

SUGGESTED READINGS

The Hans Island/Tartupaluk and Lincoln Sea Disputes

Compiled by P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Rasmus Leander Nielsen

Introduction¹

On 14 June 2022, Canada's minister of foreign affairs Mélanie Joly, her Danish counterpart Jeppe Kofod, and Múte B. Egede, the Prime Minister of Greenland, signed an agreement in Ottawa resolving outstanding boundary issues over Hans Island (Tartupaluk in Greenlandic), the countries' maritime boundary on the continental shelf within 200 nautical miles (including the Lincoln Sea), and the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles in the Labrador Sea.

The statements by the respective dignitaries emphasized various strategic messages. "The Arctic is a beacon for international cooperation, where the rule of law prevails," Joly noted, with obvious reference to a precarious geopolitical climate in the wake of Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. "As global security is being threatened, it's more important than ever for democracies like Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark to work together alongside Indigenous peoples, to resolve our differences in accordance with international law." Kofod emphasized how the sovereignty of Hans Island/Tartupaluk has been contested for more than a half century, but diplomatic efforts yielding a solution "demonstrate our firm common commitment to resolve international disputes peacefully. I hope that our negotiation and the spirit of this agreement may inspire others. This is much needed at a time when respect for the international rules-based order is under pressure." For Egede, the land border on Hans Island/Tartupaluk was not a sign of division but of "the very close ties between our countries, people and culture," marking the "beginning of a closer partnership and cooperation between us in areas of shared interest and of particular benefit to Inuit and local people living in Avanersuaq, Kalaallit Nunaat, and Nunavut, Canada."¹

Hans Island / Tartupaluk

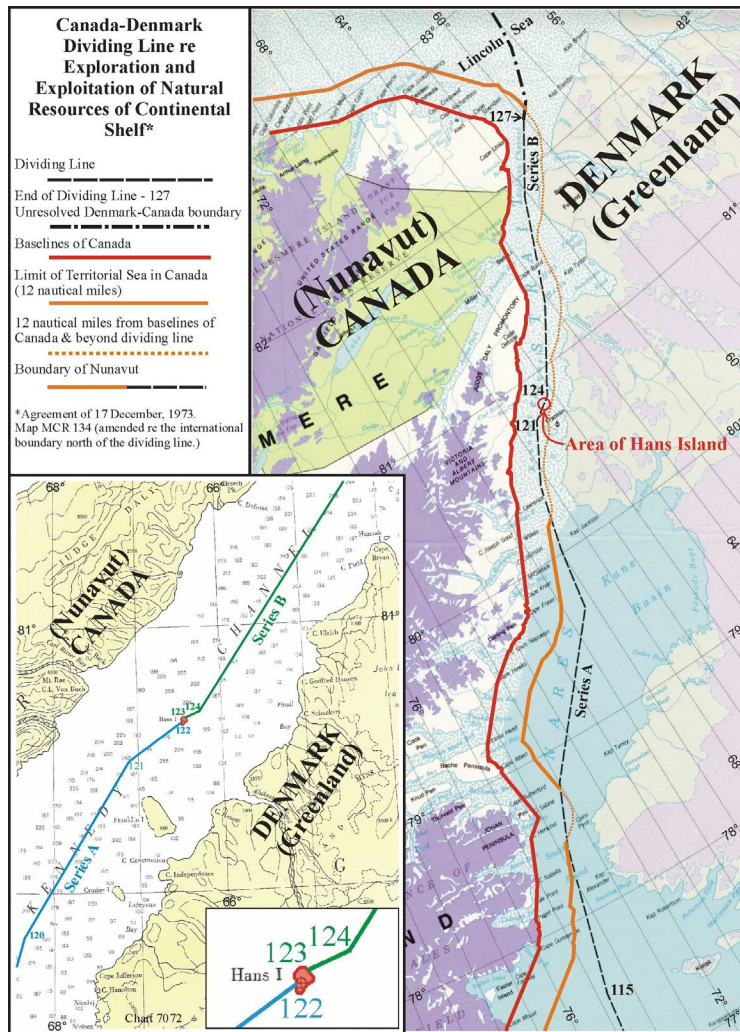
Canada's *Northern Strategy* (2009) observed that "Canada's sovereignty over its Arctic lands and islands is undisputed, with the exception of Hans Island, which is claimed by Denmark."² Because it was the only outstanding Canadian Arctic dispute involving land, this 1.3 km² barren and uninhabited sandstone island situated in the Kennedy Channel

¹ This introduction is derived from P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Canada's Other Boundary Disputes in the Arctic," in Lackenbauer, Suzanne Lalonde, and Elizabeth Riddell-Dixon, [Canada and the Maritime Arctic: Boundaries, Shelves, and Waters](#) (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2020), 158-72.

between Ellesmere Island and Greenland has attracted a disproportionate amount of attention.

The question of ownership of Hans Island/Tartupaluk arose in 1973 when the two countries delimited the continental shelf between Canada and Greenland. The two sides could not agree on the status of Hans Island, which fell right on the maritime boundary line, so they chose to set aside the question of the island itself. The shelf surrounding the island was delimited, with the maritime boundary stopping at the low-water mark on the island's south side and starting again from the low-water mark on the north side.³ Accordingly, and despite popular misconceptions, the dispute has no significant impact on the status of the waters, seabed resources, or navigation rights around Hans Island itself.

The issue of ownership was raised sporadically by both countries who, since the 1980s, undertook various public demonstrations to reinforce their claims. After discovering that Canada's Dome Petroleum was using Hans Island as a platform for research activities, the Danes sent an expedition to it in 1984 to plant their flag and proclaim sovereignty, leaving the message "Welcome to the Danish Island" and a bottle of brandy. Canada responded in kind with its own sign, a Canadian flag, and bottles of Canadian Club whiskey. This comical dance continued for the next two decades.⁴



Hans Island. Canadian Council of Land Surveyors

The Danish position rested primarily on the principles of discovery, geology and usage. Hans Island was "discovered" in 1853 by an American expedition undertaken in agreement with Danish authorities and with the participation of the famous Greenlander Hans Hendrik (1834-89) of Fiskenaasset.⁵ Previously and subsequently, Greenland Inuit stopped on the island when crossing to Ellesmere Island to hunt. On the other hand, Canadian Inuit have never used Hans Island regularly.⁶

For its part, Canada claimed that the entire region was transferred to its control by a British order-in-council in 1880 that incorporated "all British Territories and possessions in North America, not already included in the Dominion of Canada, and all islands adjacent to any such territories or possessions." Ottawa has

always understood Hans Island to be on the Canadian side of the median line demarking the boundary with Greenland. In 1953, the Topographical Survey of Canada surveyed Hans Island and placed a cairn claiming it for Canada, and Canada issued a land use permit to Dome Petroleum in the 1980s to use the island as a scientific base to study ice movements. In 2000, a team of scientists from the Geological Survey of Canada mapped the island and took geographic samples. Canadian sources also suggest that the geological and geomorphological evidence cited by Denmark is relevant only when claiming continental shelf and not islands, where the test is effective occupation.

Given that the island is uninhabited, possesses no strategic value, and boasts no natural resources, this territorial dispute should raise little practical concern – but it has been imbued with symbolic and nationalist significance since the Danes sent naval vessels to the island in 2002 and 2003. Canada responded in 2005 with an inukshuk-raising and flag-planting visit by Canadian Rangers and soldiers, followed by a highly publicized visit by its Minister of National Defence Bill Graham. The media frenzy soon spiralled out of hand, alluding to Canada’s 1995 “Turbot War” with the Spanish and even a possible “domino” effect, suggesting that if Canada lost Hans Island its other Arctic islands might succumb to a similar fate.⁷

In an effort to reduce tensions, the two countries issued a joint statement in September 2005 declaring that “we will continue our efforts to reach a long-term solution to the Hans Island dispute.” The statement also provided that “in the tradition of cooperation in the region between our scientists we will explore the feasibility of joint scientific projects on or in the area of Hans Island.” The two neighbours agreed to keep each other informed of any activities related to the Island and pledged that “all contact by either side with Hans Island will be carried out in a low key and restrained manner.”⁸

After that time, the two countries pursued regular bilateral discussions in a bid to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution. In 2008, they cooperated in setting up an automatic weather station on the island to measure atmospheric conditions in Nares Strait, which connects the Arctic Ocean with the North Atlantic Ocean and thus plays a key role in the global hydrologic cycle.⁹

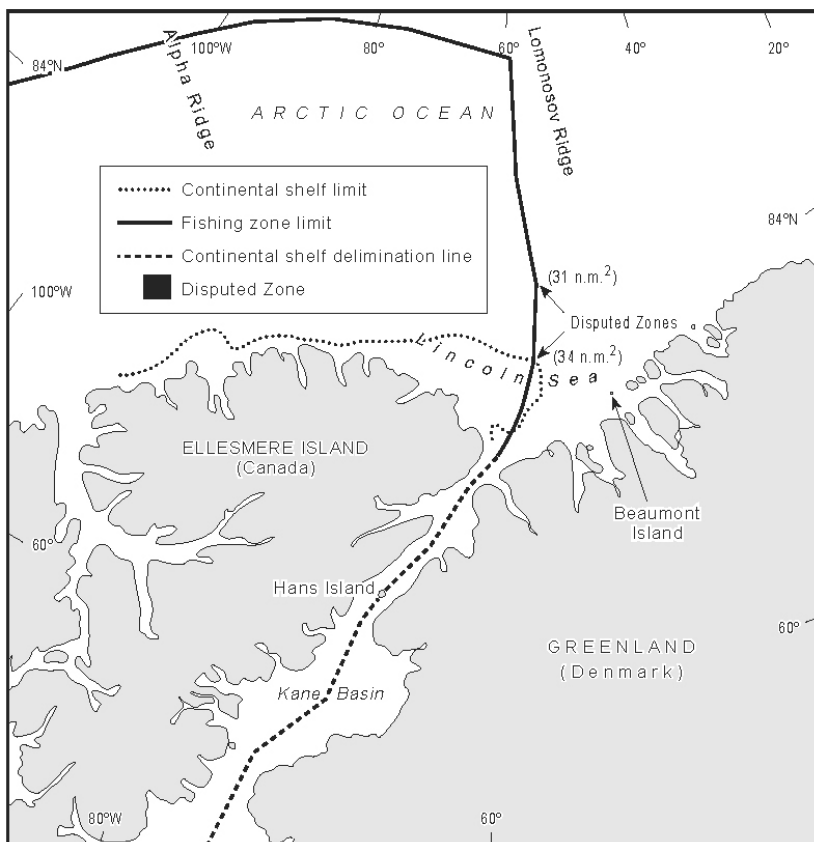
Commentators proposed various diplomatic options to resolve the dispute, as the following readings suggest. Canada and Denmark could negotiate an agreement which would see one country gain complete sovereignty over the island: perhaps the simplest solution, but one that is politically unattractive to both sides. Alternatively, the island could simply be split by connecting the lines currently demarcating Nares Strait, which would result in roughly half of the island going to each party, thus creating a new land border for both countries. In 2015, international legal scholar Michael Byers and Professor Michael Böss of the University of Aarhus proposed that Canada and Denmark should share sovereignty and jurisdictional responsibility over the island in a “condominium” arrangement, appointing a joint commission to settle governance issues where required.¹⁰ Others suggest simply ceding power to the Inuit of Nunavut and Greenland to co-manage as part of the Pikialasorsuaq (High North Polynya) area,¹¹ or (in what might be a tongue-in-cheek commentary) “gifting it” to the people of Greenland.¹²

Given the excellent relations between the two countries and that lack of economic stakes at play in the territorial dispute, there was no acute pressure to settle the issue.

Lincoln Sea

The disagreement between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark regarding two small maritime areas in the Lincoln Sea north of Ellesmere Island and Greenland, totalling approximately 65 square nautical miles, was highly technical in nature. The two countries signed a treaty in 1973 agreeing that the boundary in the Lincoln Sea should be an equidistance line, with Denmark subsequently using tiny Beaumont Island to establish its baseline and Canada arguing that this “rock” is too insignificant to influence the boundary line.¹³ On 28 November 2012, the foreign ministers of Canada and Denmark announced that they had reached a tentative agreement on where to establish the maritime boundary, stating that “with the passage of time” their “differences” on technical considerations had “faded.”¹⁴ Since that time, negotiators have been working to transform the tentative agreement into a treaty text for ratification by their respective governments which, in turn, will yield a continuous maritime boundary stretching more than 1,600 nautical miles.

During a May 2018 meeting in Ottawa, officials from Copenhagen and Nuuk announced that they were setting up a joint task force to explore options and provide recommendations on how to officially resolve outstanding boundary issues in the Arctic with Canada, including the ownership of Hans Island, the maritime boundary in the Lincoln



Sea, and the Labrador Sea continental shelf overlap beyond 200 nautical miles. Statements by the countries’ foreign ministers emphasized collaboration and a commitment to “peaceful and constructive” deliberations. “Canada is looking forward to fruitful bilateral discussions with the Kingdom of Denmark under this newly established Task Force,” Global Affairs Canada spokesperson Elizabeth Reid told reporters. “This work is a demonstration of our excellent cooperation with Denmark in the Arctic and our collective leadership in the region.”¹⁵

Lincoln Sea. David Gray, *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin* (Autumn 1997)

Readings

Global Affairs Canada News Release, [Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark, together with Greenland, reach historic agreement on long-standing boundary disputes](#), 14 June 2022.

Global Affairs Canada, [Backgrounder: Boundary Dispute](#), 14 June 2022.

Global Affairs Canada, [Canada-Kingdom of Denmark joint statement on bilateral cooperation](#), 14 June 2022.

Christian W, "[Denmark to get a land border with Canada?](#)," *Copenhagen Post*, 13 June 2022.

Nikolaj Skydsgaard, "[Canada and Denmark divide small Arctic island, ending ownership dispute](#)," *Reuters*, 14 June 2022.

Ashley Burke and Richard Raycraft, "[Canada and Denmark sign deal to divide uninhabited Arctic island](#)," *CBC News*, updated 15 June 2022.

Eilis Quinn, "[Inuit leaders welcome Canada, Denmark agreement on Arctic island](#)," *Eye on the Arctic/Radio Canada International*, 15 June 2022.

Rob Huebert, [Denmark's gunboat diplomacy over Hans Island a warning for future Arctic conflicts](#), *The National Post*, 15 June 2022.

Martin Breum, [Hans Island - and the endless dispute over its sovereignty](#), *High North News*, 28 May 2018.

Levun Sevants, "Hans Island: a housewarming gift for Greenland?," *Eye on the Arctic/Radio Canada International*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2018/06/18/hans-island-housewarming-gift-greenland/>

Christian W, "[Denmark and Canada look to resolve border issue](#)," *Copenhagen Post*, 24 May 2018.

Levun Sevants, "Canada and Denmark set up joint task force to resolve Arctic boundary issues," *Eye on the Arctic/Radio Canada International*, 23 May 2018, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2018/05/23/greenland-canada-hans-island-sea-boundary/>

Mark Walker, "[Hans Off Our Island!](#)," *Copenhagen Post*, 19 January 2016.

Bob Weber, "[Canada, Denmark should turn Hans Island into a condominium: academics](#)," *CBC News*, 12 November 2015.

Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade News Release, "[Canada and Kingdom of Denmark Reach Tentative Agreement on Lincoln Sea Boundary](#)," 28 November 2012.

"[Canada, Denmark continue talks on Hans Island](#)," *CBC News*, 12 April 2012.

Adrian Humphreys, "New proposal would see Hans Island split equally between Canada and Denmark," *National Post*, 11 April 2012.

Heather Exner-Pirot, "[Norway and Russia Sign Treaty to End Boundary Dispute in Barents Sea](#)," *Eye on the Arctic/Radio Canada International*, 16 September 2010.

Randy Boswell, "Canada, Denmark Start Talks to Resolve Border Dispute," *Edmonton Journal*, 27 March 2010.

Peter R. Dawes and Tapani Tukiainen, "[Hans Ø, celebrated island of Nares Strait between Greenland and Canada: from dog-sledge to satellite mapping](#)," *GEUS Bulletin*, 15 (2008): 77–80.

Canadian Press, "[Satellite imagery moves Hans Island boundary: report](#)," 26 July 2007.

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), "[Canada, Denmark agree to resolve dispute over Arctic island](#)," 19 September 2005.

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada, Pierre S. Pettigrew, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Per Stig Møller, "[Canada–Denmark Joint Statement on Hans Island](#)," 19 September 2005.

Ross Pudluk, "[Hans Island Belongs to Canadian Inuit](#)," *Nunatsiaq News*, 7 May 2004.

Rob Huebert, "Return of the 'Vikings': The Canadian-Danish Dispute over Hans Island," in *Breaking Ice: Renewable Resource and Ocean Management in the Canadian North*, ed. Fikret Birkes, Rob Huebert, Helen Fast, Micheline Manseau, and Alan Diduck (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 343-63. [Plain language summary](#).

Notes

- ¹ Global Affairs Canada, Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark, together with Greenland, reach historic agreement on long-standing boundary disputes, News Release, 14 June 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2022/06/canada-and-the-kingdom-of-denmark-together-with-greenland-reach-historic-agreement-on-long-standing-boundary-disputes.html>
- ² Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, *Canada's Northern Strategy*, reproduced in P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Ryan Dean, eds., *Canada's Northern Strategy under the Harper Conservatives: Key Speeches and Documents on Sovereignty, Security, and Governance, 2006-15* [Documents on Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security (DCASS) No. 6] (Calgary and Waterloo: Centre for Military, Strategic and Security Studies/Centre on Foreign Policy and Federalism/Arctic Institute of North America, 2016), 104.
- ³ *Agreement between the Government of Canada and the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark relating to the delimitation of the continental shelf between Greenland and Canada*, in force on 13 March 1974, Canada Treaty Series (CTS) 1974/9. See Article 2, para. 4, and Annex 4.
- ⁴ Kenn Harper, "Hans Island Rightfully Belongs to Greenland, Denmark," *Nunatsiaq News*, 9 April 2004; Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), "Canada, Denmark agree to resolve dispute over Arctic island." 19 September 2005, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/canada-denmark-agree-to-resolve-dispute-over-arctic-island-1.551223>; and Rob Huebert, "Return of the 'Vikings': The Canadian-Danish Dispute over Hans Island," in *Breaking Ice: Renewable Resource and Ocean Management in the Canadian North*, ed. Fikret Birkes, Rob Huebert, Helen Fast, Micheline Manseau, and Alan Diduck (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 343-63.
- ⁵ Poul Kristensen, "Hans Island: Denmark Responds," letter to the editor, *Ottawa Citizen*, 28 July 2005.
- ⁶ Milton Freeman, *Inuit Land Use and Occupancy Study* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1976).
- ⁷ Rob Huebert, "Who Owns the Arctic?," *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, TV Ontario, broadcast on 29 September 2008.
- ⁸ Canada–Denmark Joint Statement on Hans Island, 19 September 2005.
- ⁹ J.P. Wilkinson, P. Gudmandsen, S. Hanson, R. Saldo, and R.M. Samelson, "Hans Island: Meteorological Data from an International Borderline," *Eos* 90:22 (2 June 1990): 190-91. See also H. Melling, T.A. Agnew, K.K. Falkner, D.A. Greenberg, C.M. Lee, A. Münchow, B. Petrie, S.J. Prinsenber, R.M. Samelson, and R.A. Woodgate, "Fresh-water fluxes via Pacific and Arctic outflows across the Canadian polar shelf," in *Arctic-Subarctic Ocean Fluxes: Defining the Role of the Northern Seas in Climate*, ed. R.R. Dickson et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 193–247.
- ¹⁰ Bob Weber, "Experts say Canada, Denmark should share control of Arctic island," *Globe and Mail*, 11 November 2015.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Canada, Special Senate Committee on the Arctic, *Northern Lights: A Wake-Up Call for the Future of Canada* (June 2019), 112.
- ¹² Adam Lajeunesse and Heather Exner-Pirot, "Hans Island: A Housewarming Gift?" (June 2018), <http://northernmaritime.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Hans-Island-3.pdf>.
- ¹³ Randy Boswell, "Canada, Denmark Start Talks to Resolve Border Dispute," *Edmonton Journal*, 27 March 2010.
- ¹⁴ Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, "Canada and Kingdom of Denmark Reach Tentative Agreement on Lincoln Sea Boundary," *News Release*, 28 November 2012.
- ¹⁵ Levon Sevunts, "Canada and Denmark set up joint task force to resolve Arctic boundary issues," *Eye on the Arctic*, 23 May 2018, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2018/05/23/greenland-canada-hans-island-sea-boundary/>; and Sevunts, "Hans Island: a housewarming gift for Greenland?," *Eye on the Arctic*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2018/06/18/hans-island-housewarming-gift-greenland/>.