influence and Greenland’s strive for independence, the triangle brings both

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. P. 18

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. P. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. P. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P. 7.

stability and vulnerability. The stability is seen from the institutional cooperation in NATO and within Denmark while the vulnerability stems from the contrary divisions over autonomy and dependency. Greenland's pursuit of independence is far more challenged with economic realities and emerging geopolitical rivalries.

The foreseeable implications for Greenland are three. First, if Greenland achieves independence, it will make it the most strategically important small state with massive natural resources in the Arctic which could be an answer to its economic stability if it wins the diplomatic

game. Second, its reliance to use the resources to gain sovereignty could pull back into "resource curse" like other small economies.<sup>23</sup> This could also retaliate, triggering geopolitical competition over critical minerals. Third, in the longer period, Greenland can emerge independent through a process of political negotiations and working its way out with cooperation with Denmark and western allies. Therefore, the balancing strategy for strategic independence vests in the power of the Greenlanders than any external actor.



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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. P. 5.