Greenland: Why It Is Danish, Why It Interests the USA Today, and What Europe Can Do

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In recent years, Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat) has shifted from being a "periphery" to becoming a hub of the Arctic: more accessible maritime routes, technological-military competition in space and sensors, and growing attention to strategic minerals. In this context, recent statements by US President Donald Trump about the idea of "taking" or "annexing" Greenland have reopened a diplomatic rift with Denmark and Greenland, with very harsh reactions from Copenhagen and Nuuk.

Historical Context: Why Greenland Belongs to the Kingdom of Denmark

From colonization to the contemporary "Kingdom." Modern European presence was consolidated in the 18th century when, with the authorization of the united kingdom of

Denmark-Norway, missionary Hans Egede established a settlement and commercial activities near present-day Nuuk in 1721: this marked the beginning of the Danish colonial era in Greenland.

The key transition of 1814. With the **Treaty of Kiel (1814)**, Denmark ceded Norway to Sweden but **retained** the North Atlantic possessions historically linked to Norway (Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands). From there, Greenland remained within Copenhagen's orbit.

1953–2009: from colony to broad autonomy (but not full sovereignty).

- **1953**: the Danish constitutional reform integrated Greenland into the kingdom (formal end of colonial status and parliamentary representation).
- **1979**: **Home Rule** (stronger internal self-government).
- **2009**: **Self-Government Act**: recognizes Greenlanders as a “people” with the right to self-determination and further expands local competencies; defense and foreign policy remain with Copenhagen (in general terms) within the “Kingdom/Unity of the Realm.”

In summary: Greenland is part of the **Kingdom of Denmark** due to historical and legal continuity (1814, 1953), but today it is also one of the most extensive autonomies in the world, with an institutional path that keeps open—if the population decides—the road to independence.

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What Has Changed: Why Greenland Interests the USA (More Than Before)

Strategic geography and the “return” of great power competition have transformed Greenland into a pillar of North Atlantic and Arctic control; indeed, it is not only “close” to North America, but also a bridge to Europe. For Washington, this means surveillance, deterrence, and response capability in a scenario where Russia and China are increasing their attention and activities in the Arctic.

The United States has been in Greenland for decades thanks to the **1951 USA-Denmark defense agreement**, which governs areas and infrastructure for the island's defense.
In this framework operates the base now called **Pituffik Space Base** (formerly Thule), formally renamed in 2023 and central to space and alert/monitoring missions.

Diplomacy and influence: the US consulate in Nuuk was reopened in 2020, signaling a stable political investment in the relationship with Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark.

Resources, energy transition, and critical minerals, **the economic part**: Greenland is perceived as a potential source of **strategic raw materials** (rare earths, graphite, etc.), but with significant political, environmental, and infrastructural constraints. The case of projects like Kvanefjeld (debates on uranium/rare earths and disputes) shows how delicate it is to transform “geological potential” into real supply chains.

The political point: Trump justifies US interest with “security” and “resources”; Denmark and Greenland respond that the issue is not “who owns” the island but how to cooperate within international law and existing arrangements (NATO, bilateral agreements, Greenlandic self-government).

Nuuk, Greenland skyline aerial view

What Denmark and the EU Should Do to Assert Authority and Credibility (Against Annexation Rhetoric)

Here “authority” does not mean militarizing at all costs, but **making the idea that Greenland is “contested land” not credible** and, at the same time, **reducing vulnerabilities** (economic, infrastructural, informational) that make external pressure easier.

Line 1 — Political and Legal Clarity, Without Ambiguity

- **Unified Copenhagen–Nuuk message**: the sovereignty of the Kingdom and the right to Greenlandic self-determination are not negotiable with third parties. The Danish Prime Minister has already used firm tones (“no title to annex…”), and the same communicative consistency must be maintained over time.
- **NATO/allies framework**: publicly linking any scenario of coercion against a Kingdom territory to a systemic crisis of the Alliance, as highlighted by Copenhagen.

Line 2 — Presence and Capability: “Governing” the Region with Actions, Not Just Flags

- **More surveillance and response capability** (maritime, SAR, communications, cyber) in cooperation with Greenland, Denmark, and European/NATO partners, avoiding the image of external “occupation.”

- **Transparent procedures** on investments in critical infrastructure (ports, airports, cables, energy) to reduce margins of geopolitical pressure: if infrastructure is lacking, whoever finances it sets conditions.

Line 3 — Economy and Autonomy: Removing Oxygen from the “We Buy You Because You Are Weak” Narrative

Here the EU can be decisive because it already has tools and a strong industrial interest:

- The EU has signed a **Memorandum of Understanding** with the Greenlandic government on **sustainable raw material value chains**. It must be made operational with fundable projects, training, and credible environmental standards.
- Strengthening EU presence (offices, programs, investments) reminding that Greenland **is not in the EU**, but is associated as an **OCT** (overseas country/territory) and has a structured relationship with Brussels.

Practical objective: if Greenland sees real alternatives (EU, Nordic countries, reliable partners) for infrastructure and economic diversification, the temptation to “play” with external powers or to be subjected to pressures decreases. This is also an indirect response to Trump's statements: less dependence = less susceptibility to blackmail.

The Perspective of China, Russia, and the United Kingdom

China: “Near-Arctic State,” Routes and Economic Access (More Than Flags)

Beijing does not claim sovereignty over Greenland, but claims **interests** in the Arctic: in the 2018 White Paper, China defines itself as a **“Near-Arctic State”** and promotes a **“Polar Silk Road”** linked to maritime routes and economic cooperation.
In practice, China tends to seek access through investments, research, logistics, and (when possible) the extractive sector—but today it faces higher political and security barriers than a few years ago.

Russia: The Arctic as a Theater of Security and Projection (With Attention to NATO and the North Atlantic)

Moscow sees the Arctic as a vital area for resources, routes (Northern Sea Route), and defense, and interprets the growing NATO attention as a threat. Analyses and documents on Russian Arctic strategy show the emphasis on dual-use infrastructure and security up to 2035. Regarding Greenland, the Russian reflex is: **any change in status or military presence in the North Atlantic alters the balance**. In parallel, the USA itself signals increasing Russia-China cooperation in the Arctic, further fueling the spiral of “strategic attention” on the island.

United Kingdom: Support for Denmark/Greenland and NATO-North Atlantic Interest

London has publicly sided with the principle that the future of Greenland **is not up to others** (i.e., not to the USA in an annexationist key), aligning with Copenhagen.
Strategically, the British framework is also institutional: the UK's Arctic policy frames the Arctic as an area of security, science, and governance, and openly discusses the Chinese “Polar Silk Road” dimension as a factor to monitor.

Conclusion: The Real Stakes

The Greenland issue is not “sale yes/sale no” (which Copenhagen and Nuuk reject), but **who defines the rules of the Arctic** in the next decade: security, investments, environmental standards, local community rights, and resource access. If Denmark and the EU want to matter, they must make their presence useful, stable, and respectful of Greenlandic self-government—thus defusing both American pressures in a proprietary key and the more indirect strategies of China and Russia.

News link: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/denmarks-prime-minister-says-trump-is-serious-about-wanting-greenland-takeover-2026-01-05