

Forum: General Assembly 4 (GA4)

Issue: The situation in Greenland

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Introduction

The Arctic territory of Greenland, the world's largest island, is home to approximately 56,000 people, the majority of whom are Indigenous Kalaallit (Greenlandic Inuit). Although Greenland has governed most of its own domestic affairs since the Self-Government Act of 2009, the Kingdom of Denmark retains responsibility for defence, foreign policy and monetary matters. Since January 2026, the territory has stood at the centre of an escalating international crisis after United States President Donald Trump renewed and intensified his ambition to bring Greenland under American control, citing national security, Arctic competition with Russia and China, and access to critical minerals.

The crisis has raised urgent questions concerning sovereignty, the right to self-determination, and the prohibition on the threat or use of force enshrined in the UN Charter, making it a matter of pressing concern for this General Assembly committee, which is mandated to address questions of decolonisation and political self-determination.

Definition of Key Terms

Self-Government

The constitutional arrangement was established by the 2009 Act on Greenland Self-Government, under which Greenland exercises autonomous control over most domestic affairs, including natural resource management, while Denmark retains authority over defence, foreign affairs and monetary policy.

Self-Determination

The principle, enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, that a people may freely determine its political status and pursue its economic, social and cultural development without external coercion.

Non-Self-Governing Territory

A designation under Chapter XI of the UN Charter for territories whose people have not

yet attained full self-government. Greenland held this status until 1953, when its integration into Denmark was recognised by UN General Assembly Resolution 849 (IX).

Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

The exclusive right of a state to exercise supreme authority over its own territory, free from external interference or coercion, protected under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of any state.

Critical Raw Materials

Minerals, including rare earth elements such as neodymium and dysprosium, considered essential to defence, clean energy and advanced technology industries, and for which global supply is regarded as strategically concentrated and vulnerable to disruption.

Background Information

From Colony to Self-Rule

Denmark administered Greenland as a colony until 1953, when the territory's status changed to that of a constituent county of Denmark. This change, accepted by the UN General Assembly in Resolution 849 (IX), removed Greenland from the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. Many scholars have since argued that this decision, reached without a direct referendum of the Greenlandic population, cannot be considered a genuine exercise of self-determination, a position Denmark disputes. Growing demands for autonomy, fuelled by the global Indigenous rights movement, led to the Home Rule Act of 1979, which created Greenland's own parliament, the Inatsisartut, and government, the Naalakkersuisut. In a 2008 referendum, 75.5 percent of voters backed further self-government, resulting in the Self-Government Act of 2009. This landmark legislation recognised Greenlanders as “a people pursuant to international law with the right to self-determination” and established a legal route to full independence through negotiation, parliamentary approval, a Greenlandic referendum, and consent from the Danish Parliament.

Renewed United States Interest and the 2025–2026 Crisis

Although President Trump first proposed purchasing Greenland in 2019, the issue resurfaced with far greater intensity following his return to office in 2025. Throughout early 2026, Trump repeatedly described ownership of Greenland as an “absolute necessity” for American national security, citing Russian and Chinese activity in the Arctic, and declined to rule out the

use of military force. On 17 January 2026, he threatened tariffs of up to 25 percent on Denmark and seven other NATO members unless a deal for Greenland was reached. These threats triggered the largest protests in Greenlandic history, with roughly a quarter of Nuuk's population demonstrating under the slogan "Greenland is not for sale," while seven European governments and United Nations human rights experts affirmed that any forced change to Greenland's status would violate the UN Charter. Later that month, Trump described securing a "framework" for "total access" to the territory following talks with NATO's Secretary-General, though Denmark and Greenland maintained that sovereignty remained a "red line." Tensions continued throughout 2026. Denmark sent more soldiers to strengthen Arctic defence, and on 7 September 2026, the European Union signed a €200 million partnership with Greenland to support connectivity, clean energy and critical minerals. Most recently, on 22 September 2026, the United States, Denmark and Greenland reached a trilateral agreement to increase U.S. military access to Greenland while keeping Danish sovereignty. The agreement allows greater access to and development of military facilities, meaning that military cooperation is now the main focus of the dispute rather than the transfer of Greenland to the United States.

Strategic and Economic Significance

Greenland's location anchors the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap, a corridor long monitored by NATO to track Russian submarine movement into the North Atlantic, and hosts the United States' Pituffik Space Base, central to ballistic missile early warning. The territory also holds an estimated 1.5 million metric tonnes of proven rare earth element reserves, with far greater quantities potentially lying beneath its ice sheet, positioning it as a possible alternative to China's dominance of global rare earth supply chains, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Economically, however, Greenland remains heavily dependent on Denmark, whose annual block grant of approximately 4.1 billion Danish kroner supplies around half of government revenue, while fisheries account for more than 90 percent of exports.

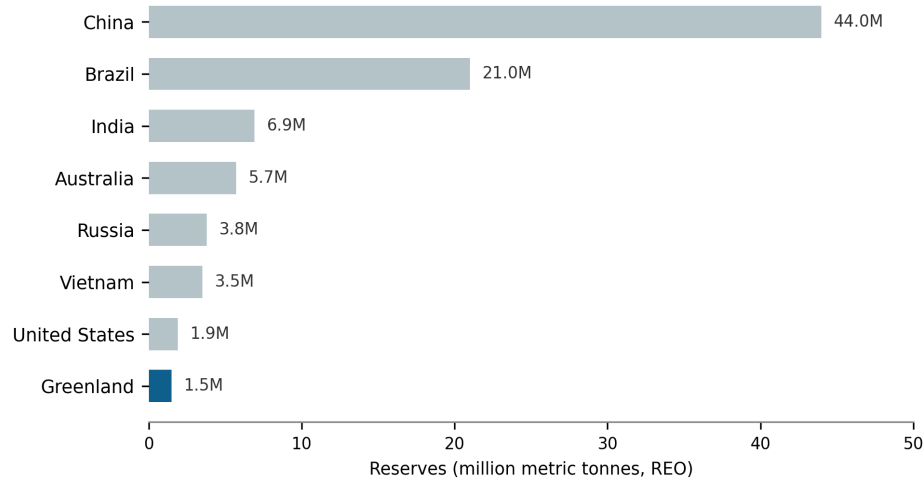


Figure 1: Estimated global rare earth element reserves by country, 2025, measured in million metric tonnes of rare earth oxide (REO). Greenland (highlighted) ranks eighth globally. Source: United States Geological Survey, Mineral Commodity Summaries, 2025.

Previous Solutions and Their Effectiveness

The 2009 Self-Government Act gave Greenland more control over its own affairs and recognised Greenlanders' right to self-determination. It was effective in increasing Greenland's control over domestic matters, but Denmark still controls defence and foreign affairs.

The 1951 U.S.–Denmark Defense Agreement created a system for U.S. military access to Greenland while keeping Danish sovereignty. It allowed the two countries to work together on defence for many years, but it did not solve wider questions about Greenland's independence or the different interests of the United States, Denmark and Greenland.

In 2026, talks between the United States, Denmark and Greenland, with involvement from NATO, tried to address U.S. security concerns without changing Greenland's sovereignty. These talks helped lead to the September 2026 trilateral agreement, but its long-term effectiveness and impact cannot yet be known.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

United States of America

The United States has framed control over Greenland as essential to countering Russian and Chinese Arctic activity and to securing critical mineral supplies, applying escalating economic and rhetorical pressure since January 2026 while stating that a framework for expanded access has been agreed with NATO.

Kingdom of Denmark

As the sovereign state responsible for Greenland's defence and foreign affairs, Denmark has firmly rejected any transfer of sovereignty, while offering to negotiate expanded United States security cooperation and increasing its own Arctic military presence, including through the deployment of conscripts to Greenland in 2026.

Government of Greenland (Naalakkersuisut)

Led by Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen since April 2025, Greenland's government has consistently maintained that Greenland is not for sale and that any change to its status must follow the democratic process set out in the Self-Government Act, while pursuing closer economic ties with the European Union and Canada to reduce dependency on Denmark.

European Union (EU)

Although Greenland withdrew from the European Economic Community in 1985, the EU has deepened cooperation with the territory through initiatives such as the September 2026 EU-Greenland Partnership Package, and its officials have repeatedly affirmed that territorial integrity, sovereignty and the inviolability of borders must be respected.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

As the alliance to which both the United States and Denmark belong, NATO faces the unprecedented situation of one member state pressuring another over sovereign territory. Its Secretary-General has sought to mediate between the parties, while several European allies have conducted joint military exercises in Greenland to reinforce Danish sovereignty.

Russian Federation

Although not directly involved in the territorial dispute, Russia has capitalised on the discord within NATO, criticising what it describes as the alliance's militarisation of the Arctic while continuing to modernise its own military bases on the Kola Peninsula, near Greenland's eastern approaches.

Possible Solutions

Any resolution to the situation in Greenland must respect the principle of self-determination and the freely expressed will of the Greenlandic people, in line with the UN Charter and the Self-Government Act of 2009. Member states could support the implementation and monitoring of the September 2026 trilateral security agreement, ensuring that expanded U.S. military access respects Greenlandic self-determination and Danish sovereignty.

A reinforced NATO Arctic security framework, jointly funded and staffed by allied member states rather than a single power, could address legitimate defence concerns while upholding existing commitments to Denmark's territorial integrity. To reduce Greenland's economic vulnerability to external pressure, the international community could support economic diversification initiatives, such as the EU's critical minerals partnership, alongside transparent and environmentally responsible mining regulated by Greenland's own government.

Finally, the General Assembly could reaffirm existing international legal norms, including the prohibition on the threat or use of force to alter a state's territory, providing Greenland and Denmark with clear multilateral backing should bilateral negotiations falter.

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