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The Greenland Deal: A Positive Outcome for Washington, Copenhagen, and Nuuk

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The 2026 Greenland Agreement between the United States, Denmark, and Greenland is a win for all sides that will strengthen both American and European security.

The September 2026 Greenland agreement adds U.S. Defense Areas at Narsarsuaq and Mestersvig and bars military installations by states outside NATO.

Greenland is critical to U.S. National security, especially for the detection of inbound missiles on their way to North America and for Arctic naval operations.

Introduction

President Donald Trump's successful conclusion of the Greenland deal with the governments of Denmark and Greenland is a major achievement that will have positive security outcomes for the United States far into the foreseeable future. The agreement will also improve Danish and Greenlandic security, increase American military contributions to Arctic security, strengthen Greenland's role in the transatlantic security architecture, and ensure that there is no risk of adversarial malign influence even if Greenland's political status changes. From both the American and European perspectives, the agreement cements and expands the U.S. role in Arctic security, primarily through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and signals sustained American interest in transatlantic cooperation on Arctic security for many years to come.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at **https://report.heritage.org/bg3985**

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Critics have claimed that the deal is the same as before and that the new agreement does not provide anything the United States did not have before, which is demonstrably untrue.[1] The 2026 agreement augments, updates, and improves the existing 1951 Defense Agreement: expanding U.S. military infrastructure on the island with new defense areas at Narsarsuaq and Mestersvig that will host U.S. troops, creating a new mechanism for the prohibition of Russian or Chinese military bases in Greenland, and establishing a process for the governments in Copenhagen, Nuuk, and Washington to bar investment by non-allied states in critical sectors of the Greenlandic economy such as the mining sector, ports, and airports.[2]

The new agreement's provisions would continue to apply even if Greenland were to become independent.

U.S. Strategic Interest

The agreement details the core U.S. national security interests at stake and the rationale behind the push for an expanded agreement, "[r]ecognizing the security challenges in the Arctic and the High North posed by adversaries' increased military activity and growing strategic interest in the region" and "[n]oting that the security situation in the Arctic is changing and that more efforts are needed to ensure security there in the future."[3]

The strategic rationale for American interest in securing Greenland from adversarial influence and maintaining a military presence is enduring, rational, and grounded in more than a century of U.S. strategic thinking.[4] It is strongest when considered in the context of great-power competition and homeland defense, as the Arctic is the shortest and most likely path for strategic bombers or intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) heading toward the U.S. and Greenland in particular lies on the shortest and most likely path for these systems when they are fired from Russia.[5] During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union operated submarines under the polar ice cap, tested weapons, and invested heavily in surveillance and early warning systems across the land, air, sea, and undersea domains because of the same geographic and strategic realities.

Greenland commands the approaches to the North Atlantic and North America, forming the northwestern end of the Greenland–Iceland–U.K. (GIUK) Gap through which Russian ships and submarines entering the North Atlantic pass.[6] It is important for the United States and its NATO allies to maintain awareness of Russian and Chinese submarines passing through this area, especially ballistic missile submarines equipped with nuclear weapons.

The airspace above Greenland is also critically important to defending the U.S. homeland, as U.S. military radars in Greenland contribute to the detection of any hostile ballistic missile movements toward North America.[7] Because the Arctic is the shortest path between Russia and the United States and between China and the United States, Russian ICBMs, strategic bombers, and hypersonic and cruise missiles would most likely traverse the Arctic on course for the U.S. in the event of a war—a fact that led Washington to negotiate the 1951 Defense Agreement with Denmark early in the Cold War. North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), a binational U.S.–Canada command, requires persistent Arctic and High North domain awareness to fulfill its core mission of defending the continent's airspace.[8] During the Cold War, the U.S. had an extended network of manned radar installations across the Arctic known as the Distant Early Warning Line (DEW Line), but it closed much of this network during the 1990s after the Cold War ended.[9] The U.S. also operated a series of air and naval bases across Greenland that were likewise closed during the 1990s.

Today, with the return of great-power competition with China and Russia, Washington has recognized the need to rebuild this Arctic infrastructure as an essential element of continental defense. Pituffik Space Base in Greenland is one of the central nodes in this architecture because its Upgraded Early Warning Radar is one of only a few U.S. or allied sensors providing ballistic missile warning and space surveillance coverage of the North Atlantic and polar approaches to North America.

The United States is increasing its engagement in the Arctic region in several ways, and the increased U.S. activity in Greenland is closely interconnected with other major national security projects being undertaken by the Trump Administration. For example, in view of the long-standing U.S. icebreaker shortage, Pituffik Space Base currently relies on a Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker for its annual resupply, given the longtime U.S. icebreaker shortage.[10] The Icebreaker Collaboration Effort, or ICE Pact, seeks to remedy this shortage by building a much larger U.S. fleet of icebreakers in collaboration with Finland and Canada.[11] The Trump Administration's Golden Dome initiative to defend the North American continent from missile threats likewise has a major Arctic component and is mentioned in the Greenland agreement's preamble as one of the shared interests of the three parties.[12]

Danish and Greenlandic Interest

Greenland is a self-governing part of the Kingdom of Denmark. It enjoys a significant degree of self-rule, but responsibility for defense and foreign policy remains primarily with the Danish government in Copenhagen.

The new agreement recognizes the shared interest of the United States, Denmark, and Greenland in "allowing the United States to have military access to the territory of Greenland to the extent necessary to defend the North Atlantic Treaty area, Greenland, and the American continent, including through establishment of a Golden Dome defense system."[13] Denmark's 2023 Foreign and Security Policy Strategy prioritizes stability and sovereignty in the Arctic and specifies that "[t]he presence of the Danish Defence is to ensure improved surveillance and enforcement of sovereignty as well as to contribute to safeguarding the interests of the allies and NATO in the region."[14]

China has demonstrated interest in the island and surrounding region. Chinese investments, for example, have targeted Greenland's key economic sectors and infrastructure.[15] The government in Copenhagen has long recognized this interest as malign and in recent years has invoked national security concerns to block certain Chinese business deals in Greenland.[16]

In 2025, Denmark committed billions to systems and infrastructure relevant to Arctic security, particularly the defense of Greenland.[17] This commitment included a spending package with two new Arctic vessels, a regional headquarters based in Nuuk, and additional maritime patrol aircraft.[18] Denmark leads Arctic Endurance, an ongoing NATO training mission in and around Greenland focused on cold weather operations that began in January 2026 and became part of NATO's Arctic Sentry a month later.[19] Danish military activities in the Arctic are conducted primarily through Joint Arctic Command, headquartered in Nuuk.[20]

Denmark has long been a reliable and capable U.S. ally and member of NATO. Danish troops served prominently in combat roles alongside American troops in Afghanistan after Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty was invoked in response to the September 11 attacks and suffered one of the highest casualty rates among NATO allies.[21] Denmark spent 3.2 percent of gross domestic product on defense as of 2025—one of the highest percentages in the NATO alliance—and is projected to be among the first NATO allies to reach the mandated 3.5 percent spending level in the very near future.[22] Much of Denmark's new spending will be to procure high-end capabilities relevant to defending its Arctic territory in Greenland.[23]

The Danish Navy operates *Iver Huitfeldt*–class air defense frigates and *Absalon*-class frigates, as well as patrol vessels of varying capabilities.[24] The *Knud Rasmussen*–class ocean patrol vessels, for example, have ice-strengthened hulls for Arctic operations and are deployed frequently to the Arctic.[25] In 2026, Denmark announced a shipbuilding strategy that included the production of five new Arctic ships for the Danish Navy.[26] This increased

naval capacity will reinforce enhanced NATO maritime domain awareness and deterrence operations in the Arctic.

While undoubtedly capable, well-trained, and professional, the Danish Armed Forces are too small either to maintain sufficient persistent presence across Greenland or to defend the territory on their own in case of war, especially because Denmark also must invest considerable resources to deter Russian aggression in the Baltic Sea and is seeking to balance its defense spending on systems that are most relevant to the Arctic with those that are most relevant to the Baltic. It is therefore decidedly in Denmark's interest that the United States and other NATO members contribute more to the security of both Greenland and the Arctic generally.

Greenlandic Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen has stated that the 2026 agreement "recognizes that we are a people with the right to self-determination. At the same time, we are recognized as a part of our common security in the Arctic."[27] Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has likewise stated that:

> Today, we have signed a good agreement. For Greenland, the Kingdom of Denmark and the United States. And for NATO and Europe. The agreement strengthens our common defence and security. And it is deeply rooted in the NATO Alliance. The agreement acknowledges and respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Denmark and the Greenlandic people's right to self-determination.[28]

Political History of the Process

The history of diplomatic discussions between the United States and Denmark with respect to Greenland traces all the way back to U.S. Secretary of State William Seward, who purchased Alaska from the Russian Empire in 1867 and explored a similar purchase of Greenland.[29] Later, the U.S. purchased what became the U.S. Virgin Islands from Denmark in the 1916 Convention between the United States and Denmark for the Cession of the Danish West Indies and proposed at roughly the same time to acquire Greenland as well. Denmark declined to include Greenland in the sale, and in a declaration signed with the convention, the U.S. stated that it would "not object to the Danish Government extending their political and economic interests to the whole of Greenland."[30] During the Second World War, the United States assumed responsibility for the defense of Greenland after the German occupation of Denmark.[31]

Following the war, the U.S. again expressed interest in Greenland, and negotiations between Washington and Copenhagen over Greenland's future security architecture culminated with the 1951 Defense Agreement.[32] This deal enabled the U.S. to build and operate bases in Greenland.[33] During the Cold War, the United States maintained a substantial military presence equipped with a sophisticated array of military systems at multiple locations across Greenland. After the Cold War ended, as the United States and Europe de-emphasized great-power competition and defense budgets fell across NATO, the United States closed all but one installation in Greenland, leaving only Pituffik Space Base (originally Thule Air Base). Several amending protocols to the initial 1951 Defense Agreement have been signed since then, but the most consequential prior to 2026 was the 2004 supplemental agreement, which officially included the Greenlandic government as a party to the accord.[34]

Although the 1951 Defense Agreement's legal framework as amended has remained largely undisturbed since 2004, two major changes, one directly concerning the relationship between Denmark and Greenland and one global, necessitated the updated 2026 agreement. The first was the June 12, 2009, Act on Greenland Self-Government, under which the decision for or against independence is acknowledged to be the right of the people of Greenland; an independence agreement with Denmark then requires the consent of Greenland's parliament, a referendum in Greenland, and the consent of the Danish parliament.[35] Article 21 of the act established that Greenland possesses the right, with an existing legal pathway, to declare independence from Denmark. The Preamble to the new agreement signed on September 22, 2026, succinctly captures the need to address this shift, "[n]oting that the procedure for Greenlandic independence is set out in Article 21 of Act no. 473 of 12 June 2009 on Greenland Self-Government."[36] Were Greenland to have declared independence, the old defense agreement might have fallen by the wayside, and American policymakers worried that Greenland would be susceptible to adversarial influence once separate from the Kingdom of Denmark.

The second, global change in the intervening period that compounds the first was the systemic transition from what was often called the "unipolar moment"[37] back to great-power competition. The threat of infiltration and cooption in the Arctic by adversary powers such as Russia and China alarmed American policymakers and played a role in spurring President Trump's 2019 proposal to buy Greenland (which Denmark and Greenland declined)[38] and his subsequent focus in his second term on securing Greenland against Russia and China.[39] This is especially important given that Russia's military activity and infrastructure investment in its own Arctic territory have increased notably in recent years.[40]

Concerns over adversary influence were heightened by Greenland's reliance on an annual budgetary grant from Denmark to cover just over half of the Greenlandic treasury's revenue.[41] An independent Greenland would struggle to account for this budgetary shortfall if its budget were no longer subsidized by Copenhagen, and there would be a huge need for outside investment and economic activity.

Elsewhere in the world, China has displayed an opportunistic approach to disbursing and leveraging capital in similar instances, providing debt-trap loans and then seizing infrastructure as payment when the country accepting the Chinese loan is unable to pay.[42] This potential liability has been amply demonstrated by China's efforts over the past decade to buy an abandoned naval base in Greenland,[43] construct a satellite ground station,[44] and renovate and operate three Greenlandic airports in Nuuk, Ilulissat, and Qaqortoq.[45] To Copenhagen's and Nuuk's credit, in each instance, Danish officials worked with Greenlandic officials to block the investments and provide alternative investments where appropriate.

President Trump brought the American concern over these liabilities to the public's attention in March 2025 when he stated in an address to Congress that "[w]e need Greenland for national security and even international security. And we're working with everybody involved to try and get it. But we need it really for international world security. And I think we're going to get it. One way or the other, we're going to get it."[46]

Over the course of the year, President Trump's appeals on the subject became more pointed and direct until he declared in January 2026 that "[w]e are going to do something on Greenland whether they like it or not."[47] This prompted a January 14, 2026, meeting in Washington at which Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio met the Danish and Greenlandic foreign ministers and they agreed to establish a high-level trilateral working group to find a compromise solution.[48] After months of closed-door work, this trilateral working group arrived at the newly signed agreement, which will ensure that Greenland (even if it eventually becomes independent) remains under the NATO umbrella, will reaffirm and expand U.S. forces' access, and will review and protect critical sectors from adversaries' investments and control.

Key Provisions

The 2026 agreement amends and supplements the existing 1951 Defense Agreement in several important ways.

Expanded U.S. Military Presence and Access. The agreement expands the U.S. permanent military presence in Greenland through the

establishment of an additional Defense Area at two sites—Narsarsuaq and Mestersvig—bringing the total number of U.S. sites in Greenland to three. Narsarsuaq in southern Greenland is the former site of a Cold War–era air base, and Mestersvig on Greenland's east coast currently hosts a Danish special forces unit.[49] The United States will also be allowed to modernize and expand its activities at Pituffik Space Base. The United States committed to awarding construction, maintenance, and servicing contracts to local Greenlandic companies to the maximum extent possible.

The agreement also augments existing free movement rights for U.S. forces and explicitly grants U.S. public vessels undersea access within Greenland's territorial waters "without restriction except as mutually agreed upon by the Parties."[50]

Establishment of Military Installations by Non-NATO States. The updated agreement adds a prohibition of "manned or unmanned military installations by third states" unless otherwise agreed, intended to exclude Russia and China from ever establishing a presence in Greenland.[51]

Strategic Investment. The recent agreement's most novel provision, Article X, concerns foreign direct investment in strategic projects ("Particularly Sensitive Sectors or Activities" in the agreement).[52] In addition to directly addressing American concerns about future adversary penetration through investment, the provision is timely because Greenland currently lacks a dedicated foreign investment screening process, and Danish and EU procedures do not legally cross-apply.[53] The agreement specifies that:

> [S]tates or investors from a state that is not a member of NATO, a NATO partner, or an EU member state shall not be allowed to have (i) control, (ii) significant influence, or (iii) access to non-public information that may constitute a threat to national security or public order within Particularly Sensitive Sectors or Activities in the territory of Greenland (including the Territorial Waters), unless agreed between the Parties that the activities of such states or investors would not constitute a threat to national security or public order.[54]

"Particularly Sensitive Sectors or Activities" is defined for purposes of the agreement as "including but not limited to critical infrastructure and the extraction of resources,"[55] and the implicated provision explicitly includes Greenland's territorial waters within the area of consideration.[56] Article X, by construing the nation-state-based guardrails for strategic investment sources broadly to encompass NATO members, NATO partners, and EU member states, creates a Western investment bastion of sorts with

exceptions approved on the basis of approval from all three parties to the agreement (which includes the United States).[57]

Analysis of Greenland's current infrastructure, economic drivers, and geographic assets indicates that three areas are likely to require careful investment surveillance and support: critical minerals; standard physical infrastructure (energy, water, heating, transport); and fisheries.

Greenland possesses substantial geological reserves of rare earth elements with 1.5 million tons of proven reserves and an estimated 36 million tons of total resources, putting it among the world's top 10 countries in terms of geological assets. Greenland also possesses substantial uranium deposits as well as many other non–rare earth minerals with wide commercial applications.[58] However, two principal difficulties—ice and regulation—will slow the pace of investment and development. The Greenland Ice Sheet extends across 656,000 square miles (roughly 80 percent of the country) and reaches thicknesses of more than 1.9 miles, making any significant extraction operation extremely complicated.[59] With respect to regulation, Greenland banned uranium mining in 2021 and banned exploration of mineral deposits with even low levels (100 parts per million) of uranium, which caused a halt to a major rare earth mine because of colocation of minerals.[60] If these difficulties are overcome, Western investment in Greenland could bring major secure upstream production of rare earth elements online.

The combination of a small population and a harsh and geographically isolating environment has caused the majority of Greenlandic communities to function independently with nearly no road networks apart from a few that link sheep farms in southern Greenland. Because of the difficulties involved in providing such essentials as power, water, and heating, these needs are serviced by a combination of national and local government entities.[61] Therefore, any investment by non-allied nations in these utilities should be subject to Article X's provisions because communities could effectively be held hostage if provision of these services were to be interrupted or maintenance were to be delayed.

Finally, fisheries deserve attention with respect to critical investments in Greenland not only because they represent the primary national industry, but also because of the vital economic lifeline they provide for certain settlement economies.[62] In addition, trends in ice distribution appear likely to herald an increase in fishing grounds off West Greenland that could spur economic growth in this sector.[63] These economic opportunities could cement their outsized importance to the Greenlandic economy as consumer demand for seafood is expected to rise for decades;[64] therefore, these benefits should be retained for local producers and fair partners.

It should be noted that Denmark has already proven itself to be highly cooperative in this regard, having blocked the aforementioned attempt by a Chinese company to purchase the abandoned Grønnedal naval base as well as another attempt by China to build new airports in Greenland.[65]

Permanence. One of the most important features of the updated 2026 agreement is that it addresses concern arising from the potential impact of Greenlandic independence by establishing that the agreement allowing the U.S. military presence, prohibiting non-NATO military bases, and establishing a mechanism for excluding malign investment by non-NATO governments will endure even if Greenland becomes independent. Specifically, the agreement provides that:

> In case Greenland exercises its right to self-determination to become independent, the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark and the Government of Greenland shall together ensure that the independent Greenlandic state will (i) agree to remain in NATO, including by applying to become a member if necessary, and (ii) affirmatively assume, as from the date of independence, all of the rights and obligations of the Kingdom of Denmark specified in this Agreement, including any implementation agreements or arrangements between the Parties, as well as the Defense Arrangements.[66]

Conclusion

The American, Danish, and Greenlandic peoples have a shared interest in a secure and sovereign Arctic where the shortest approaches to North America from Russia and China are secured and the rights of all Arctic states are respected. The September 2026 agreement protects the sovereign security and economic interests of Washington, Copenhagen, and Nuuk and helps to ensure transatlantic security cooperation through NATO in the Arctic for decades to come.[67] This major diplomatic achievement expands U.S. defense areas in Greenland, prohibits non-NATO military presence, protects critical sectors of the Greenlandic economy that otherwise could have been exploited for dual-use purposes by adversarial governments, and permanently cements Greenland's status and role in transatlantic security.

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