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The Case of Greenland: Peace and Security in the Arctic

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Abstract

This working paper analyzes Greenland's security thinking and policy since 2022, in the context of Greenland's longstanding ambition of full independence from Denmark. In recent years, Greenland's dream of independence has become part of a geopolitical rivalry in the Arctic. Thanks to the intense interest of US President Trump, Greenland's role in the global struggle for control of the Arctic has been brought into the spotlight. The research adopts a strategic narrative approach to analyze how Greenland constructs, projects and sustains its narrative about the Arctic, and its future development, and Greenland's role in the region. This methodology also demonstrates how the narrative has been circulated, elaborated, and transformed in the face of rapidly changing circumstances and three major actors that are relevant to Greenland's narrative: Denmark, the United States, and China. The paper concludes with a chapter on Germany's ongoing interests in the region and the problem of preserving it as an area of low tensions.

Zusammenfassung

Dieses Arbeitspapier analysiert Grönlands Sicherheitsdenken und -politik seit 2022 vor dem Hintergrund des langjährigen Bestrebens Grönlands nach vollständiger Unabhängigkeit von Dänemark. In den letzten Jahren ist Grönlands Traum von der Unabhängigkeit Teil einer geopolitischen Rivalität in der Arktis geworden. Dank des intensiven Interesses von US-Präsident Trump ist die Rolle Grönlands im globalen Kampf um die Kontrolle über die Arktis ins Rampenlicht gerückt. Die Studie verfolgt einen strategischen narrativen Ansatz, um zu analysieren, wie Grönland seine Erzählung über die Arktis, ihre zukünftige Entwicklung und die Rolle Grönlands in der Region konstruiert, projiziert und aufrechterhält. Diese Methodik zeigt auch, wie die Erzählung angesichts sich rasch verändernder Umstände und dreier wichtiger Akteure, die für Grönlands Erzählung relevant sind – Dänemark, die Vereinigten Staaten und China –, verbreitet, weiterentwickelt und transformiert wurde. Die Arbeit schließt mit einem Kapitel über das anhaltende Interesse Deutschlands an der Region und das Problem, sie als Gebiet mit geringen Spannungen zu erhalten.

Content

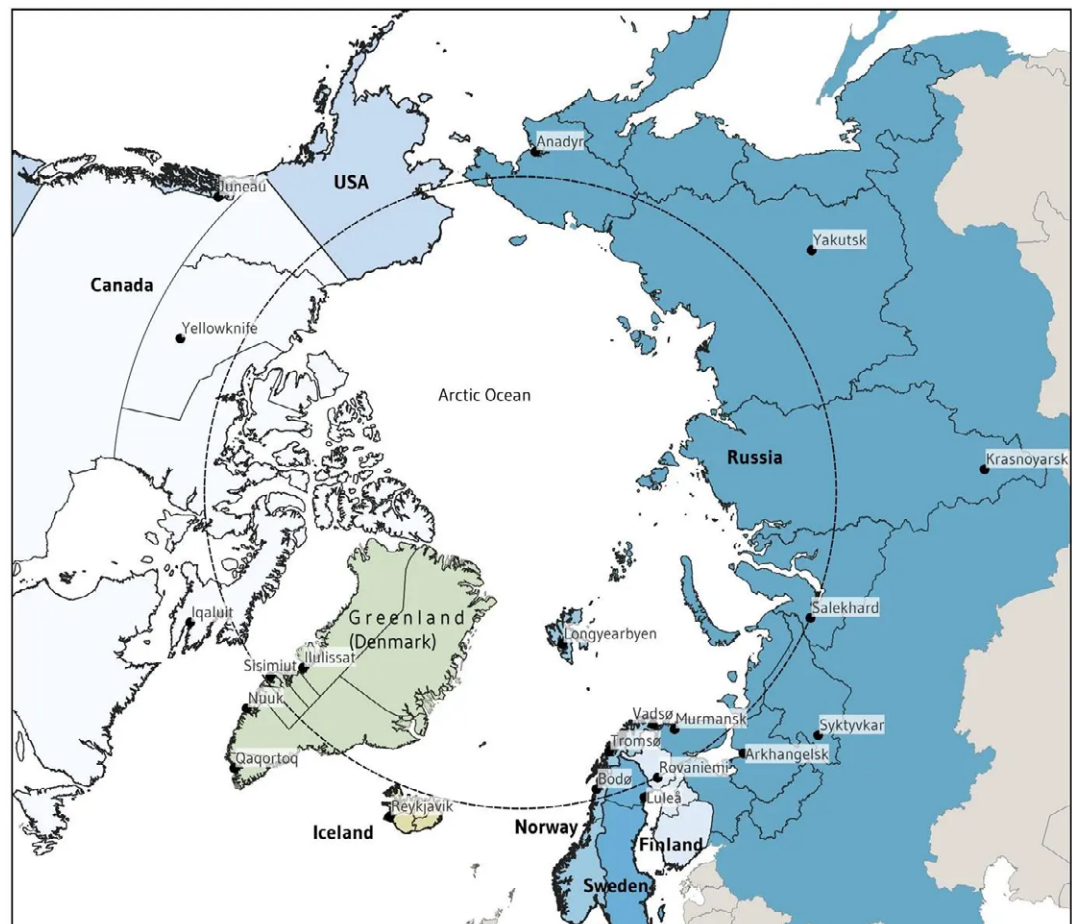
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1. GEOPOLITICAL PUZZLE IN THE ARCTIC AND GREENLAND

The first decade of the 21st century ended with the beginning of a new geopolitical rivalry in the Arctic. Despite having been disrupted by the Covid pandemic, Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022 returned the region to the global security agenda. Russia's overtly imperial ambitions and readiness to use military means to redraw borders in Europe has undermined the existing security order and triggered long-lasting consequences for the security thinking of European states and the United States. The decision of Sweden and Finland to join NATO immediately following Russia's attack on Ukraine has contributed to a wider Alliance presence in the Arctic, sharply dividing the region between NATO states and Russia. The era of comprehensive cooperation has ended. However, the question of whether the region is being drawn into a new Cold War remains open.

Greenland is an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark, roughly two thirds of which lie within the Arctic circle. Due to this fact, the Kingdom of Denmark is known as an Arctic littoral state, together with four other states: the US, Russia, Norway, and Canada. Also considered Arctic states are Finland, Sweden, and Iceland, but these do not border the Arctic Ocean and thus do not hold any jurisdiction over its maritime zones.

Due to the harsh climate conditions and permafrost, the region has long been a compelling destination for natural scientists and adventurers. The situation changed during the Cold War when the Arctic was sharply divided between the USSR and the Western bloc. At this



Arctic states, counties and other administrative regions with capitals. Map: Arto Vitikka, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland. Data: Runfola, D. et al. (2020) geoBoundaries: A global database of political administrative boundaries. PLoS ONE 15(4): e0231866. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0231866>. Source: <https://arcticcentre.org/en/arctic-region/maps/administrative-areas/>

time, the region came to be seen as a potential theater of war between the two global powers. Accordingly, the Arctic was heavily militarized, particularly by the Soviet Union, which held the most Arctic territory. Soviet decision on militarization and industrialization in the Arctic was conditioned by the fact that Moscow had unrestricted and unlimited access to the world ocean only through the Arctic. To this end, both the Soviet Union and Russia have stationed their largest maritime force, the Northern Fleet—which includes a nuclear submarine fleet—inside the Arctic circle near the Kola Peninsula.

Simultaneously, the Arctic region has a strategically sensitive zone, a strategic transit route which, under the condition of a military conflict, might have provided significant advantages to (or substantially weakened) either the USSR or the West. This zone is known as the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom Gap (GIUK).¹ In the event of a military conflict, Arctic islands like Greenland and Iceland would hold strategically advantageous positions. Through the GIUK Moscow could have easily reached the North-Atlantic and from there the American coast. Among the measures to protect itself against a potential Soviet attack during that period, Washington established strong ties with the Arctic countries. One such country was the Kingdom of Denmark, which at the time included Greenland, though the latter was not yet an autonomous territory. Like Trump today, already then Washington attempted to purchase Greenland, but the offer was declined by Copenhagen. Yet a lack of independence did not prevent Greenland from signing a defense agreement with the US in 1951, thereby becoming longstanding allies.² Because Greenland's geographical location was identified as crucial to the US security, it has continued to play a significant role in US national security thinking.

The Cold War ended in 1990 and a military conflict in the Arctic between global superpowers did not take place. The agenda of international relations changed, and military confrontation was replaced by a cooperative mode and even a US-Russian strategic partnership. World leaders recognized the Arctic as an exceptional zone of peace and cooperation and aimed to preserve a fragile Arctic ecosystem, eliminate military pollution on land and sea areas, promote sustainable development, and protect the traditional lifestyles of Indigenous Arctic peoples. European Arctic countries became strong supporters of this approach, emphasizing science and research and promoting the significance of the Arctic for the whole of humanity. Until relatively recently, the dominant security approach to the Arctic by European and NATO member states has relied on a broad understanding of security. Within this context, military threats have not been considered probable.

However, with the increased melting of Arctic ice due to climate change and the re-emergence of state ambitions for the industrial development of the Arctic, this situation has changed. The rising world economy of the early 21st century has demonstrated a profound interest in raw materials and rare earth minerals, but also in oil and gas fields, which are believed to be extensively distributed throughout the Arctic. Access to new shipping routes (including the Northeast passage along the Russian coast) and rich commercial fishing areas serve as additional incentives for the large-scale development of the Arctic. Somewhat surprisingly, China has turned out to be the most interested non-Arctic actor, seeking to acquire more resources for its growing economy and expanding geo-political ambitions. Greenland was chosen by Beijing as a potential partner, as it holds a huge number of raw resources and has also suffered from underdevelopment due to its subordinate status in

1 *The GIUK Gap's strategic significance.* (n.d.). IISS. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2019/the-giuk-gaps-strategic-significance/>

2 The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. (n.d.). *Defense of Greenland: Agreement between the United States and the Kingdom of Denmark*, April 27, 1951. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/den001.asp#1



Mountain landscape in Greenland reflected in the water. Photo: [Markus Trienke, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

relation to Copenhagen and the will to preserve the environment and traditional lifestyles. China's engagement has been especially striking against the backdrop of what has been, until recently, the relatively modest interests of the US in the region.

In parallel, Moscow increased its interest in the Arctic, which peaked with a famous expedition to the North Pole in 2007. The journey received wide media coverage, with Russian explorers placed a Russian flag

on the seabed. While the action did not have any legal consequences—as the North Pole belongs to all humanity and cannot be owned by any individual state—it was viewed and perceived as evidence of Russia's intention to project its power and influence far into the Arctic. Since then, Moscow has constantly articulated its interest in a comprehensive development of its Arctic territory, including infrastructure and military build-up. Those announcements correlated with a launched military reform, and a huge defense investment.³ Concurrently, Russian behavior in the Arctic was cooperative and reserved in comparison with its activities in other regions. After the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, there were concerns about the potential spill-over effect into the Arctic. However, Moscow did not make any worrying moves and the region remained stable and peaceful, though the bilateral and multilateral cooperation was limited and suspended in some areas.

After Donald Trump was first elected president in 2016 the region began to acquire a new significance in the geopolitical framework. The focus of Trump's foreign and security policy was shifted towards the Indo-Pacific region, aimed at counterbalancing China's ambitions to project power and influence across the globe. The US National Security Strategy of 2017 speaks of Beijing's ambitions and a renewed geopolitical rivalry.⁴ Accordingly, the US global leadership model and its set of values were threatened by the reproachment between China and Russia and their shared ambition to undermine and rewrite the existing international order. The Arctic was seen as a new region where both Beijing and Moscow could test their ambitions. Because the Arctic has been politically decoupled from most European and NATO states—its governance relying on a "complex web of multilateral and bilateral networks, ranging from states to regional institutions"—this has been relatively easy to achieve.⁵ The bureaucratic core of Arctic governance, the Arctic Council, is not an international organization and its mandate excludes political and military issues. Such a vague legal situation creates favorable conditions for revisionist global actors to wield power and exert influence in pursuit of geopolitical aims.

3 De Haas, M. (2011, November). *Russia's Military Reforms Victory after Twenty Years of Failure?* Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20111129_clingendaelpaper_mdehaas.pdf

4 The White House. (2017, December). *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. <https://trump-whitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

5 Bergman Rosamond, A. (2011). *Perspectives on security in the Arctic area*. Danish Institute for International Studies. http://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/61204/RP2011_09_Arctic_security_web.pdf

2. GREENLAND'S STRATEGIC NARRATIVE ABOUT THE ARCTIC AND ITS OWN ROLE

From a geographical point of view, Greenland is the world's largest island and exceptionally remote. It is also home to a large Indigenous population, the Greenlandic Inuit. From a legal and scholarly point of view, Greenland is a hybrid in terms of sovereignty and transitional in terms of political identity.⁶ Colonized by Denmark in 1814, Greenland has been engaged in a struggle for greater autonomy, sovereignty, and even statehood. In 1979, based on the Act on Greenland Self-Government⁷, the government of Greenland's capital Nuuk acquired self-governing rights in domestic affairs and simultaneously its legal status was changed. Nuuk has advanced the aims of Greenlandic autonomy and independence through official statements and documents. The most important was presented in 2024, titled, "Greenland in the world: Nothing about us without us - Greenland's Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy".⁸ Among other aims, this document also attempts to articulate the Greenland's strategic role in the Arctic region, together with a vision of how the Arctic should be developed, governed, and protected. This narrative has been shaped and organized through several intertwining dimensions. At the same time, the document itself could be characterized as both ambitious and vague. As such, it lacks content on number of issues, focusing instead on particular areas rather than addressing broader strategic processes and phenomena.

2.1 Internal Dimension

Firstly, the document frames core political issues like relations with the Kingdom of Denmark, regional governance of the Arctic, and Greenland's place in international order through the lens of an emerging nation, one whose primary task is narrowly focused on obtaining greater agency and corresponding historical narratives of state-building. Understandably, a transition period is required to provide Nuuk with public administration and state-building experience through a deeper engagement with administrative and legislative processes within the Kingdom.

Secondly, Nuuk uses the document to underline a general willingness to independently administer its own natural resources, and rare earth elements in particular, with a final goal of complete economic independence. This latter aim is particularly addressed to Copenhagen and its past behavior as a colonizer. Persistent economic problems are conditioned by the fact that Greenland has never been included in the world economy, and its economy is built on such industries as fishing and mining. However, the sales of minerals would be prioritized to increase foreign exports, according to the Strategy.⁹

Thirdly, Nuuk attempted to boost its competitiveness and economy by inviting China as an investor, recognizing that China has made generous and ambitious offers of invest-

6 Jacobsen, M., Wæver, O., & Pram Gad, U. (2024). Introduction: Analyzing Greenland in Arctic Security. In M. Jacobsen, O. Wæver, & U. Pram Gad (Eds.), *Greenland in Arctic Security. (De)securitization Dynamics under Climatic Thaw and Geopolitical Freeze* (p. 2), University of Michigan Press.

7 Statsministeriet. (2009). *Act on Greenland Self-Government*. <https://english.stm.dk/media/10522/gl-selvstyreløvs-uk.pdf>

8 Naalakkersuisut / Government of Greenland. Ministry for Statehood and Foreign Affairs. (2024, February). *Greenland in the world. Nothing about us without us. Greenland's Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy*. https://paartoq.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Greenlands_Foreign_Security_and_Defense_Policy_2024_2033.pdf

9 Naalakkersuisut / Government of Greenland. Ministry for Statehood and Foreign Affairs. (2024, February). *Greenland in the world. Nothing about us without us. Greenland's Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy*. https://paartoq.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Greenlands_Foreign_Security_and_Defense_Policy_2024_2033.pdf, p. 23.

ment. This is particularly interesting as Beijing cannot be identified as a strong supporter and promoter of sustainable development, which has been established as a key value for Greenlanders. The strategy emphasizes the importance of East Asia for the improvement of trade and export relations.¹⁰ In parallel, Nuuk sees China's long-term presence in the region as necessary, with China acting as the main means of connecting with other states and stakeholders. For these purposes, Greenlandic representation in Beijing was established in late 2021.¹¹

Fourthly, having tried to find a solution for Greenland's economic problems, Nuuk decided to use its unique geographical location and ethnic origin as a natural right to speak in the name of Indigenous people, and about how development should be designed and implemented.¹² Such an approach could be assessed as both resourceful and reasonable, as well as short-sighted and manipulative. It certainly does not consider the impact of different processes occurring in the international system, from geopolitical to demographic. Concurrently, it is not understandable what scope of instruments Greenland possesses to influence the development of the situation in a desirable way. While Copenhagen has chosen a considerate approach to Nuuk's aspirations, this does not necessarily apply to other international actors with interests in the Arctic.

Finally, aspirations for independence are conceptually extended from domestic issues to those traditionally reserved for the state: foreign and security policy. Because the Arctic was proclaimed to be an exceptional zone of peace, cooperation, and low tensions, Nuuk has elaborated its respective policies on this fundamental statement without a comprehensive consideration of the developments since the first and second Russian invasions of Ukraine, nor in light of Donald Trump's repeated efforts to "purchase"—and otherwise intimidate—Greenland. Respectively, Nuuk's efforts to establish itself internationally have been similar to those designed for relations with Copenhagen.

2.2 External Dimension

In the domain of foreign policy, the document identifies several key actors. Cooperation with them is conceived as necessary and desirable. The scope of actors includes individual neighboring states as the US, Iceland and Canada, and a large group of multilateral structures (Arctic Council, Arctic North American Forum, Inuit Circumpolar Council) and organizations (EU, UN). The Arctic Council is singled out as the most important to attend and speak with. This could be illustrated by the strong desire to have a Greenlandic representative as a delegation chair, as the Kingdom of Denmark has taken a two-year rotating chairship in 2025. This claim and a corresponding campaign were based on the argument that exactly Greenland is the Arctic part of the Kingdom. In other words, Greenland has been very alert to actions that have symbolic meaning in foreign affairs and has tried to increase its influence in Arctic matters by holding representative positions. Simultaneously, Nuuk has tried to emphasize that Denmark should not have supremacy in the Arctic affairs over

10 Naalakkersuisut / Government of Greenland. Ministry for Statehood and Foreign Affairs. (2024, February). *Greenland in the world. Nothing about us without us. Greenland's Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy*. https://paartoq.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Greenlands_Foreign_Security_and_Defense_Policy_2024_2033.pdf, p. 31.

11 All Greenlandic Representations | *Grønlands Repræsentation*. (n.d.). Grønlands Repræsentation. <https://grl-rep.dk/en/pas/rep-andre>

12 Pram Gad, U., Rastad Bjørst, L., & Jacobsen, M. (2024). Security Transfigurations across Sectors: Animals, Climate, and Self-Determination in Greenland. In M. Jacobsen, O. Wæver, & U. Pram Gad (Eds.), *Greenland in Arctic Security. (De)securitization Dynamics under Climatic Thaw and Geopolitical Freeze* (p. 67), University of Michigan Press.

Greenland, since it cannot possess the relevant knowledge and expertise. However, Nuuk does not attempt to obtain leadership in the Kingdom's Permanent Representation to NATO (DANATO).

Nuuk has chosen the strategy of addressing the international community on the basis how potential partners relate to its interests and needs, simultaneously emphasizing and promoting the uniqueness of the island. The analysis of the document demonstrates that the choice of foreign partners is conditioned by the focus on the North cooperation. Yet the choice is also affected by Greenland's failure to be included in international relations and the absence of a solid state-building history. This is a logical model of behavior for emerging nations and might be corrected in the following years.

The relations with the United States of America relate to both domains: to the foreign, but also security and defense policy. Their specifics are also conditioned by Nuuk's strategy for obtaining independence. Security considerations of Greenland relied on the affirmative statement that the Arctic presented itself an exceptional zone of peace, cooperation and low tensions. This description of the Arctic was established after the famous Murmansk speech of Mikhail Gorbachev and marked the end of Cold War and the following demilitarization—including in the heavily militarized Arctic. Since then, the idea of peaceful co-existence has been seen as unquestioned and unbreakable. Emphasizing 'soft security', Nuuk has continued to insist that hard security issues should not be included in the Arctic Council's mandate. Simultaneously, both Copenhagen and Nuuk enjoyed protection through the defense agreement with the US,¹³ treating the latter as an ally and security provider in the case of a military attack. The Kingdom of Denmark does not possess a strong army and respective comprehensive military facilities. Thus, American military might, and NATO membership were seen as solid and reliable security guarantees against a wide array of threats, challenges, and risks. The fact that the US military base, Pituffik Space Base (previously known as Thule Air Base), was located in Greenland for over eighty years was viewed as a confirmation of strong long-lasting relations and a persistent American interest in maintaining cooperation and its development. However, the growing demand for independence led to the correction of how these relations were seen by Nuuk. By tightening relations with Washington in defense sphere, politicians sought to distance Greenland



Pituffik Space Base Location Map. Image: USACE. Source: <https://www.nad.usace.army.mil/Media/Images/igphoto/2003273099/>

¹³ The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. (n.d.). *Defense of Greenland: Agreement between the United States and the Kingdom of Denmark, April 27, 1951*. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/den001.asp#1

safely from Copenhagen by demonstrating that there is another actor that could guarantee security and defense. This thinking was supported by the belief that Washington needs to preserve cooperation, since Greenland “plays a key role in the defense of the United States against external threats, especially from the Arctic region”.¹⁴ Subsequently, expansion of the Defense Agreement of 1951 in the direction of inclusion Greenland as a Party has been expected. The strategy document also mentions Nuuk’s ambition to establish an administrative unit to engage Greenlandic decision-makers in participation in base-related issues.¹⁵

The exclusive right of Copenhagen to decide in the domain of security and defense policy were perceived through the lens of colonialism and unfair treatment of Greenland and its rights. Nuuk opposed the idea that Copenhagen decides solely about how the island should be protected. Currently the military defense of Greenland and the Faroe Islands is performed by the Joint Arctic Command through surveillance and search and rescue operations.¹⁶ Nuuk has appealed for a more equitable division of responsibility but also addresses considerations of the established security practices and their expediency in the light of peaceful co-existence in the Arctic. More precisely, Greenland has asked for a balance between military defense, surveillance and civilian capabilities. However, criteria for the balance are not set. A related idea reimagines the predominantly military search and rescue (SAR) preparedness function as a civilian model. The critical infrastructure and civil society are to be protected within the framework of civil preparedness. The latter is directed at achieving two concurrent goals: enforcement of the sovereignty of the territory and maintenance of low tensions and peace in the Arctic.

The framework of surveillance is aimed at enforcing sovereignty, particularly through monitoring the seas of the GIUK gap. However, because Nuuk has declined enhanced military presence and related measures on its territory, it is unclear how low tensions could be maintained under the condition of a changing security situation. Greenland also strongly opposes the placement of military facilities close to civilian communities. Nuuk’s appeal for demilitarization could be viewed as wishful thinking rather than recognition of a very complicated security situation and growing geopolitical rivalry that is typically characterized by an increased military build-up, particularly in the Russian part of the Arctic. Modern Russian leadership has reversed the trend set by Gorbachev, yet this seems to have been overlooked by Nuuk. Particularly, the above-mentioned strategy did not identify any geopolitical threats and challenges. Even more, the Russian aggression against Ukraine was mentioned only once, in the context of the violation of international law and Ukrainian people’s right to self-determination. Such wording echoes Greenland’s domestic issues with Denmark and reveals a short-sighted understanding of the situation in Europe and the threat posed by Russia. Namely, the threat not only to Ukraine and nearby countries but to the very principles and values—including sovereignty and territorial integrity—upon which the UN Charter is built.

14 Naalakkersuisut / Government of Greenland. Ministry for Statehood and Foreign Affairs. (2024, February). *Greenland in the world. Nothing about us without us. Greenland’s Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy*. https://paartoq.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Greenlands_Foreign_Security_and_Defense_Policy_2024_2033.pdf, p. 17.

15 Naalakkersuisut / Government of Greenland. Ministry for Statehood and Foreign Affairs. (2024, February). *Greenland in the world. Nothing about us without us. Greenland’s Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy*. https://paartoq.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Greenlands_Foreign_Security_and_Defense_Policy_2024_2033.pdf, p. 43.

16 Danish Defence / Armed Forces / Joint Arctic Command. (2021, March 4). *Joint Arctic Command*. <https://www.forsvaret.dk/en/organisation/joint-arctic-command/about-us/>

3. THE US, DENMARK AND CHINA TOWARDS GREENLAND'S STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

It should be underlined that the reaction of Copenhagen has been reserved and thoughtful. This is, in part, because both entities constitute one state and are united by a turbulent and dramatic past. Simultaneously, Denmark is aware of still being perceived by Nuuk as a brutal colonizer. Trying to mitigate the consequences of the past, Copenhagen has initiated a policy of repentance. In particular, this has occurred in relation to an ongoing investigation into a medical program for Greenlandic Inuit women and girls by Danish health authorities in 1960s and 70s with the aim of limiting population growth. Greenlanders view the case as a serious violation of human rights, bordering on genocide.¹⁷ Denmark's reparative policies are complemented by extensive Danish efforts to support Greenland's aspirations for greater sovereignty, offering consulting, expertise, and training support to Greenlandic officials and politicians. Through an established bilateral comprehensive and holistic dialogue—and also due to Copenhagen's own reconsideration of its policy towards Nuuk—a lot of changes were made to improve Greenland's status and to meet its justified requirements towards state-building. However, this process has not been easy, particularly due to high expectations and demands of Greenlanders and an unrealistic assessment of the international reality.



Self-loading container ship of the Royal Arctic Line, Nuka Arctica, at the container dock at Sikuki Nuuk Harbor, Greenland. Photo: Gordon Leggett, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0

At the same time, Copenhagen possesses more profound expertise about Greenland compared to Washington and Beijing. Nuuk and Copenhagen also share similar approach to Arctic governance and the wish to preserve its unique ecosystem. Copenhagen stands apart from geopolitical rivalry and a wish to extensively develop the region to meet the demands of international markets and growing national economies. Particularly, Copenhagen's crafted

¹⁷ Graugaard, N. D., & Ambrosius Høgføldt, A. (2023). The silenced genocide: Why the Danish intrauterine device (IUD) enforcement in Kalaallit Nunaat calls for an intersectional decolonial analysis. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, 36(2), 162–167. <https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v36i2.137309>

its agenda for the ongoing Arctic Council chairship on the basis of proposals by Greenland and Faroe Islands.¹⁸ The agenda echoes many statements from the Greenlandic Strategy and the Strategic Plan adopted in 2021: emphasis on the role of the Arctic Council in safeguarding and promoting the interests of the Indigenous Peoples; keeping the Arctic peaceful; constructive cooperation and advanced sustainable economic development. At the same time, such an approach does not address the ongoing changes in the Arctic region and ongoing geopolitical rivalry. Respectively, NATO is not seen as a part of Arctic governance. Copenhagen has also invested in actions that have symbolic meaning and that are especially welcomed by Nuuk. Particularly, Copenhagen postponed the release of its Arctic strategy until Nuuk's presentation. Priority rights have been also applied to the chairship of the Arctic Council, as Nuuk would lead it on behalf of the Kingdom.¹⁹ Copenhagen has also supported Nuuk's demand for greater engagement in foreign and security affairs.

Nevertheless, it appears very difficult for Denmark to meet economic aspirations Greenland, due to its strong desire to preserve traditional lifestyle and pristine natural environment, together with an unwillingness to meet the requirements of profoundly changed global markets. Accordingly, Copenhagen has continued to provide an annual subsidy (alternatively known as a block grant) approximately 570 million dollars²⁰ to Nuuk, which constitutes the larger part of its public budget. When independence is achieved, Greenland will stop receiving money from Denmark. Consequently, Greenland's authorities must find other ways to replace what is currently seen as the main obstacle to independence.

Nuuk has displayed a tendency to treat cooperation with Beijing as a solution to the existing situation. However, American authorities have been suspicious of the real intentions of China in Greenland. Prominent infrastructure projects on the island were perceived as a smokescreen for China's growing geopolitical and geo-economical ambitions. Especially in the light of a Chinese Arctic Strategy that proclaimed Beijing a "near-Arctic state".²¹ Under the pressure of the US, Copenhagen initiated a policy that resulted in substantial limitation of Chinese presence in Greenland. Such policy should be viewed in a broader context of emerging confrontation between Washington and Beijing. During the Arctic Council meeting in Rovaniemi in 2019, Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, declared that both Russia and China initiated geopolitical rivalry in the international arena, also in the Arctic.²² By delivering the speech Mike Pompeo attempted to obtain support of the Arctic Council members and to build a coalition. However, his speech was met with a lukewarm response, as the concerns were viewed as exaggerated.

Additional context for such approach towards China can be found in the close cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and the considerable distancing of Moscow from the West. In other words, Washington securitized cooperation between Greenland and China and assessed it as a potential threat that could

18 Arctic Council. (n.d.). *The Kingdom of Denmark's Chairship. 2025-2027*. <https://arctic-council.org/about/kingdom-of-denmarks-chairship-2025-2027/>

19 Arctic Portal.org. (2025, May 12). *Kingdom of Denmark takes over Arctic Council Chairship! Greenland in Prominent Role*. <https://arcticportal.org/ap-library/news/3758-kingdom-of-denmark-takes-over-arctic-council-chairship-with-greenland-in-prominent-role>

20 Starcevic, S. (2025, January 3). Greenland's leader wants independence from Denmark as Trump hovers over Arctic island. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/greenland-prime-minister-mute-egede-independence-denmark-colonialism-donald-trump-arctic/>

21 Puranen, M., & Kopra, S. (2023). China's Arctic Strategy – a Comprehensive Approach in Times of Great Power Rivalry. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 6(1), p. 239–253.

22 United States Department of State. (2019, May 6). *Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus. Speech Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State. Rovaniemi, Finland*. <https://www.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/>

be multiplied under the condition of Chinese enhanced and grounded presence on island. The Greenlandic approach of treating Chinese presence only through the lens of economic cooperation and the struggle for independence was seen by the Washington as an additional reason for taking more deliberate measures to protect US security interests. As close cooperation between Moscow and Beijing and the access of the latter to the Greenland's infrastructure could turn the North-Atlantic into a potentially dangerous zone for the US security. The Chinese strategy of expanding its influence in the Arctic could have been very successful, as Washington paid little attention to the region until the first presidency of Donald Trump. The latter, however, took the course on more assertive defending of national interests, preferring political realism approach to international relations and profound weakening of multilateralism and international obligations if they were recognized as such that contradicted US national interests.

Two episodes of Russian aggression against Ukraine have profoundly affected security in the Arctic. Though the Arctic does not generate conflict itself, it serves as a recipient of tensions across the globe, especially those that relate to global power competition. Concurrently, during Donald Trump's presidency Washington has amended its overall approach towards the Arctic, subordinating the Arctic policy to the national security policy. The reserved feedback from the Arctic countries to Pompeo's speech in 2019 could also serve as an explanation why Washington decided to employ a more confrontational and unilateral approach on prioritized issues of the US foreign and security policy agenda. Such change has certainly affected policy towards Greenland. The latter is perceived neither as an equal partner, nor as the nation that demonstrates serious attention to the needs of Washington. This is largely because Nuuk and Washington operate in different international environments. When Greenland is focused on closest neighbors and the Arctic region as such; the US sees the Arctic as part of a bigger geopolitical picture. Threat assessment also differs, respectively the Pituffik Space Base is viewed as an asset that should meet new challenges in the emerging rivalry with new competitors. And Cold War considerations about the usage of the base cannot be applicable under new conditions.

Having been focused on defending its rights and establishing itself in relations with Copenhagen, Greenland did not perform a proper and comprehensive assessment of how Greenland's interests could coincide or/and collide with the interests of other actors, particularly those identified as partners and allies. In addition, Greenland's justified demands for independence and statehood do not necessarily correspond with the changed security situation in the Arctic after February 24, 2022. Since then, the region has undergone serious security changes that are manifested in a changed threat perception and assessment, in the increased NATO presence, and in enhanced defense budgets of the Arctic countries. The Russian Federation is now perceived as a long-standing threat to the European security order and the values upon which it was based. In other words, the era of the Arctic exceptionalism had ended,²³ and a renewed and intensified geopolitical rivalry, with a prospect of a military conflict, has returned.

4. GREENLAND AND DENMARK VERSUS DONALD TRUMP AND MAGA

Greenland has become a bone of contention between President Trump and Denmark. President Trump attempted to purchase Greenland for the first time in 2019. That state-

23 Chuffart, R., Devyatkin, P., & Raspotnik, A. (2025, June 24). Arctic Exceptionalism as Myth, Method, and Mirror. *The Arctic Institute*. [Arctic Exceptionalism as Myth, Method, and Mirror | The Arctic Institute – Center for Circumpolar Security Studies](#)

ment received a negative response from both a Greenlandic Prime-Minister and a Danish Prime-Minister, describing it as an “absurd”,²⁴ and was widely seen as an example of extravagant behavior by the American president²⁵. Following these statements, a planned visit by Donald Trump was put on hold, which in terms of diplomatic protocol is a sign of a substantially worsened relations. It came as a surprise to Washington that the idea of buying Greenland was seen by locals as “patronizing” or even “crazy”,²⁶ suggesting that the Trump government lacks an understanding of both Greenland’s history and present reality. At the same time, Greenlandic officials used the interest of American president in Greenland to offer him the opportunity to invest in the island, contributing to the economic independence, and, then to prospective secession from the Kingdom.²⁷

After his return to the White House, Donald Trump repeated his intention, though in a more forcible manner. He declared then that US “the ownership and control over Greenland is an absolute necessity” relating to the purposes of national security and freedom throughout the world.²⁸ In early January and in early May 2025 he detailed that annexation of Greenland could not be ruled out.²⁹ However, this time US strategy is more elaborated and has been performed simultaneously in three directions: targeting directly the Kingdom’s government, Greenland’s government and Greenlandic people, and indirectly European partners of the US—also within NATO.

The main assumption of the strategy concerns the need to provide reliable security guarantees for Greenland and simultaneously for the US under the conditions of geopolitical rivalry in the Arctic. Further, Denmark has been portrayed as a country that has been unable to ensure security in the region and of the island.³⁰ Vice-President Vance in March 2025, while visiting Greenland, openly said that Denmark did not do a good job by the people of Greenland, the island was vulnerable and the only option for the US was to ramp up its presence. He also referred to alleged Russian and Chinese designs that could not be ignored any longer.³¹ Accordingly, Copenhagen is positioned as a country that undermines US security

24 Walker, S. (2019, August 21). Danish PM ‘surprised and disappointed’ over cancelled Trump visit. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/21/trump-state-visit-cancellation-over-greenland-shocks-danes>

25 Hood L. (2019, August 23). How Donald Trump’s proposal to buy Greenland really went down in Denmark. *The Conversation UK*. <https://theconversation.com/how-donald-trumps-proposal-to-buy-greenland-really-went-down-in-denmark-122160>; Gjerstad, M. & Rogers, J. (2021, June 15). Knowledge is Power: Greenland, Great Powers, and Lessons from the Second World War. *The Arctic Institute*. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/knowledge-power-greenland-great-powers-lessons-second-world-war/>

26 Cvorak, M. (2019, August 19). What Greenlanders say about Trump’s interest in their country – video report. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2019/aug/19/what-greenlanders-say-about-trumps-interest-in-their-country-video-report>

27 Walker, S. (2019, August 21). Danish PM ‘surprised and disappointed’ over cancelled Trump visit. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/21/trump-state-visit-cancellation-over-greenland-shocks-danes>

28 Trump, D. J. [@realDonaldTrump]. (2024, December 22). *I am pleased to announce Ken Howery as my choice for United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark* [Post]. Truth Social. <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/113698764270730405>

29 Starcevic, S. (2025, January 7). Trump refuses to rule out using military force to take Greenland and Panama Canal. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-military-force-greenland-panama-canal/>; Matza, M. (2025, May 4). Trump says he won’t seek a third term. *BBC.com*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd9l3399wvno>

30 Sky News. (2024, December 26). *Donald Trump: President-elect targets Canada, Greenland and Panama Canal in Christmas message*. <https://news.sky.com/story/donald-trump-president-elect-targets-canada-greenland-and-panama-canal-in-christmas-message-13279829>; Fortinsky, S. (2024, December 29). Former Trump adviser: If Denmark can’t defend Greenland, let US buy it to ‘become part of Alaska’, 29.12.2024. *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/policy/international/5059147-former-trump-adviser-rob-ert-obrien-denmark-greenland-alaska/>

31 Treene, A., Liptak K., & Klein, B. (2025, March 28). JD Vance accuses Denmark of neglecting Greenland, makes

interests. In other words, the current US administration does not accept Greenland as an independent and resilient actor and thus questions its agency. Further, the security thinking practiced by the Kingdom of Denmark and its Nordic partners are viewed as insufficient and ineffective. Indeed, Donald Trump claims that the US is the real security-provider in the region.



Donald Trump Jr. (in the middle) and Charlie Kirk next to him (on the right) in Greenland. Photo: [Daniel Torok, Wikimedia Commons](#), Public Domain.

Concurrently, apart from official strategy, Trump has also employed a private track of portraying himself differently among Greenlanders. This refers to so-called private visits of Trump family members and administration officials. Early in January 2025, Trump's eldest son visited Greenland and declared that it would tremendously benefit after becoming a part of American nation.³² Relating to the visit, Donald Trump wrote that the deal should be concluded, and the island needed safety, security, strength, and peace, adding "MAGA. Make Greenland great again".³³

In March 2025, US Vice-President Vance together with his wife travelled to Greenland, however the visit was cut short as it was received with great hostility from the locals.³⁴ Though the White House attempted to present it as a cultural and even as a private visit, later it was declared that the American delegation was to visit the US military base. The Greenlandic Prime Minister described the visit as "highly aggressive".³⁵ However, Vice-President Vance, trying to mitigate the effects of his visit, said that the right of self-determination belonged to Greenlanders, though expressed hope that they would choose the US because it was the only nation on earth to respect Greenland's sovereignty and security.³⁶ Relating to that visit, and to previous statements about Greenland, Donald Trump claimed that it was Greenlanders who allegedly called Americans to come.³⁷ Such statements could be based on media reports about gathering of people who wore MAGA hats. Later it was reported that those people

highest-profile case for US control of the island. *CNN.com*. https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/27/politics/vances-greenland-trip-trump?cid=ios_app

32 Brennan, E. (2025, January 7). Trump Sr. called for US ownership of Greenland. Now Trump Jr. is visiting. *CNN.com*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/06/europe/trump-greenland-visit-denmark-intl-latam/index.html>

33 Trump, D. J. [@realDonaldTrump]. (2025, January 7). *Don Jr. and my Reps landing in Greenland* [Post]. Truth Social. <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/113787590758180339>

34 Grieshaber, K., Crowther, P., & Madhani, A. (2025, March 28). Vance accuses Denmark of underinvesting in Greenland as Trump presses for U.S. takeover of the island. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2025-03-28/vance-and-wife-to-tour-u-s-military-base-in-greenland-after-diplomatic-spat-over-uninvited-visit>

35 Harvey, L., & Jaramillo, A. (2025, March 24). Greenland's leader says US officials' visit is 'highly aggressive.' Trump says it's 'friendliness, not provocation'. *CNN.com*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/24/world/greenland-prime-minister-us-usha-vance-intl-hnk/index.html>

36 Treene, A., Liptak K., & Klein, B. (2025, March 28). JD Vance accuses Denmark of neglecting Greenland, makes highest-profile case for US control of the island. *CNN.com*. https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/27/politics/vances-greenland-trip-trump?cid=ios_app

37 Harvey, L., & Jaramillo, A. (2025, March 24). Greenland's leader says US officials' visit is 'highly aggressive.' Trump says it's 'friendliness, not provocation'. *CNN.com*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/24/world/greenland-prime-minister-us-usha-vance-intl-hnk/index.html>

were bribed to wear clothes imitating support for Donald Trump and MAGA. Further, it was suggested that Greenlanders could have been the targets of covert influence operations orchestrated by people close to President Trump.³⁸ Such operations are aimed at destabilizing societies from within to achieve certain political goals. A major goal of prospective American operation would be substantial undermining of unity between Denmark and Greenland, complemented by the rise in secession modes and a corresponding drift towards the US. The Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen announced that any attempts to intervene into domestic affairs would not be tolerated, though he confirmed that Copenhagen was not surprised by outside attempts to influence the future of Kingdom.³⁹



Second Lady Usha Vance and JD Vance on their trip to Greenland in 2025. Photo: [@VP on X, Wikimedia Commons](#), Public Domain.

It should be noted that when Washington addresses Greenland, it appeals to the complex of feelings towards Denmark, simultaneously praising Greenlanders and fueling its decoupling process from the Kingdom. Though Greenlandic and Danish authorities issued a number of statements against this intervention during both times, Nuuk did not mention the situation of 2019 in their official strategy. Instead, relations with the US were assessed through the prism of equal partners that are united by long-standing comprehensive cooperation in different areas. Such avoidance, whether intentional or accidental, has demonstrated partial understanding of the processes occurring in international relations, but also in the Arctic, aggravated by the lack of knowledge of American domestic politics and the range of instruments used to secure its national interests. Particularly, in defining the US as one of the closest allies together with Denmark, the strategy expresses strong confidence that all of them represent like-minded nations and share the same set of values based on “respect for international law and the right of people to self-determination”.⁴⁰ The document also emphasizes that cooperation with allies and partners in the Arctic, including the US, proved to be a tested approach for maintaining peace and low tensions.

Denmark’s sophisticated strategy of defending Greenland belongs to its Prime-Minister, Mette Frederiksen. This strategy has evolved since 2019 as a result of the substantial change in security environment in which Denmark has to operate. The strategy has been performed at three layers: mitigating, but counteracting Trump’s intensions towards Greenland; developing and deepening US-Denmark relations; and emphasizing issues that are important for European allies of Washington.

38 Associated Press Staff. (2025, August 27). Denmark summons US envoy over report of Greenland influence operations. *Defense News*. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/08/27/denmark-summons-us-envoy-over-report-of-greenland-influence-operations/>

39 DR News. (2025, May 7). *LIVE: Major political drama between the USA, Denmark and Greenland*. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/live-storpolitisk-trekantsdrama-mellem-groenland-usa-og-danmark?focusId=10083074>

40 Naalakkersuisut / Government of Greenland. Ministry for Statehood and Foreign Affairs. (2024, February). *Greenland in the world. Nothing about us without us. Greenland’s Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy*. https://paartoq.gl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Greenlands_Foreign_Security_and_Defense_Policy_2024_2033.pdf, p. 41.

The first layer—the core of Denmark’s strategy—relates to the unquestioned agency of Greenland and its right to decide about its future. The Danish position has been clear since 2019 and could be summarized as, “Greenland is not for sale”. This is not possible, neither from moral reasons, nor technically, as Denmark has sovereignty over Greenland, but does not own its land. Copenhagen has persistently repeated that Greenland is not Danish, it is Greenlandic. Nuuk also has not declared any desire to become a part of the US. In 2019, the Danish Prime-Minister reacted to Trump’s offer as if it was “something that is not seriously meant”.⁴¹ This statement was coupled with the reminder that the time of buying and selling land and people belongs to the past. In this way, the Danish Prime-Minister follows international law. In 2025, Denmark added two statements to the strategy for dealing with the US: the US cannot decide about the future of the island, and is was no support for the idea of selling the island among Greenlanders.⁴² Frederiksen did not comment on Vance’s visit in March, as it was not an official one, however she noted that his description of Denmark was not fair. However, in April 2025, she underlined that another country cannot be annexed, even with the usage of an argument about security.⁴³

In addition, Frederiksen underlined strong support to Nuuk, which has been manifested in tightening cooperation,⁴⁴ but also through such symbolic gestures as mutual visits, press-conferences, and statements. In other words, both Copenhagen and Nuuk have demonstrated their close ties based on mutual respect. In the result of snap elections in Greenland in March 2025, the new Prime-Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen underlined the need to remain united to withstand American external pressure.⁴⁵ Additionally, in early February 2025, Greenland’s Parliament adopted new rules prohibiting anonymous and foreign political contributions for political parties.⁴⁶ It was explained by the risk of foreign influence considering recent increased interest in Greenlandic affairs.

The second layer has become more intertwined with a third layer, because of the full-fledged Russian aggression against Ukraine. The transatlantic unity has been crucial for Europe’s security, and for each Nordic country in particular, including Denmark. Already in 2019, Danish Prime-Minister separated the idea of purchasing Greenland from the complex of bilateral relations, expressing the belief that both sides could continue cooperating strategically, militarily and commercially in addressing the number of rising challenges. When Donald Trump renewed his plans to acquire Greenland, the Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen said it was “no ambition whatsoever to escalate a war of words with a president on his way into the Oval Office”.⁴⁷ He added that Trump’s words were taken seriously, but not literally. Such a diplomatic stance has opened a room for discus-

41 Gambino, L. (2019, August 20). Trump tweets image of enormous Trump Tower on Greenland. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/19/trump-greenland-tower>

42 nyheder.tv2.dk. (2025, January 7). Mette Frederiksen: - Greenland is not for sale. <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/live/2025-01-06-kampen-om-groenlands-fremtid?entry=4b2880c9-b346-44e4-862d-420de86b42c6>

43 Frederiksen, M. (2025, April 3). *I would like to take this opportunity to send a message directly to the United States of America* [Post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1221506766011867&set=a.396459778516574>

44 Little, T. (2025, April 1). Greenland strengthens Danish ties as it eyes independence. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greenland-strengthens-danish-ties-it-eyes-independence-2025-03-31/>

45 Reuters. (2025, April 3). ‘You cannot annex another country,’ Danish PM tells US over Greenland. *CNN.com*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/03/europe/greenland-us-annex-trump-latam-intl>

46 Library of Congress. (2025, February 10). *Greenland: Parliament Adopts Rules on Anonymous and Foreign Political Contributions*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2025-02-10/greenland-parliament-adopts-rules-on-anonymous-and-foreign-political-contributions/>

47 Agence France Presse. (2025, January 9). Danish PM To Meet Party Leaders On Trump’s Greenland Comments. *BARRON’S*. <https://www.barrons.com/news/danish-pm-to-gather-party-leaders-after-trump-s-greenland-comments-f026a9aa>

sions both for Copenhagen and Washington. Continuation of cooperation with the US was confirmed. During her visit to Greenland in April 2025, Frederiksen called for an increased defense cooperation in the Arctic with Washington.⁴⁸ Through 2025 Copenhagen worked on finalizing the defense deal with the US, which was signed in 2023 and ratified by the Danish Parliament on June 11, 2025.⁴⁹ The document perceives common defense efforts to promote peace and security in the areas of mutual interest, which practically means that Washington gets full access to three Danish airbases (Karup, Skrydstrup and Aalborg) and powers over Danish civilians there. Greenland and the Faroe Islands are excluded from the agreement. The Danish government has decided to focus on the assumption that such agreement could provide Denmark with the American help in the case of emergency. And such option still seems to be more effective if the security situation develops rapidly. Simultaneously, such an agreement might work as a restraining factor for a potential aggressor. The agreement could be terminated if complete or partial American annexation of Greenland happens, according to the Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen.

Denmark's security thinking aligns with a similar approach in other Nordic countries that have signed similar defense agreements with the US. These European Arctic countries aim to strengthen their defense in the region, viewing the Russian Federation as the primary long-term threat. This involves modernizing their defense and security spheres, as well as their Nordic defense cooperation, which can only become stronger and more efficient through internal transformation. Simultaneously, Nordic countries must respond to Washington's intentions towards Greenland. Military confrontation is off the table, and it's unlikely to happen between NATO member states. It's also clear that Donald Trump prefers a style of interacting with foreign leaders where they praise him for thoughtful and great decisions. Currently, the primary diplomatic task for countries worldwide is to maintain good relations with Donald Trump until his term ends. If his position weakens during the 2026 US elections, when his party could lose majority, European allies will gain more flexibility in addressing Trump's intentions.

European leaders have been working to preserve NATO as a major security guarantor in Europe and develop relations with the US. Nordic countries, as well as other European nations like France and Germany, have supported Denmark. Notably, Denmark has employed "hygge diplomacy" to address Trump's plans. Hygge is a Danish concept of living, rooted in Danish philosophy and perception of the world. It involves creating a positive atmosphere filled with good people and vibes. Amidst new announcements from Donald Trump about Greenland, Mette Frederiksen shared a family-style dinner photo with Nordic colleagues, symbolizing Denmark's solidarity.⁵⁰ Nordic countries have developed their own style of showing strong unity and mutual support, albeit in a moderate, yet very talkative manner. This photo exemplifies the solidarity between Nordic countries, emphasizing that they cannot and should not be viewed separately. Furthermore, the attack on Denmark is perceived as targeting other Nordic countries, as they share similar values and principles in their foreign and security policies.

48 Reuters. (2025, April 3). 'You cannot annex another country,' Danish PM tells US over Greenland. *CNN.com*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/03/europe/greenland-us-annex-trump-latam-intl>

49 Forsvarsministeriet. (n.d.). *Agreement on defense cooperation between the Government of Denmark and the Government of the United States of America*. <https://www.fmn.dk/globalassets/fmn/dokumenter/nyheder/2023/-us-denmark-dca-den-prime-english-20dec2023-.pdf>

50 Frederiksen, M. (2025, January 26). [Photo]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1173799467449264&set=a.396459791849906>

5. BERLIN'S INTERESTS AND GREENLAND

Germany's primary interest in the Arctic has been shaped by its engagement in studying polar regions, marine areas, and nature conservation. This has involved broad participation in natural science cooperation with other Arctic countries and observers to the Arctic Council. However, climate change, coupled with geopolitical changes, has led to the realization that additional expertise is required to address security and military-related issues. In response, Germany has developed two key Arctic policy documents: "Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines: Assuming Responsibility, Creating Trust, Shaping the Future" (August 2019) and "Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines: Germany and the Arctic in the Context of the Climate Crisis and the Zeitenwende" (September 2024). These documents are closely aligned with security and defense policies, particularly the Federal Government's 2016 White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr.

While Germany is not an Arctic state, its diverse interests in the peaceful and sustainable development and management of the Arctic are being threatened by security developments from various actors. In 2019, Berlin stated its intention to counter existing geopolitical tension and prevent conflicts and crises in the region. There is a mention of the need that NATO and the EU pay

more attention to the region in terms of security policy, without militarizing it.⁵¹ The 2024 document reaffirms Germany's commitment to a stronger multilateral engagement and responsibility. It emphasizes that Russian full-fledged aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally changed the geopolitical environment for Germany's Arctic policy.⁵² Berlin's updated strategy, based on the National Security Strategy of 2023,



Snow-covered mountain in Greenland. Photo: [Markus Trienke, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

emphasizes robustness, resilience, and sustainability. The strategy recognizes the growing importance of the Arctic to security policy, beyond its geographical boundaries. This demonstrates Berlin's commitment to protecting the entire NATO Allied territory and supporting its partners in the region to defend shared security interests.

The document highlights that the increased security threat stems from Russia's and China's activities in the region, as well as their cooperation. The Russian Northern Fleet is seen as an instrument of Moscow's security and foreign policy. These guidelines also emphasize that security in the Arctic is interconnected with the security in the North and Baltic seas, and the North Atlantic. The Arctic cannot be viewed through the lens of "Arctic exceptionalism" concept anymore. Therefore, the importance of NATO's northern flank for the region's security has been underscored. Berlin also declares a strong connection between its own security and that of its European and transatlantic partners, including in the Arctic.

51 The Federal Government. (2018, August). *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines. Assuming Responsibility, Creating Trust, Shaping the Future*. https://www.arctic-office.de/fileadmin/user_upload/www.arctic-office.de/PDF_uploads/Germany_s_Arctic_Policy_Guidelines_2019_Web.pdf, p. 42.

52 The Federal Government. (2024, September). *Germany's Arctic Policy Guidelines. Germany and the Arctic in the context of the climate crisis and the Zeitenwende*. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2676060/5496910022404f7cf68049f1b10e4d5a/arktis-leitlinien-data.pdf>, p. 4.

As long as Ukraine continues fighting, the situation will constantly evolve, and Nordic countries will continue to provide substantial military and corresponding assistance. Germany, in particular, has become the most influential provider of assistance to Kyiv, leading to a significant alignment of its security interests with those of Nordic countries. Berlin actively participates in the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable and the regular sessions of the Nordic Chiefs of Defence (ChODs). Additionally, it contributes to NATO's military contingency planning for the defense of its partners and to deter Russia. This includes mutual exchange of experiences, the presence of military units, and military exercises under various auspices. Furthermore, the Bundeswehr is planning regular training activities in the region, which will undoubtedly enhance defense cooperation with Nordic partners. Notably, Denmark recently joined Norway, Canada, and Germany in a partnership on maritime security in the North Atlantic during the NATO summit in the Hague in 2025.⁵³ Berlin views the growing tensions around Greenland through the lens of international law and the need to demonstrate solidarity with its partners. Its strategy towards Nuuk has been implemented through political and diplomatic means, as well as practical measures in the security and defense spheres. Berlin operates on bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral levels to implement its strategy, which is highly coordinated with the EU strategy and NATO.

Berlin aims to demonstrate its increased responsibility in safeguarding security and providing defense in Europe, including its Arctic part, in collaboration with its Nordic partners. This could lead to unexpected situations for Donald Trump and his administration, as European countries establish new forms of security and defense cooperation, including Greenland. Instead of being forced to choose between the US and Denmark as security guarantees, Nuuk can take a more significant role in its own security, gaining greater sovereignty and potentially independence in the future. A strong Greenland capable of self-protection and contributing to Arctic security, particularly monitoring the GIUK gap, aligns with Berlin's long-standing interests. This move could also broaden European security understanding by bringing a new member equipped with specific North knowledge to the security community, fostering resilient and efficient defense in remote regions. As a leading EU country, Berlin advocates for strengthening EU unity and efficiency. In this regard, Berlin closely collaborates with EU institutions, France, and the UK. While the UK is not an EU member, it maintains close ties in the security and defense spheres and has its own Arctic interests, particularly related to the GIUK gap.

In early January 2025, Chancellor Scholz, European leaders, and the president of the European Council responded to Trump's declarations with "incomprehension," emphasizing the principle of border inviolability as a core aspect of Western values.⁵⁴ Paris reacted in a harsher tone, its Foreign Minister Barrot declared that Europe would not allow any nation, however strong, to attack its sovereign borders.⁵⁵ At the same time he stated that Europe should reinforce itself. In January 2025, French Foreign Minister Barrot also announced that Paris had been discussing with Copenhagen the possibility of sending troops to protect the island.⁵⁶ At the same time it was indicated that such an idea was not Denmark's request.

53 Forsvarsministeriet (2025, June 25). *Danmark træder ind i canadisk-tysk-norsk partnerskab om sikkerhed i Nordatlanten*. <https://www.fmn.dk/da/nyheder/2025/danmark-trader-ind-i-canadisk-tysk-norsk-partnerskab-om-sikkerhed-i-nordatlanten/>

54 AP News. (2025, January 8). *Germany's leader says all countries must respect existing borders, in a rebuttal of Trump*. <https://apnews.com/article/germany-scholz-trump-denmark-greenland-792cf697a69c0f17291dc6a18aba1355>

55 CGTN news. (2025, January 8). *Denmark, France and Germany respond to Trump sizing up Greenland*. <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2025-01-08/Denmark-France-and-Germany-respond-to-Trump-sizing-up-Greenland-1A09I115v68/p.html>

56 Harici. (2025, January 30). *Germany, France back Denmark over Greenland against the US*. <https://harici.com>.

Berlin and Paris have insisted on territorial sovereignty and confirmed this during a visit of Mette Frederiksen in late January 2025. According to a senior EU official, the Union has been coordinating every move on Greenland with Denmark to present a coherent strategy.⁵⁷ At the same time, European governments have adopted a two-pronged strategy to avoid verbal escalation and simultaneously persuade President Trump to reconsider his stance on Greenland. In parallel, Berlin has emphasized the enhanced transatlantic unity amidst rising geopolitical rivalry and threats to the European continent. Despite Vice-President delivering a harsh speech at the Munich security conference in February 2025, European NATO members and Secretary-General Rutte managed to improve personal relations with President Trump. This speech contributed to a shift in security and defense perceptions in European countries, which will likely lead to redesigns in defense spending and enhanced security measures on the continent. Earlier in February 2025, Chancellor Scholz proposed deploying a military unit in Greenland to demonstrate its sufficient security.⁵⁸

In August 2025 defense officials of Germany, Greenland and Denmark met in Greenland to discuss tightening of trilateral cooperation.⁵⁹ This cooperation is a response to Nuuk's decision to diversify its partner circle due to the profound changes in the Arctic and Greenland since the release of its official strategy (discussed in previous chapters). During the visit, German Deputy Defence Minister Nils Schmid emphasized the growing importance of the Arctic and North Atlantic for NATO and European stability.⁶⁰ Late August marked a significant milestone in bilateral relations between Nuuk and Berlin, as a German military vessel docked in Nuuk for the first time. The German navy, comprising the replenishment tanker 'Berlin' and frigate 'Hamburg', participated in exercises alongside the Danish, French, and Canadian navies. These exercises aimed to train NATO allies in defending North America by securing maritime lanes in the GIUK area and performing supply maneuvers.⁶¹ These events can be seen as Berlin's commitment to security in the Arctic, given the increasing Russian hostile activity in the region. They also serve as a testament to the high level of cooperation between Denmark and Greenland.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis leads to the following key findings:

1. The Arctic has entered a new circle of geopolitical rivalry, challenging its previous status as a "zone of peace and cooperation."
2. This rivalry is driven by political and military tensions between the US, China, and Rus-

[tr/en/germany-france-back-denmark-over-greenland-against-the-us/](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/germany-france-back-denmark-over-greenland-against-the-us/)

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- sia, as well as profound climate change that makes the Arctic more accessible for economic development, rare earth metal and mineral extraction, and enhanced navigation.
3. The primary threats in the Arctic stem from Russian imperialistic and military ambitions, as well as Chinese economic ambitions. These ambitions often involve redrawing the existing international order and undermining international law and institutions.
 4. Geopolitical, military, and economic considerations of different state actors collide with the interests of Indigenous peoples, who seek to maintain low tensions in the region and prioritize sustainable development, diverse cooperation, and research and science.
 5. Arctic governance is a “complex web of multilateral and bilateral networks, ranging from states to regional institutions”. The Arctic Council serves as its main forum, but its effectiveness has been limited under conditions of peace and cooperation. However, this system is insufficient in the face of geopolitical rivalry, as it allows different actors to project their influence and achieve their goals. Notably, the Arctic Council’s mandate excludes political and military issues, and no efforts have been made to change this situation
 6. The case of Greenland is particularly noteworthy. President Trump has intensified attention on Greenland, viewing its geographical location as crucial to US security and its European allies. To protect itself, Washington signed a Defense Agreement with Denmark and Greenland in 1951, establishing Greenland as its security provider in case of a military attack.
 7. However, during his presidencies, President Trump announced his intention to decouple Greenland from the Kingdom of Denmark. This move was part of his geopolitical competition strategy on the international stage. Currently, his policy has been implemented in three directions: targeting directly the Kingdom’s government and Greenland’s government and people; and indirectly, through European partners of the US, also within NATO. The main aim of this policy is to gain US protection over Greenland, eventually making it a new US state. To achieve this, President Trump blames Denmark for its inability to safeguard neither Greenland nor the North Atlantic, which he perceives as a direct threat to the US.
 8. Trump’s strategy for acquiring Greenland contradicts Greenland’s long-standing aspiration for full independence from Denmark and the establishment of an independent state. Greenland currently enjoys self-governing rights in domestic affairs and aims to play a more significant role in foreign and security policy, traditionally reserved for Copenhagen.
 9. The most comprehensive presentation of Greenland’s views on the Arctic, its place in the region, and its foreign and security policy can be found in the official document “Greenland in the World: Nothing About Us Without Us. Greenland’s Foreign, Security, and Defence Policy 2024-2033 – an Arctic Strategy.” However, this strategy fails to consider the developments since the first and second Russian invasions of Ukraine, as well as Donald Trump’s repeated intentions to buy Greenland in 2019 and 2024.
 10. Greenland’s focus on defending its rights and establishing relations with Copenhagen has resulted in an incomplete assessment of how its interests could align or conflict with those of other actors, particularly its partners and allies. Furthermore, Greenland’s justified demands for independence and statehood may not necessarily reflect the changed security situation in the Arctic after February 24, 2022.
 11. Greenland’s plan to strengthen relations with Washington in the defense sphere aimed to distance itself safely from Copenhagen, suggesting that another actor could have

- guaranteed security and defense. However, this strategy was not prepared for President Trump's plans, which led to the postponement of Greenland's referendum on independence and a decision to tighten cooperation with Denmark.
12. Copenhagen has developed a sophisticated strategy to defend Greenland. This strategy, updated since 2019, operates at three layers: mitigating Trump's intentions towards Greenland, developing and deepening US-Denmark relations, and emphasizing issues important to European allies of Washington.
 13. The European Arctic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland) have adopted a two-track approach to the region. They aim to maintain a low-tension zone while simultaneously updating their security and defense strategies. This includes welcoming a stronger presence of NATO in the region. In essence, they have shifted their understanding of how peace and security can be safeguarded. Increased defense spending and enhanced defense capabilities are not seen as escalatory but rather as a clear message of readiness to protect national interests and security.
 14. Germany and France have supported Denmark's efforts to preserve transatlantic unity and NATO as a major security guarantor in Europe.
 15. Germany's interest in the Arctic has expanded beyond scientific cooperation and sustainable development. It now encompasses security and military matters. Modern Germany's Arctic policy is closely intertwined with its security and defense policy. Berlin emphasizes the strong connection between its own security and that of its European and transatlantic partners, including in the Arctic.
 16. Berlin has confirmed its intention to enhance security and defense cooperation with Nordic partners, particularly in the maritime security of the North Atlantic.
 17. Growing tensions around Greenland are viewed by Berlin through the lens of international law and the need to demonstrate solidarity with its partners. European capitals have adopted a two-pronged strategy: avoiding verbal escalation and simultaneously persuading President Trump to reconsider his stance on Greenland. Berlin has also emphasized the enhanced transatlantic unity in the face of increasing geopolitical rivalry and threats to the European continent.
 18. In response, Nordic countries, led by Denmark, with support from Berlin and Paris, have decided to strengthen their security and defense cooperation, including Greenland. This cooperation aims to provide Greenland with the necessary agency in foreign and security matters and to increase Nordic contributions to the protection of peace and security in the Arctic.

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