

Greenland at the Crossroads

Amid competing global interests this year, the Arctic island nation is facing new junctures on its path toward independence.

By Gordon F. Sander



“O F COURSE MOST OF US SEE IT as a threat,” says Oline Inuusuttoq Olsen, a native Greenlandic journalist who writes for *Sermitsiaq*, the principal Greenland newspaper. “But many of us also see it as a chance to push for independence.”

The “it” Olsen is referring to are the escalating threats that U.S. President Donald Trump has made to take over the 836,000-square-mile island and self-governing Danish territory. Originally floated as an offer to purchase or otherwise acquire Greenland during Trump’s first term in the summer of 2019, many if not most Greenlanders, as well as Danes, did not take the idea very seriously, among them Martin Lidegaard, then-chairman of Denmark’s Foreign Policy Committee, who referred to the idea as a “terrible and grotesque thought.” But as Trump’s expansionist bids have increased in the months since the 2024 election, Greenlanders no longer see it as a joke.

“We are not used to force or threats backed up by force,” Inger Larsen, the vice chairperson of the local trade union and a native of the Western Greenland town Maniitsoq, told me when I visited Nuuk late last spring.

Indications of Trump’s increasing interest in the Arctic island began shortly after New Year’s, when Donald Trump Jr. arrived in Nuuk with a group of right-wing influencers in a widely controversial visit. Somewhat more serious, however, were statements that Trump made in the following weeks, after a tense phone call with Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen. Speaking with reporters aboard Air Force One, Trump stated that he believed the U.S. would take control of Greenland, adding that he believed that Greenlanders “want to be with us.” In his State of the Union message on March 4, he underscored that idea by suggesting that the U.S. needed Greenland for “national security,” noting that he was sure he “would get it [Greenland] one way or another.”

That claim was reinforced later that month by Vice President JD Vance during a contentious, three-hour visit to Pituffik Space Base, the U.S. Department of Defense’s northernmost installation on the Greenland coast. While suggesting that Denmark’s government had underinvested in security and “not done a good job” for Greenland’s residents, however, Vance also walked back any potential for forcible annexation, noting that he didn’t think that military force was necessary.

In May the threat of force was seemingly back on the table. In an interview with NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Trump told moderator Kim Welker that “something will happen with Greenland.”

All of this has since hung heavily on the nerves of the Arctic island’s nearly 57,000 residents. What will happen with *Kalaallit Nunaat*, as Greenlanders call their country?



The U.S. Consulate building in Nuuk, which opened in 2020 following the first consulate’s closure in 1953 (photo by Gordon Sander).



IN POINT OF FACT, DONALD TRUMP’S PUSH TO ACQUIRE Greenland is not totally out of the blue. “You must remember,” Oline Inuusuttoq Olsen told me one afternoon at the Hotel Hans Egede, “this is not the first time that the United States has tried to buy us. We have been fighting for our independence forever.”

American politicians have in fact been setting sights on Greenland ever since the mid-19th century. The long history of American designs on *Kalaallit Nunaat* dates back to shortly after the Civil War, when Robert Walker, an expansionist-minded former Mississippi senator turned lobbyist, raised the idea with Secretary of State William Seward—whose purchase of Alaska from Imperial Russia for \$7.2 million has left him best-remembered for “Seward’s Folly.”

Then in negotiations with Copenhagen to purchase the Danish West Indies, Seward asked his friend to prepare a report on the value of acquiring Greenland and Iceland, also colonies of Denmark at the time. As it turned out, there was a lot—both material and strategic. Walker’s 1868 report extolled the virtues of Iceland’s mountains, warm springs and hydraulic power. He was even more effusive about Greenland, which the former Treasury Secretary described as possessing “great mineral wealth,” particularly emphasizing its deposits of cryolite, which he referred to as “a most important mineral.” Just as importantly, Walker also believed that the acquisition would compel Canadians to join the U.S., completing a topographical “sandwich” he was hoping to build from Alaska to the eastern coast of Greenland. What was not to like, if Washington could meet Copenhagen’s price for its colonies?



A view of Nuuk from the rooftop bar of the Hotel Hans Egede (photo by Gordon Sander).

Well, for one, Copenhagen *didn't* like it: Neither Iceland nor Greenland was for sale. And neither did Congress, in the wake of Seward's expensive purchase of Alaska. As Representative C.C. Washburn of Wisconsin (who had gotten ahold of Walker's report) scathingly put it, according to the *Congressional Record*: "But are we to stop with the purchase of Alaska and St. Thomas?" he cracked. "No sir. I believe a treaty is now being negotiated with Denmark for the purchase of Greenland and Iceland."

This was enough to persuade Seward and the Johnson Administration to drop the idea of buying either Greenland or Iceland, as well as the Danish West Indies, altogether. (The U.S. would eventually purchase the Danish West Indies, which it renamed the Virgin Islands, from Denmark in 1917 for

The U.S. also established air force bases and other facilities, and shipped in troops.

\$25 million in gold bullion.) The following year, 1869, Walker passed away at the age of 68, his dream of expanding the emergent American empire to the northern Arctic forgotten.

For nearly a century, except for a short-lived proposal to purchase the island in 1910, Greenland was of little interest to Washington—until it was once more caught in the center of expansionist designs, this time those of Adolf Hitler. When Germany invaded and occupied continental Denmark in spring of 1940, this left Denmark's colonies, Greenland and the Faroes, open as well. Great Britain quickly occupied the Faroes and made plans to occupy parts of Greenland, which would have pulled the neutral island into the war. President Franklin Roosevelt rejected that idea. So did Henrik Kauffmann—Denmark's quick-thinking Ambassador to the U.S., who worked to make Greenland a de facto U.S. protectorate despite being charged with high treason by the Berlin-controlled Danish government shortly thereafter.

After America formally entered the war a year later, Washington asserted further control of the island, seizing its mine of cryolite, a key component for aluminum—the same precious metal William Walker had raved about in his 1868 report. The U.S. also established air force bases and other facilities, and shipped in troops. Between 6,000 and 10,000 American troops were based in Greenland during the course of the conflict, most of them at Bluie West One (later known as Narsarsuaq Air Base), located at the island's southern tip.

Relations with the native population were warm—and has continued to be warm with American visitors to the present day.

AFTER THE WAR, COPENHAGEN RESUMED CONTROL of Greenland. In 1946, the Truman administration did make a sub rosa offer to Denmark to purchase the island for \$100 million, because of its strategic importance; Danish officials firmly if politely rejected the proposal. U.S. military forces remained on the island, albeit in lesser numbers, and relations between the U.S. and Denmark, now co-members of NATO, continued to be excellent. In 1951, the Greenland Defense Agreement—orchestrated in large part by Eugenie Anderson, America's first female ambassador and the first American woman to sign a formal diplomatic treaty—enabled the U.S. to retain control of its military bases on Greenland as well as expand them.

During the Cold War, the U.S.-operated military bases in Greenland including Sondrestrom Air Base in central Greenland and Thule Air Base (now Pituffik Space Base), which became a major Strategic Air Command (SAC) base in the northwest. Greenland was also part of the North American Defense Command (NORAD)'s Distant Early Warning Line (DEW), the series of radar stations around the Arctic Circle established in the late 1950s

At nearly 1 million square miles, Greenland is by far the largest of all former territories.

to detect incoming bombers from the Soviet Union. The crash of a B-52 Stratofortress bomber laden with four nuclear bombs in the northwest corner of Greenland in January 1968 caused hearts to skip and tempers to rise; however, even this didn't mar relations between the two allies for long.

Many of the U.S. installations were dismantled or evacuated as Cold War tensions eased, including Søndrestrom Air Base, which was closed in 1992 and is now the location of Kangerlussuaq Airport. The Air Force did retain its base at Thule, however, which then became Pituffik Space Base; albeit with a smaller number of American military personnel, which today number around 150 (in addition to Danish and Greenlandic contractors), though this is not currently limited by Denmark. As per the original 1950 bilateral agreement, the Danish national flag is flown at the base in order to signify its presence on Danish territory, but the U.S. is allowed to fly its flag as well.



TODAY, THERE ARE NO LIMITS TO AMERICAN BUSINESS investment in Greenland; nor are there any Chinese or Russian investments or installations. As a result, both Danes and Greenlanders have been stumped by this recent push from the U.S. Or, as Ulrik Pram Gad, a Greenlandic expert at the Danish Institute for International Studies who previously worked for the government in Nuuk, says: "The trouble is that everything the U.S. could rationally want in Greenland it already has—or can have. It has the serious infrastructure and military equipment, so they can keep China out."

"The people of Greenland are a loving and kindhearted people," Aaja Chemnitz, one of the two Greenlandic representatives in the *Folketing*, the Danish parliament, told me. "We have had a good relationship with the U.S. for many years. Obviously," she added, "the comments from the current administration have had an impact on the relationship."

It is important to note, however, that *Kalaallit Nunaat* has a somewhat unique political-economic position in relation to other former European colonies. "Greenland remains a non-sovereign territory within the Danish state," notes Ebbe Volquardsen, a Nuuk-based cultural historian.. This means that full political decolonization has not yet occurred, even though comparable processes led to independence decades ago.

As such, though Greenland is roughly comparable to Britain's 14 Overseas Territories and France's 13 Overseas Territories, there are a number of significant differences—notably as far as land mass. At nearly 1 million square miles, it is by far the largest of all former territories. The next closest in size is the 660,000-square-mile British Antarctic Territory—which has no



Greenlandic politician Aaja Chemnitz (photo by Gordon Sander).



Journalist Oline Inuusuttoq Olsen (photo by Gordon Sander).



The Katuaq Cultural Center in Nuuk.

PHOTO: PETER LINDSTROM/VISIT GREENLAND

permanent population.

Another difference is Greenland's vast untapped mineral wealth, which is variously estimated to be worth anywhere between \$30 and \$70 billion depending on future extraction viability—which, along with its location near the melting ice cap and proximity to transatlantic shipping lanes, gives it huge strategic importance.

Last but not least, of all the various autonomous territories, Greenland is also one of the more costly. A *bloktilskud* (block grant) of 3.9 billion Danish kroner (approximately \$614 million) is paid annually by Denmark to support government and public services in Greenland, a figure which, when combined with associated other costs to Copenhagen, comprises somewhat less than one percent of the Danish annual budget, while supplying 20 percent of the Greenlandic GDP.

The not inconsiderable cost of subsidizing the island—along with most Danes' underlying respect for the principle of self-determination—is one reason why they, and the Danish government, have recently expressed more support for Greenlandic independence and expect that to eventually happen. The question is, when is “eventually?”



THE STORY OF GREENLAND'S DECOLONIZATION—particularly its political aspect—has been a long one, and is still incomplete. First established as a colony of Denmark in the early 18th century, following expeditions led by Danish-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede, Greenland's decolonization has taken place over several decades. A few

■ *Polling has shown a clear and increasing support for full and complete independence.*

key dates are as follows:

1953: Greenland is absorbed into Denmark proper. With the enactment of Denmark's 1953 Constitution, Greenland's status as a colony comes to an end. Rather than being granted independence (as with the concurrent British and French decolonization efforts), the island is incorporated into the Danish realm as an *amt* (county) and fully integrated into Denmark. Danish citizenship is extended to Greenlanders, and Greenland is granted nominal representation (two seats) in *Folketing*, the Danish parliament.

1979: Home Rule. Danish membership in the European Common Market engenders opposition in Greenland, leading the Danish government to create more political space between itself and the island. Copenhagen grants Greenland home rule, while retaining control of various areas, including foreign relations, currency matters and the legal system. The drive for full independence gains momentum.

2009: Self-government. Three-quarters of Greenlandic voters—21,355 in total—approve a referendum expanding home rule in 30 areas, including police, the courts and coast guard. Greenlandic becomes the official language on June 21, with the day being celebrated as Greenland National Day. The rules regarding division of the island's oil revenue change so that the first 75 million kroner goes to Greenland, with the remainder split with Denmark. The annual block grant from Denmark is upheld, with the understanding that it is eventually to be phased out. According to clause 21 of the new agreement, Greenland can declare independence if it wishes to pursue it, stating that “the decision on Greenlandic independence shall be taken by the people of Greenland.” However, the decision must be approved by a referendum amongst the Greenlandic people and the *Folketing*. The move is seen as a major step towards full independence, now with Copenhagen's blessing.

This stage of political decolonization is roughly where Greenland still stands today—the operative understanding being that Greenland will eventually become independent, when decided upon by the Greenlandic people. Copenhagen's commitment to Greenlandic independence has been repeatedly reaffirmed by Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, who stated last year that “the self-rule law stipulates that the future of Greenland is to be decided by Greenland and Greenlanders.”

The main question for Greenlanders, and one which has continued to divide them, is whether and how soon Greenland can *afford* to be independent. Over the years, polling has shown a clear and increasing support for full and complete independence from Denmark. However, when economic sustainability and living standards enter the picture, that support becomes problematic.

A January 2025 poll showed that 84 percent of Greenlanders supported

Greenlandic children are significantly overrepresented in Denmark's foster system.

independence, but nearly half—45 percent—were opposed if the price of independence was a lower standard of living. If the *bloktilskud* had been phased out, or was in the process of being phased out, the question would be moot; but the amount of the subsidy has in fact increased over the past decade.

Nevertheless, on the road leading up to Greenland's general elections this past March, full independence had plenty of support, led by Múte B. Egede, Greenland's incumbent Prime Minister and head of the Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA) party. In a strident New Year's speech, Egede—who earlier gained fame for the fighting words, “Greenland is not for sale”—renewed his call for a complete and immediate break with Denmark and for the Greenlandic people to throw off “the shackles of colonialism.”



THE CULTURAL ASPECT OF THE GREENLANDIC decolonization process has been even more problematic. “In today's Greenland, colonial concepts of race, knowledge and authority have outlived formal colonialism,” says Ebbe Volquardsen, “and continue to shape institutions, perceptions and relationships to the present day.”

Standing out within that cultural legacy are traumas surrounding Denmark's forcible attempts to integrate Greenland and its people into Denmark during the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1950s and '60s. Among these are:

Language. “Despite the official status of *Kalaallisut*, Danish remains dominant in many administrative, legal and academic contexts—a legacy of Danish control over education and bureaucracy that continues to create barriers for monolingual Greenlandic speakers,” notes Volquardsen.

Historical trauma and displacement. “Almost every Greenlandic family has been affected by traumatic experiences of displacement, often linked to postwar Danish policies of assimilation,” noted Volquardsen. “These include prolonged or semi-voluntary stays in Denmark that led to family separations, cultural and linguistic losses, forced or pressured.”

These include the so-called 1951 “Little Danes” experiment, involving 22 Inuit children who were sent to Danish families in an attempt to re-educate them to lead to a transformation of Greenlandic society. The experiment was part of a broader effort by Denmark to convince the United Nations that Greenland was an integral part of their country, following a pledge made by European power to the UN that they would decolonize their societies. Of the 22 children, 16 were returned to Greenland to be placed in Danish-speaking orphanages, rather than to their biological families. A large proportion of those



PHOTO: RAVEN EYE PHOTOGRAPHY/VISIT GREENLAND

A young Greenlandic girl celebrates National Day on June 21 by wearing her colorful *Kalaallisut*, the national costume, at festivities at the Colonial Harbor.

returnees experienced mental health problems and/or died in young adulthood.

Seventy years later, in 2020, after intense pressure from campaigners, the Danish government finally issued a formal, written apology for the experiment, which continues to haunt Greenland and metropolitan Denmark. In 2022 Prime Minister Frederiksen delivered a face-to-face apology to the six living victims. In August of this year, Frederiksen issued another apology to Greenlandic women and their families who had suffered or were suffering the consequences of a related scandal—the involuntary fitting of thousands of Inuit girls and women with contraceptive devices, which took place between 1966 and 1970 and caused widespread trauma, reportedly leaving many of the victims (some as young as 12) sterile.

Contemporary child welfare interventions. A number of reports have found that Greenlandic children are significantly overrepresented in Denmark's foster system. “To this day Greenlandic children—especially those living in Denmark—are at disproportionately high risk of being removed from their families by child protection authorities,” Volquardsen explained. “Beyond institutional frameworks, structural racism operates at the social level as well: Greenlanders are more likely to be reported to the authorities by their neighbors or professionals based on racialized suspicions. Such reports are more likely to result in invasive, often traumatic state interventions than comparable cases involving ethnic Danish families. These are not merely historical echoes, but active and ongoing dynamics.”

Knowledge and media representation. “Greenlandic perspectives are



Greenlandic parliamentarian
Aki-Matilda Høegh-Dam.

often marginalized or filtered through Danish institutions,” Volquardsen also points out. “Major decisions about public narratives—for instance, in national museums or media coverage—still tend to be shaped in Copenhagen rather than Nuuk, echoing a colonial epistemology in which Indigenous voices are framed or silenced.”

Today, Greenlandic society faces a number of social issues that have also been affected by the effects of colonization. One of these is mental health; the territory currently has the highest rate of suicide in the Nordic region. According

to the latest available statistics, 81.3 per 100,000 people—or roughly 40 Greenlanders per year between the years 2015 and 2018—chose to end their life, a staggering number for a country of only 57,000. Homelessness is also a major issue, with around one percent of the population (an estimated 500) lacking permanent shelter. Nuuk has a floating homeless population of roughly 200 or so individuals.

For the Indigenous Inuit population, this cultural legacy has fueled a movement to reclaim their suppressed culture and identity. One such aspect, which coincides with a worldwide Inuit renaissance, is a resurgence of traditional facial tattoos on young women that signify rites of passage.

THIS REAWAKENING HAS ALSO LED TO SOME TENSIONS with the Danish-speaking ethnic minority population—approximately 12 percent, or 7,000 Greenlanders are ethnic Danes or mixed-race Danes. Among them are Corinne Halling, the front office manager at the Hotel Hans Egede, a mixed-race Dane who was born and raised in Nuuk and later majored in Eskimology (a study of the folklore, culture and ethnology of speakers of the Eskimo-Aleut languages) at the University of Copenhagen. “The resentment [against ethnic Danes] has always been there, but now it is public,” said Halling. “People are becoming braver and more comfortable about expressing their opinion towards other people than before, when these feelings were expressed more in private.”

In Halling’s opinion the word “decolonize” has become a kind of catch-all phrase to cover the legitimate grievances of the Inuit against Denmark, as well as excuse the recent extremes of the anti-Danish “pushback,” as she calls the backlash against the legatee population.

“For the past 10 years, there has been a greater tendency to use the term ‘decolonize’ as a pushback towards the injustice that the Danes and the Danish government inflicted on the Inuit, whether it was during the distant past,

“It’s a cry for visibility: ‘We are here too. See us. Hear us. We matter,’” says Høegh-Dam.

when we were first colonized, or during the 1950s when Greenlanders were recognized as an actual people by the Copenhagen government but still experienced dehumanizing treatments,” Halling adds. “As part Inuk myself—my mother is Inuk and my father is Danish—I understand that. But the push to reclaim our identity has also become about pushing out the Danish, [making] some Danes no longer feel welcome.”

Some Danes I spoke to, who asked not to be quoted, concurred. Others did not. “I respectfully disagree,” says Aki-Matilda Høegh-Dam, a Danish-Greenlandic politician who is one of the two Greenlandic representatives in the *Folketing*. Elected in 2019 and then its youngest member, Høegh-Dam has since become an outspoken voice for Greenlandic independence in Copenhagen, alongside her more moderate fellow representative Aaja Chemnitz. In response to the friction mentioned by Halling, she notes, “[This] is often an expression of deep frustration from the Indigenous *Kalaallit*, who have long felt marginalized—even in their own homeland.

“This frustration doesn’t stem from hatred, but from being systematically excluded and discriminated against,” adds Høegh-Dam, who also serves in the *Inatsisartut*, the Parliament of Greenland. “The uncomfortable reality of the matter is that many Greenlanders who succeed—myself included—are those who are best at navigating Danish systems, institutions and language. That success, while well-earned, often reinforces a dynamic where those with the strongest Greenlandic cultural foundation—especially those who do not speak Danish or live outside the capital [Nuuk]—are overlooked. So when someone says, ‘that person isn’t Greenlandic enough,’ or when there’s criticism of Danish influence, it’s a cry for visibility: ‘We are here too. See us. Hear us. We matter.’

“If that discomfort leads to greater reflection and equity,” Høegh-Dam told me, “then maybe that’s a discomfort we need to deal with.”



IN THE MONTHS LEADING UP TO GREENLAND’S parliamentary elections this past March, the independence issue—the end game of the political decolonization process—was at the forefront.

With six parties competing to fill 31 seats, the favored party for the elections was the then-majority Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA). In a strident New Year’s speech, Múte Bourup Egede, Greenland’s then-prime minister and head of the IA party, renewed his call for a complete and immediate break with Denmark and for the Greenlandic people to throw off “the shackles of colonialism.”

Egede, who had led Greenland since 2021, asserted that Denmark’s

Denmark has also expanded its investments in Greenland's healthcare and infrastructure.

relations with Greenland had not created “full equality” and that *Kalaallit Nunaat* deserved to represent itself on the world's stage and conduct its own trade relations, not Copenhagen.

“Work has already begun on creating an independent state,” stated Egede. “The upcoming new election period must create the new steps.” He also strongly hinted that an independence referendum would follow IA's expected triumph.

Prior to March, the IA was expected to not only win, but win big, followed by a quick march back to the voting booth and independence.

Egede had openly rebuffed Donald Trump's proposal to purchase Greenland, earlier gaining fame for the phrase, “Greenland is not for sale.” Despite this, however, it was thought that a victory for IA and its explicit repudiation of Copenhagen would nevertheless give Trump more political leverage to maneuver in the post-election landscape.

AND THEN CAME A STARTLING UPSET. FOLLOWING the elections on March 11, it was not the IA but the pro-business Demokraatit (Democrat) party, led by Jens-Frederik Nielsen, who had won the largest share of the vote—30 percent—more than tripling its parliamentary seats (to 10, previously 3).

From the outset, Nielsen was clear about his goals to form a coalition government in response to the new pressures faced from the U.S., stating, “We do not belong to anyone else.” By the end of March, a coalition had been formed of four parties, including the IA, all of whom were and are committed to seeking full independence—the one outlier being the Naleraq party, which seeks immediate independence.

But the vote, which received broad international coverage, was also widely seen as favoring a slower approach to the final divorce from Copenhagen. Meanwhile, Denmark has responded to the Trump administration's charge that it has underinvested in Greenland's security. In January, it announced a \$2 billion investment package to boost its military capabilities in the Arctic, including three new ice-capable naval ships and two long-range surveillance drones.

The Copenhagen government has also begun treating the autonomous territory more like a partner than an adjunct, giving it more voice in foreign affairs. This past May, Denmark assumed chairmanship of the Arctic Council, an organization of eight Arctic-bordering nations dealing with the region's environmental protection and Indigenous rights. As chair of the organization, Denmark appointed Vivian Motzfeldt, Greenland's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Together, the two countries have reaffirmed their relationship and linked resolve through a series of bilateral visits and pronouncements. In early April, Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen flew to Nuuk for a three-day



PHOTO: KATJA SÄULÄ/FINNISH PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE

Prime Minister of Greenland Jens-Frederik Nielsen (far left) with others including Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen at a Nordic ministerial meeting in Finland, May 2025.

visit, where she made her most outspoken pushback to President Trump to date in a shipboard press conference in Nuuk harbor. “When you ask us to spend more money on defense, we are on the same page,” she said. “But you cannot annex another country.”

In late April, Jens-Frederik Nielsen flew to Copenhagen for a similar show of unity. Speaking alongside Mette Frederiksen, Nielsen restated his predecessor's vow that Greenland was “not a piece of property that can be bought,” while adding that Greenland and Denmark need to “move closer together” in light of the new foreign policy position.

Nielsen also added that Greenland was prepared to deepen ties with Washington, with a caveat. “We are ready for a strong partnership and more development,” he declared, “but with respect.”

Underlining the unity message, Nielsen returned from Denmark to Nuuk alongside the Danish sovereign, King Frederik X, for the latter's second official visit since his inauguration last year. King Frederik did not issue a statement during his visitation, which featured a *kaffemik* (a traditional social gathering) open to the public at the Katuaq Cultural Center, as well as a car tour through the adjacent mountains.

“The King's visit to Greenland was definitely arranged in response to the present geopolitical situation to send a message,” notes Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, a senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).

More recently, Denmark has also expanded its investments in Greenland's healthcare and infrastructure. In September 2025, it announced a \$253 million investment package to supplement the block grants from 2026 through 2029.



A local fishing boat in the Ilulissat Icefjord, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

PHOTO: REINHARD PANTKE/VISIT GREENLAND

The funds will include financing for a new landing strip in Ittoqqortoormiit in the eastern region of the island and a deep-water port in Qaqortoq in the south. Additionally, Denmark has now pledged to cover expenses for Greenlandic patients at Danish hospitals.



ALTHOUGH SUPPORT FOR METTE FREDERIKSEN HAS fluctuated, polls indicate strong support for the way she has handled the Greenland affair, including standing up to Washington. Meanwhile, support for the United States in Denmark has taken a dive, with a May poll showing a 48-percent drop from the previous August in the number of Danes holding a favorable view of the U.S.

“I view Greenland as the decisive factor behind this development,” says Rasmus Søndergaard, adding that the advances from the U.S. have “clearly strengthened [the] ties between Denmark and Greenland. [Greenlanders] view Trump as a threat, and see a close partnership between Greenland and Denmark as crucial to preventing an American takeover.”

“There is no doubt that the recent situation has been an awakening for Denmark,” Aaja Chemnitz notes. “The status quo is no longer an option. The need for a partnership on more equal terms is clear. The Danish government has underinvested and taken Greenland for granted too long.

“I’m happy that the Danish government is determined to better the conditions,” she adds.

Aki-Matilda Høegh-Dam is more skeptical; having previously represented

The events over the past year have put Greenland higher up on the world’s geopolitical map.

the Siumut party in the *Folketing* (which is a member of the new coalition), she is now a member of the Naleraq (the coalition outlier). Høegh-Dam became a heroine to many Greenlanders last October when she refused to translate her speech to the parliament from the Greenlandic. When asked whether she agrees that the pressure from the U.S. has brought Greenland and Denmark closer, she responds, “I would not describe it that way. If anything, [the threat] has made clear that there are unresolved questions in the relationship.” This reiterates a point she made in a speech last May to the *Folketing*. “Why,” she asked her fellow parliamentarians then, “are you listening now when another country is criticizing you, but not listening when for centuries we raised the same issues?”

In Høegh-Dam’s opinion, the recent moves from Copenhagen—including the security investment and selection of Vivian Motzfeldt, the Greenlandic foreign minister, for chair of the Arctic Council—are too little and too late. “Greenland and Denmark may cooperate on many things,” she says, “but the attention from the U.S. has merely highlighted how unequal the partnership remains. We are not a sovereign state. Our voice in foreign policy is very limited. And while we may be consulted, we are rarely treated as an equal party.”

That said, the independence activist feels that the crisis has been a positive thing for Greenland and Greenlanders. “The crisis has forced many Greenlanders to think more critically about who speaks for them and what it means to be self-determining,” she says. “It has complicated things too, of course. There are still power imbalances and internal balances to work through. But I think that the pressure has made it harder to ignore the fact that our current arrangement is temporary and insufficient, while highlighting the fact that we are not just a ‘domestic affair’ within Denmark, but a people with a right to speak for ourselves, and to be heard internationally, not just when others decide it’s convenient.”

Meanwhile, the events over the past year have certainly put Greenland higher up on the world’s geopolitical map—not only for Denmark and the U.S., but for wider Europe. In June, French President Emmanuel Macron also visited Nuuk in a show of solidarity.

Over this past summer, fears that the U.S. might use military force to occupy Greenland seemed to be receding—the greatest concern among those I spoke to seemed to be that the U.S. might establish troops or latter-day American colonists in an unoccupied region of the island, like the short-lived American Equatorial Islands Colonization Project of the 1930s (when 130 men from the then-American territory of Hawaii were deposited on a number of remote Pacific Islands in order to claim them for the United States).

Reports from Visit Greenland have shown an influx in tourism over the past few years.

However, Greenland has still clearly remained of deep interest to the current U.S. administration. In June, the Pentagon announced that it had redesigned its command structure by shifting Greenland from the U.S. European Command, which encompasses Europe and Russia, to the U.S. Northern Command, encompassing North America; the justification, according to a Pentagon spokesperson, being “in order to strengthen the Joint Force’s ability to defend the U.S. homeland.”

In late August, the Danish public broadcaster DR reported covert influence operations were being conducted by American envoys in Greenland, prompting Denmark’s foreign minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen to summon a U.S. diplomat for talks. “We are aware that foreign actors continue to show an interest in Greenland and its position in the Kingdom of Denmark,” Rasmussen stated. “It is therefore not surprising if we experience outside attempts to influence the future of the Kingdom in the time ahead.” In September, Denmark conducted its largest military exercises in Greenland to date—without the participation of the U.S., which has been involved in similar exercises in the past.



AMID THIS NEW POLITICAL FOCUS ON GREENLAND, there has been another development—increased tourism.

Reports from Visit Greenland have shown an influx in tourism over the past few years, jumping 36 percent from 2022 to 2023, with a record high of cruise passenger visits in 2023. Beginning in June 2025, a new direct flight route was also launched between Greenland and the U.S., operated by United Airlines and flying from Newark, New Jersey to Nuuk. For East Coast visitors, the island can now be reached in as little as four hours. The tourist boom is seen by many Greenlanders as enabling their ultimate dream of economic self-sufficiency and complete freedom.

To be sure, there is certainly a lot to see and experience in *Kalaallit Nunaat*, not least of which is its natural beauty. Jaw-dropping icebergs, glaciers and fjords including the UNESCO World Heritage Ilulissat Icefjord; the northern lights and midnight sun; wildlife ranging from whale-watching to reindeer to musk ox. Even in rougher weather, the phenomena is awe-inducing, including its blizzards—there is nothing quite like being pinioned against the wall of a Nuuk building in 60-mile-per hour winds, pelted with particles of snow, as I was on my second day in town.

The territory also has an extraordinarily vibrant and rich culture, which can be experienced through traditions such as the *kaffemik* at local villages,



PHOTO: PETER LINDSTROM/VISIT GREENLAND

Inuit tupilaks on view at the Greenland National Museum.

events at the Katuaq Cultural Center and visits to Nuuk’s two outstanding museums: the Greenland National Museum and the Nuuk Art Museum.

The oldest and larger of the two, the National Museum (*Numatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu*), was founded in 1965 and was Greenland’s first established museum. Located in a warehouse overlooking Nuuk’s old colonial harbor, the National Museum houses a wealth of interconnected exhibits of artefacts, photos, videos and various materials from over the centuries depicting the ethnographic and cultural history of *Kalaallit Nunaat*. Visitors can learn about history beginning with the days of the Saqqaq, the Paleo-Eskimo people who first settled in southern Greenland in 2500 BC; through the arrival of the Thule people, the ancestors of the modern day Inuit (or proto-Inuit), who migrated from Alaska between 1000 and 1300 AD; to the arrival of Hans Egede in 1714 and the colonial period; through the contemporary era of self-rule.

Objects on view range from domestic utensils to grave goods to amulets, anoraks, *kamiks* (boots) and the Qilakitsoq mummies, which date back to the 15th century. Other exhibits link the past to the present, including a comprehensive photo exhibit documenting the resurgence of *Kalaallit* facial tattoos.

Across town from the National Museum is the Nuuk Art Museum (*Nuuk Kunstmuseum*), founded by the Danish businessman Svend Junge and his wife Helene and inaugurated in 2007. Located in a converted Seventh Day Adventist Church, the museum houses Junge’s original collection comprising works from the colonial period, including three paintings by Aero Island native Jens Erik Carl Rasmussen made after his visit to Greenland in 1870, including the famous *Greenlanders on a summer trip. A day in June on Godthaabsfjorden* (*Grønlandere paa Sommerrejse. Junidag paa Godthaabsfjorden*), 1878, all of which



PHOTO: REBECCA GUSTAFSSON/VISIT GREENLAND

Visitors explore the exhibition *Avatangiisit* at the Nuuk Art Museum.

are on view on the museum's second floor.

The first floor, however, exhibits works entirely by contemporary Greenlandic artists, in a cornucopia of paintings, drawings and sculptures depicting the breathtaking range, variety and imaginative force of the island's contemporary art. Notable pieces include: the camera obscura works of Pia Arke, the late artist, writer and performance artist whose series *Arctic Hysteria* prompted a new era for *Kalaallit* art; the sweeping, parfait-colored sunset paintings of Miki Jacobsen; the sinuous watercolors of Buuti Pedersen; political *agit-prop* posters from the early days of the independence movement, and much more.

The museum's second-floor extension was built last year in order to accommodate its growing collection and faces east towards Sermitsiaq, the regal, near-4,000-foot mountain overlooking Nuuk. The decision to reorganize the collection with all Greenlandic artists on the first floor, according to the museum's long-time director Nivi Katrine Christensen, has been a goal throughout the ten years of planning. "It has been our dream for a long time," Christensen explains. "As Greenland's biggest art gallery of only two, we want to put local Greenlandic artists in the spotlight. We have so many talented artists in Greenland who deserve recognition and to be seen."

On view this spring, the exhibition *Avatangiisit* celebrated 30 years of KIMIK, the Association of Artists in Greenland, and its role in developing the modern Greenlandic art scene. Works on view by 24 artists spanned a wide variety of media including carvings, paintings, ceramics, mixed media, installations, video works and prints, reflecting the surroundings that the

The exhibition *Avatangiisit* celebrated 30 years of KIMIK, the Association of Artists in Greenland.

artists navigate and interpret in their works. Among those are practices traditional to Inuit culture, including beaded works by Lisbeth Karline Poulsen and a beaded installation by Arnajaraq Støvlbæk.

Others works dealt with cultural issues, including anger at Denmark—and, now, the United States. These included a drawing by Miki Jacobsen of an anti-Trump demonstration in March outside the new American consulate in Nuuk, as well as a watercolor by Buutio Pedersen of a figure based on the *Kaassassuk*, the monstrous Sasquatch-like figure of Inuit myth, throwing a certain American intruder off a cliff. Though the exhibition closed in August, the Nuuk Art Museum now has several of these works in its permanent collection, which will remain on view.

That anger notwithstanding, Greenland continues to be an exceptionally generous and friendly location to visitors, including those from the U.S.; as Aaja Chemnitz stresses, Greenlanders are "a loving and kindhearted people." I witnessed this throughout my recent visit, from the hearty "*Tikilluarit*" I received from a taxi driver at Nuuk's new airport, to a surprise garnet gifted to me by a staff member of a hostel, to the friendly bartenders in the Skyline Bar, the Hotel Hans Egede's rooftop bar featuring a jaw-dropping view of the city and ice-covered mountains beyond.

I SAW THIS AS WELL IN THE COMMUNITY SPIRIT OF Greenland. In afternoons and evenings at Café Pascucci, a coffee shop located in the city's shopping hub, the Nuuk Center (which, by the way, makes a superb milk shake), birthday celebrations and other rites of passage combined with family outings, date nights and greetings passed between municipal workers, to create an aura of singular kindness and warmth.

"We have survived Danish colonialism," the journalist Oline Inuusuttoq Olsen told me shortly before I—reluctantly—departed Nuuk following my memorable visit to her homeland. "And yes, we have fears about the U.S. But," she added, "whatever happens, I am staying here."

Gordon F. Sander is a journalist, historian and photographer who has been writing about the Nordic and Baltic region since 1990. A long-time contributor to the *Scandinavian Review*, he also writes for *The New York Review of Books* and *The Washington Post*. He also is the author of nine books, including several works of Nordic history, including *The Finnish Front Line: Kekkonen, Kennedy, and Krushchev's Cold War Showdown*, which will be published this fall by Cornell University Press.