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The Role of Greenland in Arctic Security: Greenland's Allure

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Introduction

Greenland, the biggest island in the world that, however, appears much larger than it really is on some map projections, has a territory of 2.17 million square kilometres (836,330 square miles). Nonetheless, a large portion of this territory, 81 per cent of it, is covered by ice. Due to being covered by vast tundra, transportation and general living conditions on the island are quite difficult for its 57,000 inhabitants. So why is Greenland so appealing?

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fairness of NATO while slowly withdrawing from European defence matters and turning towards maintaining stronger influence over the Western hemisphere, which could be seen by the *Operation Absolute Resolve* in Venezuela in early 2026, indicates towards a new US foreign policy shift that has now culminated with Greenland. The policy of 'hemispheric defence' was announced in the 2025 National Security Strategy of the United States of America by the introduction of the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Threatening with the use of military force to acquire Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, means threatening another NATO ally. Even though Trump loosened up on the idea of using force to acquire Greenland, at least according to his speech on the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, he still has not given up on the idea of owning Greenland. This time, being a successful businessman, Trump proposed a more transactional method, suggesting that the US should buy Greenland from Denmark or directly make payments to Greenlanders. Even though the situation deescalated and there are now diplomatic efforts to find a common agreement between Denmark, Greenland and the US, this has undoubtedly left a rupture within the NATO alliance whose relations were already deteriorating.

Greenland is located within the Arctic Circle which encompasses land from seven other countries: United States, Canada, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. This makes it a potential ground for future great-power rivalries, especially with the increasing involvement of China in the region. Greenland is also a part of the GIUK Gap (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom) which is according to The International Institute for Strategic Studies, a maritime passage that is a major strategic transit route for NATO. Therefore,

Denmark and Greenland are open to stronger and closer cooperation with the US in order to assure Arctic security and the GIUK gap. However, they insist on Greenland's sovereignty as an autonomous Danish territory.

Due to the defence agreement that was signed with Denmark in 1951, the US already has wide military access to Greenland. So, if Greenland is so imperative to global security and American national security as Trump stresses, why does the US have only one military base on the island, the Pituffik Space Base? The interest in Greenland and in the Arctic region is not new. However, it is becoming increasingly prominent as climate change begins to take its toll. The warming of the Arctic is progressing four times faster than the global average. This creates economic opportunities, as well as security threats that will be discussed in the next section.

Greenland's Strategic Significance in the Arctic

When it comes to economic security, there are three main shipping routes in the Arctic that connect the Pacific and the Atlantic. The Northeast Passage runs along Russia's Arctic coast and can shorten maritime travel between East Asia and Western Europe by 10–15 days compared to the Suez Canal route. This makes it strategically important for China, which seeks a larger role in the region. Russia also uses the route to ship liquefied natural gas (LNG). The passage is controlled by Rosatom, a Russian state nuclear energy corporation, allowing Moscow to restrict foreign military traffic along the route. The Northwest Passage extends

alongside Canada's northern border and has potential to reduce maritime travel between East Asia and Europe by 10 days when compared to travelling through the Panama Canal. The Transpolar Sea Route is a direct route through the North Pole. This route is very rarely used given the fact it is covered by permanent ice. However, due to climate change and melting ice caps, this route could become passable and practicable which makes it appealing to great powers. This has engendered new economic opportunities in the region. Hence, since 2013, the number of ships that are operating in the Arctic has increased by 37%.

When it comes to military hard power and defence, President Trump has been emphasizing the increasing Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic as a direct threat to US national security, and the reason behind his Greenland ambitions. By focusing on the Sino-Russian partnership in the Arctic, which is rather symbolic, one can lose insight into individual ambitions of these two countries. For example, Russia has developed mobile defence systems (Bastion-P and Pantsir-S1) on Kotelný Island and Novaya Zemlya, Russian islands in the Arctic region, enhancing its area-denial capabilities. It has expanded radar coverage through the Bering Strait, upgraded airfield and rescue capacities and reactivated Soviet-era airbases, radar station and facilities in the Western Arctic.

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China, on the other hand, is the second most important export destination for Greenland. In addition, China's presence on the island is increasingly focusing on natural resources and infrastructure, amidst Greenland's efforts to diversify its economy. Beijing has tried investing in Greenland's airports and an abandoned naval station, but those ambitions have been diminished by Danish and US stakeholders. Beijing keeps advancing its vision of the 'Polar Silk Road' while trying to connect East Asia and Europe through shorter shipping routes. China declared itself a 'near-Arctic state' but its lack of Arctic territory makes it dependant on partnerships with other countries. Therefore, Norway's Svalbard archipelago and Iceland are home to China's two continuous research stations in the Arctic.

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Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic has indeed intensified. Amidst Western sanctions and isolation, Russia has become more open to Chinese logistical and economic engagement. Together they have conducted joint drills and overflights and are planning to construct ice-class container ships and train specialists for Arctic navigation, strengthening the commercial dimension of their partnership. Russia's Federal

Security Service and the Chinese Coast Guard have signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2023 which led to their first joint coast guard patrol and drill in the Russian Arctic in 2024. However, the partnership remains carefully managed. Most of these activities occur within Russia's Arctic zone and under Russia's control. For Russia, the Arctic is a core strategic domain, and therefore, it remains cautious about expanding China's footprint there, especially in the military sphere.

Denmark exerts its military presence in Greenland mainly through the Joint Arctic Command. The main task of this framework is to assert sovereignty, surveillance and military defence of Greenland, as well as of the Faroes Islands. The Danish Armed forces have also set up a special force in Greenland - the Serius sledge patrol. Denmark's current military presence in Greenland is far from sufficient, creating frictions with the US which see Greenland as essential for their national security.

The United States have had numerous strategically relevant bases on Greenland during the Cold War. Today, there is only one operable military base, the Pituffik Space Base, that is hardly accessible due to being covered by ice nine months of the year. The Base serves as a first warning base for missile warning, missile defence and is important for conducting space surveillance missions. Due to vast ice and hardly accessible territories, the US has invested \$9 billion in icebreakers in order to strengthen its presence in the polar region.

NATO has been trying to increase its presence in the region as well. In 2019, a Joint Force Command Norfolk was established with headquarters in Norfolk, Virginia. Its main duty is to secure sea lines of communication that are strategically important. In 2025, Denmark,

Finland and Sweden joined the Command. NATO is also present in the Arctic region through numerous operations; such is the Arctic Light led by Denmark. In February 2026, the Arctic Sentry was launched by the Allied Command Operations in order to strengthen NATO's strategic posture in the Arctic. It will be led by JFC Norfolk and aims to create a coherent allied approach to shifting security paradigms in the Arctic. Arctic Sentry came as an answer to rising tensions between NATO allies regarding Greenland. This multi-domain 'Vigilance Activity' is designed to improve coordination of existing allied activity in the Arctic, without new NATO military presence being established in the region. The existing activities mainly concern Denmark's 2026 Arctic Endurance which consists of exercises in and around Greenland that involve allied countries, and Cold Response exercise in Norway and Finland. Therefore, Arctic Sentry is simply a new way to coordinate existing Arctic military exercises under NATO command, which does not resolve the issue of Greenland between the US and Denmark.

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As can be seen above, the Arctic Circle is becoming increasingly relevant as a platform for great power projection. Greenland, by virtue of its strategic geographic position, is central

for surveillance, maritime control and broader security framework for North America and Europe. Instead of strengthened cooperation under NATO allies, we have witnessed unprecedented uncertainty of the alliance. The new Arctic Sentry is merely a joint platform for existing military exercises in the Arctic, which does not resolve the Greenland issue among NATO allies.

Greenland's Resources

Another great allure of Greenland are its vast rare earth deposits ranking it eighth in the world when it comes to rare earth reserves. Greenland is home to two large rare earth deposits: Kvanefjeld and Tanbreez. Nonetheless, so far there has been no rare earth mining on the island. However, global warming of temperatures and melting ice caps are creating possibilities for easier access to minerals and more accessible shipping and transportation routes, making Greenland an attractive partner for all great powers.

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Kvanefjeld is the third largest land deposit of rare earths, encompassing more than 11 million metric tons of reserves which include 370,000 metric tons of heavy rare earths. Tanbreez is potentially the world's largest rare earth deposit, with estimated 27% of heavy rare earths. However, it is low on ore grades which are financially more viable and cost-effective

considering the easier separating and processing procedures. Even though Greenland is rich in natural resources such as graphite, iron ore, gold, zinc and rare earth minerals, there are only two mining projects operating on the island, none of which are rare earth mining projects. This is due to lack of exploitation licenses that are hard to obtain considering the environmental impact and safety concerns regarding rare earth mining that is connected to uranium.

Due to Greenland's vast resources of rare earth minerals, the island is, for some time now, a place of great power contestation. In 2008, the people of Greenland voted for the Self-Government Act which provided greater autonomy for the island. Since then, the Government of Greenland had the possibility to conclude and negotiate international agreements with foreign states on matters under their field of responsibility. This opened a door to greater cooperation between Greenland and China. The most visible Chinese presence in Greenland is the Kvanefjeld project led by Australian company Energy Transition Minerals (formerly Greenland Minerals Limited). The Chinese company Shenge Resources bought 12.5 percent of the Australian companies' shares making Shenge the second largest shareholder of the Kvanefjeld mine. In 2018, the two companies signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that enabled Shenge to lead the marketing and processing of materials extracted from the Kvanefjeld mine. However, in 2021 Greenland experienced a change in government, with the Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA) party coming to power after winning the parliamentary election. A new law was enacted that banned prospecting, exploration and exploitation of minerals that contain uranium at a concentration above 100 parts per million, effectively paralysing the Kvanefjeld project.

In 2019, the United States also followed with signing a memorandum of understanding with Greenland that set forth a cooperation in joint valuation of the region and efforts in developing rare earth and critical mineral capacities. Together, the two jointly funded and operated an aerial hyperspectral survey over 3,000 square kilometres in the southwest Greenland. Through this partnership, the US focused on data collection, which is of great importance for future mining activities. The US has also invested in companies in order to foster investments in rare earth mining in Greenland. Therefore, in 2025 the US Export-Import Bank provided a \$120 million loan to a company, Critical Metals Corp, in order to fund the companies' rare earth mining in the Tanbreez mine. However, few American firms have shown interests in diving into the extremely difficult and expensive process of mining in Greenland.

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Critical Raw Materials Act that are of strategic importance for Europe's industry, and 25 of them can be found in Greenland. The EU has therefore signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of Greenland in 2023 to strengthen cooperation and partnership to develop raw materials value chains. The MoU focuses on the economic and industrial integration of value chains for critical raw materials while following the strictest ESG standards as well as on the deployment of infrastructure required for the development of these value chains.

As can be seen above, Greenland is trying to diversify its economy and, since 2008, it is able to autonomously negotiate and conclude national agreements with foreign states on specific matters. The EU has prioritized reinforcing its strategic partnership with Greenland, whereas China has adopted a commercially oriented strategy based on investments and shareholding in extractive projects. To date, Chinese efforts have largely stalled, primarily due to domestic resistance in Greenland stemming from environmental concerns related to mining operations. The United States has adopted a mixed approach: in addition to developing formal partnerships and institutional cooperation with the Government of Greenland, Washington has also pursued commercial engagement through investments and support for rare earth projects in Greenland. The interest in Greenland's valuable deposits shows that great powers are emphasizing resource security as a crucial part of national security. This will inevitably lead to amplified great power projection in the Arctic and on the resource-rich Greenland.

Conclusion

Due to the changed nature of the region caused by climate change, the Arctic circle and Greenland as its integral part, are increasingly becoming a platform for great power contestation. The European Union, and especially its non-Arctic member states have in great measure overlooked the strategic relevance of Greenland and the Arctic as a whole. Other international actors such as Russia and China have been strengthening their cooperation in the Russian part of the Arctic, but it is mostly oriented towards strengthening commercial ties under cautious and careful management by Russia who is still wary of China's influence in the region. Even though China is trying to gain a foothold in the Arctic, it is not an Arctic state and is therefore limited in its endeavours in the region and dependant on partnerships.

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The NATO alliance has experienced unprecedented levels of uncertainty and fragility due to Trump's attempts at geo-political real estate. The United States' threats of using

military force to acquire Greenland have shocked the European NATO allies. This course of action reflects a broader US foreign policy shift that is relocating to the western hemisphere. The emerging NATO Arctic Sentry operation is so far just a new way to coordinate existing Arctic military operations under NATO command and, as such, does not resolve the question of Greenland among NATO allies.

The question of Greenland is far deeper than its strategic geographic relevance in the Arctic region. Its main allure are its vast deposits of rare earth elements crucial for critical value chains. It seems that the US, as well as other great powers, are equating resource security to national security. In this sense, bringing Greenland under the American flag would be the greatest real estate deal for the US since the Alaska Purchase in 1867. China's attempts in investing and securing rare earth materials in Greenland and its infrastructure investments have largely been stalled, either by domestic resistance or by Danish and US efforts. American companies have shown limited interest in investing in extremely costly mining projects in Greenland. Nevertheless, the US has supported certain companies in their mining activities and has expressed interest in owning Greenland. As Greenland is an autonomous territory of Denmark, an EU member state, such ambitions have raised concerns in Europe, with some observers viewing the US as the most significant external threat to Greenland's current political status. Even though the EU has in large measure overlooked the importance of Greenland – both in terms of its natural resources and its strategic position in the Arctic, exclusion from Greenland would constitute a major geostrategic loss for

the EU, restricting its access to potential critical raw materials vital for future resilience of supply chains.

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