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Grass-roofed houses, as in Kirkjubour, above, are common in the Faroe Islands. Below, Joannes Patursson, a sheep farmer, advocates independence from Denmark. “We are a nation of our own,” he said.

Another Danish Territory Feels Trump-Induced Anxiety

U.S. Warships and Russian Subs Ply the Waters Off the Faroe Islands. China’s Sniffing Around, Too.

This article is by *Amelia Nierenberg, Jeffrey Gettleman, Regin Winther Poulsen and Sergey Ponomarev.*

KIRKJUBOUR, Faroe Islands — It is a Danish territory sitting in the North Atlantic.

Many of its people have been yearning for independence for decades. But it is not Greenland.

The territory, the Faroe Islands, is another far-flung piece of the Kingdom of Denmark, hundreds of miles from Copenhagen, that has become a geopolitical jump ball.

Its 18 islands — rugged, beautiful, windswept and often soaked with rain — have their own complicated story that is now getting tangled up in Greenland’s crisis. Even though President Trump backed down from his threats to seize Greenland, he set off a wave of anxiety in this part of the world.

The Faroes, home to 55,000 people, sit in the middle of a crucial waterway between Iceland and Scotland at the threshold of the Arctic, where superpowers are vying for dominance. European fishing fleets, American warships and Russian submarines cruise through these waters. A few years ago, a Chinese company made a play for the Faroese telecom system.

Day to day, things look fine. Cozy restaurants serve fermented mutton, a Faroese specialty. Salmon farms export nearly a billion dollars’ worth of fish across the world. Traffic circulates smoothly through the islands’ impressive tunnel network. The Faroese have even built a roundabout under the sea.

Unlike Greenland, which relies heavily on Danish subsidies, the Faroese have built a strong local economy. That gives them a high standard of living and the means to break away from Denmark and go it alone. In the past few years, the drive for independence had been building.

Then Mr. Trump’s threats to take over Greenland posed an existential threat to the Kingdom of Denmark. Greenland pulled closer to Denmark, its former colonizer. And the Faroe Islands hit pause on negotiations with Copenhagen over more autonomy that were supposed to begin last month.

Still, senior members of the islands’ semiautonomous government insist they were not giving up on their dream.

“Greenland and Denmark are in a bad situation,” said Aksel V. Johannesen, the prime minister.

But he added, “There is a broad political agreement that our relationship with Denmark must change.”

Even if these islands have attracted far less attention than Greenland, geopolitical analysts are watching them closely and the islanders themselves can sense the sharpening interest.

“The old Cold War is coming back,” said Hogni Hoydal, a former Faroese foreign minister and a leading voice for independence. “And we are at the center.”

‘We Are Wild Cards’

The Faroese see themselves as survivors in a tough land. Many trace their lineage back to Vikings who waded ashore more than 1,000 years ago. Their homeland is one of Europe’s rainiest places, and winds routinely reach 30 to 40 miles per hour.

But the Faroese do not cower. As they say: “There’s no bad weather. Just bad clothes.”



Joannes Patursson, a sheep farmer, is part of the 17th generation of his family to live in a spectacular seaside farmhouse with a bright green grass roof that is common here. It is cheap, abundant material and known to be good insulation. On a recent day, as his sheep grazed by the water, the wind whipped the waves into a sharp white froth.

“There will always be a struggle,” Mr. Patursson said about the drive for independence. “We are a nation of our own.”

Mr. Patursson even keeps an old knife hanging on his wall that a plucky ancestor used to cut down a Danish flag nearly a century ago.

In 1946, the Faroese voted narrowly for independence, but the Danish king blocked that. In 2000, when the Faroese tried to negotiate for full sovereignty, Denmark threatened to pull its subsidies. At the time, the islands’ economy

was not as strong, and the Faroese backed down, hoping to try again later.

Last month, the Faroese were supposed to reopen negotiations with Denmark and push for more autonomy. But that was before Mr. Trump doubled down on his threats to “get” Greenland, alarming the entire Danish kingdom and leading many in Europe to fear that the world order was collapsing.

So the leadership in the Faroes, which have been connected to Denmark for more than 600 years, decided that it was not the time for heavy negotiations with Copenhagen.

“It’s very important that we stand together,” said Eyddis Hartmann Nielsen, a lawmaker from a pro-Denmark party in the Faroese Parliament, which meets in a graceful, wooden-planked house.

“In the current global situation,” she added, “we are wild cards in the North



The 18 islands of the Faroes have a strategic location, a population of 55,000, a strong economy and a 600-year connection to Denmark.

Atlantic, and big nations will take advantage of that.”

A Vital Choke Point

The Faroese sit right inside one of the world’s most important naval choke points, which is also one of Russia’s main routes between the Arctic and the Atlantic Ocean.

The waterway is called the GIUK Gap; it takes its name from the lands around it: Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom. It is 200 miles across at its narrowest point. It is used by NATO, which intensified patrols there last year, and by nuclear submarines that come from Murmansk, Russia’s main submarine base in the Arctic.

The Faroes are “disproportionally important,” said Troy J. Bouffard, the director of the Center for Arctic Security and Resilience at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Even though the Faroes have the population of an American suburb, he said, they sit “right in the middle of one of the

most important transit points for our main adversary.”

China made a play in 2019 for its telecom giant, Huawei, to modernize the Faroese’ network in exchange for an increase in mutual trade. The American government has designated Huawei a national security threat and put enormous pressure on Faroese politicians not to allow the company to operate there. In the end, the islands chose a different — and European — supplier.

In the past few years, more American submarines and vessels from other NATO nations have appeared at Faroese ports, according to data from the Faroese Foreign Ministry.

After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, most European countries shunned Russian vessels. Not the Faroes. Russian fishing trawlers have been docking here for years. They still do.

Some Faroese politicians worry that Russia is using the trawlers to conduct surveillance or possibly even plot sabotage. Several major undersea cables in Scandinavia and the Baltics have been severed in recent years, and Russia remains the prime suspect.

“We really don’t know what the Russian ships are doing,” said Sjurður Skaale, who represents the Faroes in Denmark’s Parliament.

And he added, “We don’t know what’s on board.”

Another thing that makes him nervous is a recent change in Russian naval doctrine. A few months into the Ukraine war, Russia’s government announced that Russian civilian vessels could be utilized for military purposes, if necessary.

The Faroes are currently under NATO’s security umbrella as part of the Kingdom of Denmark, one of the alliance’s founding members. Without NATO, Mr. Skaale said, “the Russians would take us if they wanted before breakfast tomorrow.”

Solidarity, for Now

Faroese leaders say they are not giving up on their push for more autonomy. They say that they need to strike their own trade deals with foreign nations, and that under the current arrangement with Denmark, they are denied their own voice on the international stage.

With Mr. Trump’s threats about Greenland, some might think this is a great time for the Faroese to extract concessions because Denmark is desperate to prevent its centuries-old kingdom from breaking apart.

But several Faroese politicians said they did not want to exploit that leverage and play hardball, at least not right now.

“From a negotiating standpoint, it’s probably unwise,” said Bjarni Karason Petersen, a member of the Faroese Parliament whose party has been pushing for talks on independence. “But it’s an act of good faith and solidarity toward our friends in Greenland and Denmark.”

There is widespread support among the public for more autonomy from people like Heri Joensen, the frontman for Tyr, a Faroese metal band.

“We feel pretty independent already,” Mr. Joensen said.

Even though he has toured the world, he keeps coming back home, where a hiker can drink water straight from the streams, people can leave their cars unlocked for weeks and the hillsides are dotted with grass-roofed homes passed down generation after generation.



Bjarni Thomsen, a retiree, raising the Faroe Islands flag in front of the governmental building in Torshavn, the capital.