

Greenland: Caught in the Arctic geopolitical contest

SUMMARY

Greenland is a self-governing Arctic island within the Kingdom of Denmark, which strives for economic self-sufficiency and future independence. In the context of a – literally and figuratively – heating Arctic, this representative democracy of 56 542 inhabitants is a focus of geopolitical competition and growing confrontation between major powers – the United States (US), Russia and China. The island 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, including mineral reserves.

According to its foreign policy strategy, Greenland is open to enhanced cooperation and dialogue with partners, including the US. Indeed, the US has been an important ally of Greenland and security guarantor since 1951. Relations have strengthened and widened during the last two decades, with cooperation now encompassing not only security, but also environment, science, health, technology, trade, tourism, education, and culture. However, US President Donald Trump's rhetoric on acquiring Greenland has shocked Greenlanders, Danes and Europeans alike.

Upon the island's withdrawal from the European Economic Community (EEC, now European Union) in 1985, Greenland became an Overseas Country and Territory, associated through Denmark. The main areas of cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Greenland are fisheries, education, and, lately, green growth. The EU has recently stepped up its engagement with Greenland by opening an office in Nuuk in March 2024 and signing a Memorandum of Understanding for a strategic partnership to develop sustainable raw materials value chains in November 2023.

The European Parliament engages with its counterparts from Greenland through meetings with the Nordic Council and West Nordic Council. In October 2021, the European Parliament called for the EU to establish an enhanced political dialogue on bilateral cooperation with Greenland.

This briefing updates an earlier one written by the same author in March 2025.



IN THIS BRIEFING

- Overview
- Greenland and the 'Unity of the Realm'
- Greenland: Caught in the Arctic race
- Greenland and the United States
- EU-Greenland relations
- European Parliament's position
-



Overview

Greenland is the world's largest island, located in the North Atlantic and Arctic oceans to the east of the Canadian Arctic, with a total area of more than 2.1 million square km, of which around 81 % is under ice. Despite its small population of [56 542](#) people, limited infrastructure and harsh climate, this self-governing territory within the Kingdom of Denmark has become a focal point in the Arctic [contest](#) between global powers Russia, China and the US. While it is not the only reason, climate change (responsible for the region's ice receding at an unprecedented speed), is a factor contributing to rendering Greenland, and the Arctic as a whole, more strategically important. Melting ice is rapidly opening previously inaccessible **trade routes**; making extraction of abundant **natural resources** easier and less costly; affecting local fauna and marine life; and redrawing the map, making areas more accessible to human activity – including those pertaining to security and defence.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, **geopolitical tensions** in the Arctic have increased. On the one hand, Russia's aggression was a catalyst for two Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden, to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), enhancing its northern dimension. On the other hand, **Russia's intensifying hybrid threats, military build-up** and strengthened cooperation with China in the north have raised concerns and triggered calls for action among the remaining [seven Arctic States](#) and beyond. Moreover, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine resulted in the halting of most cooperation in the Arctic, reducing the channels for communication and further amplifying tensions. As a result, the Arctic, which was once known for attempted '[low tension](#)' science and research cooperation efforts, is now the arena of **fierce competition and mistrust**, with Greenland at the centre.

Greenland was not always the centre of attention, however. The country's global relevance has fluctuated, peaking during the Cold War. Nonetheless, some global actors, most notably the US, have kept their eye on Greenland for decades, an interest that long predates the Cold War. President Trump's [recent comments](#) regarding his plan to acquire Greenland nevertheless surprised many and provoked intense reactions in Greenland and Denmark, but also within the EU. This is not the first time President Trump and the US have sought to obtain the island (see section below), and his insistence on buying it confirms that Greenland's strategic relevance is now higher than ever.

As a self-governing island, **Greenland should not be seen as being without its own agency**; the majority of its society supports future independence. Greenland has made it clear that 'nothing [should be done] about us without us', a message equally reiterated by the Danish government.

Greenland and the 'Unity of the Realm'

A snapshot of Greenland's history

Thule people – ancestors of modern Greenlandic Inuits (who account for 88 % of Greenland's population today) – settled on the island in around the 12th century. In 1721, Danish-Norwegian missionary [Hans Egede](#) started a settlement near what is now Greenland's capital, Nuuk. In 1776, Denmark established sovereignty over Greenland, assuming a monopoly of trade and restricting foreign access to the island. It was not until the aftermath of the Second World War that, in 1953, Denmark ended Greenland's colonial status, [incorporating](#) the island as a county (an integral part of the Danish Kingdom) and granting Greenlanders Danish citizenship. In [Denmark's 1972 referendum](#), Greenlanders opposed joining the European Economic Community, but were bound by Denmark's decision to join in 1973. The adoption of the [Home Rule Act of 1979](#) marked a significant step towards a more autonomous Greenland. It provided for Greenland's future assumption of administration of its internal affairs in areas including **education, labour and social policies, environment, conservation and land use, hydropower resources, fisheries and hunting, healthcare, media, flag, land use, trade, taxation and competition**. The same year, the first Greenlandic government

was set up and the Provincial Council was given the title of Parliament. Due to increased autonomy, Greenland now could leave the European Community, which it did on 1 January 1985 (see section on EU–Greenland relations).

A non-binding [referendum](#) held in November 2008 [underscored](#) Greenlanders' desire for a higher degree of autonomy through self-government (75.5 % of votes cast were in favour). Consequently, the [Act on Greenland Self-Government](#) of 21 June 2009 expanded Greenland's autonomy provided by the Home Rule Act. The Act recognised the Greenlanders as a people under international law and provided opportunities for Greenland to pursue independence. It listed 33 areas of competence that can be transferred to the self-government either by a decision of Greenland,¹ or following negotiation with the Danish government.² The Act sets out that the governments of Denmark and Greenland may decide to transfer responsibility for affairs relating exclusively to Greenland to the self-government. Greenland has therefore since acquired competence in **mineral resources (2010)**, **occupational safety for offshore work (2010)** and **determination of time (2023)**. However, the Constitution, citizenship, the Supreme Court, foreign, defence and security policy, exchange rate and monetary policy remain with the Danish government and are not transferable.

Greenland in the Unity of the Realm: Current state of play

Political set-up

Together with the [1953 Danish Constitution](#), the Act on Greenland Self-Government constitutes Greenland's constitutional position in the Danish Kingdom or 'Unity of the Realm'. The King of Denmark, Frederik X, is Greenland's Head of State. Greenland elects two members to the Danish Parliament, the *Folketing*, and is a parliamentary democracy; it governs via a democratically elected parliament, *Inatsisartut*, and government, *Naalakkersuisut*, currently a coalition between four of the five parties – all except the ardent pro-independence [Naleraq](#) party. Since April 2025, its Prime Minister, elected by the parliament, is Jens-Frederik Nielsen from the Democratic party.

Greenland's Parliament

Greenland's Parliament has [31 members](#) elected for four years, based on proportional representation. Greenlanders and Danes resident in Greenland for at least six months prior to an election and over the age of 18 years have the right to vote. The latest elections were held on [11 March 2025](#). The aspirations for independence, relations with the US and Denmark, and the economy featured as key [topics](#) in the elections, with a voter turnout of 71 %.

The [elections](#) saw the [Democrats](#) – Greenland's social liberal party, with a cautious [approach](#) to gradual independence and with a focus on advancing a free-market economy – secure 10 seats, a significant gain from the three seats they won in 2021, when they were in opposition. [Naleraq](#) (Point of Orientation), an ardent pro-independence centrist party, came in second, winning eight seats – four more than before. In contrast, both [Inuit Ataqatigiit](#) (Community of the People), the left-leaning pro-independence party of Greenland's former prime minister, Múte Bourup Egede, and social-democratic [Siumut](#) (Forward), which together formed a coalition before the 2025 elections, saw reductions in their seats. The first now holds seven seats, a decrease of five, while the latter has four seats, down by six. Finally, conservative [Atassut](#) – the [only party in the parliament](#) that argues for remaining within the Realm, maintained its two seats. In April 2025, all the parties except for [Naleraq](#) signed a [coalition agreement](#) that sets out the main priority areas for the new parliament. Concerning future independence, the agreement commits to 'tread carefully', focusing on realistic planning and the involvement of the population.

Internal affairs

At present, the self-government is responsible for: central and local government affairs; the flag; trade; taxation; business affairs; competition law; social and labour policy; culture, media and education; the church; healthcare; housing; internal transport; fisheries and hunting; conservation and land use; and protection of the environment, including offshore environmental protection,

hydropower and mineral resources. Under the Act on Greenland Self-Government, Greenland may still acquire a further 31 areas of competence (plus those not included in the list but exclusively concerning Greenland), including for: passports, police and prosecution services, as well as related parts of the administration of criminal justice, criminal law, border controls, family and succession law, weapons, aviation, intellectual property and copyright, security at sea and ship registration and maritime matters. Greenland exercises executive, legislative and judicial power in all fields of responsibility and assumes their financing.

Economy

Greenland's economy is heavily dependent on the **fishing industry**; in 2024, its seafood export value, amounting to DKK3.84 billion (or €516 million),³ accounted for 97.8 % of total goods exports. In addition, Greenland's **tourism sector is growing**, and the island carries out **limited mining activity**. The public sector makes up almost half of domestic employment, followed by the fisheries, hunting and agriculture sectors.

Greenland relies upon large block grants from the Danish government. Under the Act on Greenland Self-Government, the annual Danish government grant is DKK3.4 billion (approximately €457 million at 2009 price and wage levels, and thus adjustable). The Act stipulates that, if Greenland generates revenue from mineral resources exceeding DKK75 million per year (slightly more than €10 million), which has not been the case to date, the grant will be decreased by 50 % of the excess amount. **In 2023, Denmark provided Greenland with a grant of DKK4.14 billion (almost €556 million).** This accounts for around half of the government's revenue and, while relatively less, still amounts to approximately 20 % of Greenland's gross domestic product. The Danish government's additional [expenses](#) related to Greenland (public order and safety, police services, military and defence, prisons, courts, general public services, economic affairs, research, environmental protection and other areas) amounted to around €204 million in 2023. **Greenland also receives around €17.29 million annually from the EU for access to the island's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)** and in support of its fisheries policy.

Low economic diversification, strong dependency on external support, an ageing population and labour shortages [challenge](#) Greenland's sustainable development and self-sufficiency. In 2022, Denmark's national bank published an [analysis](#) of the economy, underlining that Greenland's fiscal policy is unsustainable and 'public expenditure cannot be financed under the current taxation rules', which is characterised by imbalances and results in low tax revenue, pointing to a growing need for reform of the tax system and education system. The *Naalakkersuisut* is working to address these issues, including through reforms, exploring the island's mining potential, attempting to attract foreign investment, encouraging international trade and, tourism and strengthening cooperation with a variety of actors.

External affairs

While Greenland's government has competence for much internal policy, **foreign, defence and security policy remain the responsibility of the central government of Denmark**, as vested by the Danish Constitution and in line with the Act on

International trade

Foreign trade is essential to Greenland's revenues. In 2024, its trade balance was negative (minus €0.15 million), with imports amounting to approximately €0.676 million and **exports reaching €0.527 million**. Holding a trade monopoly on Greenland until 1950, **Denmark remains the island's main trading partner**, responsible for around 62 % of Greenland's imports and receiving 86 % of its exports in 2024.

In its 2024 foreign policy strategy, Greenland underlined the importance not only of retaining existing markets but also of developing new trade relationships, reducing vulnerability, boosting competitiveness and strengthening its security of supply. The strategy specifically notes that Greenland would focus on: (i) Asia, especially China, Japan, Korea and India; (ii) the US and Canada; (iii) the EU and UK; and (iv) other countries.

Greenland Self-Government. A [2021 policy brief](#) by the Danish Institute for International Studies underlines that Danish decisions concerning foreign policy have not always prioritised Greenland's interests. However, the Unity of the Realm has taken steps to enhance 'respectful and equal [cooperation](#) on foreign, security and defence policy. Notably, the 2003 Itilleq Declaration, now integrated into the Act on Greenland Self-Government, provided for Greenland's involvement in

Foreign policy strategy

In February 2024, Greenland adopted its first foreign policy [strategy](#) entitled 'Greenland in the World: Nothing about us without us – Greenland's Foreign, Security and Defence Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy'. Focusing on cooperation, connectivity and dialogue, the strategy lays down an overall framework, objectives and guidelines for Greenland's relations with others. Its key message is straightforward and repeated 12 times in the document – **'nothing about us without us'**.

foreign and security policy issues of significance to Greenland. An administrative cooperation agreement to facilitate cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Foreign Affairs of Greenland was signed in 2005. Moreover, a political [Danish-Faroese-Greenlandic contact committee](#) was set up in 2021, where authorities exchange classified information, among other things.

The Danish Constitution vests the authority to enter into obligations under international law (treaty competence) with the Danish Government and the Parliament. However, the 2005 authorisation arrangement, also [incorporated](#) into the Act on Greenland Self-Government, **authorises Greenland to conclude agreements with third countries and**

international organisations on behalf of the Kingdom of Denmark on matters that concern only Greenland and that fall within Greenland's competences. Nevertheless, the arrangement **does not include agreements on defence and security**, nor does it cover agreements that apply to Denmark or are negotiated within an international organisation of which the Kingdom of Denmark is a member.

Even though Greenland has limited competences in external policy, it strives to be a 'trustworthy partner and pursue a consistent and reliable foreign policy' and 'to make a difference in the world'. Greenland has had a foreign office since 1994, which became the ministry of foreign affairs in 2018. In addition, Greenland maintains a mission to the EU in Brussels, and representations in Washington D.C., Reykjavik and Beijing. Furthermore, in order to improve multilateral cooperation, Greenland [intends](#) to establish a mission to the United Nations in New York and post a staff member to Geneva within a decade. Greenland actively participates in regional organisations, including the [Arctic Council](#), [Nordic Council](#), [West Nordic Council](#) and [Inuit Circumpolar Council](#). Moreover, Greenland's foreign policy strategy underlines its intention to explore the possibility of developing collaboration between the governments and parliaments of Alaska, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik and Greenland, to serve as a forum to meet and discuss common challenges, developments and solutions on education, research, climate, tourism, energy, shipping, culture, youth, freedom of movement, and natural resources.

Quest for independence

The Act on Greenland Self-Government recognises the people of Greenland as 'people pursuant to international law with the right of self-determination'. According to the Act, the people of Greenland decide on the island's independence. However, agreement between the governments of Greenland and Denmark would be necessary for Greenland's independence, as well as consent by the parliaments of Greenland and Denmark and approval through a referendum in Greenland.

The debate on Greenland's constitutional future is complex and nuanced, with a wide spectrum of perspectives, including those on an often-painful colonial past. Whereas successive opinion surveys reveal that most (around [two thirds](#)) of Greenlanders want to be independent, the timeline and strategies on how to reach independence are debated. In particular, [most](#) Greenlanders support future independence – on the [condition](#) that their quality of life is maintained or at least does not

drastically decrease. However, some decline in quality of life is a [potential](#) outcome, given the island's heavy reliance on the Danish block grant, which would end upon independence, and with the current lack of a diverse economy. Greenland's economic sufficiency and practical considerations regarding monetary policy or access to health and education facilities in Denmark are some of the key issues to resolve.

In September 2024, Greenland's government adopted a report providing for the establishment of an expert commission tasked with: (i) examining pathways to independence in line with the Act on Greenland Self-Government; (ii) assessing the legal framework under which a referendum on independence and state formation can take place; and (iii) a legal-technical assessment of the existing [draft constitution](#), including its relation to state formation.

Greenland: Caught in the Arctic race

Greenland is strategic in all dimensions of the Arctic race. The island occupies a key position along emerging shipping routes, making it a key player in the future of **international navigation and shipping**. Due to its location, the island has important **security and defence implications** for the regional powers, most notably the US (and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a whole) and Russia. Greenland also possesses untapped **natural resources**, attracting attention well beyond the Arctic players. Finally, the island is important for Arctic **science and research**, including climate research, and has high tourism potential.

Security and defence

As the geostrategic importance of the Arctic grows, Greenland's location is becoming increasingly critical for regional powers aiming to project influence and deter potential adversaries. Greenland's position could allow a civilian and military presence and infrastructure to ensure safe navigation, assert influence in territorial disputes, and respond to unauthorised activities such as hybrid threats or war.

For NATO and the US, Greenland is important for several reasons. First, **Greenland is a part of NATO** and has had a defence agreement with the US, through Denmark, since 1951. Under this agreement, the island hosts the **Pituffik Space Base** (formerly known as Thule Air Base), a critical US military [installation](#) that supports NATO's missile defence and space surveillance systems. Modern military operations [rely](#) heavily on polar-orbiting satellites for a range of activities, including weather monitoring, communications, imaging, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, as well as exploring navigation alternatives to GPS. Greenland's coordinates make it ideal for development and management of those systems, and a wide range of space activities are undertaken by the US and NATO at the Pituffik Space Base. Therefore, the base not only provides early warning capabilities against potential missile threats but also plays an important role in monitoring space activities, contributing to NATO's overall deterrence and defence posture.

Figure 1 – Map of Greenland in the Arctic



Source: EPRS, 2025.

Second, Greenland is positioned within the **Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap**, an area of the northern Atlantic Ocean forming a critical passage for vessels moving between the Atlantic Ocean and the Arctic, as well as between North America and Europe (see Figure 1). Controlling this strategic transit route allows NATO to monitor and regulate maritime traffic, ensuring that essential sea-lanes remain open and secure, and to detect and deter possible underwater and subsurface threats, including more frequent Russian hybrid threats. In the event of conflict, the gap would facilitate the rapid deployment of NATO forces across the Atlantic.

2024–2033 Defence Agreement

In January 2025, to [respond](#) to the security situation in the context of geopolitical tensions between the US, Russia and China in the Arctic, Denmark, together with Greenland and the Faroe Islands, made steps to strengthen defence and security in the Arctic and North Atlantic under the 2024–2033 Defence Agreement. Through **financial commitments of approximately €1.96 billion**, Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands will improve surveillance and assertion of sovereignty and societal resilience in the region, supporting allies and NATO's mission. The parties will also strengthen cooperation on intelligence and research and upgrade the facilities of the Joint Arctic Command in Nuuk.

Mineral resources

Greenland's untapped mineral resources are of strategic importance. Its soil contains valuable minerals, rare earth minerals, precious metals and stones, coal, graphite and uranium, with a high potential for new mineral discoveries. A 2023 report published by the Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland (GEUS) [found](#) the island has [25 of the 34](#) critical minerals identified in the EU's official critical raw materials list, including large deposits of graphite (vital for military industries) and moderate deposits of lithium (essential for batteries) and rare earth minerals (used in clean technologies). In the same vein, according to [Benchmark Minerals Intelligence](#), 43 of the 50 minerals deemed critical to US national security and economic stability may also be found on the island. As the demand for essential and rare earth minerals, crucial to the green transition and modern technologies (including defence production), grows, and as climate change makes mineral resources more accessible, the focus is turning towards Greenland. The tense geopolitical landscape is refocusing attention on strategic autonomy, supply chains and diversification, further increasing Greenland's attractiveness.

Greenland itself sees mining and foreign investment and the associated tax revenues as an opportunity to achieve economic sufficiency, which is crucial to achieving full sovereignty, and welcomes those interested in its potential. In its 2024 foreign policy strategy, Greenland presents itself as 'an attractive and reliable partner in the mineral resources sector' that will 'assist in making minerals available for the production of renewable sources of energy, thereby doing its part' to lower global carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. Greenland signed (non-binding) partnership agreements with the US on mineral sector governance (2019), and with the EU on the development of sustainable raw materials value chains (2023). Its 2025–2029 [mineral resources strategy](#) underlines its plans to continue implementing the agreement with the EU, which focuses on cooperation along the whole value chain, and renew the [US agreement](#), including collaboration on geological hyperspectral data, marketing and setting framework conditions. The strategy also focuses on further concrete initiatives to offer more attractive investment frameworks. In 2024, Greenland became a member of the [Mineral Security Partnership Forum](#), a multilateral [collaboration](#) platform between mineral exporting and importing parties, [including](#) the EU, several of its Member States, the US and others.

Nevertheless, the **mining industry in Greenland remains highly underdeveloped**. This is due to large parts of the reserves remaining under thick ice, in harsh weather conditions, as well as missing infrastructure (and the difficulty of creating it), skills and workforce barriers, political volatility and an evolving regulatory landscape. As of February 2024, Greenland's Minerals Licenses and Safety

Authority had granted [132 licences](#), including 75 currently active mineral exploration and six mineral exploitation licences. Greenland currently has only two [active mines](#) (neither of which extract critical raw materials) and several projects at the mid-late development stage.

Shipping routes

Greenland lies near emerging Arctic shipping routes: the **Northwest Passage** along Canada's northern coast, the **Northeast Passage** or Northern Sea Route on the Russian Arctic coast, and the future Trans-Arctic or **Transpolar Route**, which will cross the central Arctic Ocean. As Arctic sea ice continues to melt, these routes are projected to become crucial shipping lanes, shortening shipping times, complementing or even replacing traditional shipping routes, and attracting important shipping industry activity to the region. The Northwest and the Northeast Passages are expected to become viable for commercial navigation sooner. However, the Transpolar Route holds revolutionary potential once ice conditions permit passage around the North Pole. It would **drastically reduce the distance between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans**, and, unlike the first two routes, would largely avoid territorial waters and EEZs, amplifying its geopolitical importance.

Shipping in the Arctic: When will the game change?

Owing to climate change, Arctic sea ice has declined by more than 12 % every decade since 1978. According to the 2023 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [report](#), between 1979 and 2018, the proportion of multi-year ice that is at least five years old has declined by approximately 90 %. Whereas **Arctic conditions remain suboptimal for shipping** (costly and dangerous due to adverse climate conditions and the equipment, such as icebreakers, needed for navigation) for most of the year, summertime **Arctic ship-based transportation has increased** in the past two decades, corresponding to sea ice reduction.

Arctic sea ice loss is projected to continue until the middle of this century, with differences thereafter depending on the magnitude of global warming; some of the latest estimates project that the Arctic could see its first ice-free day [before 2030](#). However, for Arctic shipping to become a game changer, prolonged periods of ice-free ocean are necessary. According to the IPCC, there is a 10–35 % probability of Arctic seas becoming September ice-free by the end of the century, if global warming stabilises at 2 °C.

Greenland's position is strategic, with a view to **establishing support facilities along shipping lanes** (e.g. ports, logistics hubs, supply and refuelling stations, maintenance services) and **developing maritime infrastructure** (e.g. installation of tracking systems, traffic management, emergency, search and rescue capabilities). Moreover, Greenland's location would **enable monitoring and securing of these routes**. It could **also facilitate military and defence positioning**, enabling power projection over increasingly important shipping lanes. Finally, the emergence of navigation routes in the Arctic could further increase Greenland's **potential for tourism and associated activities**.

Greenland and the United States

Given that Greenland is midway between Moscow and Washington, the US regarded the island as a strategic partner for decades, and important to ensuring national security. In this context, the US-Greenland relationship has traditionally had a strong **focus on security**. Through the 1951 [Defence of Greenland Agreement](#) with Denmark, and under NATO, the US operated the Thule (Pituffik) military base in Greenland. Although the importance of the base diminished after the end of the Cold War, its significance is being [renewed](#) amid an intensifying Arctic race and growing tension in the region. The Pituffik base falls under the purview of the US Space Force today,

Nuclear controversy

During the Cold War, the US stored nuclear weapons at Pituffik base without Greenland's or Denmark's [knowledge](#) and against Denmark's non-nuclear policy. In [1968](#), a US bomber carrying four nuclear bombs crashed near the Pituffik base, resulting in the radioactive contamination of the area. In 2007, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the public health consequences of this incident.

[supporting](#) missile warning, missile defence missions and enabling US space superiority.

Although until the 2000s US interest in Greenland was limited to security cooperation, the US-Greenland relationship expanded [beyond](#) its traditional scope following the [update](#) to the Defence of Greenland Agreement and the signature of two additional political declarations in 2004. Through this update, the Joint Committee, serving as an expanded forum, was created to promote cooperation between the US, Denmark and Greenland across a [diverse range](#) of policy areas, including **environment, science, health, technology, trade, tourism, education and culture**. The latest annual meeting took place in October 2024, where partners reviewed progress and, through a [joint statement](#), set new priorities for 2025. To [enhance](#) the relationship further, the US reopened its [consulate](#), closed since 1953, in Nuuk in 2020. Under the October 2020 [Common Plan for US-Greenland Cooperation in Support of our Understanding for Pituffik](#), the partners are working on: (i) expanding trade, investment, and economic relations; (ii) the energy and mining sector; (iii) building educational ties; (iv) tourism sector cooperation; and (v) nature management.

Greenland's foreign policy [strategy](#) underlines its commitment to **continue to cooperate with the defence authorities of Denmark and the US**, 'particularly on the most beneficial way to maintain a military presence and installations in Greenland'. At the same time, Greenland is cautious not to increase militarisation and an arms race in the Arctic and encourages 'all Arctic States to exercise restraint with regard to any military build-up'.

US interest in Greenland

Because of Greenland's potential to play a strategic role in emerging shipping routes, defence and mineral supplies, and due to the US's aim of countering Russian and Chinese influence in the region, the US has developed a profound interest in the island. Historically, US ambitions have not been limited to increased cooperation; the US has considered and/or made several unsuccessful attempts to acquire the island, notably in 1867, 1910, 1946, and 1955.

President Trump initiated the latest attempts, expressing his interest in purchasing the island in [2019](#) and pressuring Denmark to sell Greenland since late 2024. Trump has proposed taking control of Greenland, threatened to target tariffs against Denmark, [insisted](#) that the Greenlanders want to be a part of the US and refused to rule out the use of military force. Soon after Trump's remarks, the House of Representatives introduced a bill to authorise the President to seek to enter into negotiations with the Kingdom of Denmark to secure the acquisition of Greenland ([Make Greenland Great Again Act](#)). As in 2019, Trump's aggressive rhetoric and pressure to acquire Greenland, as well as his dismissal of Greenland and Greenlanders' agency, received a unanimous response from both [Greenland](#) and [Denmark](#): Greenland is open for business with the US, but the island is not 'for sale'. According to an [opinion poll](#) conducted in January 2025, **85 % of Greenlanders do not want to become a part of the US** (9 % were undecided and only 6 % were in favour of joining the US).

As Trump claims that acquiring Greenland is 'an absolute necessity' for national security reasons and for 'freedom throughout the world' ([reportedly](#) to counter Russian and Chinese influence), many [analysts](#) argue that, instead of acquiring the island, the US could aim for enhanced cooperation with Greenland and Denmark to address Arctic issues, including security, military and deterrence. Indeed, the US already has an agreement-based military presence on the island, and both [Danish](#) and Greenland officials noted the possibility for the US to enhance this presence further. As former Danish minister of foreign affairs and [former Member of the European Parliament](#) Jeppe Kofod [notes](#), the aims stated by the US President (protection of Arctic interests, peace, prosperity and stability and countering external threats) could be achieved through a stronger NATO commitment to Arctic defence. This could include, through joint military exercises, expanded activities and improved equipment such as icebreaker fleets. In this context, some [experts](#) argue that, besides security interests, Trump may be attempting to secure US access to Greenland's natural resources and the island itself.

The US counters Chinese and Russian interests in Greenland

Increasing Chinese and Russian interest, activity and influence in the Arctic has become a concern among US policymakers, leading the US to take a more proactive approach towards Greenland. Many argue that Trump's quest to acquire the island is indeed motivated by the urgency of countering Russia's military and economic presence, as well as China's economic (but often reportedly with military aspects) activities in the region.

China: China's self-proclaimed 'near-Arctic state' and economic activity in Greenland is characterised by resource extraction ventures, infrastructure development, scientific and cultural cooperation and tourism since 2010. Experts [argue](#) that Chinese involvement in Greenland crossed a line for US policymakers when the state-owned China Communications Construction Company won a 2018 tender to construct three airports on the island. Concerned about a potential further increase of Chinese influence in Greenland, the US urged Denmark to finance these projects instead, which Denmark did. Following this and several similar obstacles to Chinese involvement (including a failed attempt to acquire an abandoned Danish naval base), as well as stalled or [failed](#) mining projects, Chinese [interest](#) in Greenland has arguably [diminished](#). On the other hand, China is also a top market for Greenland's fisheries exports. Greenland's foreign policy [strategy](#) indicates its intention 'to prioritise its engagement with East Asia to improve trade and export relations with a number of countries, especially China, Japan and South Korea, as well as India'.

Russia: Many US policymakers are also concerned about [increased](#) Russian military and commercial [activity](#) in the Arctic. Russia's growing cooperation with China, especially since its invasion of Ukraine, has further created [concern](#) that Russia could become a [gateway](#) for a stronger China presence in the region. However, Greenland's foreign policy strategy calls Russia's invasion of Ukraine an 'attack on a sovereign state' and 'a direct violation of international law and the Ukrainian people's right to self-determination'. Greenland has joined EU sanctions against Russia.

EU-Greenland relations

While [over 70 %](#) of voting Greenlanders opposed joining the then-European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1972 Danish referendum on accession, Greenland became a part of the bloc through Denmark in 1973. Following the establishment of Home Rule in 1979, and the subsequent referendum in the island, where 53 % of those voting supported withdrawal due to a fishing rights dispute, Greenland became the first territory to leave the Community. It became an EU Overseas Country and Territory ([OCT](#)), associated through Denmark. This was formalised through the 1985 [Greenland Treaty](#). Even though Greenland is no longer part of the EU, all Greenlanders are citizens of Denmark, and therefore also EU citizens.

Greenland's relations with the EU are based on the Greenland Treaty and the [Council Overseas Association Decision \(EU\) 2021/1764](#), which applies to all 13 OCTs. Under this decision, Greenland has a special political, cooperation and commercial partnership with the EU and has traditionally been one of the largest recipients of EU support per capita among the OCTs. For 2021-2027, [€225 million](#) is allocated for Greenland under its multiannual indicative programme (MIP). For the next long-term budget (2028-2034), the European Commission proposed [doubling](#) this funding. The EU maximises the impact of its support via the [Global Gateway](#), delivered through a [Team Europe](#) approach that mobilises EU and EU Member State financial and development institutions as well as private sector financing.

The EU in the Arctic

The EU's approach to the Arctic is laid down in its latest Joint Communication from 2021. However, the geopolitical situation of the region has changed significantly since the adoption of this document – due to the implications of Russia's war on Ukraine and changes in US policy. In this context, there have been calls, including from the [European Economic and Social Committee](#) and several Members of the European Parliament, to update the Arctic strategy. To protect its interests in the heating Arctic, many [argue](#) for a [stronger](#) EU role in the region.

[Protocol No 34](#) to the Treaty on European Union links preferential tariffs on the European market for Greenland's fisheries products to European vessels' access to Greenland's fishing areas. In addition, the EU and Greenland have concluded several fisheries and fisheries partnership [agreements](#), implemented by protocols, through which the EU maintains its fishing rights in Greenland's waters, providing financial compensation in return. In December 2024, the EU and Greenland renewed the [protocol](#) implementing the [sustainable fisheries partnership agreement](#) for 2025–2030, under which the EU pays for access to the Greenland EEZ (€14.09 million) and supports Greenland's sectoral fisheries policy (€3.2 million). This new [protocol](#), which received [consent](#) from the European Parliament, also provides for cooperation on responsible fishing and experimental fisheries.

As an OCT, Greenland is eligible to benefit from EU funding programmes such as Invest EU, Horizon Europe, Life, and Erasmus+, as well as the thematic part and rapid response actions of the NDICI and the Humanitarian Aid Instrument. Greenland also [takes part](#) in the [Northern Periphery and Arctic programme](#) under INTERREG and receives support for projects under the [Connecting Europe Facility](#). Finally, young people from Greenland participate in the [OCT-Youth Network](#), which aims to increase the ties between young people living in OCTs and the EU.

The [2021 EU Joint Communication](#) on the Arctic called for a strengthening and deepening of the EU–Greenland partnership. To achieve this, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, inaugurated the **EU Office in Nuuk** in March 2024, [proclaiming](#) 'the beginning of a new era of the EU–Greenland partnership'. [Observers](#) and [analysts](#) see this as proof of the EU's willingness to enhance its presence in Greenland and the Arctic.

EU–Greenland partnership priorities

The **education** sector is the cornerstone of the EU–Greenland partnership. For 2021–2027, the EU dedicated €202.5 million to support education quality, equity and efficiency in Greenland. This represents 90 % of the EU financial envelope for Greenland. More recently, the EU and Greenland broadened cooperation to **green growth**. With an envelope of €22.5 million, which accounts for 10 % of the EU's financial allocation for Greenland, the partners work to support renewable energy, particularly [Power-to-X applications](#), such as hydrogen production, to ensure biodiversity protection and to support sustainable tourism in Greenland. Research coordination and critical raw materials (CRM) are also at the centre of cooperation. This supports Greenland's foreign policy strategy aim to develop 'a responsible climate policy that takes into account the country's development needs'.

Greenland's high mineral resource potential, combined with EU demand for minerals to deliver on its green and digital transition objectives and the EU's expertise in prospecting, exploration, extraction, processing and refining, led the partners to [sign](#) a memorandum of understanding ([MoU](#)) for a **strategic partnership to develop sustainable raw materials value chains**. This partnership, signed in November 2023, and guided by the roadmap on CRM value chains, is set up around five pillars: (i) economic and industrial integration of value chains for CRM and other raw materials; (ii) cooperation to leverage high international environmental, social and governance standards; (iii) deployment of infrastructure for raw materials projects development; (iv) strengthening capacities and skills development along raw materials value chains; and (v) cooperation on research and innovation in raw materials.

European Parliament's position

The European Parliament, through its delegation for relations with Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, the European Economic Area (EEA) and the North, is actively involved in dialogue with its northern counterparts, including Greenland. Notably, the Parliament and the Nordic Council, an official body for Nordic inter-parliamentary cooperation, with 87 elected members from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Åland and Greenland, started to hold annual inter-

parliamentary meetings in 2022. Parliament's [delegation](#) also attends the annual sessions of the Nordic Council. Moreover, Parliament's delegation meets with the West Nordic Council, made up of parliamentarians from the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland, each year. In September 2025, delegations from Parliament's [Committee on Security and Defence](#) (SEDE) and from the [Committee on Fisheries](#) (PECH) visited Greenland to discuss the topics pertinent to their respective fields of competence. On **8 October 2025**, Greenland's prime minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen is expected to [deliver](#) his speech at Parliament's plenary session.

Parliament supports stronger EU engagement in the Arctic, including with Greenland. Its [resolution](#) of 7 October 2021 called for increased EU visibility in the Arctic and for the EU 'to establish an enhanced political dialogue on bilateral cooperation with ... Greenland'. Currently, Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) is [preparing a draft recommendation](#) for the Council, the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission on the EU's diplomatic strategy and geopolitical cooperation in the Arctic. The [draft report](#) prepared by Urmas Paet (Renew Europe, Estonia) welcomes 'any potential initiative by the Government of Greenland to strengthen its political, institutional and economic links with the EU, and encourage the EU to engage in deeper strategic and economic partnerships, including in the context of eventual accession, if and when desired by the Greenlandic people'. After the draft report is voted by the AFET committee, the recommendation is expected to be put to the vote during Parliament's plenary in November 2025.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See list I of the schedule of the Act on Greenland Self-Government: a) industrial injury compensation, b) the remaining areas under the healthcare area, c) road traffic, d) the law of property and obligations, e) commercial diving.
- ² See list II of the schedule of the Act on Greenland Self-Government: 1) prison and probation service, 2) passports, 3) police, prosecution service and related parts of the administration of criminal justice, 4) administration of justice, including the establishment of courts of law, 5) criminal law, 6) aliens and border controls, 7) law of capacity, 8) family law, 9) succession law, 10) law practice, 11) weapons, 12) radio-based maritime emergency and security services, 13) radio communications, 14) company, accounting and auditing, 15) food and veterinary, 16) aviation, 17) intellectual property, 18) copyright, 19) shipwreck, wreckage and degradation of depth, 20) security at sea, 21) ship registration and maritime matters, 22) charting, 23) buoyage, lighthouse and pilotage, 24) marine environment, 25) financial regulation and supervision, 26) mineral resources, 27) the working environment, 28) meteorology.
- ³ DKK is an abbreviation for Danish Krone. According to the [European Central Bank](#), the average exchange rate between the euro and DKK was 7.4509 from 2 January 2023 to 29 December 2023 (€1 equals DKK7.4509).

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2025.

Photo credits: © Zheng / Adobe Stock.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

<https://eprs.in.ep.europa.eu> (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)