

# US-DK Greenland Game 2026

## 2026 version

Ignore any previous scenario you have been given for the US-Danish dispute over Greenland.

### Background

Greenland has been occupied by native circumpolar people for at least 4500 years. From 986 when it was first visited by the Norse Vikings, Greenland came under Norwegian rule. The 13th century saw the arrival of the Inuit circumpolar people, and by around the late 15th Century the Norse settlers had died out, but the island was still deemed a part of Norway, and the island was resettled by Europeans (alongside the Inuit) from the early 17th Century. When Denmark and Norway separated in 1814, Greenland was transferred from the Norwegian to the Danish crown. Since the 19th century, Greenland was seen by the Danish kingdom as one of its ancestral lands and part of its national identity, linked to a thousand-year-old Nordic history.

The 1953 Constitution of Denmark integrated Greenland fully into the Danish state, ended its status as a colony and made the people in Greenland citizens of Denmark. As Danish citizens, Greenlanders can live, study and work in Denmark and the European Economic Area. In the 1979 Greenlandic home rule referendum, Denmark granted home rule to Greenland; in the 2008 Greenlandic self-government referendum, Greenlanders voted for the Self-Government Act, which transferred more power from the Danish government to the local Naalakkersuisut (Greenlandic government).

Due to the Constitution, the Danish government retains control of citizenship, monetary policy, Supreme Court, security policies (including military affairs), and foreign affairs. Most residents of Greenland are Inuit. With the melting of the ice due to global warming, its abundance of mineral wealth and its strategic position between Europe, North America and the Arctic zone, Greenland is of interest to great powers.

The United States has a NATO military base on the island (Pituffik Space Base) under the 1951 Greenland Defense Agreement with the Danish government. The United States recognized Danish sovereignty over all of Greenland for eternity by a 1917 treaty. At the height of the Cold War the United States had many military bases on Greenland, but since the Cold War ended has abandoned all but Pituffik, although it is still allowed to maintain more or less whatever bases it wants.

Some particular issues and information to be aware of:

- Greenland is mostly covered by an icecap, and all activity can be challenging, especially in the winter.
- The island has a population of 57,000, of whom 90% are Inuit, 7.5% Danish, 1% other Nordic and 2% others.
- Greenland is only reachable by ship and aircraft.
- Greenland is 2800 km from Denmark, so about 4 days travel by ship
- Greenland is 3900 km from the USA, so about 5.5 days travel by ship

### Current Situation

The current date is: 1 February 2026.

Once Donald Trump was elected to his 2nd term as President of the USA he started to suggest that Greenland should be a part of the USA, or at least brought under US control, as it was essential to US security (mainly in terms of trans-polar shipping and ballistic missile defence), but the raw materials locked under the ice cap (and which will become more extractable with global warming) are no doubt also part of his considerations. Both the Danish and Greenland governments rejected the proposals instantly, and there was a "horrible" phone call between Trump and the Danish Prime Minister (PM). On 7 Jan 2025, the day after Trump was inaugurated as President of the USA, Donald Trump's son arrived in Greenland on a Trump liveried aircraft, ostensibly just on a holiday, but obviously to highlight Trump's claim. Trump has threatened Denmark with tariffs and other economic action if it fails to enter talks over Greenland's future and cede the country to the USA, and has also not ruled out using military force. In response Denmark announced a £1.2bn package of increased defence measure for Greenland, including a beefed up Arctic Command HQ, 2 new inspection ships, 2 more Sirius dog patrols, and upgrading an airport to handle F-35s. Whilst distracted by Gaza and the Ukraine for much of 2025, US Vice President JD Vance visited Greenland in March 2025 and stated that the world, the climate, and the Arctic region are changing fast, and Greenland needs to wake up to threats posed by an expansionist China; long-standing Western security partnerships have run their course; the only way the island can protect itself, its values and its mineral wealth is by abandoning weak and miserly Danish overlords and turning instead to the muscular and protective embrace of the US. His visit was greeted by anti-US demonstrations. After Trump's seizure of President Maduro of Venezuela (and his declaration that the US now "ran" Venezuela), and of two oil tankers in international waters in January he has returned to his desire to claim or control Greenland. He has said that making a deal would be "easier" than taking control of the territory through military means, but that the US will gain control "one way or the other". The Danish Prime Minister has said that "the US has no right to annex any of the three nations in the Danish kingdom". and that an attack on Greenland by the US would mean the end of NATO. Katie Miller - the wife of one of Trump's senior aides, Stephen Miller - posted on social media a map of Greenland in the colours of the American flag alongside the word "SOON".

## **Challenge/Disagreement /Crux/Dissonance**

The key issues, as of 1 March 2026 are:

- How will Trump aim to move his claim on Greenland forward. For the purpose of this scenario it is assumed that he does move the claim forward rather than letting it drift.
- What economic, and other non-military, possibly grey-zone, measures will he take to try and bring Denmark to the negotiating table?
- What will the Danish response be?
- What will be the response of Greenlanders be?
- What, if anything, will be the trigger for Trump to start to use military force, and what might this military force look like?
- How will Denmark and the Greenlanders respond to the use of military force?
- What are the implications for NATO, of which both the USA and Denmark are members - and where Article 5 states that if a country is attacked (such as Greenland/Denmark) then other countries should come to its aid (which includes the USA!)

## **Game Turns**

Each game turn represents 1 month of real time, starting with February 2026. Ensure that all actions are representative of what could be achieved in that amount of time. Play the game until told to stop.

## **Actors**

Where a real leader is named below, base the player on what real information you know about them and their personalities. For other players create a random player character as per the standard instructions.

The actors/players and their aims are:

- President Donald Trump, President of the USA
  - Aims
    - To bring Greenland under US control, either as the 51st state, or as some form of protectorate or client state
    - Ideally to achieve the goal through peaceful means, probably linked to some sort of trade or investment deal to get access to the minerals as well as security
    - In extremis to use US military power. This could include one or more of signalling intent by a show of force (e.g. despatching combat units to Pituffik), blockade the islands, launching some sort of special forces action to seize vital installations and/or command, control and governance facilities, or even to seize the island by force
  - Views/Beliefs
    - Greenland should belong to the USA for security and economic reasons
    - NATO is a joke with no guts and minimal capability without the USA
    - You have become emboldened after the success of the Maduro seizure and the lack of censure from your Western "allies"
  - Resources
    - The whole might of the US military, US State Department, CIA, cyber hackers at the National Security Agency, and a variety of Special Forces units. The military and special forces must be tasked through the Joint Chiefs of Staff
- Air Force Gen. Dan Caine, The Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
  - You control the whole of the US Military, reporting to the President. You were appointed by the President in April 2025 after he fired your predecessor. You have no doubt that he would do the same to you if you failed to agree with and support his plans.
  - Aims
    - To avoid going to war with a fellow NATO country
    - To follow the President's orders as much as possible so as to keep your job
  - Views/Beliefs
    - You have a lot of friends in NATO and don't want to go to war with them
    - The USA going to war with NATO will make Europe a target for Russia, and possibly encourage China to seize Taiwan.
  - Resources
    - The whole might of the US military, including a variety of large Special Forces units
- Mette Frederiksen, The Prime Minister of Denmark
  - You have been Prime Minister since 2019. Your politics are left of centre.
  - Aims
    - To keep Greenland part of Denmark
    - In extremis you might be able to accept a truly independent Greenland, with no U.S. control.
  - Views/Beliefs
    - Greenland is Danish, and will always be Danish
    - Trump is completely unpredictable, but you can't believe that US troops would fight other NATO troops
  - Resources

- The Danish Army is only 2 Brigades strong, and the Navy has only 20, mostly small, ships. The airforce has about 60 fighter/ground attack aircraft.
- Based in Greenland is the Sirius Patrol, a Danish Special Forces unit which continually patrols the remote coasts and interior of Greenland to deter or find any activity by hostile, or other, nations. It only consists of 14 soldiers, who deploy in 2 man patrols.
- Jens-Frederik Nielsen, The Prime Minister of Greenland
  - You have been leader since April 2025. You are the first member of the Demokraatit party to hold the office of prime minister. You have condemned U.S. hybrid warfare against Greenland under the Trump administration, and said that Trump will not "get" Greenland. Demokraatit is a social liberal party, and whilst traditionally unionist and anti-independence has recently urged remaining within the Danish Realm for the foreseeable future, with independence as the end goal of a gradual process that starts with increased self-determination.
  - Aims:
    - Largely maintain the status quo of Greenland with Denmark.
  - Views/Beliefs
    - You know that many people would like Greenland to be an independent country, assuming it could be economically viable - and the resources being revealed beneath the icecap could enable that, but you think this should be a long term goal (or even just an option) and that the short term is more about greater self-determination with Denmark.
  - Resources
    - Nothing really in military or political/diplomatic terms since Denmark looks after all of those.
- Mark Rutte, NATO Secretary General
  - You have been Secretary General since 2024, before that you were the Prime Minister of the Netherlands for over 10 years. You are well regarded on the world stage. Your politics are liberal, slightly left of centre. You have though been accused of cosying up to Trump, calling him "daddy", which has damaged your reputation somewhat.
  - Aims:
    - To avoid conflict between NATO members
    - To support Danish claims to sovereignty over Greenland whilst also recognising the principle of self-determination for the Greenland people.
  - Views/Beliefs
    - NATO must stand strong and United in order to face the greater threat from Russia.
  - Resources
    - Whilst you do not have direct control of the big armies of the European powers, and those US troops committed to Europe, it would be up to you to decide how to respond to any request for support from Denmark under Article 5, and then to issue to instructions to the military command in NATO to carry them out.

Randomise player order each turn.

## Reporting

Unless otherwise instructed, play each game through without further input from the user. Summarise each turn in 2 sentences, and the whole game at the end in 300 words or less. Also at the end score each actor on a scale of -5 to +5, where -5 means that they have suffered very badly and achieved none of their aims, 0 means that they have achieved little but losses have been manageable, and 5 means that all aims have been achieved for minimal casualties.

## Sources

### What can the EU and Nato do to stop Trump from trying to claim Greenland?

From The Guardian - 12 Jan 2026

The territory and the European bloc are trying to see off the US president, who has said control of Greenland is essential to national security

Jon Henley Europe correspondent

Mon 12 Jan 2026 05.00 GMT

The Trump administration has said repeatedly that the US needs to gain control of Greenland, justifying its claim from “the standpoint of national security” and warning that it will “do something” about the territory “whether they like it or not”.

This puts the EU and Nato in a difficult spot. Greenland, a largely self-governing part of Denmark, is not a member of the bloc but Denmark is; while the Arctic island is covered by the defence alliance’s guarantees through Denmark’s membership.

European leaders have strongly defended sovereignty, territorial integrity and the right of Greenland and Denmark to decide on matters concerning them, but there is as yet no clear strategy on how to deter Trump – or respond if he does make a move.

Here are some of the options.

#### **Diplomacy, and Arctic security**

The US secretary of state, Marco Rubio, is due to meet the Danish and Greenlandic foreign ministers on Wednesday but Denmark’s ambassador to the US, Jesper Møller Sørensen, and Greenland’s envoy, Jacob Isbosethsen, have already begun lobbying US lawmakers.

Diplomatic overtures will aim in part to address US security concerns, first by stressing that an existing US-Danish defence treaty from 1951, updated in 2004, already allows for massive expansion of the American military presence on the island, including new bases.

In a message aimed squarely at Republicans beyond Trump’s Maga circle, they will also underline that, as Denmark’s prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, put it, a US attack on Greenland, in effect one member turning against another, would mean “the end of Nato”.

More concretely, Nato ambassadors reportedly agreed in Brussels last week that the transatlantic alliance should move to boost military spending in the Arctic, deploying more equipment and holding more and bigger exercises to help allay US security concerns.

Although Trump’s claims that Greenland “is full of Chinese and Russian ships everywhere” are plainly exaggerated, diplomats believe some kind of concerted western move to strengthen Greenland’s external security could be the least painful way out of the crisis.

EU officials have said this could be modelled on Baltic Sentry, a Nato operation launched last year to secure infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, and Eastern Sentry, which expanded the concept to more broadly protect Europe’s eastern flank from drones and other threats.

## **Economic sanctions**

In theory, the EU – a market of 450 million people – has considerable economic leverage over the US and could threaten retaliatory measures ranging from shutting down US military bases in Europe to banning European purchases of US government bonds.

The most widely touted sanction is the EU's anti-coercion instrument or "trade bazooka", which gives the European Commission the power to bar US goods and services from the EU market, apply tariffs, strip their intellectual property rights and block their investments.

But that would require the bloc's national governments to agree to use it, which – unwilling to inflict economic harm on the bloc, and eager to keep the US onboard over Ukraine – they have seemed unlikely to do even when faced with Trump's threatened trade tariffs.

Europe relies on US tech companies in all manner of areas, noted Jean-Marie Guéhenno, a former top UN official: "Whether it is data protection, artificial intelligence or software updates, including for defence, Europe remains at the mercy of American goodwill."

For any threat of economic sanctions to be effective, moreover, Trump would have to believe it was real – which, so far at least, it all too clearly is not.

## **Invest in Greenland**

Greenland's economy relies heavily on annual subsidies from Denmark, totalling about DKK4bn (about €530m) last year, which cover roughly half of the vast territory's public spending budget and represent about 20% of its GDP.

Trump's promises to "invest billions" could be matched by the EU in an effort to keep the island – which, at some stage in the not too distant future, is thought likely to vote in favour of independence from Denmark – out of the economic clutches of the US.

A draft Commission proposal from September suggests the EU could double its commitments to Greenland to match the annual Danish grant, while the island could also apply for up to €44m of EU funding for remote EU-associated territories.

While Washington may have billions more to offer than Brussels, Greenlanders may, once they have won their independence, be wary of laying themselves open to rapacious US corporations and reluctant to lose their Nordic-style social security system.

## **Commit troops**

All the above would take time. Moreover, it is not clear that Trump's Greenland ambitions would be satisfied by treaties or enhanced Arctic security: US "ownership" of the island was "psychologically needed for success", the US president told the New York Times.

In a paper for the influential Bruegel thinktank, Moreno Bertoldi and Marco Buti argued that EU governments should "proactively protect Greenland from US expansionism", adding: "The EU has a rapid deployment capacity and it should be activated."

In agreement with Copenhagen and Nuuk, they said, European troops should be deployed on the island "as a signal of Europe's commitment to Greenland's territorial integrity". While that would not prevent US annexation, it would render it far more complicated.

“While there would be no need for an armed confrontation, the spectacle of the US taking prisoner the troops of its closest allies would ruin US credibility, tarnish its international reputation and strongly influence the US public and Congress,” they argued.

A German government spokesperson said last week that Berlin was working on a plan “including European deterrence” for if the US tried to take Greenland, while France’s foreign minister, Jean-Noël Barrot, last year floated the prospect of deploying a French military contingent.

The EU’s rapid deployment capacity is a framework for quickly deploying up to 5,000 troops from several different member states, under EU command, for crisis response outside the bloc. It could change US calculations, experts and some politicians believe.

“No one believes a war between the US and the EU is desirable or winnable,” said Sergey Lagodinsky, a German Green MEP. “But a US military move against the EU would have devastating consequences for defence cooperation, markets, and global trust in the US.”

That may make Trump think twice.

## **What are Trump’s real options for gaining control of Greenland?**

The White House has said using the US military is always an option, but few analysts believe it a likely one

Jon Henley and Miranda Bryant  
Wed 7 Jan 2026 18.08 GMT

The Trump administration has said repeatedly that the US needs to gain control of Greenland, a mineral-rich, largely self-governing part of Denmark with foreign and security policy run from Copenhagen.

The White House has said using the US military is “always an option”, but few analysts believe an armed operation is likely and France’s foreign minister has said the US secretary of state, Marco Rubio, has ruled out the possibility of an invasion.

Last weekend’s events in Venezuela and Donald Trump’s unpredictability mean nothing can ever really be excluded, however, and the US has other ways of fulfilling the president’s territorial ambitions. Here are some of the options.

### **Buy Greenland**

The US first floated the idea of making Copenhagen an offer for the Arctic island in 1867 after buying Alaska from Russia. It reconsidered the idea in 1910, and in 1917 it bought what are now the US Virgin Islands from Denmark for \$25m (£18.5m).

As the cold war got under way, the Truman administration made a formal offer in 1946 – only made public in 1991 – of \$100m for the island, arguing it was “completely worthless to Denmark ... and the control of Greenland is indispensable to the safety of the US”.

Copenhagen declined and since 2019, when Trump first expressed interest in the island, the Danish and Greenlandic governments have repeatedly said it is not for sale. Rubio, however, reportedly told members of Congress this week that the goal was to buy the territory.

Legal and constitutional experts have noted that the era when countries could buy or barter others’ territories – and their people – is long gone. The international legal principle of self-determination makes an outright sale more or less impossible.

Under their 2009 self-rule law, Greenlanders can hold a referendum on independence. It is up to the island's 57,000 inhabitants to decide their future. A poll in January found 85% did not want their homeland to become part of the US, with only 6% in favour.

## **Woo Greenland**

Polls, not always reliable on such small numbers, suggest Greenlanders' feelings about Trump's promises to invest billions of dollars in the territory are less clearcut, with the population almost evenly divided between seeing them as a threat and as an opportunity.

The first step, already under way, is a hearts-and-minds campaign, investing in the island's economic and educational development and intensifying diplomatic ties. The US consulate in Nuuk reopened in 2020 and a special envoy to Greenland was named last month.

Denmark also suspects Washington of more covert tactics, including an alleged influence campaign. Copenhagen believes this is intended to encourage the island's growing independence movement, which is backed by a broad majority depending on the timescale.

With an independence referendum won and approved by the Danish parliament, the dealmaking could begin. On a visit to Nuuk in March, the US vice-president, JD Vance, said he hoped independent Greenlanders would "choose to partner with the United States".

Greenland's current four-party coalition government has strongly asserted that the island belongs to its people. Naleraq, the opposition party that came second in last year's election, is also in favour of independence but is more open to dialogue with the US.

The party's leader, Pele Broberg, has said he is not concerned by Trump's recent threats and is confident the US would protect Greenland as an independent nation. "Besides, the US can't do anything to us that Denmark hasn't done already," he said this week.

## **Sign a 'free association deal'**

Officials in Washington have reportedly been working for months on a possible "compact of free association" (Cofa) deal similar to the arrangement the US has with a number of small South Pacific nations, including the Marshall Islands.

Under such a compact, the smaller country retains its independence and is guaranteed Washington's protection and a potentially lucrative duty-free trade deal, while the US military gets to operate more or less without restriction in a strategically important territory.

Many analysts see this as perhaps the most plausible longer-term outcome, with Greenland's leaders – post-referendum – likely to see a Cofa or some other form of bilateral agreement as allowing them to combine independence with economic advantage.

## **Rely on existing treaties**

One of the mysteries of the latest transatlantic tensions over Greenland is that the US already has wide military access and could easily have more. A 1951 US-Danish agreement allows it to "construct, install, maintain and operate" military bases across the territory.

The treaty, which was updated in 2004 and includes Greenland's semi-autonomous government, also allows the US to "house personnel ... and control landings, takeoffs, anchorages, moorings, movements and operation of ships, aircraft and waterborne craft".

Copenhagen has repeatedly signalled its willingness to allow the US to significantly expand its military presence on Greenland, currently confined to the northern Pituffik space base, where about 500 personnel are reportedly stationed.

Another agreement, signed in December 2023 and in force since last year, gives the US unhindered access to Danish airbases and allows it to carry out military activities in and from Denmark. The US has similar agreements with Sweden, Finland and Norway.

## **Invade**

If all else fails, US analysts have suggested a military takeover would not in principle be difficult. Greenland has no territorial army, and the handful of ships and helicopters and lone plane operated by Denmark's joint Arctic command in Nuuk are for observation purposes.

They argue that a US military presence on the island, potentially with the support of a few special forces, would theoretically be enough to capture Nuuk in a matter of minutes, and could simply declare Greenland US territory.

In practice, however, Danish analysts say it would be anything but straightforward – particularly in Greenland's notoriously challenging weather conditions. And the fallout would be enormous.

Denmark's prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, said this week that a US attack on Greenland, which is covered by Denmark's Nato membership, would mean the end of the military alliance.

It would also explode "post-second world war security", she said. Besides being entirely illegal, analysts also say a US military operation would instantly deprive Washington of its allies' trust and potentially vital intelligence.

Jacob Kaarsbo, a former analyst at the Danish defence intelligence agency, said a US attack would face opposition. A "quick and dirty job", seizing the control tower and strategic sites, might have been possible in 2025, he said, but Denmark has ramped up its presence.

Winter weather would also make any operation very difficult, he said. "I hope the Europeans can convince the US that we will indeed shoot back," he said. "US soldiers would come back to the US in body bags."

## **Other**

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