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Why is Greenland part of the Kingdom of Denmark? A Short History

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Why is Greenland part of the Kingdom of Denmark? A Short History

From the Vikings to Trump: Greenland's historic development negates recent White House territorial demands.

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Photo from the town of Qaqortoq (then Julianehaab) between 1889 and 1910. Julianehaab (Qaqortoq) was founded in 1775 by the Norwegian farmer Anders Olesen and soon became an important center for trade. Today Qaqortoq is the central town in south Greenland.

The first Nordic presence in Greenland dates back to Erik the Red, a Norse Viking banished from Iceland for manslaughter, who sought a new future in Greenland around the end of the 10th century. The name "Greenland" referred to the vegetation around Southern Greenland's fjords, but the name was likely also given in an attempt to lure more Norse settlers to Erik's settlement in Southeast Greenland. The Norse settlements in Greenland became part of a North Atlantic empire ruled from Norway.

The Norse stayed in Greenland for centuries. At the start of the 15th century, they disappeared with little trace. There are numerous possible reasons, including: a colder climate that made the island less habitable and conflict with the Inuit, who began to arrive in the areas that were populated by the Norse.

In 1721, Hans Egede, a Norwegian priest and missionary with support from the united Dano-Norwegian crown, reestablished contact with Greenland. A concern at the time was that the Norse settlers had missed the Reformation and were still Catholics. When Hans Egede arrived, however, he found only the Inuit, by then firmly established in most of Greenland, and he decided to focus his efforts on converting them to Christianity.

That marked the beginning of the colonial period. It was a slow start, and Norwegian-Danish influence in Greenland had to compete with other foreign powers, notably the Dutch. In a process that spanned generations, the Inuit were converted to Christianity, and Greenland was both politically and economically tied to Denmark-Norway in a colonial relationship.

When the monarchy of Denmark and Norway broke apart in 1814, Denmark kept Greenland. Danish-Greenlandic colonial relations in the 19th and early 20th centuries were characterized by a Danish

paternalistic policy for cautious development, ensuring that Greenland would be a profitable colony. In 1916, Denmark's rights to Greenland were confirmed by the United States, as part of a deal that facilitated the American purchase of the Danish West Indies. A controversy concerning a Norwegian claim to parts of Greenland ended in 1933, when the Permanent Court of International Justice, founded by the League of Nations, ruled against Norway.

After the Second World War, the United Nations pushed for decolonization in Greenland. In 1953, the former colony was incorporated into Denmark and granted two seats in the Danish Parliament. In 1979, Greenland achieved Home Rule, which included the formation of the Greenlandic Parliament, and it gained self-rule in 2009 through the passage of a law that included a 'blueprint' for seeking independence. The 2009 law firmly established that the decision to go for independence from Denmark would now rest with the Greenlandic people.

There is no doubt that the majority of Greenlanders want to use this option eventually. [Polls](#) show this. Independence has been accepted in Denmark as well. However, polls also consistently show that Greenlanders do not want independence if the price is the collapse of the Greenlandic welfare state. Herein lies the challenge. Greenland is vast, stretching over more than 800,000 square miles, but its population is tiny, consisting of only 56,000 people. Furthermore, the climate remains harsh for most of the year, especially in the North. For these reasons, among others, the Greenlandic government remains dependent on a yearly block grant from Denmark of roughly \$600 million, as well as on the Danish state supporting services in areas such as defense, coast guard, and law enforcement. Greenlandic independence, therefore, depends on substantial continued Danish assistance

after independence, something the Greenlandic government has yet to convince Denmark to accept.

It is in this context that President Donald Trump saw an opening to acquire Greenland. American strategic interests in Greenland are not new, but stretch back into the 19th century. Extensive U.S. involvement in Greenland, however, did not materialize until the Second World War, triggered by the German invasion of Denmark on April 9, 1940. As such, the German occupation of Denmark put Greenland in a peculiar position and caused worry in the United States that Greenland's geography could eventually be used against it. For that reason, Washington reacted favorably when the Danish ambassador to the U.S., Henrik Kauffmann, took the rather unusual step of proposing *himself* as the true representative of free Denmark, cutting bonds with the occupied country. Kauffmann offered the United States base rights in Greenland for the duration of the war.

This was the start of the U.S. presence in Greenland. After the Second World War, a liberated Denmark honored Kauffmann's commitments, and from 1949, the United States and Denmark became allies through NATO. During the Cold War and the decades after, the U.S. safeguarded its security interests in Greenland: tracking Russian missiles, bomber planes, and nuclear-armed submarines from that location. This became the basis for the "Greenland card" in U.S.-Danish relations: the idea that base rights in Greenland constituted an important contribution from Denmark and Greenland to the U.S. and NATO.

This state of affairs changed with Donald Trump. In the broader context of U.S.-European relations in the age of "America First," the U.S. had to push its 'free-riding' European allies to do more on every front. No longer would Washington be satisfied with having

a free hand in Greenland. Instead, Denmark was now a bad ally for not taking responsibility for U.S. security concerning Greenland. In Trump's narrative, this perceived Danish lapse justified an American takeover of Greenland in its entirety. Trump even went so far as to refuse to rule out the use of military force. Other reasons, voiced by Trump, included securing mineral wealth, especially rare earth minerals, as well as a more general ambition to make the U.S. greater through territorial expansion.

The Greenlandic right to self-determination should form the bedrock for any future developments. For that reason, as well as for many other reasons, the U.S. military conquest of Greenland is beyond unacceptable. The American public agrees: in a February 2025 [poll](#), only 11% expressed support for using military force to take control of Greenland, while 69% opposed it. This may be why the Trump administration has not mentioned the military 'option' recently. Instead, the Trump administration now seems focused on winning over the 'hearts and minds' of the Greenlanders. At the same time, [stories](#) about US influence agents compiling lists of pro-American and anti-American individuals caused understandable worry in Nuuk and Copenhagen – a behavior that few countries would expect from their allies.

So far, the Trump administration has not been particularly successful. A [poll](#) from January shows that only 6% of Greenlanders are in favor of joining the U.S., with 85% against it. Greenlandic politicians have rejected the idea on numerous occasions, and in March, the party leaders of all Greenlandic parties issued a joint rejection of American attempts to annex Greenland. Most telling, the Trump team had to give up on finding Greenlandic hosts willing to meet the Second Lady Usha Vance during her planned trip to Nuuk that month.

Where do we go from here? The United States should cease its ill-fated adventurism and work with Greenland and Denmark to secure its legitimate security interests. This would be nothing new, but a return to policies that served the United States well for the last 75 years.



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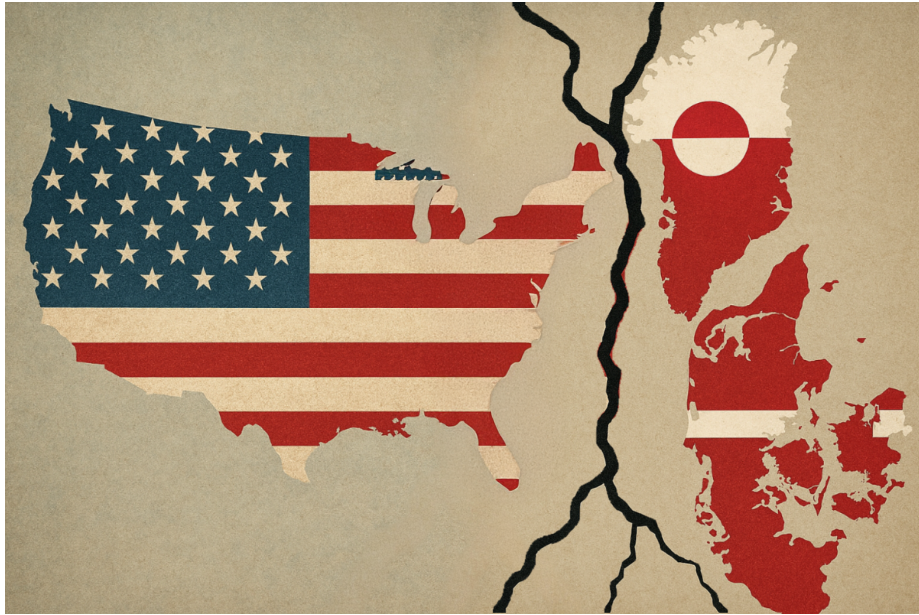
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