



Purchasing Greenland

Trump's fantasy or a real national security stake for
the United States?

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Abstract

In December 2024, Donald Trump, not yet sworn in as President of the United States, revisited a proposal originally formulated in 2019 to purchase Greenland from Denmark. This time, the request was accompanied by threats of force, or at the very least severe reprisals, should Copenhagen refuse. Pressure intensified in January 2026 following the U.S. attack on Venezuela. Donald Trump has offered little explanation regarding the underlying motives of this project, other than to mention national security imperatives. The idea of Washington acquiring Greenland is not unprecedented: on several occasions in the past, the United States has made such proposals to Denmark across varying international contexts. What are the objectives of these purchase proposals, both past and present?

I. Introduction

When President-elect Donald Trump reintroduced the idea of purchasing Greenland in December 2024—rekindling a proposal first mentioned in 2019—reactions ranged from mockery to incomprehension and indignation. Most critics dismissed the idea as another eccentric whim. However, history reveals that U.S. interest in Greenland is far from new; it represents a strategy dating back over a century.

The political and legal dynamics surrounding the island have evolved significantly over time. Today, Greenland is autonomous and possesses the right to declare independence from Denmark. Donald Trump maintains that extending U.S. sovereignty over the island is a fundamental issue of national security. He has even suggested the use of force to achieve this end (Shamin, 2025), a threat repeated not only by the President but by various administration members, including Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy Stephen Miller on January 6, 2026 (Miller, 2026, 10:55) and White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt (Leavitt, 2025, 1:17). Conversely, others have downplayed the necessity of military action,

such as Vice President JD Vance in March 2025, who suggested Greenland would eventually align itself (Hivert, 2025), or Secretary of State Marco Rubio on January 6, 2026, who characterized the military threat as mere rhetoric intended to pressure Denmark and Greenland (WSJ, 2026). What are the objectives behind this American assertion of will over Greenland, which, rhetorically at least, extends to the idea of invading the territory of a NATO ally?

II. A Longstanding Interest

When President Trump announced his desire to purchase Greenland in August 2019, the proposal was met with incredulity and a touch of derision. Both the media and analysts were quick to depict the project as a whim of the American president. This, however, overlooks the fact that discussions have taken place in Washington on several occasions regarding the relevance of acquiring Greenland, and that there have been multiple American attempts to purchase the island from Denmark. This sequence indicates a recurring objective, even if it is not always prominent in the perceptions and priorities of the U.S. administration.

The first mention of the possibility of purchasing Greenland was formulated in 1832 during the Andrew Jackson administration. Throughout the 19th century, the United States repeatedly employed this method of territorial expansion, notably with the purchases of Louisiana from France (1803), Florida from Spain (1819), southern New Mexico and Arizona from Mexico (1853), and then Alaska from Russia (1867)

In 1868, shortly after purchasing Alaska from the Russians, Washington once again considered buying the island from Denmark (Peirce, 1868), as well as Iceland, which remained a Danish possession until 1918 and was attached to the Danish Crown until 1944. Secretary of State William Seward, who had negotiated the Alaska Purchase, had entered into discussions with Denmark for the acquisition of the Danish West Indies (*Dansk Vestindien* in Danish, today the U.S. Virgin Islands). During this negotiation process, several American nationalists urged Seward to increase pressure on British possessions in North America following the acquisition of Alaska. Seward, an 'ardent expansionist' (Dyer, 1940), saw this as an opportunity to seize Canada and the British territories by increasing pressure to incite London to cede British North America (Seward, 1868, 3). It must be remembered that the 19th century was marked by poor relations between London and Washington: the United States had just emerged from the Civil War, during which the British had not hidden their sympathies for the secessionist Confederacy. Furthermore, most British fortifications built in the mid-19th century in North America (Quebec, Halifax, Bermuda, Bahamas) were primarily intended to guard against an American assault, as the U.S. had already attempted such invasions twice before (1775, 1812). Seward also mentioned the abundance of Greenland's natural resources (fisheries, coal, and cryolite for the aluminum industry) (Seward, 1868). The press of the time suggests that negotiations

with Denmark for a \$5.5 million in gold purchase (2025 value: approximately \$125 million¹) for both territories were nearly finalized (Ogdensburg Journal, 1868). However, no transaction was formalized. Dyer posits the hypothesis that Congress's rejection of the agreement to purchase the Danish West Indies likely convinced Secretary Seward that it was useless to enter into negotiations for 'far northern lands' (Dyer, 1940).

From the beginning of the 20th century, the United States observed Germany's rise to power, which rekindled its interest in Greenland and the Danish West Indies. A treaty signed in 1902 provided for the purchase of the Danish West Indies. Although signed, it was not ratified by both houses of the Danish Parliament (Danish National Archives, nd). In a letter to his Secretary of State in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt stated that "...both the Danish West Indies and the Dutch West Indies in the Americas...will be a constant temptation to Germany unless we take them" (quoted by Jacobsen and Olsvig, 2024:116). Roosevelt instructed the US Ambassador in Copenhagen to argue in favor of a territorial agreement. The ambassador confirmed Roosevelt's fears, writing that "Prussianized Germany could at any moment seize this small country and... the Danish West Indies would be German" (ibid.).

Consequently, in 1910, a proposal to acquire Greenland was discussed within the American government by the U.S. Ambassador to Denmark, Maurice Francis Egan. As suggested by "important Danish persons," friends of Egan, the United States would have exchanged Mindanao and Palawan in the Philippines (then an American possession) for Greenland and the Danish West Indies; Denmark could then exchange Mindanao and Palawan to Germany for Northern Schleswig, annexed by Prussia in 1864. This project for Greenland was conceived as parallel to the project for acquiring the Danish West Indies (Egan, 1910). It seems, however, that this project was not forwarded to the Danish government.

The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 emphasized the strategic importance, in Washington's eyes, of the approaches to the canal, thus reinforcing the relevance of reaching an agreement on the Danish West Indies. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the attack on the liner *Lusitania* in 1915 reinforced the idea that Germany could pose a threat and seize Denmark, and thus the Danish West Indies. Discussions between governments resumed, during which Secretary of State Lansing threatened Copenhagen with the occupation of the Danish West Indies in case of disagreement (US Department of State, nd). The Danish government requested \$25 million and American recognition of its sovereignty over Greenland (Jacobsen and Olsby, 2024). The treaty of August 4, 1916, formalizing the cessation of the Danish West Indies (which became the U.S. Virgin Islands on March 31, 1917), mentions simply that the U.S. government "will not object to the

¹ Measuring Worth, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/>
The website CPI Inflation Calculator gives a slightly different value, <https://www.in2013dollars.com/>
According to this website, 5,5 million \$ in 1868 were worth 124,35 million \$ in 2025.

Danish Government extending its political and economic interests to the whole of Greenland" (Office of the Historian, nd). Juridically, this is very different, as Washington does not mention the concept of sovereignty, nor does it recognize anything: it merely promises not to oppose the extension of Denmark's political hold over the entire island. Without access to the minutes of the discussions between Lansing and members of his government, it is difficult to know if this wording was intentionally convoluted or fortuitous.

On April 9, 1940, Nazi Germany invaded Denmark and Norway: the question of the possible use of Greenlandic territory arose again, especially when, in March 1941, Germany extended the conflict zone to the east coast of the territory². The Danish ambassador in Washington, Henrik Kauffmann, was the first Danish envoy to declare that he could neither receive nor execute orders from a Danish government under German control, yet the United States continued to recognize him as the official representative of Denmark (Wenande, 2018). On April 9, 1941, the Roosevelt administration signed an agreement with Kauffmann, acting on behalf of the King but without the consent of the Danish government in occupied territory, a treaty granting the United States the right to occupy Greenland: "The defense of Greenland against an attack by a non-American power is essential to the preservation of the peace and security of the American continent, and is an object of vital concern to the United States of America and also to the Kingdom of Denmark" (World Legal Information Institute, nd). By asserting that the defense of Greenland was "essential" to the security of the Americas as a pretext to occupy the territory, Washington was directly applying the Monroe Doctrine.

In 1945, after the war, the Danish government requested the repeal of the 1941 treaty and the restitution of Greenland to the kingdom, which Washington refused, citing Article 10: "The present agreement shall remain in force until it is agreed that the present dangers to the peace and security of the American continent have passed" (ibid.). While the Nazi threat had disappeared in Copenhagen's eyes, Washington was already thinking in terms of the Cold War and believed the security of the continent was not established (Jacobsen and Olsby, 2024). In this logic of structuring the American response to the Soviet threat—Greenland being on the shortest route between the USSR and North America—Democratic President Harry Truman proposed \$100 million in gold to Denmark in 1946 (2025 value: approximately \$1.22 billion³) to acquire Greenland. Military authorities argued that American bases on the island would counter potential Soviet bomber attacks. It was truly the military value of Greenland that mattered to Washington, with the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimating that the acquisition of this island, "of no value to Denmark," was vital for the

² From 1941 to 1945, the Allies and the Germans worked together to build weather stations on the east coast of the island, providing strategic information for the routes of Allied convoys and then for conducting military operations after the landing, but also to track down and destroy enemy stations.

³ According to CPI Inflation Calculator, \$100 million in 1946 were worth \$1 646 million in 2025.

United States (Nelson, 2019). One of the solutions considered was for the United States to exchange lands in the Point Barrow district of Alaska for parts of Greenland considered to have military value. Under this plan, the Danes would have received rights to potentially discovered oil with an obligation to sell it to the United States (Julian, 2024)—recalling that the discovery of major oil fields in northern Alaska dates to 1967. Nearly 80 years later, Marc Thiessen, White House speechwriting director (2007–2009), continues to believe that Denmark made a masterful error that day. "In 1967, the richest oil discovery in U.S. history occurred in the Point Barrow region. Bad move, Denmark! Sad!" (Thiessen, 2019), he wrote in a 2019 analysis that disregarded the wishes of the directly concerned populations, namely the Inuit of Greenland and Alaska.

Acknowledging Washington's focus on security issues, the Danish government accepted the idea of a permanent American military presence, a change in posture that allowed for the negotiation and signing of the 1951 treaty. This agreement allows the United States to maintain its military bases in Greenland (13 in 1945) and to establish new bases or "defense zones" if NATO deems it necessary. The American military can freely use and move between these defense zones but cannot infringe upon Danish sovereignty in Greenland. The agreement remains in effect as long as the NATO treaty is in force (Yale Law School, nd). It was under the aegis of this treaty that the large Thule airbase was built, which housed up to 10,000 people during the Cold War. The treaty was renewed in 2004 and amended to include Greenland's autonomous status and the need to consult the territorial government (US Department of State, 2004).

It is therefore clear that the idea of purchasing the territory of Greenland is neither recent nor a whim of President Trump. While the 1868 acquisition project was primarily motivated by the appeal of resources and the desire to gain an advantage in the rivalry with the British, security motives were at the heart of the 1910, 1916, and 1946 purchase projects. However, one may wonder about the current motives behind President Trump's recent revival of this old idea of acquiring Greenland.

III. A Project Relaunched by President Trump

Revealed on August 16, 2019, by *The Wall Street Journal* (Salama et al., 2019), Donald Trump's interest in acquiring Greenland was confirmed three days later by the President himself. The refusal of the Greenlandic government and Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen at the time prompted Donald Trump to delay his visit to Denmark scheduled for September, leading to a diplomatic incident.

The reception from Danish and Greenlandic authorities regarding the purchase proposal reformulated as of December 23, 2024—while Trump was not yet the sitting president—was no better. This time, the Trump administration is clearly redoubling efforts to advance

its project to acquire Greenland. He asserts that the United States "needs Greenland for international security. We will go as far as we have to go. And the world needs us to have Greenland" (Trump, 2025: 0:11), claiming a supposed international necessity.

He dispatched Vice President J.D. Vance in March 2025 to Greenland, to the Pituffik base, where Vance delivered a speech highly critical of Danish management of security issues in Greenland ("you haven't done a good job") (Vance, 2025, 10:55) and mentioned "very aggressive incursions by Russia and China" (Vance, 2025, 8:55) without providing a single example. On December 20, he appointed Louisiana Governor⁴ Jeff Landry as special envoy for Greenland. Landry quickly stated on X that it "is an honor to serve you in this position to make Greenland a part of the United States" (Landry, 2025). The U.S. has thus officially appointed an administration member whose mandate is explicitly to integrate the territory of an ally, leading the Danish government to summon the American ambassador (Hivert, 2025b). Faced with increasing pressure from Washington, which does not exclude the implementation of punitive tariffs (Trump, 2025c, 1:54) or the use of force, Copenhagen now considers the United States a threat to its security (Hivert, 2025c).

IV. The Appeal of Natural Resources?

Numerous articles on Greenland mention abundant natural resources on the island, which would explain the interest of the United States and other powers like China. Washington would want to get its hands on what is presented as an eldorado of resources. It is true that former National Security Advisor Mike Waltz told *Fox News* in 2024 that the administration's interest in Greenland focused on "critical minerals" and "natural resources" (in Ronald, 2026).

It has long been known that resources are present on the island; mineral exploration is old and dates back to the 19th century. A major cryolite mine was operated at Ivittuut from 1854 to 1987 and sparked real interest from Washington in the 1868 project, and to a lesser extent in 1910. A lead and zinc deposit was mined from 1956 to 1963 at Mestersvig; a lead, zinc, and silver mine operated at Maarmorilik from 1973 to 1990. Coal was extracted from the Qullissat mine from 1924 to 1972 (Lasserre, 2010).

Regarding hydrocarbons, the potential represented by continental shelf oil was judged encouraging by many analysts. United States Geological Survey (USGS) estimates indicate approximately 31.4 billion barrels of oil equivalent in East Greenland (Gautier, 2019) and 7.8 billion barrels of oil in the western Baffin Bay basin, shared with Canada (USGS, 2025). This encouraging potential strongly prompted Greenland to promote major oil and gas exploration campaigns. Started in the 1970s, exploration saw a significant acceleration from 2011 under the autonomous government (Casey, 2014), which saw resource

⁴ The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 is obviously a communication element in this appointment, as the president himself has pointed out (Trump, 2025b, 0 :10).

extraction as an economic lever to potentially finance independence (Kuokkanen, 2017; Lasserre and Pic, 2021). However, the failure to discover commercially viable deposits led the government, which became more focused on environmental protection issues after the 2021 elections, to halt oil and gas exploration in 2021 (Reuters, 2021; DW, 2021).

There has therefore never been any oil and gas production in Greenland, and there are no proven reserves to date. Four exploration licenses remain active, which the government did not wish to revoke when the moratorium on exploration was introduced in 2021. In the eastern part of the territory, three are grouped together in an area known as the Jameson Basin, where no exploration has yet taken place. The British company 80 Mile, in partnership with the Texas-based Greenland Energy Company⁵, recently announced that preliminary estimates suggest a potential of around 13 billion barrels of oil in its concessions, which is more than the USGS estimates for the whole of eastern Greenland (Thorsson, 2025; Knight, 2025).

If a major discovery were made, it would change the geopolitical dynamic, but since no drilling has yet been carried out, we are still limited to estimates that have yet to be confirmed. The partners in this project are communicating publicly as if a major discovery were imminent, while the Greenlandic government points out that exploratory drilling has not yet been carried out (Jørgensen, 2026). The current government is hesitant about how to proceed in the event of a significant discovery, as there is debate within Greenlandic society and the ruling coalition parties about the risks associated with oil exploitation, but it is likely that a major discovery and the associated revenues would be a strong incentive to maintain the current exploration and exploitation license.

In the mining sector, significant deposits have been identified.

The company Greenland Minerals⁶, which became Energy Transition Minerals in 2022, invested in developing the Kvanefjeld rare earth deposit, described as the world's second largest deposit of rare earth oxides and the sixth largest uranium deposit in the world. However, this project was blocked by the Greenlandic government in 2023 for environmental reasons⁷ (Breum, 2023). The scale of this deposit in this strategic sector has lent credence to the idea of Greenland being rich in resources that could fall under the control of Chinese companies. Greenland's estimated rare earth reserves are substantial, as

⁵ Resulting from the merger of the two Texan companies Greenland Exploration Ltd and March GL (World Oil, 2025).

⁶ Australian firm now called Energy Transition Minerals (ETM). The Kvanefjeld site is still among its projects, <https://etransmin.com/kvanefjeld-project/>. The Chinese company Shenghe Resources Holding Co. holds 7% of the company's capital.

⁷ In 2021, the autonomous government of Greenland, which has a pro-sovereignty stance, passed a law banning uranium mining in Greenland. In the summer of 2023, ETM was denied a mining license for its Kvanefjeld project. Indeed, the rare earth elements in the region are mixed with uranium, and mining would inevitably bring the latter to the surface, which the Greenland government sought to prevent.

evidenced by the size of the Kvanefjeld deposit (Lasserre and Lerouge, 2021). However, 2025 estimates by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) put Greenland's potential rare earth deposits at around 1.5 million tons, or about 1.7% of the global total, compared to 1.9 Mt in the United States and 21 Mt in Brazil: while resources do exist in Greenland, based on current knowledge, we are far from a mining El Dorado, even in the field of rare earths.

Table 1. Estimated reserves of rare earths, 2024

	Estimated reserves (Mt)	% of world reserves
China	44	48,8
Brazil	21	23,3
India	6,9	7,7
Australia	5,7	6,3
Russia	3,8	4,2
Vietnam	3,5	3,9
United States	1,9	2,1
Greenland	1,5	1,7
Tanzania	0,89	0,99
South Africa	0,86	0,96
Canada	0,83	0,92
Total	> 90	

Source : US Geological Survey, Rare Earths, Mineral Commodity Summaries, January 2025, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2025/mcs2025-rare-earth.pdf>

In 2026, only two mines are in operation. Operated by Lumina Sustainable Materials, controlled by two Swiss and Canadian investment funds, the first, located in western Greenland in Qaqortorsuaq, produces anthrosite, used in construction materials. The second, located in the south of the island, is the former Nalunaq gold mine, which closed in 2013 and was bought by the Canadian company Amaroq Minerals, which has been in the process of restarting production since 2024 (Mining.com, 2026).

The Greenland Ruby mine went bankrupt in September 2024 (Bye, 2024). The large Isua iron deposit remains unexploited: Chinese mining company General Nice bought it in 2015 after London Mining went bankrupt, but the Greenlandic government revoked its operating license in 2021 due to inactivity at the mining site (Mining Technology, 2021). In the far north of the island, the Citronen Fjord zinc project, with a deposit considered to be very substantial, was to be developed in partnership between Australia's IronBark and China's NFC (China Nonferrous Metal Industry), which signed a memorandum of understanding in 2014. In 2021, the international context led IronBark to turn away from NFC (van

Leeuwen, 2021) in favor of American financing, before selling its interests to Almeera of Dubai in December 2024 (IronBark, 2024). The Wegener Halvø copper deposit on Jameson Land in eastern Greenland was the subject of a Sino-British project in 2008 between Nordic Mining and Jiangxi Zhongrun Mining. Other Chinese companies joined the project in 2011. However, faced with the Chinese economic slowdown, falling global prices, and high costs, the project made little progress and the exploration license expired in 2019 (Jiang, 2021).

This media frenzy over Greenland's riches “is based on a misunderstanding,” says Greenlandic geologist Minik Rosing. "Of course, these critical materials are valuable, and Greenland has plenty of them. But they can also be found elsewhere in the world, where it is often easier and cheaper to mine them. What makes them a resource is their value relative to their production cost, and we're not there yet," he explains (quoted by Hivert, 2026). Production costs, as elsewhere in the Arctic, remain high, and it is the relationship between world prices and costs that determines the expected profitability and therefore the interest of mining companies (Lasserre and Pic, 2021; Lasserre, 2021). “If there were a ‘treasure’ at the end of the rainbow in Greenland, private companies would have already gone there,” said Jacob Funk Kirkegaard, a researcher at the Peterson Institute for International Economics (cited by Egan, 2026).

Greenland is probably rich in mineral resources, as few exploration campaigns have been conducted there to assess the extent of the deposits, and the potential that is emerging seems interesting, as it does in the Canadian Arctic. However, the territory is open to all companies, including American ones, because the autonomous government is seeking to develop its economic potential in order to achieve its goal of independence. In the short term, the Greenlandic government's decision to block the exploitation of any uranium-containing deposits may worry some mining companies and slow down the exploration process in Greenland, but it does not mean that it is opposed to mining or industrial projects. In any case, on December 22, 2025, D. Trump reiterated that the United States “needs Greenland for national security. Not for minerals, we have so many sites with minerals and oil, we have more oil than any country in the world (sic)” (Trump, 2025b, 0:49).

V. Strengthening military security, but against what threat?

V.1. The revival of an almost extinct interest in the Arctic

After the end of the Cold War, Washington largely turned its back on this region, becoming what researcher Rob Huebert described as a “reluctant Arctic power” (Huebert, 2009). The strategy published by the Pentagon in June 2019 (Department of Defense, 2019) marks a major shift: it clearly presents this area as the setting for a new major competition between the United States, Russia, and China. The United States is once again interested in the Arctic, not because it is of interest in itself or because part of US territory is located in the

Arctic, but because Russia's and, above all, China's interest in this region could pose a threat to the United States' backyard.

It is within this strategic framework of renewed military interest in the Arctic, after decades of disinterest, that Donald Trump's proposals must be viewed. However, the reasons given to justify President-elect Trump's plan to buy Greenland on the eve of his second term remain very vague.

V.2. A national security issue?

The statements made by President Trump and his colleagues in the government raise issues related to US security, as Trump asserted in 2024: “For the sake of national security and freedom throughout the world, the United States of America believes that ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity.” “ (Trump, 2024), a sentiment repeated several times during 2025, as we have seen. Trump and J.D. Vance place particular emphasis on the threat posed by China and Russia. ”If you look along the coast [of Greenland], you see Russian and Chinese ships everywhere “ (Trump, 2025b, 1:02), and ”We are going to do something about Greenland, whether they like it or not, because if we don't, Russia or China will take over Greenland, and we don't want China or Russia as neighbors”⁸ (Trump, 2026c, 0:11).

Walter Berbrick, from the Naval War College, stated in 2019: “Whoever controls Greenland controls the Arctic. It is the most important strategic location in the Arctic and perhaps in the world” (quoted in Lippman, 2019). However, there is no credible analysis to support this statement, which echoes Halford Mackinder's highly controversial heartland model⁹ — while contradicting this 1904 model, which places the heart of the world in continental Siberia.

More specifically, several analyses in the American press highlight security issues related to the development of the Northern Sea Route along the Siberian coast and Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic.

⁸ Forgetting in doing so that Alaska is already neighboring Russia, the American island of Little Diomedé is only 3 km away from the Russian Big Diomedé in the Bering Strait.

⁹ With his famous maxim "Who controls the Heartland... controls the world," H. Mackinder became a renowned theorist of materialist geopolitics; however, his ideas, directly inspired by the Russo-British rivalry of the time, are not based on any credible evidence. See Lasserre, F. (2020). Mackinder, la Chine et les nouvelles routes de la soie. Un modèle adapté? *Regards géopolitiques* 6(3), 12-23, <https://cqegehiulaval.com/mackinder-la-chine-et-les-nouvelles-routes-de-la-soie-un-modele-adapte/>

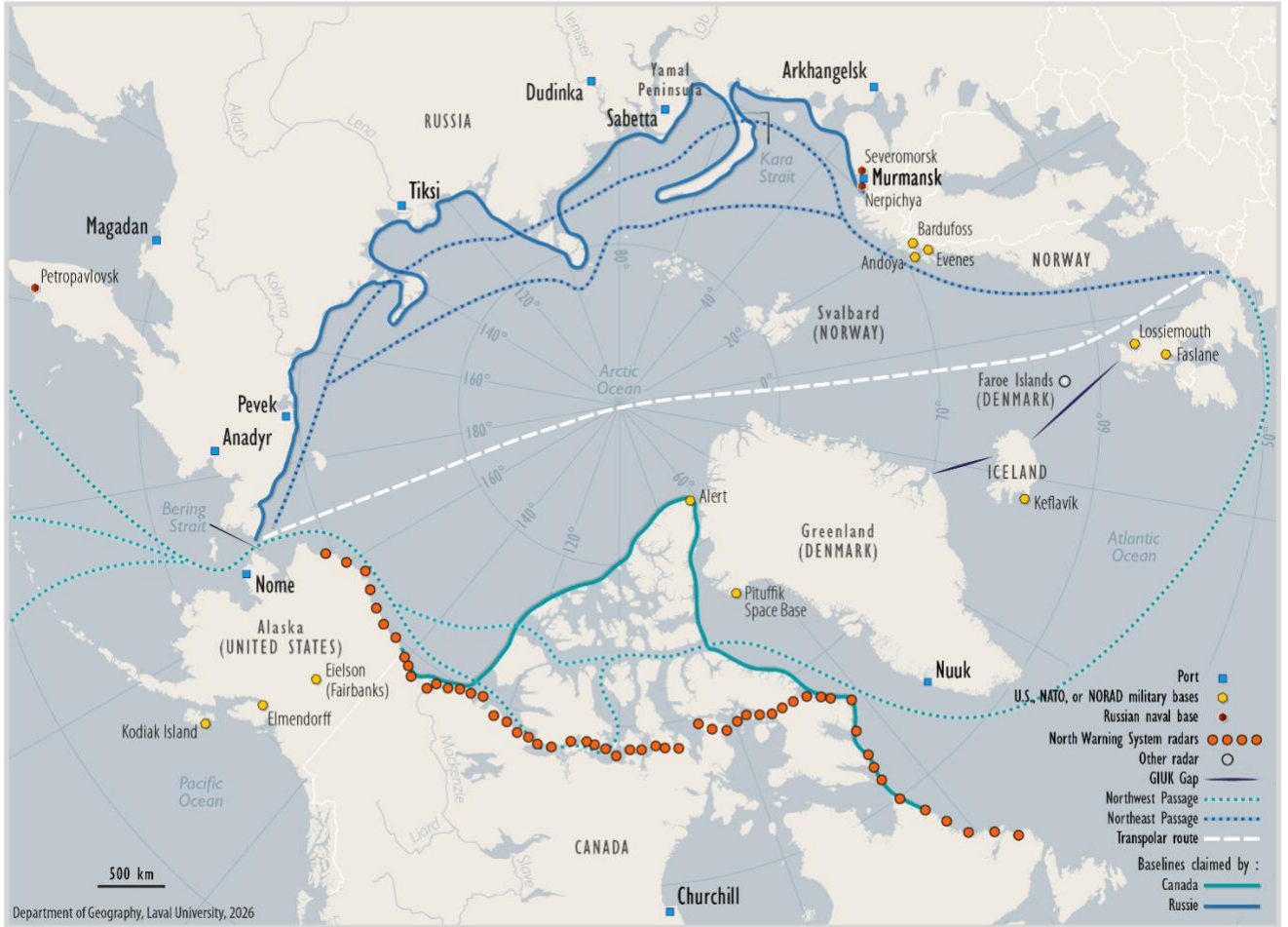


Fig. 1. Greenland in its military and security environment

Source: F. Lasserre

[the map pictures the location of Greenland in its Arctic environment, closed to the North American North Warning System line across Alaska and Canada]

V.2.1.1. Maritime routes and China-Russia maritime cooperation

With this in mind, the United States and its allies would have every interest in ensuring that these Arctic maritime routes do not fall under the control of Russia or China (Pechko, 2025). “Do we want the Arctic Ocean to become another South China Sea, marked by militarization and competing territorial claims?” asked Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Rovaniemi, Finland, on May 6, 2019 (Hounshell, 2019; The Guardian, 2019). From this perspective, the purchase of Greenland would help the United States to better secure these new strategic passageways. This analysis is flawed for several reasons. First, competing claims to extended continental shelves are certainly rivalrous—this is already the case and

includes the US claim—but they coexist peacefully because the Arctic states have never challenged their neighbors' claims, even though they could have done so. It is as if, despite the differences and tensions between Russia and the West, there is a desire to preserve the potential for negotiation to settle these competing claims when the political moment is right (Lasserre, Choquet, Escudé, 2025).

Furthermore, the Siberian Northern Sea Route (NSR) is already de facto under Moscow's control; Russia is not seeking to develop transport activities on the Northwest Passage (NWP) side, and the few Chinese companies that sail in the Arctic do so along the NSR, not the NWP (Baudu and Lasserre, 2025a, 2025b). Greenland is not close to the Siberian coast; a quick glance at a polar projection map shows that it is actually an Arctic landmass far away from Siberia. The northern tip of Greenland is 1,800 km from Murmansk or the Taimyr Peninsula, the shortest distance to any point in the Russian Arctic, while Alaska is very close to Eastern Siberia: it is difficult to see how sovereign control of Greenland would prevent China and Russia from continuing to develop commercial shipping along the NSR, given that they have no intention of doing so in the NWP. Greenlandic ports do exist and they enable local traffic for the fishing industry and local resupply and trade, but they cannot be converted into regional hubs to boost trade along the NWP (see fig. 2). Furthermore, commercial transit traffic through the NSR remains very limited, with only 97 transits in 2024, mainly Russian ships and including only 14 voyages by Chinese ships (Baudu and Lasserre, 2024; CHNL, 2024, 2024b). For the record, transit through the Suez Canal was 26,434 ships in 2023 (before the Houthi crisis) and 14,080 through Panama.



Fig. 2. The port of Aasiat in Greenland. A bustling local port, but not an Arctic hub.

Source: F. Lasserre

[the picture shows a cargo vessel docked at the port of Aasiat in Greenland. The assets support local trade and the fishing industry, but are too small to represent a strategic asset with a view to developing Arctic transit commercial shipping.]

Finally, while there has been no particular Russian or Chinese maritime activity near the Greenland coast, there have been Chinese and Sino-Russian exercises in the Bering Sea in 2022 and 2024 respectively, while joint coast guard patrols have taken place in the eastern RMN, i.e., in the Pacific approaches to the Arctic (CSIS, 2025; Edvardsen and Hansen, 2024; Schreiber, 2022). To better control the possible entry of Chinese military vessels into the Arctic, a possibility since the acceleration of Sino-Russian political rapprochement since 2022 and the development of cooperation between the Chinese and Russian navies and coast guards in the Arctic (Nilsen, 2023), bolstering military assets in Alaska and near the Bering Strait makes much more sense for the United States, as this is undoubtedly the point of passage that Chinese vessels would seek to use. Several US military bases in Alaska already monitor access to the strait, which acts as a gateway from the Arctic Ocean to the Pacific.

V.2.2. The prospect of confrontation with Russia?

The US nuclear deterrent continues to weigh heavily on Russia, just as the threat of US nuclear deterrence weighs heavily on Russia. In the context of the rapprochement between China and Russia that has been taking place for several years, it is possible that this prospect of a threat from Russian ballistic missiles has been perceived more strongly in Washington. But it was precisely to ensure early detection of the arrival of these missiles that the Distant Early Warning (DEW Line) radar network, transformed into the North Warning System in the 1990s, was built in northern Canada, with the Thule base, which became Pituffik in 2023, as an important advanced listening and detection site. On January 13, 2026, for the first time, Donald Trump mentioned a link between control of Greenland and the implementation of the Golden Dome (Trump, 2026c), a major umbrella project designed to protect US territory from any ballistic missile attack.

However, it is unclear how American sovereignty over Greenland would actually change US surveillance capabilities in the face of the Russian ballistic threat, whether in terms of early detection or the implementation of the Golden Dome, a project still in its infancy, with enormous costs and whose feasibility is doubted by several analysts (Bellais, 2025). The United States already has a very large military base in northwestern Greenland, the Thule Air Base (renamed Pituffik in 2023), which the Greenlandic government has not challenged, either now or with a view to independence. The 1951 treaty on military cooperation between the United States and Denmark, renewed in 2004, expressly provides for the possibility for Washington to request the opening of other bases in order to reinforce NATO or NORAD¹⁰ military assets in Greenland. As for the Chinese ballistic threat, the map clearly shows that Greenland is of no use in monitoring it, as missiles from China or Chinese submarines stationed in the Pacific do not fly over the Arctic.

Could it be that American concerns are focused on the naval sector? Passive sonars along the GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom) line were installed during the Cold War specifically to monitor the infiltration of Soviet nuclear submarines into the North Atlantic from their stronghold in Severomorsk near the Barents Sea through these critical thresholds, which had long been mandatory passage points. but they have been gradually dismantled since the end of the Cold War. However, they have been replaced by mobile SURTASS (Surveillance Towed Array Sensor System) systems towed by specialized ships that can patrol the passageways between Greenland, Iceland, and Scotland. In addition, the Russian fleet has seen its numbers dwindle since the fall of the USSR in 1991, from 65 nuclear attack submarines (SSN) to 16 in 2024, and from 60 nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) to 14 in 2024. The Russian Arctic fleet is now a shadow of its former self in 1991.

¹⁰ NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) is the American-Canadian military organization responsible for the monitoring and defense of North America's air and maritime space against threats, particularly aerospace threats.

However, after a period of rapid decline in the size of the Russian fleet, in recent years Russia has made a sustained effort to restore a credible naval force, including its submarine force. The Yasen-class SSNs and Borei-class SSBNs are now being launched on a regular basis to renew this force with modern and discreet units. With the increased range of submarine-launched ballistic missiles, SSBNs have not needed to cross the GIUK gap for several years to provide deterrence; they simply need to hide in the Barents Sea. What is new is the development of conventional strike capabilities using Kalibr cruise missiles with a range of 2,200 km, fired from ASNs or submarines designed as conventional missile launchers (SSGNs). Thus, in order to threaten the deployment of reinforcements from the United States and Europe in the event of a major conflict between NATO and Russia, SSNs no longer need to track convoys. They could simply anchor north of GIUK and fire their missiles at the convoys, or even just at the ports where these convoys would dock, thus considerably complicating the delivery of these reinforcements (Strategic Comments, 2019; Metrick, 2019; Childs, 2022).

It is also in this context of NATO's search for a response to these changes in the Russian threat to NATO logistics in the event of war, a search that began in 2019 (Pincus, 2020). This explains the reopening of the Keflavik naval air base in Iceland, which was closed in 2006 and reopened in 2019, and the reopening of the Evenes base in Norway, which was closed in 1995 and reopened in 2020. and the deployment of P-8 Poseidon anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft to the bases at Keflavik, Lossiemouth in Scotland in 2022, and Evenes in Norway in 2025.

Finally, the emergence of a threat to submarine cables, which increasingly form the backbone of the internet and telecommunications networks on which our economies and societies have become highly dependent, and with several Arctic cable projects on the horizon (Middleton and Bønning, 2025), reinforces the relevance of increased surveillance of Russian submersible movements in the far north of the Atlantic, at the junction with the Arctic Ocean (Aguilar, 2025).

This adaptation of NATO's naval strategy in the North Atlantic and the approaches to Russia's Barents Sea stronghold is therefore not new. Indeed, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act¹¹ of 2020, Congress asked the armed forces and the maritime administration to find a new strategic port in the Arctic in order to expand the intervention capabilities of US forces. While several sites in Greenland may be viable options (Larter, 2020), acquiring and building them could be done without necessarily bringing Greenland under US sovereignty under the 1951 treaty. This issue of adapting NATO's naval strategy in the face of Russia's underwater threat may seem like the most credible argument and has

¹¹ Law allowing the annual funding of the American defense.

been discussed in the literature for several years, yet it has never been mentioned by the Trump administration.

Finally, on January 16, for the first time, White House Deputy Director Stephen Miller spoke of the need to control shipping around Greenland. He was not referring to the fallacious intense military activity of Russian and Chinese vessels near Greenland, but to the issue of “the ability to control shipping movements and traffic routes in the polar and Arctic regions (sic)” (Miller, 2026, 1:45). This argument is new and does not take into account the fact that transit shipping is very low in the Canadian Arctic and much more developed on the Russian side. The highly fluid, eclectic, and imprecise nature of the elements that would justify the idea that Greenland is fundamental to U.S. security does not speak well for its credibility.

While Trump cites the need to strengthen military security, it is difficult to see how an American Greenland would substantially enhance this security in a significantly more effective way than the levers already in place under the 1951 treaty. Furthermore, security in Greenlandic waters does not appear to be threatened either by the Russian or Chinese military fleets, or by the still embryonic maritime traffic along the Northern Sea Route. Finally, while security issues played an important role in the US desire to retain Greenland in 1946, in the context of the Cold War, before returning to the forefront in the arguments presented by successive Trump administrations in 2019 and then in 2025, this recurrence of security fears, which led Trump to speak of “absolute necessity,” was not reflected in the definition of the Arctic strategies of 2022 and 2024 (White House, 2022; Department of Defense, 2024), which were drafted by the Biden administration, where Greenland is mentioned very little (twice in 2022 and three times in 2024) and certainly not from the perspective of security urgency. In other words, although previous Democratic and Republican administrations had already developed concerns about China's presence in the Arctic and about adapting to the qualitative change in the Russian underwater threat in the North Atlantic, these fears did not translate into a bipartisan desire to exercise greater control over Greenland.

V.2.3. Danish defense efforts

President Trump and his Vice President Vance regularly accuse Copenhagen of neglecting defense efforts, which would expose the island territory to Chinese and Russian aggression, as J.D. Vance mentioned in March 2025. Trump himself claimed that Danish defense in Greenland amounted to “two dog sleds” (Trump, 2026b: 9:20). Beyond considerations of the disinvestment of many European states in a post-Cold War context, a trend that is no longer relevant given Washington's pressure on its allies to increase their military efforts and in the context of uncertainty about Russia's medium-term posture, it is inaccurate to claim that Denmark has made no effort to defend the territory. Under American pressure, two major reinvestment plans were decided in Copenhagen in 2021 (14.6 billion kroner, or

\$2.28 billion) and then in 2024 (27.4 billion kroner, or \$4.29 billion) to bolster Danish defense forces in Greenland. In addition, Copenhagen announced the purchase of 16 additional F-35s, bringing the total to 43, and long-range cruise missiles (Defense News, 2025).

Table 2. Danish investments announced for the defense of Greenland, 2025

January 2025	
Land	
Special forces	Strengthening of Arctic Special Forces
Naval	
Arctic patrol vessel	Purchase of three patrol vessels
Radars	Installation of two coastal radars
Air	
Drones	Purchase of two long-range air surveillance drones
Satellites	Development of a satellite surveillance capacity
October 2025	
Commandment	New headquarters in Nuuk
Land	
Special forces	Creation of an Arctic special force unit
Personnel	Increased efforts in hiring
Rangers	Creation of a new patrol unit with the Rangers of Greenland (inuit militia as in Canada)
Naval	
Arctic patrol vessel	Purchase of two patrol vessels
Icebreaker	Purchase of an icebreaker
Telecommunication	Development of the cable network between Greenland, Faeroe Islands and Denmark d
Port of Nuuk	Construction of an additional dock
Air	
Radar	Development of radar coverage in East Greenland
Drones	Purchase of surveillance drones
Air base	Development of the infrastructure of Kangerlussuaq Airport (dual civil and military use)

Source : Danish Ministry of Defense (2025a). First agreement on the Arctic and North Atlantic Under the 2024-2033 Defence Agreement, Copenhagen, January, <https://www.fmn.dk/globalassets/fmn/dokumenter/-fact-sheet-first-agreement-on-the-arctic-and-north-atlantic-.pdf> et (2025b). Second Agreement on the Arctic and North Atlantic Under the 2024-2033 Defence Agreement, Copenhagen, October,



Fig. 3. HMDS Rodal Danish Navy Arctic patrol vessel Knud Rasmussen in Ilulissat, 2008.

Source: F. Lasserre

[the picture shows the Arctic patrol vessel Knud Rasmussen from the Danish Royal Navy, anchored in the port of Ilulissat in Greenland. There were Danish military assets in Greenland.]

V.2.4. And in the event of independence?

The only shadow cast over American security concerns the political orientation of a likely independent Greenland in the medium term. In 2006, the ambassador to Denmark highlighted the risk that an independent Greenland might distance itself from the West, in which case "the United States would have as the host nation for Thule [the name of the Pituffik base at the time] a country inclined to sympathize with the positions of the non-aligned movement, rather than one of our closest NATO allies " (U.S. Embassy in Copenhagen, 2006). However, although the territorial government, offended at not having been invited to the discussions between American and Danish representatives in 2019, stated that it would not necessarily accept Denmark's decision to increase the Danish or

American military presence in Greenland (Jacobsen and Olsvig, 2024), successive Greenlandic autonomous governments have not raised the possibility of revoking the 1951 treaty in the event of independence, and the two-stage re-equipment program announced by Copenhagen in 2025 has not been contested. In the short term, they would like to be more involved in discussions on military issues (Reuters, 2025), even though, under the 2009 autonomy agreement, defense remains a prerogative of Denmark.



Fig. 4. The Greenlandic village of Ilulissat, 2008.

Source: F. Lasserre

[The picture shows the Greenlandic village of Ilulissat with a fishing vessel in the foreground. Fishing is a major activity in Greenland.]

V.3. More personal issues?

The Trump administration has struggled to justify the threat to the United States that could be countered by the annexation of Greenland. The rapid disappearance, after February 2026, of US pressure on Greenland and Denmark also points to a highly opportunistic political campaign, which has been justified through strategic pretexts and the concept of national security, often used by the Trump administration to justify many of its positions.

Statements by the president himself suggest another motive: the president's own desire. In an interview with *New York Times* journalists, Mr. Trump emphasized the great importance he attaches to a title of ownership – he used to be a real estate professional after all. When David Sanger reminded him of the broad latitude in defense matters offered by the 1951 treaty and expressed surprise that Washington was not content to invoke it to bolster its defense capabilities, the president emphasized the importance, in his view and from a psychological standpoint, of formal title to the property, without justifying this need on legal grounds and pointing out that “so far, I've always been right about everything.”.

President Trump - Because I want to do it properly.

David E. Sanger - And properly means own it?

President Trump - Really it is, to me, it's ownership. Ownership is very important.

David E. Sanger - Why is ownership important here?

President Trump - Because that's what I feel is psychologically needed for success. I think that ownership gives you a thing that you can't do, whether you're talking about a lease or a treaty. Ownership gives you things and elements that you can't get from just signing a document, that you can have a base.

Katie Rogers - Psychologically important to you or to the United States?

President Trump - Psychologically important for me. Now, maybe another president would feel differently, but so far I've been right about everything (*New York Times*, 2026).

VI. The fear of China's shadow

If there is any fear of China, it is more in the area of political influence via economic channels that it could exert, either on an autonomous Greenlandic government eager to increase its number of partners, or on a government that has become independent but is potentially weak. As early as 2006, the US ambassador to Denmark emphasized that “China is expressing growing interest in Greenland's potential energy resources” (US Embassy in Copenhagen, 2006). In 2007, the Ambassador also reiterated the importance of strengthening ties with the Greenlandic government to counter the Chinese, who “have shown a growing interest in Greenland's natural resources” (US Embassy in Copenhagen, 2007).

While China's efforts in Greenland are primarily economic, they have focused on projects with potential dual uses, such as a former naval base, airports, and strategic minerals, fueling fears, whether founded or not, in Washington (Pincus and Berbrick, 2018).

In the mining sector, as we have seen, the involvement of Chinese companies is limited. General Nice's operating license for the Isua iron deposit was revoked in 2021 due to inactivity, Jiangxi Zhongrun Mining abandoned its Wegener Halvø copper mine project, China Nonferrous Metal Mining Group was excluded from the Citronen zinc mine project, and Shenghe Holding Co. holds only 7% of the capital of Energy Resources Transition Minerals in the Kvanefjeld rare earth project, which has been blocked by the Greenlandic government. However, this argument of the fear of developing Chinese interests in the mining sector are recurrent. In an analysis of the American interest for Greenland, Auerswald (2024) mentions it could be to prevent China from developing mining projects on the island. However, the analysis never hinted Greenland was considered strategic in Washington, and the whole book where the chapter was published (Strauss and Wegge, 2024) barely mentions Greenland, except to mention it harbors the Thule/Pituffik Air Base.

Chinese companies have also shown interest in the infrastructure sector. In 2016, controversy erupted when it was alleged that the then Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, had intervened to block the purchase of the former Danish naval base at Grønnedal by the Chinese mining company General Nice, which at the time held the mining rights to the Isua iron deposit (Breum, 2016). Several analysts believe that Rasmussen acted under pressure from the US (Andersson and Zeuthen, 2024). In 2018, several Chinese state-owned companies had expressed interest, in a completely legal manner, in tenders for the modernization and construction of airports and a scientific station in Greenland. The China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) was selected as one of the finalists by the Greenlandic authorities, before controversy arose over the vulnerabilities that such a contract awarded to Chinese companies would represent. As China had announced its plan to develop the “Polar Silk Roads” in 2017 and then published its Arctic Strategy in 2018, Washington, already concerned about Chinese projects in the Arctic and Greenland in particular, probably saw this as further evidence of the need to counter Chinese projects (Andersson and Zeuthen, 2024).

American and Danish concerns then led the Danish government to intervene in the process, which was under Greenlandic jurisdiction. In exchange for 700 million Danish kroner (\$109 million), Greenland would allow Denmark to take a 33% stake in Kalaallit Airports, the public company created to renovate, own, and operate airports in three locations: the capital Nuuk, the tourist destination of Ilulissat, and Qaqortoq, where new facilities would be built (Bennett, 2018). Without officially excluding CCCC, Copenhagen undoubtedly put indirect pressure on Kalaallit Airports, which CCCC understood well when it decided to withdraw from the market in June 2019 (Breum, 2018; Arctic Today/Reuters, 2019).

A major concern then — and still now? — on the part of the Trump administration would be to prevent China's influence from growing in Greenland, a concern that, as we have seen, emerged as early as the Bush presidency in 2006. The aim would be to prevent China from

acquiring strategic mineral deposits or developing significant economic and, it is feared, political influence in a territory that may be on the road to independence, according to the criteria defined in the 2009 agreement with Copenhagen (Government of Denmark, 2009), but which would be highly vulnerable financially.

In 2009, Denmark and Greenland signed an agreement in which Copenhagen recognized the legitimacy of Greenland's possible independence, if this desire was sanctioned by referendum. In 2023, Danish financial transfers (approximately US\$660 million) accounted for 58% of Greenland's budget: the territory therefore remains heavily dependent on Denmark economically and financially. Although not explicitly stated in the 2009 agreement, the idea that Greenland cannot become independent without first achieving financial autonomy is widely held among the Greenlandic public and political circles (Bjerregaard, 2017).

The island's pro-independence government had announced a probable referendum on independence for 2025 (Starcevic, 2025); the current situation has clearly led it to postpone this consultation. Greenland has certainly encouraged Chinese investment in the island, not because of any pro-Chinese bias, but because it saw it as a lever to support the territory's economic development, which is a prerequisite for achieving independence based on economic and financial capacity (Paul, 2021; Landriault et al, 2022; Jakobsen, 2024). An independent Greenland with a population of 57,000, potentially weak economically, would be a tempting prey for China in Washington's eyes. However, these are political fiction scenarios, given that, in addition, the best way to counter Chinese influence would be precisely to support an independent Greenland politically and economically, as the US State Department seemed to want to do with a cooperation protocol signed in 2019 for the development of Greenland's mineral resources (Government of Greenland, 2019), a protocol that appears to have come to nothing to date.

VII. What is Greenland's reaction?

Under the 2009 agreement granting extensive autonomy, Denmark retained jurisdiction over foreign policy on behalf of Greenland and the Faroe Islands, as well as currency and defense. The Greenlandic government, which has been pro-independence since the 2021 elections, is not happy about being controlled by Denmark in the conduct of international diplomacy, including in forums such as the Nordic Council and the Arctic Council, where Greenlandic representatives participate with Denmark as co-partners, or junior partners according to Greenland.

This is why, according to Argetsinger (2025), some political leaders in Greenland see Donald Trump's demands as an opportunity to capitalize on Washington's interest in acquiring Greenland to accelerate its move toward independence. Although the issue of independence is very much present in domestic political debate, very little attention is paid

to the material consequences of what it would entail, or even to whether such a move would have positive effects on the lives of Greenlanders in areas such as health, education, and living conditions (Argetsinger, 2025). In fact, the associated state formula is attracting some interest among part of the pro-independence electorate.

“Free association” appears to be the legal and political option favored by some Greenlandic leaders to achieve independence, as this model would allow small nations to enjoy sovereign statehood without being slowed down by the need to develop a strong economy or immediately assume responsibility for complex areas of jurisdiction that exceed their capabilities. The Government of Greenland currently depends on Danish transfers to administer services within its jurisdiction and does not assume responsibility for defense or border protection (Argetsinger, 2025).

This idea, proposed in October 2024 by three conservative American authors, extols the merits of this status in an attempt to convince public opinion and the Greenlandic government (Arha, Gray, and Dans, 2024). Of the five associated states—all small Pacific island states—three are associated with the United States through free association agreements. Two others, the Cook Islands and Niue, are freely associated with New Zealand. The US agreements allow the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Micronesia to benefit from the status of states recognized by the international community. They receive transfers of funds from the United States. For the most zealous independence activists, this formula would allow them to quickly achieve a form of formal independence, without having to worry about the financial viability of the territory, through this status of free association, which closely resembles that of a “discreet protectorate” (Argetsinger, 2025). But would this suit the Greenlanders as well as the Trump administration? Greenland's current high degree of autonomy allows it to choose its economic partners, including Chinese companies if such agreements are deemed appropriate. As this is precisely one of the elements that Washington finds disagreeable, would President Trump agree to maintain such extensive economic autonomy for Greenland? Would he agree to transfer so much money to the Greenlandic budget without controlling spending? (Lasserre, 2025).

Statements by Greenlandic Prime Minister Mute Egede underscore a strong commitment to complete independence: “Greenland belongs to us. We are not for sale and never will be. We must not lose our long fight for freedom” (quoted by Reuters, 2024); “Greenlanders do not want to be Danes. Greenlanders do not want to be Americans” added Mute Egede (quoted by Ewing, 2025). Succeeding him as Prime Minister following the March 2025 legislative elections, Jens-Frederik Nielsen stated on January 5 that “the situation is not such that the United States can conquer Greenland. That is not the case. So we must not panic. We must restore the good cooperation we have had.” However, he emphasized that his government would “now take a tougher stance, because we are not satisfied with the situation we find ourselves in.” (Le Devoir, 2026). While the Greenlandic government

perceived the repeated American requests as “neo-colonial provocation,” the short-term media attention the territory is receiving offers Nuuk the opportunity to negotiate a more important political role, including in the areas of military cooperation and foreign affairs, which are theoretically under Copenhagen's jurisdiction (Jacobsen and Olsvig, 2024, 135).

The leaders of Greenland's five main political parties—the opposition party and the four parties in the governing coalition—have reaffirmed their refusal to move forward with the option of a U.S. purchase. “We don't want to be American, we don't want to be Danish, we want to be Greenlandic” (Le Monde, 2026; PBS, 2026), they jointly emphasized, expressing their rejection of the Trump administration's proposal. The political parties seem to be in tune with public opinion: a January 2025 poll suggested that the option of the United States buying Greenland was rejected by 85% of respondents (Bryant, M., 2025).

Economically speaking, the Greenlandic government hopes that once the crisis is over, the island's notoriety could contribute to increased investor interest. Already during the Trump administration's first term, the expression of interest in acquiring Greenland had triggered a wave of cooperation between the Arctic territory and the US State Department in the mining sector (Ivanova and Milne, 2026). In 2025, Minister of Mineral Resources Naaja Nathanielsen hoped that similar enthusiasm would materialize and lead to concrete projects, which remain few and far between to date, provided that the president's rhetoric is not too harsh...

Furthermore, from a legal standpoint, it is unclear whether Denmark can bow to US pressure to sell Greenland. Under the 2009 autonomy agreement, Denmark recognized the principle of self-determination for the Greenlandic people (Government of Denmark, 2009), which precludes the legitimacy of a transaction on Greenland between States without the consent of its population (Tsiouvalas, 2026). A change in sovereignty over the territory could therefore only be valid with the agreement of the Greenlandic government and population.

President Trump's next steps regarding this plan to annex Greenland remain unknown. It remains to be seen whether the opinion of the Greenlandic population will be a relevant factor in Washington's eyes, as self-determination was a political principle dear to the founding fathers of American independence.

VIII. Potential consequences on relations between Western States

The sharp hardening of the US position on its desire to annex Greenland, the rhetoric brandished by Donald Trump and other members of his administration about resorting to punitive tariffs, or even force, to seize the coveted territory, has sent shockwaves through European governments and Canada. Accustomed to a relationship sometimes marked by

disagreements but always characterized by a shared understanding of the rule of law and the importance of treating partners with respect, they are now discovering with dismay that the fundamental paradigms of the Trump administration's policy have changed radically.

European states are struggling to grasp the shift in tone in discussions about Greenland. Invoking the law and respect for sovereignty does not seem to be affecting the Trump administration's determination. Seven European countries (Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Finland) have decided to send military detachments to Greenland in January 2026, officially to participate in exercises with Danish forces as part of NATO; Implicitly, and no one is fooled, this is about presenting a united front and complicating any attempt to take control by force: this would require US troops to contend not only with the presence of Danish forces, but also with many of their European allies. It is a symbolic gesture, but one that illustrates the change in attitude among Europeans, with Canada considering joining them. This gesture is embarrassing and irritating to Washington: on January 16, Donald Trump announced that he would impose tariffs on these countries starting February 1 if they continued to oppose the acquisition of Greenland by the United States (La Presse, 2026), in a move that smacks of deliberate intimidation.

At no point did Washington mention the relevance of seeking the opinion of Greenlanders regarding their future. Similarly, Stephen Miller, Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy, clearly outlined the parameters that now guide US foreign policy—his January 6 interview on CNN has not been denied. (Miller, 2026b). After refusing to rule out the military option, Miller reiterated that it was obvious that the United States should acquire Greenland: “The United States should incorporate Greenland into its territory” (11:14) and “No one is going to fight the United States over Greenland” (11:27). Miller questioned the legitimacy of Danish sovereignty over Greenland: “What right does Denmark have to control Greenland?” (10:31), even though this sovereignty was recognized by the Permanent Court of International Justice in 1933¹². Above all, Miller challenges the primacy of international law in relations between states. He states that the United States is “a superpower, and under Donald Trump's presidency, we are going to act like one” (12:33); he goes on to say that “You can talk all you want about international niceties. We live in a world governed by force, by power, by might” (5:46) (Miller, 2026b).

Western countries find themselves powerless in the face of this paradigm shift, this change in the values of their American ally. In the event of an attack on Greenland, Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, the pillar of the Alliance as the embodiment of mutual assistance, would be useless. In theory, a country under attack can ask the others to come to its aid. But the allies must agree on the measures to be taken. The United States would oppose this. “NATO has

¹² Norway contested Danish sovereignty over East Greenland in 1931. The Court ruled in favor of Denmark on April 5, 1933..

never been able to resolve the dispute between Turkey and Greece over Cyprus, so it will be powerless between the United States and Denmark,” says a European source (quoted by Hivert, 2026b). The diplomatic card has failed, the public opinion card does not seem to have any influence on D. Trump, nor does the Western solidarity card. Washington's partners are trying to reassure themselves by pointing to the considerable political cost of annexation for Washington: a profound erosion of trust between states and the implosion of NATO. It is not certain that these consequences will weigh heavily in Washington's political calculations, as evidenced by the National Security Strategy, which presents Europe as declining, of little value, and potentially a competitor to the United States (White House, 2025).

On January 20, at the Davos summit, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney drew the ire of President Trump with a speech on the need for middle powers to unite in the face of pressure from larger powers (CBC News, 2026). But after indicating that he would not resort to force, on January 21, at the same Davos summit, Mr. Trump said that ongoing discussions had eliminated the need to resort to economic tariffs (Chambers and Mayes-Osterman, 2026).

Even in the United States, strong opposition, including among Republicans, has emerged against the president's policy. A YouGov poll found that only 8% of Americans supported an invasion of Greenland, while 73% opposed it (Hayes, 2026). Trump's actions have sparked strong bipartisan opposition in Congress, with Republican House Majority Leader Mike Johnson calling President Trump's threats "totally inappropriate " (O'Brien et al, 2026) and a bipartisan congressional delegation traveling to Copenhagen to support relations between Denmark and the United States (Kim, 2026).

Finally, in an effort to address the military security argument, NATO has organized new maneuvers in the Arctic: Operation Arctic Sentry, launched on February 11, 2026, aims to strengthen NATO's presence in the region by intensifying intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities, while improving coordination among allied forces. This is not a time-bound exercise, but rather an initiative designed to increase the level of coordination (NATO, 2026). Besides, US Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot declared in March 2026 the US military is considering expanding numerous capabilities: space systems to enable the proposed Golden Dome missile defense system; expanded air capacities to launch fighters to be “the first line of defense” against cruise; and ports for special operations forces and the Navy (Shkolnikova, 2026). From this perspective, these developments could well be a political response to the White House's stated concerns about military security in the Arctic. It remains to be seen whether this approach will allay the fears raised by the US administration.

Conclusion

It would be tempting to dismiss the Trump administration's insistence on acquiring Greenland by describing it as a personal whim. Motives related to his ego may certainly play a role; the possibility of going down in history as the president who significantly expanded U.S. territory at the beginning of the 21st century is undoubtedly very tempting. However, it would be wrong to stop there. The idea of acquiring Greenland does not date back to 2019 and was not conceived by Donald Trump. On several occasions from 1868 on, the U.S. Government initiated efforts to persuade Copenhagen to cede the territory to it, often for reasons linked to the American perception of the need to strengthen its military security.

However, it remains difficult to assess the motivations that led the Trump administration to revive this idea, first in 2019 and then forcefully again from 2025 onward, especially since the Department of Defense strategy documents of 2013 and 2022, as well as those of the White House from 2009, 2013, 2022, and 2024, made absolutely no mention of the relevance of acquiring Greenland. Analysts sometimes invoke arguments related to natural resources or the Chinese presence, but these arguments do not withstand close scrutiny. Should we conclude that these are merely pretexts, or that the analytical effort of the president's team of advisers remains only at the surface of the issue?

Nevertheless, the pressure exerted by the U.S. government has become very significant. Washington is brandishing the threat of armed intervention, while the government openly assumes that it is willing to use, without restraint, all the means at its disposal to achieve its objectives, in a world governed not by law but by force, in its own words. The capture of Venezuelan president Maduro in January 2025 and the desire to regulate the exploitation of the country's oil wealth constitute another illustration of this. In this context, European states find themselves largely powerless and divided when it comes to forming a common front in response to the brutal shift in the paradigm of transatlantic relations.

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