

Greenland, Denmark, and U.S. Relations

August 30, 2019 (IN11161)

Related Author

- [Kristin Archick](#)
-

Kristin Archick, Specialist in European Affairs (karchick@crs.loc.gov, 7-2668)

In August 2019, President Trump [expressed interest](#) in purchasing [Greenland](#)—a self-governing part of the [Kingdom of Denmark](#)—due to the island's strategic location in the [Arctic](#) and its increasingly accessible natural resources. After Greenlandic and Danish officials asserted that Greenland is "[open for business, not for sale](#)," President Trump [canceled](#) a previously scheduled state visit to Denmark in early September and [subsequently objected](#) to Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's description of his proposal as "[absurd](#)." The incident sparked tensions with Denmark—a close U.S. ally in [NATO](#) and fellow member of the [Arctic Council](#)—and led some experts to raise concerns about the future trajectory of [U.S.-Nordic](#) and [U.S.-European relations](#) more broadly.

Greenland and U.S. Interests

Greenland At a Glance

Area: 840,000 sq. miles, roughly three times the size of Texas

Population: 55,992 (2019 est.)

Ethnicity: 90% Greenlandic (mostly Inuit); 10% Danish and other (2018 est.)

Languages: Greenlandic (official), Danish, English

Gross Domestic Product (GDP): \$2.8 billion (nominal, 2017 est.)

Currency: Danish krone (DKK)

Prime Minister: Kim Kielsen

Sources: [CIA World Factbook](#); [Statistics Greenland](#)

Located northeast of Canada between the Arctic and North Atlantic Oceans, Greenland's population is around 56,000 (mostly of [indigenous Inuit ancestry](#)). It is the world's largest island, with the second-largest ice sheet after Antarctica; about 80% of Greenland's territory is ice-capped. Denmark is considered an Arctic country because of Greenland.

Greenland was a [Danish colony for over 200 years](#) but has increasingly governed itself since 1979. It has a 31-member unicameral parliament and an executive (headed by its own prime minister) responsible for most domestic policy areas. Denmark retains responsibility for defense policy, most aspects of foreign policy, and monetary policy. Although Denmark is a member of the European Union (EU), Greenland is not.

The Danish government regards the Greenlandic government as an [equal partner](#). Many Greenlanders, however, have long harbored aspirations for [independence](#) from Denmark. Given Greenland's annual budget subsidy from Denmark (approximately [\\$535 million in 2017](#)), many view independence as economically impractical. The [Self-Government Act of 2009](#) passed by the Danish parliament recognizes that the people of Greenland have the right to self-determination under international law and sets out a process by which Greenland may seek independence through a public referendum. Experts conclude that [Denmark would not have the legal authority to sell Greenland](#) without approval from Greenland's public and parliament. As Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen stated, ["Greenland belongs to Greenland."](#)

Figure 1. Greenland



Source: Created by CRS. Map information from the U.S. Department of State and ESRI.

Notes: The Kingdom of Denmark consists of Denmark, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands.

The United States considers Greenland strategically important and has maintained a military presence in Greenland since World War II. During the Cold War, Greenland played a key role in U.S. and NATO defense strategy. [Thule Air Base](#) in northwest Greenland is the U.S. military's northernmost installation, providing [24/7 missile warning and space](#)

[surveillance](#). Thule also hosts a deepwater seaport and airfield. Warming temperatures in the Arctic and [ice loss in Greenland](#) pose environmental concerns but also raise the possibility of increased access to Greenland's potential oil, gas, and mineral reserves (since the 2009 Self-Government Act, Greenland has assumed the right to utilize these resources). In 2013, in a controversial effort to diversify its fishing-dominated economy, Greenland repealed a law banning the [mining of radioactive materials and rare earth minerals](#).

Many U.S. policymakers and experts are wary about increased Russian military and commercial activity, as well as Chinese investments, in the Arctic. Some believe that [China views Greenland](#) as key to increasing its influence in the Arctic. In 2018, the prospect that China's state-run banks and a Chinese construction company might fund and help build or upgrade several airports in Greenland [alarmed U.S. defense officials](#); the United States reportedly [expressed its security concerns](#) to the Danish government, which ultimately announced it would help finance the airport projects instead.

Implications for U.S. Relations

[Danish and Greenlandic officials and citizens](#) reacted with surprise and dismay to President Trump's desire to buy Greenland, in part because it seemed to [harken back to colonialism](#) and disregarded Greenland's right to self-determination. At the same time, Denmark considers itself a strong U.S. partner and the cancellation of President Trump's trip troubled Danish leaders. Denmark backs NATO efforts to deter Russia, Danish soldiers have fought and died in Afghanistan and Iraq with U.S. forces, and Denmark participated militarily in U.S.-led operations against the Islamic State terrorist organization (ISIS/ISIL). U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has [reassured Denmark](#) of its importance as an ally, and Prime Minister Frederiksen and President Trump had a ["constructive" conversation](#) to defuse tensions.

Several [Members of Congress](#) note that the United States attempted to acquire Greenland in [1946](#) and appear open to [examining the idea](#). Given Greenland's inclination toward independence from Denmark, experts suggest it is [unlikely that Greenland would want to be part of the United States](#). Many analysts [argue instead](#) for [enhanced U.S. cooperation](#) with Greenland and Denmark to address Arctic issues. The State Department recently confirmed that it intends to establish a [U.S. consulate in Greenland](#).

Prime Minister Frederiksen asserts that [President Trump remains welcome in Denmark](#) and reiterates Denmark's commitment to close long-term relations with the United States. Some critics contend that the canceled visit and ensuing criticism of Denmark's defense spending illustrate President Trump's [transactional foreign policy approach](#) and have [renewed European fears](#) about the U.S. commitment to NATO and European security. Danish experts suggest the public uproar could make it [politically difficult](#) for the government to support certain U.S. requests, including for Danish troops in Syria or naval ships to help protect the Strait of Hormuz from Iranian threats. In addition, although Nordic leaders appreciate the Trump Administration's interest in the Arctic, there is unease about possible increased pressure to support U.S. policies in the region—particularly those aimed at curbing Russian and Chinese influence—and concern that [U.S.-Nordic cooperation could be challenged](#) by diverging policy perspectives on climate change or Arctic security.