



Greenland: The Strategic Center of the High North

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Growing competition in the Arctic Circle is putting Greenland's strategic position on the public agenda. The Arctic island, which is under Danish sovereignty, is vital to American interests given the military presence of Russia and China and the nearby shipping lanes. These interests are leading to secret understandings between Denmark and the US.

President-elect Donald Trump has reignited interest in the strategic status of the island of Greenland following his proposal to purchase it from Denmark, which controls it. The previous Trump administration had already proposed to purchase the island.

Greenland is a central part of the Arctic region, an area that is of substantial geopolitical significance. The increased focus on the island's strategic value has been accompanied by calls from its Inuit residents to make the local government in Nuuk (Greenland's capital) fully independent of Denmark. While recent statements by Trump about his intentions have stoked tensions, Denmark is conducting secret talks with the US to expand American military bases.

The region is important because the melting of the glaciers is creating potential economic and strategic opportunities. The US, Russia and China are all taking steps to strengthen their military presence in the area. In 2014, Denmark and Greenland claimed an area of 895,000 square kilometers beyond the Arctic Circle and up to the border of the Russian exclusive economic zone. Denmark also has claims to the

Lomonosov Ridge, which it sees as a geological extension of Greenland. For its part, Russia has territorial claims against Norway, which has expanded its continental shelf to include the Barents Sea, the Arctic Ocean and the Norwegian Sea.

Denmark, which officially maintains its sovereignty in the region, has struggled to preserve the Arctic island's Danish identity and set its agenda. The two share a long history of power struggles. In late 1826, a trade treaty was signed between Denmark, Sweden, and Norway that included recognition of Danish sovereignty over Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. William H. Seward, the US Secretary of State from 1861 to 1869 who spearheaded the purchase of Alaska from Russia, also proposed – without success – that the US purchase Greenland and Iceland from Denmark.

During World War I, Denmark sold the West Indies to the US in return for American recognition of its claim to extend its sovereignty to all of Greenland. In 1919, the Norwegian Foreign Minister expressed his government's explicit recognition of Denmark's ownership of Greenland, following negotiations that resulted in the transfer of the Arctic island of Spitsbergen to Norway. In 1933, a decisive judgment was issued recognizing Danish sovereignty over all of Greenland as part of a legal battle between Denmark and Norway. A tribunal of judges rejected the Norwegian argument that parts of Greenland were no-man's land. Following the judgment, the Norwegian government declared that it was rescinding its ownership of East Greenland. In return, Denmark announced that it would not harm Norway's economic interests in the island.

Fast forward to today. In recent years, Denmark has adopted a renewed defense strategy in the Arctic region, which includes Greenland and the Faroe Islands. As a result, it has accelerated its armament while striving for close security cooperation with the Nordic countries in the protection of critical infrastructure especially in the Arctic region and the Baltic Sea. The Norwegian General Staff increased Nordic cooperation by establishing a Nordic Air Force Command as part of the NATO command structure. Norway notes that it is necessary to recognize the military challenges along the Finnish-Russian border, the strategic location of the Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, and the importance of the Danish Straits that connect the Baltic and North Seas.

At the same time, Denmark has pledged to be a significant player in the Arctic. In December 2019, at the NATO summit in London, Danish Prime Minister Mette

Frederiksen revealed plans to spend two hundred million euros on promoting a renewed strategy for the Arctic region, and in June 2022, Denmark and the Faroe Islands agreed to install an early warning radar system around the islands. In view of the war in Ukraine, the Faroe Islands extended the ban on Russian vessels entering their ports, a move that aligns with the Danish government's commitment to expand its defense infrastructure investment to an average of 143 billion Danish kroner over the coming decade.

The latest moves were also made under pressure from the Pentagon, which called for increased Danish involvement amid concerns that the government in Greenland's capital, Nuuk, would find it difficult to refuse generous offers from China to increase its exposure and economic activity on the island. These actions correspond with Denmark's policy on Greenland, which prohibits Chinese companies from building an airport on the island. The Americans are also conducting broader exercises in the region, and airborne divisions are training to increase their mobility to be more effective on a future battlefield. When these units operate in Greenland, they operate on missions on behalf of the Joint Arctic Command.

While Trump's belligerent rhetoric is not conducive to negotiation, the Danes are nevertheless trying to form direct secret understandings with Trump's people in order to increase the American presence in the region. The Danish public may be taken aback by Trump's style of speech, but the government in Copenhagen gained experience dealing with a Trump administration during his previous term in office. It can be assumed that the government in Copenhagen is formulating a plan of action. It will allow Trump's public statements to gain political capital, but will at the same time build discreet confidential or unofficial understandings with him to expand American activities.

Furthermore, NATO sees the Nordic countries as a vital factor in strengthening regional security and is developing an Arctic military strategy that involves large-scale exercises throughout the Nordic region. In 2018, a NATO exercise held in Norway showcased a significant demonstration of military strength. This large-scale maneuver involved NATO forces practicing a comprehensive offensive, including an assault on the Arctic coastline. NATO has also begun a renewed series of exercises and operations designed to respond to the Russian submarine threat in the region. These exercises, called Dynamic Mongoose, took place in the

Norwegian Sea and adjacent areas and included most of the fleets of NATO's northern flank.

The US has also been refining its Arctic policy through strategic military deployments. These include stationing a B1-Lancer squadron in Norway, establishing a naval operations center in Iceland, and conducting submarine-based exercises to ensure high operational readiness in the high north. Notably, in 2022, the US conducted the largest military exercise within the Arctic Circle in Norway since the 1980s, further underscoring the growing strategic importance of the region.

These developments reflect a concerted effort by NATO and its allies to enhance their preparedness and maintain stability in the evolving Arctic security landscape. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO slightly alters the military balance in the Arctic region while also supporting non-military initiatives that both countries have actively promoted in recent years.

Therefore, one should avoid drawing conclusions about a political clash between the Americans and the Danes. The latest challenges point to cooperation in the Arctic region. The government in Copenhagen has approved the resumption of Cold War-era radar activity on the Faroe Islands. In 2023 and 2024, two pairs of satellites were launched to monitor more than two million square kilometers of the Arctic Circle. This is to improve the intelligence capabilities of the US, and there is a high probability that this agreement also applies to Greenland.

Alongside these moves, there is the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR), which serves as a platform for military leaders from Arctic and observer states to strengthen multilateral security cooperation. Denmark also encourages cooperation with the European Commission and Naalakkersuisut (the government of Greenland), which have initiated the EU Arctic Forum on Inuit Dialogue. In this context, Denmark acts as a liaison between the interests of the EU and the people of Greenland, with the participation of the current Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen.

Nordic leaders have consistently demonstrated their ability to settle regional disputes without compromising broader Arctic cooperation. For instance, ecological concerns arising from a decade-long dispute among Iceland, the European Union, the Faroe Islands, and Norway were successfully addressed, leading to collaborative efforts to preserve the region. Similarly, disputes around

Svalbard – related to the application of the Svalbard Treaty to the continental shelf surrounding the archipelago – were resolved. These disagreements, sparked by developments in the Norwegian Arctic as a potential resource hub, were effectively compartmentalized, ensuring they did not negatively impact overall Arctic cooperation.

The resolution of such disputes has maintained stability in the region, reinforcing the preference of Nordic states for peaceful and collaborative Arctic relations. However, recent suspicions and events highlight the need for strengthened security arrangements, including military exercises and enhanced surveillance capabilities by Nordic air forces to deter unexpected actions in the Arctic.

Meanwhile, Nuuk's push for greater autonomy has raised concerns in the US, prompting warnings about potentially taking control of Greenland to prevent foreign interference. These developments are likely to foster dialogue between the US and Denmark on Greenland's future, with the aim of avoiding political escalation and preserving regional stability.

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