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## Introduction

The past year marked the second year of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the development of Israel's war on Gaza. On top of that, previous years saw the resurgence of right-wing populism in Europe (Coi, 2024). These events collectively created a tense background for the latest American presidential election, with the two main players being Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The two candidates stand in radical opposition on most topics; Biden continues a close relationship with Brussels and provides military support for Kyiv supporting the current neo-liberal policies, whereas Donald Trump maintains his unclear stance on Ukraine (Cabral, 2024), thus gathering support from the same right-wing populists during his inauguration (Vinocur & Toosi, 2025).

As expected, Trump's victory and subsequent return to the White House was sure to challenge the current status quo. Nevertheless, declarations from the Cabinet of the 47th President of the United States (US) managed to catch the West by surprise, particularly those concerning the annexation of Greenland, the reclamation of control over the Panama Canal, and even the incorporation of Canada into the United States. During his previous presidency, Trump had already voiced his interest in obtaining the island, citing its strategic importance regarding the security and economy of the US (Zellen, 2025). However, it is not the first time the US has attempted to acquire Greenland. During the Cold War, the United States unofficially proposed to buy the island from Denmark, and, similar to the recent proposals, the offer was met with a rather stern refusal (Ewing, 2019). Nonetheless, the most recent announcements have Europe worried, as President Trump has directly declined to reject the use of force and questioned Denmark's legal right to Greenland (Starcevic, 2025). These comments may have sounded a little too familiar at a time when the sovereignty of many European states is threatened by Russia, which has invoked similar sentiments to defend its actions for a long time. Though historically well known, America's brash external policy takes an unexpected turn in this case as it is directed towards an allied Western European state.

Consequently, these emerging geopolitical dynamics underscore the importance of examining Greenland's current legal situation, Denmark's position regarding the island's aspirations for independence, and the complicated history between Greenland and the US. The analysis will provide critical context for understanding the significance of these developments and offer insights into the potential routes that Donald Trump might pursue in his efforts to obtain Greenland.

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## 1. Danish-Greenland-American Relations: A Historical and Legal Perspective

### *A Historical Overview*

Nowadays, the Kingdom of Denmark is a state that encapsulates three distinct territories: the European territories of Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Greenland. Both the archipelago and the largest island in the world are autonomous territories governed by their own territorial authorities in most cases. In the case of Greenland, its autonomy is regulated by the Home Rule Act of 1978, which was later expanded through further legislation in 2009 (Act on Greenland Self-Government, 2009). Unlike the Faroe Islands, Greenland joined the European Communities alongside Denmark. Now, the island is considered an Overseas Country or Territory (OCT) of the European Union (EU), hence its capacity to maintain economic ties with the EU, and all Greenlanders are considered EU citizens (TFEU, 2012). Yet, the history of Nordic presence on the island started much earlier.

This rocky relationship between the Nordic countries and Greenland dates back to the 10th century, when Icelandic Vikings became the first Europeans to settle on the island (Rasmussen, 2025). Long before this, various Inuit cultures had inhabited the island at different times. However, due to the harsh climate, the Norse settlements were abandoned just a few hundred years after they were established (Rasmussen, 2025). Still, it was only during the 18th century that Denmark established its control over the island (Rasmussen, 2025). The history between the United States and the island began during the Second World War when a controversial agreement was signed between the US and Danish ambassadors, which allowed the US Military to create bases on the island (Friedman, 2025). This relationship was further reinforced by an agreement signed in 1951 between Denmark and the US, now allies under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which obliged the US to protect Greenland from any possible attacks (Kayali & Cokelaere, 2025). This cooperation resulted in the creation of Camp Century, a secret nuclear-powered base underneath the ice that would serve as a home for missiles against the Soviet Union (Ewing, 2019). The base, abandoned since 1967, now poses a huge environmental risk associated with the melting of Greenland's ice sheet. An undetermined amount of radioactive waste and debris remains, with the potential of future exposure due to the impacts of climate change (Starcevic, 2025).

### *Greenland's Legal Status and Sovereignty*

Trump's comments regarding Greenland have also brought renewed attention to the possibility of Greenland's independence and separation from the Kingdom of Denmark. The Preamble of the 2009 Home Rule invokes Greenlanders' right to self-determination. Explicitly mentioned in many international human rights treaties, the right to self-determination of

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colonised countries was affirmed by the International Court of Justice to hold the peremptory character (Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, Advisory Opinion, 2024), meaning that it is a non-derogable obligation, that all states must respect. Therefore, it would be beneficial to explore the potential routes that Greenland could take towards full independence.

The primary point concerning the possibility of Greenland's independence is whether the island fulfils the international requirements for statehood. While not exhaustive, the most widely recognised list of requirements is outlined in the 1933 Montevideo Convention (Vidmar, 2011). Accordingly, any aspiring state must have a permanent population, a defined territory, an effective government and the capacity to enter into international relations (Montevideo Convention, 1933). The fulfilment of the first two requirements is apparent as the borders of the island serve as a defined territory, and it has a permanent population of around fifty thousand people. As aforementioned, the island is mainly self-governed and thus, the current Greenlandic authorities can serve as an effective government (Act on Greenland Self-Government, 2009). The last requirement is always the most difficult to fulfil since it encompasses both the structures and capacity to host the necessary formal delegations, as well as the international recognition of statehood. In this case, Greenland is already considered a separate and autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark and a remnant of the colonial past, so gaining international recognition may not be unachievable.

Furthermore, there are two main theories of state recognition (Vidmar, 2011). Firstly, according to the declaratory theory, recognition carries limited legal significance and mostly serves as evidence of a pre-existing legal capacity of the new state (Eckert, 2002). Contrarily, the constitutive theory understands recognition as a necessary condition for statehood and not mere evidence of it (Eckert, 2002). Most scholars today favour the declaratory theory (Eckert, 2002), thus it can be asserted that by fulfilling the criteria, Greenland has everything it needs to become a state.

However, due to their vagueness, many scholars consider the Montevideo Criteria insufficient (Vidmar, 2011), and additional requirements have been subsequently recognised. Legality-based criteria are the most widely accepted and outlined in the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo, 2010). Accordingly, a new State cannot emerge under the illegal use of force, a violation of the right to self-determination or under racist policies (Vidmar, 2011).

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Subsequently, there are two main ways in which Greenland may seek to legally obtain independence from the Kingdom of Denmark. Firstly, the 2009 Act foresees the possibility of Greenland's independence (Act on Greenland Self-Government, 2009). Alternatively, as confirmed by the judgments of the ICJ (Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo, 2010), Greenlanders, like all colonised peoples, have the right to declare independence unilaterally.

Following the scheme devised in the 2009 Act, upon a decision regarding independence, Greenlandic authorities would have to enter into negotiations with the Kingdom's government and conclude an agreement which must be further legitimised by a referendum on the island (Act on Greenland Self-Government, 2009). Additionally, the Danish Parliament must approve the agreement (Act on Greenland Self-Government, 2009). The Kingdom of Denmark recognises the right to self-determination of the Greenlandic peoples and its possible external expression through an independence referendum. However, there are clear limitations to the Act's text. The requirements for negotiations with Danish authorities and approval from the Danish Parliament clearly showcase that the Kingdom does not foresee the island's independence solely on Greenlandic terms.

As previously mentioned, Greenlanders can take a more direct pathway to independence grounded in their right to self-determination. The rules governing unilateral declarations, like the one applicable to Greenlanders, can be found in the jurisprudence of the ICJ regarding Kosovo and Canada's Supreme Court ruling on the possibility of Quebec's separation. In the case of Kosovo, the ICJ had to determine whether a unilateral declaration of independence is permissible under International Law (Kosovo AO). The judges concluded that no prohibition in contemporary International Law would preclude a declaration of independence. Further, they invoked the numerous successful independence declarations of colonised states that took place during the second half of the twentieth century (Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo, 2010). Consequently, the Court determines that a declaration of independence is not inherently illegal, provided it meets the legality-based criteria outlined above (Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo, 2010). What the Court refused to explore further, despite numerous State submissions (Meester, 2011), is the legality of remedial secession and its connection to the right to self-determination (Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo, 2010).

In 1995, Quebec held a referendum regarding its possible separation from Canada, in which, with a very slim margin, the voters decided to stay. Nonetheless, the following year, the federal government sought an advisory opinion from the Supreme Court regarding the eventual legality of the prospective secession (Reference re Secession of Quebec, 1998). The

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Court began its judgment by stipulating the importance of the principle of territorial integrity as well as the people's right to self-determination (Reference re Secession of Quebec, 1998). Regarding the latter, the judges acknowledged that, in most cases, it can be fulfilled both internally and externally within the boundaries of an existing state (Reference re Secession of Quebec, 1998). The Court identified only three exceptional circumstances where the right to self-determination could justify a secession or any other infringement on a State's territorial sovereignty. These circumstances apply only to people who are under an alien occupation, colonised peoples, and, more controversially, people who are blocked from meaningfully exercising their right to self-determination within their state (Reference re Secession of Quebec, 1998). The Albanian Serbs in Kosovo or possibly the predominantly Christian population of South Sudan can be seen as examples of such peoples. According to the Court's opinion, the people of Quebec could not qualify for any of the three groups and thus did not possess the right to a unilateral secession (Reference re Secession of Quebec, 1998). Furthermore, the judges explained the relationship between the legality of secession and the role of recognition that the prospective state gathers following its emergence. The Court emphasised that while recognition may be one of the factors that would, in time, legitimise a state that has emerged through an illegal secession, it would never retroactively legitimise the act of secession itself (Reference re Secession of Quebec, 1998).

In the case of Greenland, the situation is much more clear-cut. The island served as a Danish colony in the past (Rasmussen, 2025), and its current autonomous status does not preclude its peoples from exercising their right to self-determination. This means that they do qualify as the special group of people legally allowed to seek independence unilaterally, as long as they do so without severe violations of International Law (Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo, 2010).

## **2. Contemporary U.S. Interests and Efforts to Gain Influence Over Greenland**

There are three main methods by which the United States can attempt to assert sovereignty over the largest island in the world. Firstly, the US can wait for Greenland to gain independence and negotiate directly with the island's authorities. Secondly, Trump can continue to put economic and political pressure on the Danish government, expecting them to give up their stark stance. Lastly, which, at least for now, still seems improbable, the US can use its military force to invade the island.

The first approach, referring to Greenland's independence, seems the most reasonable. It would require the US to wait for Greenland to gain independence, as discussed in the previous paragraph, and subsequently negotiate directly with the Greenlanders. There are two main arguments why such an approach may have the highest chance of success. The



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main hurdle between Greenland and its independence seems to be its economy. Unlike its predecessors, the current government has banned all future oil and gas exploration from the island (Ramsay & White, 2021). If this position holds true in the years to come, Greenland might lack the funds to become fully independent from the Kingdom of Denmark, as its annual budget currently is approximately one billion euros in funding from Copenhagen (Verhelst & Weizman, 2025). These circumstances can create a situation in which the possibility of joining the US might become appealing to the Greenlandic authorities. The allure of the American economy was already on display the last time Trump attempted to buy the island in 2019, which heightened American interest in Greenland, leading to over twelve million dollars worth of investments on the island (Zellen, 2025).

Furthermore, the independence approach is most likely the one that would guarantee respect for International Public Law norms, such as territorial integrity and sovereignty, thereby avoiding widespread non-recognition of American governance over the island. However, there are still distinct drawbacks to this idea. While the polls show that the population of Greenland is keen on gaining independence from Denmark (Breum, 2019), the island leaders send clear signals that they do not wish to be controlled by the US (Svendsen, 2025). Following the US elections, this unwillingness for American involvement in Greenlandic matters has only been exacerbated by the polar opposite views on climate change and fossil fuels between the Trump administration (Gavin & Lefebvre, 2024) and the current authorities of the island (Ramsay & White, 2021). The general population of the island also seems to share a similar sentiment, with the latest survey suggesting that 85% of Greenlanders oppose the idea of joining the United States (Walker, 2025). Nevertheless, the acquisition of Greenland seems an important goal for Trump's administration, even though the process of Greenlandic independence can take a few years.

Out of the two remaining possibilities, the one encompassing economic and political pressure over Denmark seems more probable yet less effective. Denmark and other European countries seem determined to withstand the extortion attempt, with some even comparing Trump's actions to Russia's reoccurring practice of violating the territorial integrity principle (Ross et al., 2025). On the contrary, a military invasion of Greenland would most likely be much more effective due to the power imbalances between the US and Denmark, along with the island's reliance on the American military for its defence. Hopefully, the vision of a military conflict with a fellow NATO member will discourage the Trump administration from making such a move. If not, the legal implications of this conflict seem difficult to predict.

The Washington Treaty, comprising only fourteen Articles, fails to set any rules regarding a potential conflict between two State Parties (The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949). Nonetheless,

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nothing in the wording of the Article dealing with collective self-defence seems to point to a conclusion that it ceases to apply in case of a conflict between two Member States (The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949). In this case, Denmark, as the attacked party, could trigger collective self-defence as permitted by the United Nations Charter (UN Charter, 1945), which would oblige all other NATO States to render military assistance (The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949). Following, Article 8 further prohibits the State Parties from any international activity which would come in conflict with the Treaty. Evidently, an attack directed against a fellow Member State would violate this provision. Additionally, the Treaty on European Union (TEU) contains a clause on mutual assistance, which requires all European Union Member States to render assistance to the affected state (TEU, 2012). Thus, a potential military invasion of Greenland by the US would result not only in a major strain on the relationship between Europe and the US but also in the emergence of an unprecedented challenge for NATO.

## **Conclusion**

This paper provides an analysis of the current legal situation of Greenland and examine the possibilities of an American takeover of the island. As a former colony, Greenlanders enjoy their right to self-determination and thus have the right to decide about their political future. Although currently, the island serves as an autonomous region within the Kingdom of Denmark, Greenlandic authorities can at any time decide to pursue independence either in accordance with Denmark or through a unilateral secession. In line with that, the US can seek to gain control over Greenland by negotiating directly with the island's authorities about joining the Union and, therefore, avoiding dealing with Denmark, which is supported by the EU. Alternatively, the US can continue its current approach of economic and political pressure or, ultimately, act on its threats and gain control over Greenland vis-à-vis a military operation. Each of the scenarios has its advantages and potential downfalls, with the military operation standing out as the most damaging to the position of the US on the international scene. Nonetheless, it also appears to be the sole realistic opportunity for Trump to fulfil his ambitions of acquiring Greenland.

In conclusion, the inauguration of the newest US President could mark a significant shift in the American approach towards its allies. Trump's administration has already threatened the sovereignty of Canada, Panama and Denmark and has refused to rule out the use of military force in the cases of the latter two. While Trump's 'America First' agenda is often seen as isolationist, it has very clear external objectives, and it is likely to have long-term implications for the relations with US allies, as clear parallels can be drawn between his conduct and the imperialist-driven actions of Russia. While it is clear that the US's position as a global superpower has been shaped by imperialist policies, this marks the first time that these tendencies have targeted America's Western allies. After all, this is an added reason why the



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most recent actions of Donald Trump regarding Greenland have especially unsettled the Danes and the rest of Europe (Ross et al., 2025).

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