GREENLAND: A NEW FRONTIER OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION?

Greenland's strategic significance has intensified in recent years, driven by its role in **Arctic security, access to critical minerals, and proximity to emerging shipping routes**. Located between the Arctic Ocean and the North Atlantic, the island sits along key maritime approaches and supports early warning systems tracking missile trajectories across the polar region. As climate change reduces ice coverage, Arctic accessibility is increasing, reshaping both **economic prospects and strategic calculations.**

HISTORICAL & GOVERNANCE STATUS

1979

HOME RULE ACT

Greenland gained **political autonomy** from Denmark in several policy areas, including education, taxation and internal governance. The Act set the foundations for further independence for Greenland.

SELF GOVERNMENT ACT

The Act expanded autonomy by transferring additional competences to Nuuk, including **full authority over natural resources,** while Denmark retained control over foreign, defense, and monetary policy. The Act also recognized Greenlanders' right to self-determination.

2009

2021

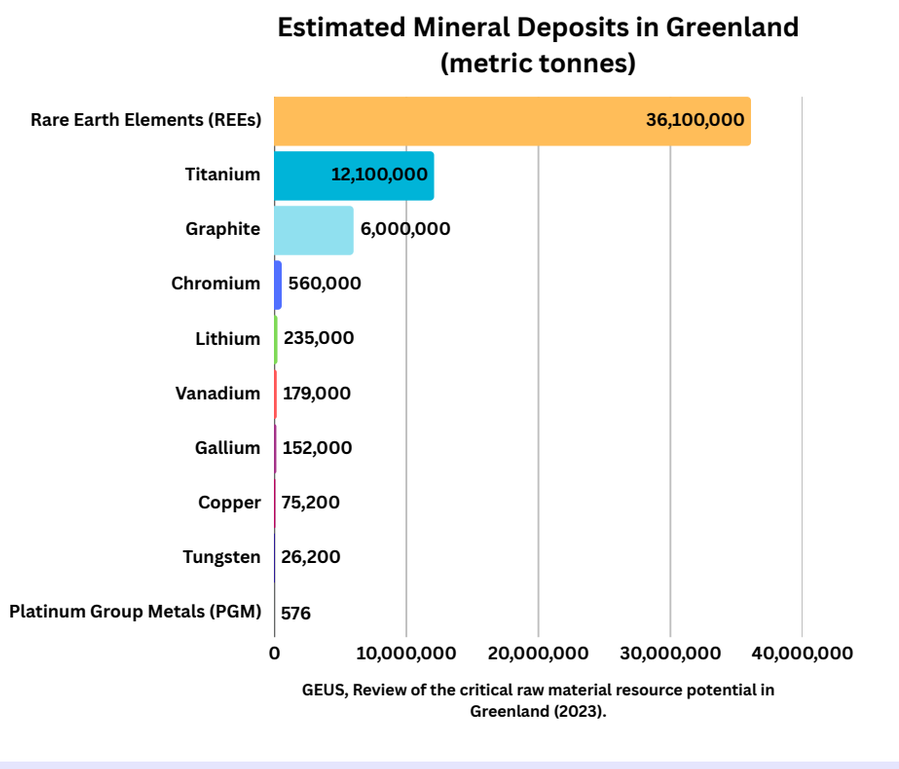
URANIUM MINING BAN

Greenland adopted a **law banning uranium mining** following an election centered on opposition to the sector, highlighting the role of domestic political decisions in shaping resource governance.

GREENLAND'S RESOURCE PARADOX

Greenland holds significant deposits of **rare earth elements and critical minerals** central to defense and the energy transition, yet **extraction remains minimal**. Despite strong strategic interest, most projects remain at the exploration stage, with only a limited number of active mines.

Structural constraints - including harsh Arctic conditions, high development costs, limited infrastructure, and regulatory uncertainty - continue to **delay large-scale production**. As a result, Greenland's resource wealth is defined more by its geopolitical potential than by its current economic output.



MINING REALITY

EXPLORATION LICENCES

[redacted]

138

EXPLOITATION LICENCES

[redacted] 7

ACTIVE MINES

[redacted] 2

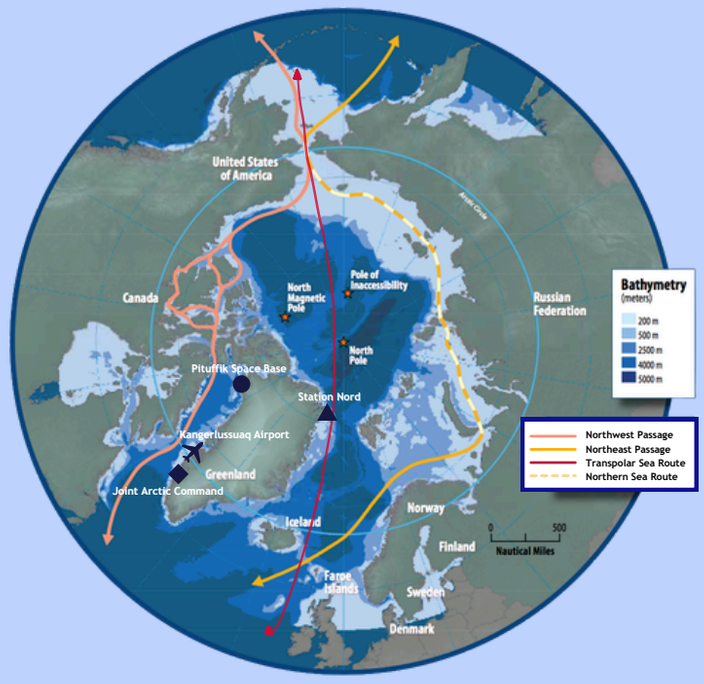
ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE

Denmark provides the island a 4.45 billion **annual block grant** - a fixed financial transfer supporting public services - which accounts for roughly **50% of Greenland's public revenue**. Despite strong independence aspirations, this economic dependence complicates the path toward sovereignty.

DKK 4.45bn (≈€600m)

GEOSTRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

Greenland's location supports **early warning and space surveillance**, including tracking intercontinental ballistic missiles across the Arctic. It also enables monitoring of the **GIUK Gap**, a key chokepoint for Russian naval movements. These functions make the island a critical enabler of **situational awareness and deterrence** in the High North.



Susie Harder, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Climate change is opening new Arctic shipping routes, including the **Northern Sea Route** (NSR), **Northwest Passage** (NWP), and **Transpolar Sea Route** (TSR). Greenland's location along these emerging corridors positions it as a strategic hub for monitoring, access, and control of future Arctic maritime flows.

Sources: Danish Government; Government of Greenland; GEUS; OSW.

WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR ARCTIC SECURITY?

Building on earlier **proposals to acquire Greenland**, President Trump has intensified rhetoric, framing **control of the island as critical to U.S. national security** and questioning Denmark's ability to defend it. This has raised questions about NATO posture, alliance cohesion, and the balance of power in the High North, while introducing **new tensions within the Alliance**. In response, **military coordination and presence** are being adjusted, alongside increased engagement through multilateral and bilateral initiatives.

Pittufik Space Base

~200 U.S. personnel;
Missile warning space surveillance hub

U.S. EXPANSION PLANS

The United States maintains a **long-standing defense presence** in Greenland, anchored in the 1951 agreement and Pituffik Space Base.

U.S. Northern Command is currently seeking to **expand its operational footprint** beyond existing facilities. Plans include increasing **naval access** and **special operations capabilities** across **three additional defense areas.**

1951
U.S.- Greenland Defense Treaty

Grants rights to establish and operate U.S. military installations

CHINA & RUSSIA THREATS?

While concerns over Russian and Chinese activity in Greenland have increased, their **actual involvement remains limited**, highlighting a gap between strategic intent and operational presence.

China has previously sought access to Greenland's mineral resources and infrastructure as part of its broader Arctic ambitions, however most **projects have been blocked or stalled**. Its remaining involvement is limited to a **minority stake (~6.5%)** in a project currently on hold.

Russia has **no active military presence** in Greenland, with its military modernization efforts primarily focused on its **own Arctic coastline**. Russia's strategic concerns towards Greenland is limited to **NATO's northern consolidation** and **the U.S. Pituffik military base**.

NATO'S RESPONSE

In February 2026, NATO has launched the **"Arctic Sentry" initiative**, which will strengthen coordination, enhance surveillance, and deploy **additional maritime and air assets** across the Arctic.

The initiative aligns existing Allied activities under a more integrated framework and reflects efforts to **reinforce NATO's role** amid tensions triggered by U.S. claims over Greenland.

ALLIED INITIATIVES IN GREENLAND

In March 2026, **Canada and Greenland** signed a Joint Declaration of Intent on **critical minerals and energy cooperation**, focusing on supply chains and knowledge sharing, and reflecting growing allied efforts to secure strategic resources.

France and Greenland also signed a technical cooperation agreement to map Greenland's mineral potential, focusing on critical resources such as **rare earths and lithium**. The partnership will use satellite-based technologies to support geological mapping and resource assessment.

Sources: Danish Government; Government of Greenland; NATO; U.S. Department of Defense; Natural Resources Canada; GEUS; OSW.