



USA

Greenlanders explore Pacific Islands' relationship with Washington

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FILE - Large icebergs float away as the sun rises near Kulusuk, Greenland, on Aug. 16, 2019.

WASHINGTON — Greenland's representative in the United States met recently with at least one ambassador from the Pacific Islands to learn more about a political arrangement that some think could create an opportunity for the Arctic island and Washington, VOA has learned.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly expressed his interest in either buying or taking control of Greenland, a resource-rich semiautonomous territory of Denmark, noting its strategic importance and position in the Arctic Ocean where Russia and China are rapidly advancing. But there has been pushback from the island's residents, political leaders, Denmark and Europe.

Greenland representatives have declined to comment to VOA on their meeting that focused on a framework that Pacific Island nations have with Washington — known as the Compacts of Free Association, or COFA. The compacts give the United States military access to three strategic Pacific Islands — the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau — in exchange for economic aid.

Jackson Soram, ambassador to the United States from the Federated States of Micronesia, told VOA that the discussions took place at the end of January and focused on "basic questions" on the "provisions of economic assistance, and also the security and defense provisions of the compacts."

Soram said he met with representatives from Greenland and the Faroe Islands, another self-ruled Danish territory.

Alexander Gray, a former National Security Council chief of staff during the first Trump administration who worked on Pacific Island issues, told VOA he encouraged the Pacific Islands' ambassadors to conduct these meetings.

"[The Greenlanders] want independence from Denmark," Gray, who is now a managing partner of American Global Strategies, said in an emailed response. "An independent Greenland, with a tiny population and the second-least densely populated geography on the planet, will quickly become dominated and its sovereignty undermined by Beijing and Moscow."

Russia has been reopening bases in the region even as Beijing has invested more than \$90 billion in infrastructure projects in the Arctic Circle. Both the United States and Denmark have military bases in Greenland.

Gray said arctic dominance by Moscow and Beijing poses "a unique strategic threat" to the United States. He said a COFA "would allow Greenland to maintain its sovereignty, while allowing the U.S. to ensure that sovereignty is truly protected."

Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has repeatedly told Trump that Greenland is "not for sale." But Monday, she said Copenhagen welcomes additional U.S. military investment in the strategic island.

"So, if this is about securing our part of the world, we can find a way forward," she said.

US-Greenland defense agreement

Some analysts say that neither Washington nor Nuuk needs a COFA agreement to increase the U.S. military presence in Greenland. In 2004, the United States, Greenland and Denmark signed the Igaliku Agreement to reduce the U.S. military presence in Greenland to a single air base, the Thule Air Base, which has been renamed Pituffik Space Base. It provides Washington with missile defense and space surveillance.

The 2004 agreement provides for "any significant changes to U.S. military operations or facilities" in Greenland to be made through consultation between Washington, Nuuk and Copenhagen.

"Washington can already achieve its objectives through working with Greenland and Denmark," Otto Svendsen, an associate fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, [wrote last month on CSIS's website](#).

A [Danish Institute for International Studies policy brief in 2022](#) pointed out that COFA has created economic dependence between the Marshall Islands and the United States, as U.S. donor money makes up 70% of the Marshall Islands' total GDP. This is the opposite of what Greenland's leaders say they want.

Search for independence

A 2009 law called the Act on Greenland Self-Government [outlines a "road map"](#) — drawn up by Nuuk and Copenhagen — for an independent Greenland, which requires a successful referendum.

[In his New Year's address](#), Greenland Prime Minister Mute Egede said, "The upcoming new election period must, together with the citizens, create these new steps," opening the door for a referendum during parliamentary elections in April.

A 2019 survey suggested that more than two-thirds of Greenlanders want independence at some point. Yet in a poll released in January by two newspapers in Denmark and Greenland, 85% say they do not want to be part of the United States. Fifty-five percent, however, see Trump's interest in Greenland as an opportunity.

Gray told VOA that the U.S., Denmark and Greenland should enter trilateral discussions for a compact.

"Working together, Washington, Copenhagen, and Nuuk can find common ground and move forward on a post-independence arrangement that works for all parties," he said in an emailed response.

Read Greenland's 2010 letter to the United Nations

As far back as 2010, Greenland told the United Nations it was exploring the idea of negotiating independence through a "free association" with Denmark.

SEE ALSO:

[Read Greenland's 2010 letter to the United Nations](#)

Egede said he is ready to meet with Trump, but, "We do not want to be Danes. We do not want to be Americans."

Soram said he is trying to get ambassadors from Palau and the Marshall Islands to attend additional meetings with Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Denmark.