



U.S. Interest in Greenland Reflects the Ongoing Competition in the Arctic

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President Donald Trump has repeatedly suggested his intention to attach Greenland to the U.S., a move that has met with opposition from the Greenlandic and Danish governments. The pressure from the U.S. is one manifestation of its aspirations to strengthen its position in the North Atlantic, both because of the strategic importance of the island and the growing international rivalries in the Arctic. The situation will require greater EU and NATO involvement in the High North, as well as consideration of this perspective by countries outside the region, such as Poland.

Determinants. Greenland is strategically important because of its geographic location, as it is both crucial in terms of security (military bases and facilities) and potential access to lower cost transport routes through the Arctic. In addition to its desirable location and logistics possibilities, Greenland also has abundant natural resources, with the world's second-largest deposit of rare earth elements (an estimated 38.5 million tonnes, or 25-30% of global reserves).

The complex nature of the island's dependence on Denmark determines the extent of its autonomy, which since 1953 has been not as a colony but a part of the kingdom. In 2009, Greenland gained expanded autonomy, including the right to self-determination. With some exceptions, the conduct of the island's foreign, defence, and security policy is formally determined by Denmark.

U.S. Objectives. The interest in Greenland is linked to the security of the North Atlantic region. The development of military infrastructure on the island, including the Pituffik space base (formerly Thule air base), which has been in operation since 1943, increases the effectiveness of early warning systems to detect, among others, incoming ballistic or hypersonic missiles from Russia. Satellites and objects in space are also monitored.

Annexation of the island would increase the U.S. access to natural resources. Trump's stance stems from the "Monroe Doctrine" of 1823, which proclaims the Western Hemisphere's independence from outside influence, and

treats interference in the affairs of North and South American countries as directly hostile to the United States. Trump's transactional approach to matters is also grounded in U.S. policy of expansionism, such as the purchases of Alaska in 1867 and the Virgin Islands in 1916.

The U.S. administration assumes that Greenland will achieve independence in the short term, but due to its limited capabilities, it will not be able to operate independently, including resisting invasions or hostile actions by China and/or Russia. Greenland's "annexation"—repeatedly probed by the U.S. in the past—is, however, unlikely. The most realistic scenario involves the signing of a so-called "free association agreement" (COFA), which the U.S. has already concluded with the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Micronesia. The COFA could define the scope and nature of U.S. commitments to Greenland, including on defence matters, and give the U.S. veto power over foreign investment in the island's natural resources.

Greenland's and Denmark's Positions. The U.S. interest in Greenland is not new in American-Danish relations, and colonialism is embedded in the island's history. It has never been fully independent, which also applies to its current status in its relations with Denmark. However, about 85% of Greenlanders surveyed earlier this year are negative towards Trump's proposal.

Relations between Denmark and Greenland gained momentum with recent events, including Prime Minister

Mute Egede's call for early parliamentary elections. They took place on 11 March 11 this year and brought an unexpected victory for the opposition, the moderate Demokraatit party, which focuses first on rebuilding the island's socio-economic potential, distancing it from U.S. policy, and wary of a radical, meaning immediate, vision of independence. In practice, full independence for the island is neither quick nor certain. This is because the specifics of its dependency and path to achieving full independence from Denmark go beyond formal issues, such as the need for a referendum, and expose the island's lack of sufficient human and organisational resources, such as health and education (Denmark's "block grant" to Greenland is more than \$500 million). Social issues requiring Danish government assistance, such as unemployment, are also a challenge, as social benefits are the population's second source of income after fishing.

At the same time, Denmark avoids antagonising relations with the U.S., which is an important strategic and business partner for it, its largest export market, and the partner with which it has the highest returns on investment (18% of Danish export revenues and 21% of investment in 2024 came from the U.S.). Denmark also has a strategic approach to engaging domestic companies in the U.S. defence industry to supply components and software for the F-35 Lightning II aircraft. For example, Denmark's energy sector innovations support the U.S. military, including equipping systems to secure critical infrastructure.

Greenland as Part of U.S. Arctic Policy. Trump's aims for Greenland will contribute to a change in the Arctic governance system, currently based on cooperation within the Arctic Council (AC), in which Denmark will assume the presidency starting this May. This affects the shape of U.S.-Russia relations in the region, as Trump is sceptical of multilateralism and anticipates a return to bilateral cooperation with Russia, which will antagonise other countries with interests in the Arctic. Starting in 2023, Russia, as part of its updated Arctic strategy, envisions strengthening its influence in the region, while at the same time questioning Norway's exclusive rights to Svalbard, which it seeks for itself, seeking to secure, for example, access to transit routes.

Trump's intentions for Greenland are to be seen in the context of the U.S. increasing its presence in the polar part of North America and are intended to be a reinforcement of its activities in Alaska. Achieving these goals is expected to translate into key U.S. missions, including monitoring and protecting maritime routes, including developing the Northwest Passage (NWP) or "GIUK" gap, an open area of sea between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK already used by Russian naval forces, transport ships, and Chinese research vessels.

The political dynamics in the High North are simultaneously confirmed by Denmark's 2022 security strategy, which is less conciliatory toward countries in the region and defines threats in the Arctic. Although the Danish government has opposed NATO's presence in the region, current conditions have caused a change in this position, including in Greenland itself. In both cases, the authorities point to the strategic importance of the Arctic and the growing rivalry between the U.S., China, and Russia. As a result, Denmark in February this year increased military spending in the northern direction by nearly €2 billion, earmarked for the purchase of ships and reconnaissance drones. Denmark is now keen to activate both NATO and the EU in the Arctic, which have had representation in Greenland since 2024 and backed Denmark in its dispute with the U.S. earlier this year.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The U.S. push for Greenland indicates a determination to strengthen the U.S. position in the High North in a multidimensional way. The Trump administration will seek to tighten bilateral commitments, likely under a COFA agreement. At the same time, Trump's claims affect the political situation in Greenland, which, after the moderate Democrats take power, will require reaching a new consensus with Denmark and gradually reducing the island's structural dependence on the kingdom.

Greenland will remain the focus of intensifying rivalry in the Arctic. This motivates the U.S. to maintain influence on the island, distancing itself all the more from China and Russia. With this advantage, there would be increasing U.S. pressure to exploit Arctic resources and logistics routes that are increasingly available and cheaper to operate. Trump's aggressive policy, meanwhile, is likely to weaken regional cooperation, including in the Arctic Council, and may strengthen Russia's influence in the region.

The growing international importance of the Arctic, such as for the U.S., will translate into further militarisation of the Arctic, including by NATO. For Trump, however, the priority is to strengthen U.S. capabilities in North America's Arctic zone, which may limit the scope of cooperation with NATO partners in the European part of the Arctic. Increasing competition for natural resources will highlight the importance of access to transportation routes. Due to current conditions, including the war in Ukraine and the intensification of Russian and Chinese hybrid activities in the Baltic and North Seas, there is a growing need for countries outside the region, including Poland, to consider the Far North. The intensifying rivalry in the Arctic affects the security of Northern Europe, especially in the energy dimension and the protection of critical infrastructure. The need to increase own capabilities and balance U.S. influence in the area requires from Poland to further strengthen its cooperation with allies in the European part of the Arctic, and in the Baltic Sea region and with Canada, especially in the areas of defence and resilience.