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SOVEREIGNTY OF GREENLAND, GEOPOLITICS IN ARCTIC SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

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Abstract

President Donald Trump's renewed push to acquire Greenland is now framed not as a novelty or negotiating stunt, but as a foreign policy and national security imperative. Administration officials argue that Greenland's Arctic location, proximity to emerging shipping lanes, and potential role in countering Russian and Chinese influence make US control strategically essential. The Greenland episode may teach him differently. While Denmark is no match for the US in military terms, it does hold good title to the island, along with the right to self-determination of the local population. In this instance, International Law does play an important strategic role, balancing the relative power of both sides. The united and strong European response to US threats against Denmark – a brand leader in compliance with International Law along with other Nordic states – offers an indication that others remain committed to the international rule of law and will, eventually, be willing to speak up in favour of an international system governed by rules and principles that by and large yield stability and security for all, whether weak or strong.

Keywords: International Law, Sovereignty, Jurisdiction, National Security, Alliance

Introduction

Greenland is a self-governing Arctic island within the Kingdom of Denmark, which strives for economic self-sufficiency and future independence. In the context of a – literally and figuratively – heating Arctic, this representative democracy of 56 542 inhabitants is a focus of geopolitical competition and growing confrontation between major powers – the United States (US), Russia and China. The island has high strategic importance, due to its proximity to the emerging Arctic shipping routes, its strategic location in relation to security and defence activities, and its vast

untapped natural resources, including mineral reserves.

Despite its small population of 56 542 people, limited infrastructure and harsh climate, this self-governing territory within the Kingdom of Denmark has become a focal point in the Arctic contest between global powers Russia, China and the US. While it is not the only reason, climate change (responsible for the region's ice receding at an unprecedented speed), is a factor contributing to rendering Greenland, and the Arctic as a whole, more strategically important. Melting ice is rapidly opening previously inaccessible trade routes; making extraction of abundant natural resources easier

and less costly; affecting local fauna and marine life; and redrawing the map, making areas more accessible to human activity – including those pertaining to security and defence.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, geopolitical tensions in the Arctic have increased. On the one hand, Russia's aggression was a catalyst for two Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden, to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), enhancing its northern dimension. On the other hand, Russia's intensifying hybrid threats, military build-up and strengthened cooperation with China in the north have raised concerns and triggered calls for action among the remaining seven Arctic States and beyond. Moreover, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine resulted in the halting of most cooperation in the Arctic, reducing the channels for communication and further amplifying tensions. As a result, the Arctic, which was once known for attempted 'low tension' science and research cooperation efforts, is now the arena of fierce competition and mistrust, with Greenland at the centre.

According to its foreign policy strategy, Greenland is open to enhanced cooperation and dialogue with partners, including the US. Indeed, the US has been an important ally of Greenland and security guarantor since 1951. Relations have strengthened and widened during the last two decades, with cooperation now encompassing not only security, but also environment, science, health, technology, trade, tourism, education, and culture. However, US President Donald Trump's rhetoric on acquiring Greenland has shocked Greenlanders, Danes and Europeans alike.

Upon the island's withdrawal from the European Economic Community (EEC, now European Union) in 1985, Greenland became an Overseas Country and Territory, associated through Denmark. The main areas of cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Greenland are fisheries, education, and, lately, green growth. The EU has stepped up its

engagement with Greenland by opening an office in Nuuk in March 2024 and signing a Memorandum of Understanding for a strategic partnership to develop sustainable raw materials value chains in November 2023.

Greenland's economy is based mainly on fishing, with exports accounting for 85% of economic activity, and hunting. However, its main source of income is the economic contribution of the Danish government, which accounts for more than half of total income and employs more than 10,000 people in a labor market of just over 25,000 workers. As for mineral resources, according to the 2023 report of the Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland, moderate to high deposits of the 38 minerals listed as essential by the European Commission exist in the non-ice covered lands (400,000 km²). However, these resources are currently only at prospecting stage.

The United States Air Force has, since 1941, its northernmost military base at Thule (1,524 km south of the North Pole), today called Pituffik Space Base. Presently, among other facilities and forces, it houses the early warning system for intercontinental ballistic missiles that could be launched against the USA and 2,600 flights are carried out annually, which gives an idea of the geostrategic importance of the island for the USA.

In 1968, a U.S. B-52 carrying four hydrogen nuclear bombs crashed in the waters near the base, causing one of the worst radioactive contamination disasters in history. From a security and defense standpoint, it should be noted that Greenland has a small contingent of defense forces, consisting mainly of Danish military personnel, 150 persons from the 1st Squadron of the Royal Danish Navy that focuses mainly on domestic operations in and around the Faroe Islands and Greenland. In addition, Denmark has increased defense spending for Greenland in response to growing tensions in the Arctic and the Russian military presence.

A Snapshot of Greenland's History

Thule people – ancestors of modern Greenlandic Inuits (who account for 88 % of Greenland's population today) – settled on the island in around the 12th century. In 1721, Danish-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede started a settlement near what is now Greenland's capital, Nuuk. In 1776, Denmark established sovereignty over Greenland, assuming a monopoly of trade and restricting foreign access to the island. It was not until the aftermath of the Second World War that, in 1953, Denmark ended Greenland's colonial status, incorporating the island as a county (an integral part of the Danish Kingdom) and granting Greenlanders Danish citizenship. In Denmark's 1972 referendum, Greenlanders opposed joining the European Economic Community, but were bound by Denmark's decision to join in 1973. The adoption of the Home Rule Act of 1979 marked a significant step towards a more autonomous Greenland. It provided for Greenland's future assumption of administration of its internal affairs in areas including education, labour and social policies, environment, conservation and land use, hydropower resources, fisheries and hunting, healthcare, media, flag, land use, trade, taxation and competition. The same year, the first Greenlandic government was set up and the Provincial Council was given the title of Parliament. Due to increased autonomy, Greenland now could leave the European Community, which it did on 1 January 1985 (see section on EU-Greenland relations).

A non-binding referendum held in November 2008 underscored Greenlanders' desire for a higher degree of autonomy through self-government (75.5 % of votes cast were in favour). Consequently, the Act on Greenland Self-Government of 21 June 2009 expanded Greenland's autonomy provided by the Home Rule Act. The Act recognised the Greenlanders as a people under international law and provided opportunities for Greenland to pursue independence. It listed 33 areas of competence that can be transferred to the self-government

either by a decision of Greenland, or following negotiation with the Danish government. The Act sets out that the governments of Denmark and Greenland may decide to transfer responsibility for affairs relating exclusively to Greenland to the self-government. Greenland has therefore since acquired competence in mineral resources, occupational safety for offshore work and determination of time. However, the Constitution, citizenship, the Supreme Court, foreign, defence and security policy, exchange rate and monetary policy remain with the Danish government and are not transferable.

Economy

Greenland's economy is heavily dependent on the fishing industry; in 2024, its seafood export value, amounting to DKK3.84 billion (or €516 million),³ accounted for 97.8 % of total goods exports. In addition, Greenland's tourism sector is growing, and the island carries out limited mining activity. The public sector makes up almost half of domestic employment, followed by the fisheries, hunting and agriculture sectors.

Greenland relies upon large block grants from the Danish government. Under the Act on Greenland Self-Government, the annual Danish government grant is DKK3.4 billion (approximately €457 million at 2009 price and wage levels, and thus adjustable). The Act stipulates that, if Greenland generates revenue from mineral resources exceeding DKK75 million per year (slightly more than €10 million), which has not been the case to date, the grant will be decreased by 50 % of the excess amount. In 2023, Denmark provided Greenland with a grant of DKK4.14 billion (almost €556 million). This accounts for around half of the government's revenue and, while relatively less, still amounts to approximately 20 % of Greenland's gross domestic product. The Danish government's additional expenses related to Greenland (public order and safety, police services, military and defence, prisons, courts, general public services, economic affairs, research, environmental protection and other areas)

amounted to around €204 million in 2023. Greenland also receives around €17.29 million annually from the EU for access to the island's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and in support of its fisheries policy.

Quest for independence

The Act on Greenland Self-Government recognises the people of Greenland as 'people pursuant to international law with the right of self-determination'. According to the Act, the people of Greenland decide on the island's independence. However, agreement between the governments of Greenland and Denmark would be necessary for Greenland's independence, as well as consent by the parliaments of Greenland and Denmark and approval through a referendum in Greenland.

The debate on Greenland's constitutional future is complex and nuanced, with a wide spectrum of perspectives, including those on an often-painful colonial past. Whereas successive opinion surveys reveal that most (around two thirds) of Greenlanders want to be independent, the timeline and strategies on how to reach independence are debated. In particular, most Greenlanders support future independence – on the condition that their quality of life is maintained or at least does not drastically decrease. However, some decline in quality of life is a potential outcome, given the island's heavy reliance on the Danish block grant, which would end upon independence, and with the current lack of a diverse economy. Greenland's economic sufficiency and practical considerations regarding monetary policy or access to health and education facilities in Denmark are some of the key issues to resolve. In September 2024, Greenland's government adopted a report providing for the establishment of an expert commission tasked with: (i) examining pathways to independence in line with the Act on Greenland Self-Government; (ii) assessing the legal framework under which a referendum on independence and state formation can take place; and (iii) a legal-technical assessment of the existing draft

constitution, including its relation to state formation.

Greenland Caught in the Spider's Web of the Arctic Race

Greenland is strategic in all dimensions of the Arctic race. The island occupies a key position along emerging shipping routes, making it a key player in the future of international navigation and shipping. Due to its location, the island has important security and defence implications for the regional powers, most notably the US (and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a whole) and Russia. Greenland also possesses untapped natural resources, attracting attention well beyond the Arctic players. Finally, the island is important for Arctic science and research, including climate research, and has high tourism potential.

As the geostrategic importance of the Arctic grows, Greenland's location is becoming increasingly critical for regional powers aiming to project influence and deter potential adversaries. Greenland's position could allow a civilian and military presence and infrastructure to ensure safe navigation, assert influence in territorial disputes, and respond to unauthorised activities such as hybrid threats or war.

For NATO and the US, Greenland is important for several reasons. First, Greenland is a part of NATO and has had a defence agreement with the US, through Denmark, since 1951. Under this agreement, the island hosts the Pituffik Space Base (formerly known as Thule Air Base), a critical US military installation that supports NATO's missile defence and space surveillance systems. Modern military operations rely heavily on polar-orbiting satellites for a range of activities, including weather monitoring, communications, imaging, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, as well as exploring navigation alternatives to GPS. Greenland's coordinates make it ideal for development and management of those systems, and a wide range of space activities are undertaken by the US and NATO at the Pituffik Space Base. Therefore, the base not only

provides early warning capabilities against potential missile threats but also plays an important role in monitoring space activities, contributing to NATO's overall deterrence and defence posture.

Second, Greenland is positioned within the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, an area of the northern Atlantic Ocean forming a critical passage for vessels moving between the Atlantic Ocean and the Arctic, as well as between North America and Europe (see Figure 1). Controlling this strategic transit route allows NATO to monitor and regulate maritime traffic, ensuring that essential sea-lanes remain open and secure, and to detect and deter possible underwater and subsurface threats, including more frequent Russian hybrid threats. In the event of conflict, the gap would facilitate the rapid deployment of NATO forces across the Atlantic.

Greenland's untapped mineral resources are of strategic importance. Its soil contains valuable minerals, rare earth minerals, precious metals and stones, coal, graphite and uranium, with a high potential for new mineral discoveries. A 2023 report published by the Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland (GEUS) found the island has 25 of the 34 critical minerals identified in the EU's official critical raw materials list, including large deposits of graphite (vital for military industries) and moderate deposits of lithium (essential for batteries) and rare earth minerals (used in clean technologies). In the same vein, according to Benchmark Minerals Intelligence, 43 of the 50 minerals deemed critical to US national security and economic stability may also be found on the island. As the demand for essential and rare earth minerals, crucial to the green transition and modern technologies (including defence production), grows, and as climate change makes mineral resources more accessible, the focus is turning towards Greenland. The tense geopolitical landscape is refocusing attention on strategic autonomy, supply chains and diversification, further increasing Greenland's attractiveness.

Greenland itself sees mining and foreign investment and the associated tax revenues as an opportunity to achieve economic sufficiency, which is crucial to achieving full sovereignty, and welcomes those interested in its potential. In its 2024 foreign policy strategy, Greenland presents itself as 'an attractive and reliable partner in the mineral resources sector' that will 'assist in making minerals available for the production of renewable sources of energy, thereby doing its part' to lower global carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. Greenland signed (non-binding) partnership agreements with the US on mineral sector governance (2019), and with the EU on the development of sustainable raw materials value chains (2023). Its 2025–2029 mineral resources strategy underlines its plans to continue implementing the agreement with the EU, which focuses on cooperation along the whole value chain, and renew the US agreement, including collaboration on geological hyperspectral data, marketing and setting framework conditions. The strategy also focuses on further concrete initiatives to offer more attractive investment frameworks. In 2024, Greenland became a member of the Mineral Security Partnership Forum, a multilateral collaboration platform between mineral exporting and importing parties, including the EU, several of its Member States, the US and others.

Greenland lies near emerging Arctic shipping routes: the Northwest Passage along Canada's northern coast, the Northeast Passage or Northern Sea Route on the Russian Arctic coast, and the future Trans-Arctic or Transpolar Route, which will cross the central Arctic Ocean. As Arctic sea ice continues to melt, these routes are projected to become crucial shipping lanes, shortening shipping times, complementing or even replacing traditional shipping routes, and attracting important shipping industry activity to the region. The Northwest and the Northeast Passages are expected to become viable for commercial navigation sooner. However, the Transpolar Route holds revolutionary potential once ice conditions permit passage around the

North Pole. It would drastically reduce the distance between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, and, unlike the first two routes, would largely avoid territorial waters and EEZs, amplifying its geopolitical importance.

US interest in Greenland and Canada

US interest in Greenland, and in Canada, is by no means new – in 1868, Secretary of State William Seward commissioned a report on the acquisition of Greenland, which would also require Canada to join the Union – but, until the start of President Trump's second term on January 20, 2025, the possibility that any of the powers involved, beyond specific disputes over small islets, would seek to improve their position in the Arctic by also adding to their territory a large country, 10 million km², like Canada, or an island like Greenland, which enjoys an autonomous status that provides for the possibility of selfdetermination, was not on the table of international discussions.

Because of Greenland's potential to play a strategic role in emerging shipping routes, defence and mineral supplies, and due to the US's aim of countering Russian and Chinese influence in the region, the US has developed a profound interest in the island. Historically, US ambitions have not been limited to increased cooperation; the US has considered and/or made several unsuccessful attempts to acquire the island, notably in 1867, 1910, 1946, and 1955.

President Trump initiated the latest attempts, expressing his interest in purchasing the island in 2019 and pressuring Denmark to sell Greenland since late 2024. Trump has proposed taking control of Greenland, threatened to target tariffs against Denmark, insisted that the Greenlanders want to be a part of the US and refused to rule out the use of military force. Soon after Trump's remarks, the House of Representatives introduced a bill to authorise the President to seek to enter into negotiations with the Kingdom of Denmark to secure the acquisition of Greenland (Make Greenland Great Again Act). As in 2019, Trump's aggressive rhetoric and pressure to acquire Greenland, as

well as his dismissal of Greenland and Greenlanders' agency, received a unanimous response from both Greenland and Denmark: Greenland is open for business with the US, but the island is not 'for sale'. According to an opinion poll conducted in January 2025, 85 % of Greenlanders do not want to become a part of the US (9 % were undecided and only 6 % were in favour of joining the US).

As Trump claims that acquiring Greenland is 'an absolute necessity' for national security reasons and for 'freedom throughout the world' (reportedly to counter Russian and Chinese influence), many analysts argue that, instead of acquiring the island, the US could aim for enhanced cooperation with Greenland and Denmark to address Arctic issues, including security, military and deterrence. Indeed, the US already has an agreement-based military presence on the island, and both Danish and Greenland officials noted the possibility for the US to enhance this presence further. As former Danish minister of foreign affairs and former Member of the European Parliament Jeppe Kofod notes, the aims stated by the US President (protection of Arctic interests, peace, prosperity and stability and countering external threats) could be achieved through a stronger NATO commitment to Arctic defence. This could include, through joint military exercises, expanded activities and improved equipment such as icebreaker fleets. In this context, some experts argue that, besides security interests, Trump may be attempting to secure US access to Greenland's natural resources and the island itself.

Although between 2017 and 2021, during his first term, Trump had already made more or less explicit references to Greenland, the change made in the White House Oval Office, with the placement of the portrait of Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States, now makes perfect sense. It was a significant gesture that, in light of recent events, can be linked to the ideology of Manifest Destiny, of which Jackson was the best representative. Manifest Destiny argued that, given its

exceptionalism, the United States has the duty and the right to advance into other territories to ensure the development and expansion of the country's experiment in freedom and self-government. This includes securing resources to sustain the economy and guarantee the country's security.

Thus, in his second inaugural address, President Trump could not have been clearer: "We will pursue our manifest destiny to the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Star-Spangled Banner on the planet Mars," he stated. Days earlier, Trump had stated that Canada should become the 51st state, named the Panama Canal the US Canal, and agreed, by presidential order, to rename the Gulf of Mexico the Gulf of America.

Geostrategic Situation

Greenland brings the US closer to China and Russia, and vice versa. The construction of Thule Air Base after World War II and the missile shield are examples of this. For the US, Greenland is part of its "Homeland Security", hence the importance the US has recently attached to it. Added to this is the fact that the US would facilitate monitoring and alerts of the GIUK Gap (an imaginary line between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom, through which anyone transiting from the Arctic to the North Atlantic must pass. This line has traditionally been controlled by Russia or the former USSR and constitutes a strategic point of vital importance for both NATO and Russia.

Additionally, the melting of the Arctic not only facilitates the extraction of raw materials but also facilitates movement through its waters. China needs to exploit these new maritime routes, which not only enable the overall increase in its maritime traffic and the acquisition of necessary raw materials, but also allows it to get closer to the US. Therefore, since 2011, coinciding with Greenland's increased autonomy, it has stepped up its influence on the island, leading to an increase in Greenland's exports by almost 20%.

For Russia, Greenland means greater control over the Arctic, where it is intensifying its control with new bases, and, like China, greater proximity. This desire for control is part of its strategy, since the melting of the ice has made new Arctic routes viable. News such as the fact that the last nuclear submarine is destined to operate in the Arctic makes this visible. Greenland's independence would represent a radical change in Russian perception, as it would cease to be NATO territory, and would open up new possibilities for action. For the EU, Greenland's withdrawal from the EEC meant reducing its territory by almost half and placing a clear geographical restriction on the Arctic. Although it cannot replace Denmark, it can "provide a reference, provide political patronage, and economic and regulatory support. And, above all, protection from external pressures". In fact, in recent statements by its government, Greenland has requested EU support. Fishing rights are also one of the key elements in maintaining the relationship.

It may seem that the desire to break with Denmark is gaining ground in Greenland, but Greenlanders differ on the degree of autonomy. Denmark faces a very difficult situation. Despite having supported the country during difficult times, it seems that the interest unleashed by the major powers could lead it to assume a secondary role. However, on the other hand, it is true that this is a difficult decision to undo. Its control over the island would allow it to be a leader in the exploitation of resources when conditions allow it to do so efficiently. The Prime Minister's recent visit proves that she is not willing to lower her interest. Despite all the inconveniences, Denmark remains the main player in the country.

Trump's latest words, which are not new, if more aggressive, generate uncertainty that major powers wish to exploit.

Impact of Takeover of Greenland

The number of plausible scenarios presented today is almost unlimited, so this section presents some of those considered most

relevant, due to the actions of the US, and primarily its President. President Trump declared in a press conference on January 7, 2026 that he would not give up US military force to purchase Greenland from Denmark. It would not take much effort for the US to militarily defeat Denmark. However, the use of force in relations between states has been prohibited since 1945, according to Article 2.4 of the United Nations (UN) Charter. Therefore, US military action against Denmark would constitute a serious violation of international law. The UN would be powerless to stop such an attack, as the US holds veto power in the Security Council. Therefore, the UN's reputation as the main guarantor of world peace would be significantly damaged. Furthermore, the aggressor country is the largest contributor to the UN budget and the host country of its main headquarters.

On the other hand, an attack by a NATO country (the US) on another NATO member (Denmark) would undermine the foundations of NATO, which does not contemplate aggression between its own members. As for the European Union (EU), the mutual assistance clause (Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty) does not provide sufficient credibility, as shown by the fact that Sweden and Finland have considered NATO membership necessary for their security. Article 42.7 itself refers to NATO regarding military aid. In any case, the EU's international reputation would be damaged by its lack of defense capacity against aggression from a third country.

Finally, a US forceful intervention in Denmark would generate an attitude of outright rejection by the Greenlandic population of the aggressor forces, provoking a high level of social conflict and a risk of the conflict becoming entrenched if a local guerrilla group were to form.

A peaceful US takeover of Greenland could be achieved through three means: a voluntary sale of the island to the US by Denmark; a decision by Greenland, once it has gained independence, to surrender its sovereignty to the US; or a deepening of the de facto control

that the US already exercises over the island by dominating its economy, foreign policy, and security and defense policies.

Regarding the transfer or sale of the island to the US—this is not the first time it has been raised, since in 1946 former President Harry Truman offered Denmark \$100 million in gold for the island, equivalent to \$1.3 billion in today's dollars—Denmark has made it clear to the US that Greenland is not for sale, and that the island's residents must solely determine its future.

Greenland's surrender of its state sovereignty to the United States would require a prior agreement between Greenland and Denmark on the terms of independence, followed by a referendum convened by the Greenlandic authorities the result of which needing to be in favor of the territory's independence (Article 21 of the island's 2009 Statute of Autonomy) and subsequent approval of independence by the Danish parliament in accordance with Article 21 of the Danish Constitution. Once independence is achieved, the Greenlandic population could submit to a referendum the renunciation of its sovereignty as a state and its integration into the United States as an associated state of the American federation or as its 51st state. This final step would probably not be immediate and would require a generous financial offer from the United States. Some analysts have estimated that Greenland is worth about \$50 billion, subtracting the Danish subsidy and taking into account the net present value of the taxes that Greenlanders would pay annually in the United States as American taxpayers, with an average tax rate of 16%. Therefore, each Greenlander would be eligible to receive \$1 million, which, combined with the promise of future income from the exploitation of the island's natural resources, could convince Greenlanders of the advantages of dependence on the United States.

As a third peaceful means of achieving control of Greenland, it must be said that the US was actually already exercising significant de facto

control over the island and was destined to fully exercise it in the medium to long term. This control has manifested itself in three ways: first, attempts to increase China's economic presence on the island have been successively vetoed by Greenland, under US influence; second, US military dominance over the island with its air and communications base in Thule, northwest of the island (Pittufik Airport), which has done everything possible to prevent Chinese and Russian control of the Arctic maritime routes involving Greenland; and third, the US is, with the possible exception of China, the only power with the technical and financial capacity to bring Greenland's significant mineral wealth into production (extraction and, above all, processing or refining). Greenlanders didn't seem bothered by US influence on the island until Trump's recent threatening statements, which have offended and humiliated them, making them less supportive of a potential "American solution" for the island.

Countering Russian Expansion and Chinese Encroachment??

As the accessibility of Arctic increases, Russia has been making extensive expansion, both militarily and economically. There is denying that when it comes to Arctic region, Russia has a huge stake, with almost half of the region being part of Russia. In a way or other, Russia's disdain act to prove their presence in the Arctic lives one, both militarily or economically. However, since the 2022, with the Russia invasion of Ukraine, Russia's Arctic militarisation has intensified with the modernisation of Soviet-era bases, deployment of hypersonic missiles, and expansion of its Northern Fleet. Additionally, Russia is on the path to gain full access to their Arctic natural resources. The Arctic harsh climatic condition makes the exploration and investment expensive and difficult. The 2022 Russian invasion pushed western investors out of the Arctic. This resulted in Russia heavily relying on Chinese investment and technology to develop NSR infrastructure, particularly for liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports from the

Yamal Peninsula, potentially creating a point of contention for U.S.

Consequently, the Chinese Arctic ambitions aim to integrate Greenland into its Belt and Road Initiative via the Polar Silk Road. Beijing is keenly interested in Greenland's mineral wealth, including rare earth elements (REEs) to fuel its renewable energy and defence technologies. The Kvanefjeld and Isua mining projects, estimated to have significant reserves of REEs and uranium, have attracted Chinese investment through entities like Shenghe Resources. Chinese firms have also sought to acquire strategic assets, such as a decommissioned naval base in Greenland and contracts to build airports, which could potentially serve military logistics under the guise of civilian projects. Thus, China has sought to invest in Greenland's mining and infrastructure sectors, raising alarms in Washington about the potential for dual-use facilities and increased Chinese leverage in the Arctic.

Another aspect shaping U.S. strategic interests in Greenland is the aggressive Russian expansion and the growing Chinese presence in the Arctic region. This could threaten and undermine U.S. influence in the Arctic region. The Trump administration has responded by securitising Greenland's role in Arctic defence, leveraging the 1951 U.S.-Denmark-Greenland Defence Agreement to expand surveillance and military infrastructure. The proposals include deploying F-35 jets at Pituffik and enhancing coastal radar networks to track Russian and Chinese activities. Economically, the U.S. has countered Chinese influence by funding Greenlandic mining projects and offering development aid, aiming to reduce reliance on Chinese REE processing, which dominates 80% of global supply.

The Legality of Acquiring Greenland

Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has repeatedly stated that "Greenland is not for sale," and that the island's future is for Greenlanders to decide. U.S. President Donald

Trump's interest in purchasing Greenland, which dates back to 2015, is not new. Historically, the United States has offered to purchase Greenland in 1867 and 1946. However, Greenland's legal and political landscape has changed dramatically since then. Additionally, the international law on territorial acquisition has changed, making such a transaction exceedingly complex and frowned upon.

Greenland is an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. Greenland has achieved high self-governance since the Home Rule Act of 1979 and, more significantly, the Self-Government Act of 2009. The Self-Government Act, 2009, explicitly recognises Greenlandic people with the right to self-determination under international law. Under the Act, Greenland's parliament (Inatsisartut) and government (Naalakkersuisut) have authority over most domestic affairs, including natural resources, education, health, and the environment. Denmark retains control over foreign affairs, defence, and constitutional matters, but Greenland is consulted and involved even in these areas, especially when its interests are directly affected.

Under the United Nations Charter and other related international agreements, the principle of self-determination is respected and preserved to bring form of order in the international anarchical system. Accordingly, the people of Greenland have the right to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development. The Self-Government Act provides a clear legal pathway for Greenland to achieve full independence if its people so choose, via a referendum and subsequent negotiations with Denmark. Therefore, any attempt to transfer sovereignty over Greenland whether through sale, cession, or other means would require the explicit, democratic consent of the Greenlandic people. Neither Denmark nor any foreign power can unilaterally decide Greenland's fate.

While International Law does not prohibit the sale or cession of territory per se, such

transactions in the modern era are rare and fraught with legal and ethical complications. The era of colonial land sales is over; today, peoples' right to self-determination takes precedence. Even if the United States and Denmark were to reach a bilateral agreement, the Greenlandic parliament and population would have the final say. Recent statements from both Danish and Greenlandic leaders have made clear that there is no interest in such a transaction, and that Greenlanders themselves will determine Greenland's future. Therefore, any attempt to acquire Greenland without the consent of its people would be viewed as a violation of international law and norms, and would likely provoke condemnation from the international community, including their NATO allies. The prevailing sentiment in Greenland is toward greater autonomy and eventual independence, not toward becoming part of another state.

Article 5, Credibility, and the Risk of Alliance Paralysis

The Greenland sovereignty saga has indeed exposed rifts that threaten NATO's unity. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen warned that a U.S. attack on Greenland would mark "the end of NATO" – effectively shattering the post-World War II security order. Her alarm is not theoretical: Denmark's defense officials reminded everyone of a standing directive to resist any invasion of Danish territory (including Greenland) immediately and without waiting for orders. If an ally as central as the United States were to act as an aggressor, it's widely feared that other NATO members would be paralyzed. Observers note that no one truly expects the rest of NATO to invoke Article 5 against the U.S. itself in defense of Greenland. Such an unthinkable fracture in collective defense would destroy the core trust holding the alliance together. It also carries real strategic consequence: Russia – and other adversaries – would be the obvious beneficiaries of a divided or weakened NATO. Kremlin officials have every reason to "gloat" as this crisis unfolds, seeing an opportunity to

exploit NATO's distraction and discord. Security analysts caution that NATO's credibility is on the line – if one leading member undermines another's sovereignty, it erodes the alliance's credibility and serves only the interests of rivals like Moscow or Beijing.

Way ahead

The US-Greenland conflict marks a return to Great Power Competition where geography and resources define global relations. While the United States has legitimate security concerns regarding China and Russia, attempting to "buy" a nation challenges the modern Westphalian system of sovereignty. The US should respect the 2009 Self-Government Act and engage in dialogue rather than coercion. Instead of purchase, the US could increase investment in Greenland's infrastructure to secure influence.

Greenland's strategic importance to NATO is undeniable; what is deeply troubling is how casually that reality has been weaponized to justify rhetoric that undermines the very alliance it purports to protect. The Greenland sovereignty debate is a stress test for NATO's foundational principles. If the alliance cannot uphold territorial integrity and collective restraint among its own members, its credibility as a security institution in an era of great-power rivalry will be irreparably damaged.

While Europe's response is couched in legal and moral terms, the strategic stakes of the Greenland issue are enormous – especially for European security. Greenland sits astride vital Arctic and North Atlantic corridors that are increasingly important to NATO's northern flank. The island forms part of the famed GIUK gap (Greenland-Iceland-UK), a choke point for naval traffic between the Arctic and the Atlantic, and it overlooks emerging Arctic sea lanes that could significantly shorten shipping routes between Europe, Asia, and North America. Critically, Greenland hosts U.S. early-warning radars and space surveillance systems that are crucial for detecting ballistic missile launches over the polar region, which directly bolsters the

security of Europe and North America. In military terms, control of Greenland can influence Russian strategic calculus: Moscow's Northern Fleet operates out of bases on the Kola Peninsula and relies on access to the North Atlantic, meaning that a hostile power in Greenland could impede Russian naval movements or threaten its second-strike nuclear submarines. Indeed, Russia has long maintained a "bastion" defense posture stretching into the Arctic Ocean and Norwegian Sea, up to the vicinity of Greenland, precisely to secure its Arctic assets and sea lanes. For NATO, then, Greenland is not a remote abstraction but a linchpin in monitoring Russian activity and maintaining the security of the North Atlantic. European defense planners know that any change in Greenland's alignment could upset this delicate balance.

Beyond military geography, there are transatlantic cohesion issues at play. European officials are frankly alarmed that a unilateral U.S. action toward Greenland – especially a forcible one – would shatter NATO unity. Such a move "would send shock waves through the NATO alliance" and fundamentally undermine trust between America and Europe. As Poland's Prime Minister (and former European Council chief) Donald Tusk put it, *"No member should attack or threaten another member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Otherwise, NATO would lose its meaning."* European NATO members see Trump's Greenland gambit as a worrying sign of great-power unilateralism that disregards the alliance framework. It has not escaped notice that Trump's rhetoric invokes a new-era Monroe Doctrine in which Washington feels entitled to "control any critical assets" in the Western Hemisphere. For Europeans, this raises the specter of an unpredictable superpower ally willing to sidestep international norms. Their united stance on Greenland's status thus serves a dual purpose: defending a principle of international law (sovereign equality) and quietly drawing a red line to dissuade Washington from destabilizing the Arctic region. In effect, Europe is saying that

even in the face of Russian militarization of the Arctic and Chinese economic interest, the answer cannot be for an ally to violate sovereignty – that cure would be worse than the disease.

At the same time, this episode has exposed subtle fault lines in how Europe might handle threats in the far north. By emphasizing legal norms and *“the island’s future lies in the hands of its people”*, European leaders reinforce their commitment to the liberal international order. But an exclusive focus on sovereignty doesn’t fully answer a pressing question: How should Europe deter external threats or unwanted strategic encroachments (whether from Russia, China, or even an overzealous ally) without provoking a spiral of escalation? The Greenland scare has underscored that Europe’s high-minded principles may be tested by hard power realities in the Arctic.

Conclusion: Sovereignty First, But Strategy Must Evolve

In contemporary International Law, territorial title can be neither created nor altered by the historic modes of territorial acquisition, such as occupation, conquest and annexation. Cession can be legal where it does not violate the right of self-determination and does not result from coercion. Since Greenland is not a Non-Self-Governing Territory in the sense of Chapter XI UN Charter, the option of merger or association with another state does not apply *prima facie* under international law. As a matter of domestic law, there exists a non-self-executing law-governed path to achieve an agreement on Greenland’s independence. These rules refer to independence, not merger or association with another state. In principle, Greenland could merge or associate with another state subsequently, after achieving independence. But independence would need to be negotiated with Denmark, and such negotiations could lead to binding stipulations prohibiting merger or association with the United States or any other state.

Europe’s firm stance that Greenland’s future is for Greenland (and Denmark) to decide is a principled and politically sound position. Upholding sovereignty and the right of self-determination sends a strong message that even close allies cannot simply rewrite international norms for strategic convenience. In the short term, this unified front has likely deterred any immediate aggressive moves and reassured the people of Greenland that they are not alone. However, this moment is also a wake-up call about the changing strategic dynamics of the Arctic – and Europe’s role within them. The region is becoming an arena of heightened great-power interest, and Europe effectively sits on the front lines. European governments, led by Denmark, now face growing pressure to prepare for a more assertive American posture in the Arctic as well as the existing Russian one. Simply put, strategy must evolve to match the new reality.

Moving forward, Europe will need to align its laudable normative commitments with a more robust and credible defense posture in the Arctic. This means investing in Arctic domain awareness, military capabilities, and infrastructure – as Denmark has already begun doing with plans to significantly boost its Arctic defense spending. NATO, too, has declared the Arctic a priority and European allies are “stepping up” their involvement in collective security up north. The goal for Europe should be to deter any coercive maneuvers by external powers *before* they escalate, and to do so in a way that doesn’t undermine the very principles Europe seeks to protect. As one analysis bluntly framed Europe’s dilemma: it may eventually have to *“defend its own interests when the challenge comes from its most powerful ally”*. This will require deft diplomacy and unity – managing the alliance with the U.S. to ensure consultation and cooperation, while also standing firm that “pressure works on Europe” only if Europe allows it.

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