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Issue Brief

Trump 2.0, Greenland and Arctic Geopolitics

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S*ummary*

The Trump administration's approach towards Greenland could significantly weaken NATO, increase the overall securitisation threshold in the region and further narrow the space for re-establishing mutual trust and cooperation.

Greenland has been the subject of extensive public debate during the second term of the Trump administration. President Donald Trump’s remarks of “buying” or “using military force” to acquire Greenland and his labelling it as “essential for United States’ national security” have raised serious concerns among Danish authorities and like-minded European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. Further, Trump’s threat to impose initial tariffs of 10 per cent on eight of these like-minded EU and NATO member states, with the possibility of increasing them to 25 per cent if these states did not comply with US ambitions regarding Greenland, drew severe national and international criticism.¹ Greenland, which constitutes an important element of the Arctic’s overall security framework, now faces a direct sovereignty threat to its own existence not from traditional perceived rivals—Russia or China—but from its very own ally, the United States. This brief highlights potential challenges and repercussions that could result from the US’s planned ambitions regarding Greenland.

Greenland’s Importance to the US

Greenland has always remained important in Arctic geopolitics. The United States’ interest in acquiring Greenland is not new; it dates back to 1832, when members of President Andrew Jackson’s administration first proposed purchasing Greenland. The idea was rearticulated by US Secretary of State William H. Seward in 1868, who believed that acquiring Greenland along with Alaska would yield significant geostrategic dividends to the United States and would also enhance its capacity to geostrategically squeeze Canada into becoming part of the US.² The plan, however, could not materialise due to various external factors and challenges within the US Congress.

In 1910, under President William Howard Taft, American diplomats, for the second time, proposed a land exchange with Danish authorities, intended to transfer Greenland to the United States in exchange for US concessions to Denmark elsewhere, but Denmark again rejected the proposal.³ The third development regarding Greenland occurred in 1940, when Germany invaded Denmark, and a subsequent breakdown in relations between Copenhagen and the Danish authorities in Greenland ensued.⁴ Germany already maintained weather stations at critical

¹ [“Statement by Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom”](#), Government Offices of Sweden, 18 January 2026.

² Signe Lyngholm Lindbjerg and Marc Jacobsen, [“X Marks the Spot: Dissecting Danish SoMe Debates on U.S. Interest in Greenland”](#), *Polar Geography*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 13 August 2024.

³ R.J. Rico and The Associated Press, [“America Has Actually Tried to Acquire Greenland 3 Other Times, as Early as 1867”](#), *Fortune*, 8 January 2026.

⁴ Clive Archer, [“The United States Defence Areas in Greenland”](#), *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 23, No. 3, June 2003, pp. 123–144.

locations in Greenland, which provided important meteorological information for German war operations. Fearing German invasion of Denmark as a direct threat to Greenland, Danish authorities in Greenland in May 1940 requested American protection.

Acting in accordance with the Monroe Doctrine and the Act of Habana, the United States established a consulate in Nuuk, sent its Coast Guard ships, and made Greenland a de facto US protectorate.⁵ A year later, in April 1941, the Danish representative in Washington, Henrik Kauffman, signed an agreement with the US that permitted the US to establish bases in Greenland, which soon thereafter led to the construction of several US military bases there.⁶ By the end of the World War II, the US had around 13 Army and 4 Naval bases in Greenland.⁷

In 1946, following the end of the World War II, President Harry Truman formally offered Denmark US\$ 100 million in gold to purchase Greenland, but Denmark again rejected the offer.⁸ In 1949, Denmark became a founding member of NATO and, in 1951, negotiated a formal agreement with the United States that enabled arrangements under which the armed forces of NATO countries could use facilities in Greenland for Greenland’s defence as well as for the defence of the rest of the North Atlantic Treaty area.⁹

In 1950, the United States started constructing Distant Early Warning (DEW) system, which, with an overall stretch of between 3,000 and 3,600 miles in length, constituted a complex network of radars that extended from Alaska across Canada to eastern Baffin Island with extensions to Greenland and Iceland.¹⁰ The primary purpose of this DEW line was to provide warning of any possible Soviet nuclear attack over the US or alliance partners and enable US bombers with launch time, thereby reducing the overall effectiveness of any Soviet pre-emptive nuclear strike. In 1980, DEW was replaced by a much more advanced and technologically superior ‘Northern Warning System’ (NWS). NWS comprises both long- and short-range surveillance radars that, to date, remain operational and are maintained by the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

⁵ [“Denmark-United States: Agreement Relating to the Defense of Greenland and Exchange of Notes”](#), *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2017, pp. 129–134.

⁶ [“United States of America and Denmark—Agreement Relating to the Defence of Greenland...”](#), *League of Nations-Treaty Series*, 9 April 1941, pp. 135–141.

⁷ [“Denmark-United States: Agreement Relating to the Defense of Greenland and Exchange of Notes”](#), no. 5.

⁸ Jeffrey Gettleman, Amelia Nierenberg and Maya Tekeli, [“Buy Greenland? Take It? Why? An Old Pact Already Gives Trump a Free Hand”](#), *The New York Times*, 7 January 2026.

⁹ [“Defense of Greenland: Agreement Between the United States and the Kingdom of Denmark, April 27, 1951”](#), Yale Law School.

¹⁰ F. Robert Naka and William W. Ward, [“Distant Early Warning Line Radars: The Quest for Automatic Signal Detection”](#), *Lincoln Laboratory Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2000, pp. 181–204.

Trump’s latest claims regarding Greenland now underscore that US control over Greenland is essential for the construction of its new proposed ‘Golden Dome’ project, for which the Pituffik Space Base would serve as a key ground station. Some Western scholars argue that, although the 1951 US–Denmark defence agreement already provides the US with almost unrestricted access to achieve its desired objectives, the US still requires sovereign control over Greenland to eliminate Danish or Greenlandic political red tape and limitations that would impede its broader strategic national security objectives in the region. It is important to highlight that, as per the amendments in the US–Denmark defence agreement of 2004, Greenland’s semi-autonomous government is now very much a part of this agreement and the United States is supposed to consult both Denmark and Greenland before it makes “any significant changes” in its military operations on the island.

Greenland and Trump’s 2.0 Foreign Policy Approach

As mentioned above, US intentions regarding acquiring Greenland are not new; however, the only striking difference between past and present is in the ‘manner’ or ‘approach’ through which the Trump administration is perceiving Greenland in its attempts to meet the US’s past desired objectives.¹¹ A critical view of the US policy approach towards Greenland highlights that, on the one hand, policymakers in Washington are willing to pay a perceived price to Greenland’s people by offering US\$ 10,000 to US\$ 100,000 per person. On the other hand, Americans propose annexing the Island by ‘military means’ should their other approach fail to achieve their desired objectives. Furthermore, discourses about a possible Russian or Chinese invasion of Greenland are being invoked to justify and obscure the US’s own intentions regarding Greenland, through both economic and military means.

The second important aspect of Greenland is its resource potential and its potential role in enabling US access to rare-earth elements (REE). Greenland currently ranks eighth globally in rare-earth reserves. Even a conservative estimate suggests that Greenland has 1.5 million tons of rare-earth reserves. Its two Kvanefjeld and Tanbreez deposits are among the largest in the world in terms of rare-earth resources.¹² However, REE mining in Greenland is a subject of great public debate and a strong factor in local elections. Despite the presence of these huge reserves of rare-earth deposits, mining of these REE currently remains banned on the Island.

In 2019, during the first Trump administration, the United States entered into a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Greenland to jointly survey the region

¹¹ Benjamin Mills Peirce, “[A Report on the Resources of Iceland and Greenland](#)”, Government Printing Office, US State Department, 1868.

¹² Meredith Schwartz and Gracelin Baskaran, “[Greenland, Rare Earths, and Arctic Security](#)”, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 8 January 2026.

and exchange scientific and technical expertise to develop rare-earth and other critical mineral resources on the Island. The MoU is also approaching expiration, and efforts to renew it under the Biden administration were unsuccessful. In the past, China has attempted to make inroads into Greenland's mining and infrastructure development projects. These ambitions were halted through direct interventions by Danish and US authorities, who have labelled them as threats to national security. The Danish government, which for a long time has catered to most of the US's demands regarding Greenland, once again stands at a crossroads of difficult choices, as the threat to Greenland's sovereignty has resurfaced in the region from the United States.

Dividing NATO

The US' ostensible plans for a military invasion of Greenland have caught not only Denmark but also the members of the entire alliance by surprise regarding how to respond when one of their dominant allies has attempted to challenge the sovereignty of another NATO member state. In response, some allies sent small contingents of troops to Greenland to protect its sovereignty, but most of these contingents did not remain stationed for long.¹³ This, however, has never occurred before, and the act has challenged NATO's fundamental principles.

Emerging voids of mistrust and doubts about NATO's credibility are clearly evident, and their reflections can be drawn from the speeches of various heads of state at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos.¹⁴ EU Foreign Affairs Chief Kaja Kallas, in her remarks, has clearly highlighted that Trump has “shaken the transatlantic relationship to its foundations” and if NATO needs to maintain its strength, “it needs to become more European”.¹⁵ NATO Chief Mark Rutte has, however, warned Europe that it cannot defend itself without US support.¹⁶ This further indicates emerging friction among NATO allies, which could, in the future, pose challenges for NATO's operational command-and-control structure.

Further, Trump's remarks regarding the role of British troops in NATO's past missions in Afghanistan have outraged the public sentiments among war veterans and the general public in the UK. As a result, the British Prime Minister had to call upon Trump to publicly apologise for his remarks.¹⁷ Similarly, hundreds of war

¹³ [“Greenland Welcomes European Response to Trump's Tariffs”](#), *Arctic Today*, 19 January 2026.

¹⁴ [“Davos 2026: Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada”](#), World Economic Forum, 20 January 2026.

¹⁵ Mark Hallam and Alex Berry, [“European Leaders Call Trump Greenland Rift a 'Wake-up Call'”](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2026.

¹⁶ Victor Jack, [“Europe Can't Defend Itself Without the US, NATO's Rutte Warns”](#), *Politico*, 26 January 2026.

¹⁷ [“Starmer Slams Trump's 'Appalling' Claims that NATO Troops Avoided Front Lines in Afghanistan”](#), *France 24*, 23 January 2026.

veterans in Denmark also gathered outside the US Embassy in Copenhagen to protest against Trump’s remarks. Although EU policy experts publicly argue that NATO remains vital for the defence of Europe, reports suggest that most European capitals no longer trust the United States regarding future commitments to the alliance. Therefore, inferences from these aspects indicate that the credibility of the NATO alliance has come under serious question, and these emerging fractures within the alliance create opportunities for Western adversaries to exploit further.

Tariffs and Emerging Economic Challenges

The aspect of ‘imposing’ or ‘fear of imposing’ irrational tariffs as a fundamental tool for dictating US foreign policy if states refuse to comply with US demands, has become a new normal. Such repeated attempts to impose tariffs have already sent multiple shock waves through global economies. In response to Trump’s tariff threat, EU member states called for halting all the ongoing talks about the US–EU ‘Turnberry’ trade framework deal. They called for the imposition of a retaliatory €93 billion tariff package on the US if Trump insisted on his tariff stance.¹⁸ Critical assessments further suggest that all these eight member states combined hold over US\$ 1.7 trillion in US treasuries, most of which is held in pension funds.¹⁹ Clear signals of state sell-offs of these Treasury Bonds also became one of the most significant factors in Trump’s reversal of his tariff decision.

It is important to note that although the current economic dispute between the US and these states has cooled, any future US measures could prompt serious economic retaliation from EU member states. The existence of the EU’s Anti-Coercion instrument further binds the EU to act accordingly if third countries use economic coercion against an EU member state that poses a particular threat to its sovereignty or fundamental rights.²⁰ Therefore, actual use or implementation of any such economic instruments of coercion by either side to protect its own core interests could trigger global economic ramifications.

The Greenland Question

Greenland’s long struggle for self-independence from Denmark has been confronted with new challenges and complexities, such that any new attempt by Greenlanders or its government would now face domestic and international resistance. The Naleraq Party of Greenland, which calls for swift and complete independence from Denmark,

¹⁸ [“MEPs to Resume Work on EU-US Trade Deal”](#), *The Brussels Times*, 4 February 2026.

¹⁹ Philip Luck, [“Why Economic Coercion Over Greenland Would Backfire”](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, 28 January 2026.

²⁰ [“Protecting Against Coercion”](#), European Commission, 27 December 2023.

came second in Greenland’s legislative elections in March 2025. The party’s official position is that it does not want Greenlanders to become either American or Danish. Some party members believe they should bypass Denmark and negotiate directly with the US regarding Greenland’s sovereignty.²¹

This indicates that public opinion among Greenlanders regarding their own sovereignty remains divided. Recent reports also highlight US approaches to intensifying surveillance in Greenland (by increasing the number of surveillance satellites, enhancing communications intercepts, and deploying personnel on the ground) to shape local narratives in the US's favour and to gather critical information to support US objectives on the island.²² All these aspects indicate that, even if the United States remains unsuccessful in its ongoing efforts in Greenland, the possibility of new divisions in public opinion among Greenlanders regarding sovereignty cannot be ruled out. This could lead to internal tensions on domestic political lines in the future and have implications for both US–Denmark and Danish–Greenland relations.

Strategic Signalling and Realignment

Russian President Vladimir Putin has stated that the US claims over Greenland have nothing to do with Russia.²³ It is, however, important to understand that, despite Putin’s public statements regarding Greenland, strategic experts in Moscow view the US’ Golden Dome project with great concern. Reports suggest that Greenland’s location and US infrastructure on the island would provide assured command and control of the space-based components of Golden Dome. Russian Foreign Affairs Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has previously warned that “Golden Dome provides for reinforcing combat capabilities in outer space... effectively turning outer space into a deployment area and an arena for military confrontation”.²⁴

Similarly, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov has highlighted that space-based interceptors (which are a crucial component of the Golden Done Project) are “extremely destabilising” and these create a “direct path not only to the militarisation of outer space, but also to its transformation into an arena of armed

²¹ Camille Bas-Wohlert, [“Explainer: What to Know About Greenland’s Security and Four Key Questions”](#), *The New Zealand Herald*, 8 January 2026.

²² Katherine Long and Alexander Ward, [“U.S. Orders Intelligence Agencies to Step Up Spying on Greenland”](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 May 2025.

²³ [“Putin Says Current Greenland Situation Has Nothing to Do with Russia: Media Report”](#), *Global Times*, 22 January 2026.

²⁴ [“Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Makhachka!”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, 27 May 2025.

confrontation”.²⁵ Furthermore, the Greenland–Iceland–UK (GIUK) Gap remains one of the most heavily contested maritime areas for achieving strategic dominance. NATO’s emphasis on enhancing its surveillance and security capabilities in the GIUK Gap to counter Russian and Chinese submarines will have strategic implications for Russia.

All these arguments highlight that though the US approach towards Greenland has been currently downplayed by Putin, it remains a source of concern for Moscow. Moscow would not ignore such activities of Arctic militarisation and the strengthening of strategic posturing against Russia, which may elicit reciprocal responses. This would significantly increase the overall securitisation threshold in the region and further narrow the space for re-establishing mutual trust and cooperation.

Maritime Claims in the Arctic

In a hypothetical scenario in which the United States were to annex Greenland and make it its own sovereign territory (despite the odds remaining low), the US would also have sovereign claims over Greenland’s maritime space. The issue of extended continental shelf claims among Denmark, Canada and Russia over the control of the Lomonosov Ridge in the Arctic remains contested and unresolved. All the three states, i.e., Canada, Russia and Denmark (on behalf of Greenland), have made their claims over the Lomonosov Ridge and call it a ‘natural extension of their continental shelf’. To establish their sovereignty over the Lomonosov Ridge in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), all these states have made formal scientific submissions to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS).²⁶

Following the analysis of Russia’s submitted scientific data supporting its claim regarding Lomonosov Ridge, the CLCS issued recommendations in favour of Russia in 2023. The commission still has to analyse the scientific submissions from Denmark and Canada to substantiate their claims. If the United States were to assert sovereignty over Greenland, it would give rise to new disputes between the United States and other states over their extended continental shelf claims in the area of the Lomonosov Ridge. It is worth noting that the US remains a non-party to UNCLOS and adheres to it only as customary international law. In 2023, the United States have made unilateral extended continental shelf claims in the Bering Sea and

²⁵ Raymond Wang and Lachlan MacKenzie, [“Golden Dome for America: Assessing Chinese and Russian Reactions”](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, 20 November 2025.

²⁶ [“Canada Files Submission to Establish Continental Shelf Outer Limits in Arctic Ocean”](#), *The Barents Observer*, 27 May 2019.

Chukchi Sea region.²⁷ These inferences suggest the possibility of an entirely new set of challenges emerging in the Arctic if the United States were to acquire Greenland’s sovereignty by any means.

Repercussions for Other Regions in the Arctic

US’ aspirations to harness and secure critical minerals for its national interests remain a top priority of the Trump administration. Such US ambitions to secure access to Greenland’s minerals face challenges stemming from the island’s sovereignty. Still, the likelihood that the United States will seek access to such minerals elsewhere in the world has increased significantly. It would therefore be naïve, from a geopolitical perspective, to argue that the United States would not seek such avenues in places like Svalbard in the future. The Svalbard Treaty of 1920 (also known as the Spitsbergen Treaty), though establishes full Norwegian sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago, its Articles 2 and 3 also provide equal rights for undertaking fishing, hunting, industrial, mining and other commercial activities to high contracting parties and their citizens, while keeping the area demilitarised.²⁸ The United States remains one of the high contracting parties to the treaty, and this gives it the right to pursue exploitation of such resources in Svalbard if it deems necessary.

Conclusion

The Arctic region as a whole remains heavily militarised. US’ intentions regarding Greenland have further militarised the region. On the one hand, alliance member states are working to enhance their military contributions to NATO; on the other, they are unilaterally upgrading their military capabilities and infrastructure in the region to address potential future unexpected scenarios. The level of trust that was once unquestionable in NATO and in its functioning as an alliance has begun to wane, giving rise to emerging mistrust. Trump’s ambitions and policy approach towards Greenland challenge the fundamental aspects of the rules-based order established by the Bretton Woods institutions. The Arctic region has begun to witness escalating military build-ups not only between traditionally perceived ‘rivals’ but also among NATO's trusted and founding partners.

²⁷ Bipandeep Sharma, [“Assessing US Extended Continental Shelf \(ECS\) Claims in the Arctic”](#), Comment, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 10 July 2024.

²⁸ Svalbard Treaty, [“Treaty between Norway, The United States of America, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Ireland and the British Overseas Dominions and Sweden Concerning Spitsbergen”](#), Paris, 9 February 1920.

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