

Briefing Paper

Committee: SPECPOL

Topic: The Question of Self-Determination for Greenland

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Summary

Greenland is an island in the North Atlantic Ocean and an autonomous territory (Otherwise called a self-governing overseas administrative division) in the Kingdom of Denmark having been granted home rule in 1979 and increased autonomy in 2009. Since 1979, all Greenland residents are Danish citizens and therefore have access to health and social benefits provided by Denmark including free healthcare and access to medical treatment in Danish hospitals. Greenland is also reliant on Denmark economically via grants and for trade and in part for their education system.

Self-determination is both *the right of a group of people to choose their own political status and governance* as well as *the process by which a country determines its own statehood and forms its own government*, in this case the right for the people of Greenland to choose what they wish their relationship with Denmark to be (whether they wish for full independence or not) and then the process by which that and the actions required afterward occur.

With Greenland being under Danish control since the 18th Century (Except when it was under the protection of the United States of America from 1941 to 1945 due to the Nazi occupation of Denmark) and the people of the island not always being treated in an ethical way or as equals to those in Denmark, this topic has grown in prevalence after the foundation of the United Nations (With Greenland being classed as a 'non self-governing territory' or otherwise colony) and especially in the 21st Century with the probability of many Greenlanders preferring independence being high if a referendum on independence were to be held in the near future.

Definition of Key Terms

Self Determination – the process by which a country determines its own statehood and forms its own government. (Oxford Dictionary of English); the right of a group of people to choose their own political status and governance

Autonomous Territory – a region with some freedom from an external authority. (*Wikipedia definition, cross-checked*)

District – an area of a country or city/a region defined for an administrative purpose. (*Oxford Dictionary of English*)

Province – a principal administrative division of a country or empire. (*Oxford Dictionary of English*)

Sovereign State – a state with a defined territory that administers its own government and is not subject to or dependent on another power. (*Oxford Dictionary of English*)

Home Rule – limited autonomy or self-government granted by a central or regional government to its dependent political units. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

Colony – a country or area under the full or partial political control of another country and occupied by settlers from that country. (*Oxford Dictionary of English*)

Non-self-governing territory – territories whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government. (*Chapter XI of the Charter of the United Nations*)

Background Information

This topic started as a modern political issue in 1945 when Greenland was categorised as a non-self-governing territory (Or colony) by the United Nations [UN]. Having been placed into this category, Denmark had to report to the UN but portrayed its rule over Greenland as a “role model” given its apparent sole aim being the development and protection of Greenland and its people.

This idea was put to the test in 1954 when Denmark declared to the UN that Greenlanders had freely agreed to be a part of Denmark and thus the decolonisation process that it would otherwise be subject to, should not apply. However, Greenlanders **were not** consulted directly on this matter. Despite this, Greenland’s new status was accepted by a majority vote in a UN committee and then again in the General Assembly.

Greenland was not exactly equal to Denmark however, wages in Greenland were much lower than in Denmark (Danish officials said due to a lower level of productivity on the island) but Danish officials stationed in Greenland received a (higher,) Danish salary whilst their local counterparts did not due to a ‘birthplace criteria’. Such caused discontent amongst the educated Greenlanders and ultimately fuelled the first wave of Greenland nationalism in the 1960s, focused on obtaining equality within the Kingdom of Denmark. Such has only grown over recent years, coming to dominate Greenland politics in the 21st Century; a sentiment which has only been fuelled by scandals and social experiments such as the ‘Little Danes’ social experiment and the forced implantation of IUD Devices into women and girls by Danish authorities.

As a result, rising autonomy has been given to Greenland in recent times with home rule granted in 1979 and even more autonomy granted in 2009. However, Greenland is still heavily reliant on Denmark’s financial grant (Which in 2024 amounted to the equivalent of £480m) economically and for its welfare system. Denmark has also improved the lives of those in Greenland, starting especially in 1953 when reforms were taken to improve the local economy, transportation systems and education systems following Greenlanders’ complaints over how Denmark administered the island.

Despite this, Greenlanders still have a want for self-determination and possible independence given the scandals and reasons above and especially due to the Trump administration's recent increased threats about 'taking over' Greenland. Such was also a concern beforehand however due to the United States of America's [US] sweeping military access to the island under a 1951 cold-war agreement between themselves and Denmark as well as the US storing nuclear bombs on the island during the Cold War without Greenland's knowledge, despite a Danish ban on such weapons. Another notable incident involving the US military and Greenland was in 1968 when a US military aircraft carrying four hydrogen bombs crashed near Thule, supposedly causing the destruction of all four weapons but only three of the four bombs were able to be accounted for after the crash by US authorities.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United States – Has often expressed interest in buying or taking control of Greenland from Denmark. Has a military base on the island (Pituffik Space Base) and sweeping military access under a cold-war defence agreement between Denmark and themselves which was modified slightly in 2004.

Greenland – The country who's future and ability to self-determine such is being discussed.

Denmark – The country which Greenland is part of the Kingdom of, Denmark manages foreign affairs and defence for Greenland.

Siumut – Social democratic political Party in Greenland that supports self-determination whilst maintaining close relationships with Denmark.

Democratic (Demokraatiit) party – Social liberal Greenland political party created as a breakaway from the Siumut supporting remaining a part of the Danish realm for the foreseeable future but with independence as the end goal of a gradual process.

Atassut – More Conservative Greenland political party that supports Greenland's historical relations with Denmark.

Inuit Ataqatigiit – Greenland political party calling for full independence from Denmark.

United Nations – Examined and was involved in helping to determine Greenland's status in the 1940s and 1950s but is yet to otherwise get involved.

Timeline of Events (Relevant UN Treaties)

Two important events in the lead-up to the current status of this issue are highlighted in red.

1776 – Danish government assumes a full monopoly of trade with Greenland and the Greenland coast becomes closed to foreign access.

1776-1950 – Denmark has (essentially) full control over Greenland, attempting to gradually acclimatise them to the outside world without exposing them to economic exploitation.

1867 – The United States of America first proposes the idea of purchasing Greenland.

1941-1945 – Greenland falls under the protection of the United States because of Nazi occupation of Denmark. Afterward it is returned to Danish control.

1910 – The United States of America proposes another offer for them to acquire Greenland.

1950 – Greenland's coast is re-opened to foreign access.

1951 – Monopoly of Royal Greenland Trading Company abolished.

1951 – Cold War agreement between the United States [US] and Denmark which grants the United States sweeping military access rights in Greenland. The agreement allows the US to “construct, install, maintain, and operate” military bases across Greenland, “house personnel” and “control landings, take-offs, anchorages, moorings, movements, and operation of ships, aircraft, and waterborne craft.”

1951 – Start of the “Little Danes” program, a failed social experiment involving 22 Inuit children from Greenland being sent to live with foster families in Denmark so that they may help to “modernise” Greenland when they returned. The children were never returned to their families, many developed psychological problems and nearly half died in early adulthood.

1953 – Greenland becomes an integral part of the Kingdom of Denmark and reforms are undertaken to improve the local economy as well as transport and education systems.

1966-1974 – Implementation of forced birth control policy in Greenland by Danish authorities that involved the forced implantation of intrauterine devices (IUDs) into thousands of women and girls. It aimed to end what Denmark viewed as an excessive number of children born out of wedlock in Greenland as well as to slow overall birth rates on the island.

1979 – Greenland is granted home rule by the Danish government, Greenland remains a part of the Danish realm and Denmark manages constitutional affairs, foreign relations and defence but Greenland manages economic development, local (municipal) regulations, taxes, education, the social welfare system, cultural affairs and the state church with mineral resources being managed jointly by both Denmark and Greenland. Each Greenlander also is now a Danish citizen and has equal rights with all other Danes. The Greenland Parliament (Inatsisartut) is also founded.

2004 – Agreement between Denmark and the United States for it to upgrade its missile defence system at Pituffik Space Base (Then called Thule Air Base).

2008 – Overwhelming vote in a referendum for increased autonomy.

2009 – Home rule agreement expands; Greenland now becomes a self-governing overseas administrative division of Denmark; gains greater control over its mineral & oil resources, manages essentially all domestic affairs and Greenlandic replaces Danish as the official language of the government. Denmark, in collaboration with Greenland, still manage the island's foreign

relations and defence. The people of Greenland's right to self-determination is also recognised here.

2013 – Greenland removes the 25-year ban on the mining of radioactive materials.

2021 – Greenland bans all new oil & gas exploration in its territory with the government saying that the environmental “price of oil extraction is too high”.

2025 – Donald Trump ramps up his idea of the United States acquiring Greenland.

6th January 2026 – The leaders of Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom issue a “Joint Statement on Greenland” that concluded “Greenland belongs to its people. It is for Denmark and Greenland, and them only, to decide on matters concerning Denmark and Greenland.”

Possible Solutions

Greenlanders already have the right to self-determination under the Self-Government Act which was enacted in 2009 (See the above timeline). However, due to Greenland's current reliance on Denmark and the possible threat of takeover from the United States of America, its ability to do the actions required afterward may be impeded.

Nevertheless, *some* possible solutions include:

- Holding a referendum to consult the Greenland people on what they want for their future.
 - Most Greenlanders do appear to want independence but believe it will take some time to get there.
 - Should the outcome of the referendum be for independence, Greenland could follow Iceland's path to independence, as Iceland was too a former part of the Kingdom of Denmark but left in 1944.
 - Should (full) independence not be wanted, then Greenland people could be consulted as to what ties they wish for with Denmark.
- Reducing dependence on Denmark so that more autonomy or independence is possible (Greenland still heavily relies on a block grant to it by the Danish government, see the summary for more information).
 - Greenland could increase investment or economic growth through mineral extraction, especially that of Lithium or Uranium.
- Denmark handing over responsibility for managing foreign relations and defence gradually to Greenland should (full) independence be wanted.
 - There could be a security pact or agreement in place for Greenland by Denmark and possibly other Arctic countries to help manage Greenland's defence, especially as an island with a lot of remote coastline.

Useful Links

1. <https://theworld.org/stories/2025/09/15/greenlanders-largely-want-independence-but-think-itll-be-a-long-road-to-get-there> ('Greenlanders largely want independence but think it'll be a long road to get there', 15th Sept. 2025)
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gpgqqzqymo> ('Greenland's dark history - and does it want Trump?', 3rd Feb. 2025)
3. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Greenland> (Encyclopaedia Britannica's page on Greenland)
4. <https://unric.org/en/greenland-and-the-un-colony-or-not-a-colony-that-was-the-question/> (Extract from a UN Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC) paper focusing on Greenland's status since 1945 and possible paths to independence)
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/07/world/europe/trump-greenland-denmark-us-defense-pact.html> (Article from the New York Times on the Greenland and US 1951 cold war defence agreement and its 2004 amendment)
6. <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/26/nx-s1-5341505/greenland-pituffik-space-military-base> (Article on the United States' military base in Greenland)

Bibliography

1. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Greenland/History>
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gpgqqzqymo>
3. <https://unric.org/en/greenland-and-the-un-colony-or-not-a-colony-that-was-the-question/>
4. <https://theworld.org/stories/2025/09/15/greenlanders-largely-want-independence-but-think-itll-be-a-long-road-to-get-there>
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/07/world/europe/trump-greenland-denmark-us-defense-pact.html>
6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/07/world/europe/trump-greenland-denmark-us-defense-pact.html>
7. <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/103874-denmark-greenland-traumatic-birth-control-campaign.html>
8. <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/26/nx-s1-5341505/greenland-pituffik-space-military-base>
9. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gpgqqzqymo>
10. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7720049.stm>
11. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18249474>
12. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proposed_United_States_acquisition_of_Greenland#1867_proposal

The content for this briefing paper was finalised on Tuesday 6th January 2026. As this is an on-going political topic, information provided above may now be out-of-date. Please conduct your own research to ensure that you are using up-to-date information.