



GREENLAND AS A STRATEGIC NECESSITY

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Abstract: *This article examines the growing geopolitical significance of Greenland within the evolving architecture of Arctic and global security, with particular attention to the strategic rationale underlying former U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated assertions regarding the necessity of Greenland for American national security. Moving beyond the perception of such statements as rhetorical excess, the study situates U.S. interest in Greenland within broader structural dynamics, including climate change, Arctic militarization, critical resource competition, and the transformation of transatlantic relations. The analysis explores Greenland's historical and legal status within the Kingdom of Denmark, its economic structure and vulnerabilities, and its geostrategic value as a node in missile defense, maritime control, and emerging Arctic infrastructure. Furthermore, the article assesses the implications of intensified U.S. involvement for European security, Danish sovereignty, NATO cohesion, and relations with Russia and China. It argues that Greenland has become a test case for shifting norms in international order, where geo-economics and security considerations increasingly challenge established principles of sovereignty and alliance governance. The findings suggest that European actors must reassess long-held assumptions about the stability of transatlantic security arrangements and prepare for a more contested and multipolar Arctic future.*

Key words: *Greenland, security, NATO, Denmark, Donald Trump, Vikings, North Atlantic, Russia, China, Pituffik Space Base, GIUK Gap.*

Introduction

In the 21st century, Greenland has ceased to be a 'blank spot' on the political map of the world and has become one of the key hubs of global geopolitics. While formally remaining an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, Greenland is increasingly finding itself at the center of attention of the world's leading powers — primarily the United States, the European Union countries, Russia and China. The reasons for this interest go far beyond symbolic politics and are linked to the transformation of international relations in the context of climate change, the militarization of the Arctic and competition for strategic resources.

The international debate was particularly resonant following statements by former US President Donald Trump about the possibility of acquiring or establishing



tighter control over Greenland (*Trine Jonassen, 2025⁴⁶*). Although such statements were perceived by many as political eccentricity, in reality they reflect the deep structural interests of the United States in the Arctic region — interests related to security, military presence, control over sea lanes and access to rare earth resources. In this context, Greenland is seen not as an isolated territory, but as a strategic asset on a global scale (*Thomas Mackintosh, January 2026⁴⁷*).

The relevance of studying Greenland in the political and international dimension is also due to the changing balance of power in the Arctic. The melting of glaciers not only accelerates environmental processes, but also opens up new transport corridors, intensifying rivalry between states. Against this backdrop, Greenland.

History and culture

For many hundreds of years, Greenland has been a land whose development reflected the conflicting interests of the native peoples of the Arctic and those of the European powers. The Vikings were the first Europeans to put in settlements there, around the end of the 10th century, whereas its eventual sustainable political integration into the European system did not take place until the era of Danish colonial expansion (*Wayback Machine⁴⁸*). From the 18th century on, Greenland was part of Denmark and in 1953 it was formally made a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, which on paper meant the end of its colonial status but in reality did not give it full political rights (*Reuters, January 8, 2025⁴⁹*).

Instinctive ethnic identity growth among the Inuit people later on led to constructive changes. Home Rule was introduced in 1979 as a direct result of a referendum, which handed Greenland autonomy over domestic affairs (*Wikipedia, 2025⁵⁰*). The 2009 Act on Greenland Self-Government (*STATSMINISTERIET, June 12, 2009⁵¹*) represents the most important step in which legally Greenlanders were recognised as a separate people with the right to self-determination under international law. The law gave the island the right to jointly exploit its natural resources and allowed the possibility of full independence through a referendum (*The Prime Minister's Office⁵²*).

⁴⁶ **Trine Jonassen.** (2025) *US president Donald Trumps speech to a joint Congress.*

<https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/trump-says-us-will-take-control-greenland-one-way-or-other>

⁴⁷ **Thomas Mackintosh.** (2026) *We need Greenland': Trump repeats threat to annex Danish territory.*

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g0zg974v1o>

⁴⁸ **Wayback Machine.** *Timeline of the history of Norse Greenland.*

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170804120655/http://www.greenland-guide.gl/leif2000/history.htm>

⁴⁹ **Reuters.** (2025) *Greenland's history as a Danish territory.* <https://www.reuters.com/world/why-does-trump-want-greenland-could-he-get-it-2025-01-08/>

⁵⁰ **Wikipedia.** (2025) *1979 Greenlandic home rule referendum*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1979_Greenlandic_home_rule_referendum

⁵¹ **STATSMINISTERIET.** (2009) *Act on Greenland Self-Government.* <https://english.stm.dk/media/4vgewyoh/gl-selvstyrellov-uk.pdf>

⁵² **The Prime Minister's Office.** *The modern legal framework for extended self-government.*

<https://english.stm.dk/the-prime-ministers-office/the-unity-of-the-realm/greenland>



However, Denmark still retained the rights to decide on foreign affairs, defence and security issues thus turning Greenland into a privileged item of international relations not a state on paper, but a strategically important territory. The economic reliance on the financial support from Denmark is still a stumbling block for a fast move towards full independence but the legal framework of self-government is laying the groundwork for a slow transfer of sovereign powers (*Greenland Self-Government Act, 2024*⁵³).

Therefore, Greenland's present-day political identity is a product of the colonial past, international law and the growing geopolitical significance of the Arctic all coming together. Staying at this crossroads of being an autonomous territory is what makes Greenland a target of interest not only to the United States but also to other external actors, and is the main reason for foreign policy moves such as Donald Trump's statements.

Geographical location and natural conditions

Greenland, the world's largest island, covers about 2.16 million km². It is situated between the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans, at the crossroads of the North America-Europe routes. Ice covers over 80% of the land, which makes the island remarkable both geologically and environmentally (*Traci Pedersen, 2018*⁵⁴).

At the heart of Greenland lies the Greenland Ice Sheet, globally only second to the Antarctic Ice Sheet in size. It spans over 1.7 million km², and a complete melting of the ice sheet would result in a sea level rise of around 6 to 7 meters, thus placing the island in the centre of global climate change discussion (*Sanat Pai Raikar*⁵⁵).

Almost the entire climate of Greenland is Arctic and sub-Arctic. The ice-covered central regions of the country witness extremely cold temperatures, whereas the coastal areas, primarily the south and west, are influenced by the ocean and hence, are relatively warmer. The economic development is largely hampered by the climatic conditions, and simultaneously, the territory becomes valuable strategically as a result of climate change and ice melting (*Wetherbee, Amy, 2025*⁵⁶).

Thus, Greenland's geographical location and natural conditions make it not only an important climate indicator, but also a strategic space whose influence extends far beyond regional politics.

Economy — fishing, tourism, subsidies from Denmark

The economy of Greenland is still quite specialized and structurally dependent, with fishing and state support from Denmark being its main sources of income.

⁵³ **Greenland Self-Government Act.** (2024) <https://www.iea.org/policies/18078-greenland-self-government-act>

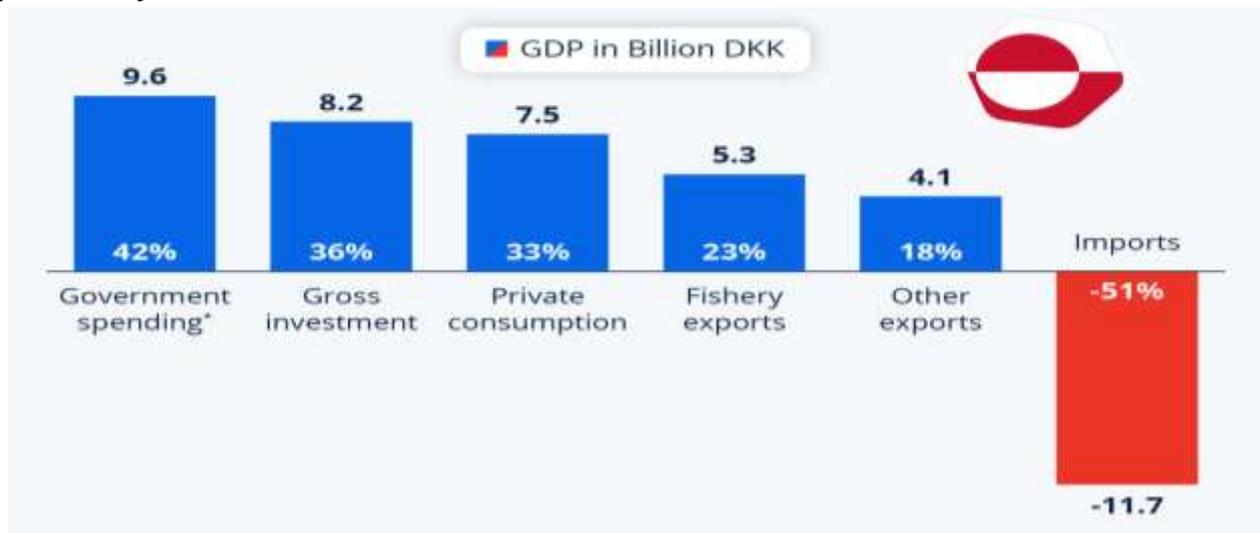
⁵⁴ **Traci Pedersen.** (2018) *Greenland: An Arctic island that's rapidly melting.* <https://www.livescience.com/61602-greenland-facts.html>

⁵⁵ **Sanat Pai Raikar.** *Greenland Ice Sheet.* <https://www.britannica.com/place/Greenland-Ice-Sheet>

⁵⁶ **Wetherbee, Amy.** (2025) *Greenland.* <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/geography-and-cartography/greenland>

The economy is still basically fishing and exports. Fish and seafood, mainly shrimp and cod, continue to form the backbone of the economy: they represent over 90% of Greenland's total exports and are the biggest source of foreign currency on the island. The very high share of exports makes the economy quite vulnerable to world price fluctuations and changes in fishing quotas.

The public sector plays a very significant role in the economy and accounts for a very substantial portion of GDP, in 2023 government spending was equivalent to about 42% of GDP and, of that, around half was financed through the annual subsidy from Denmark. That subsidy was roughly equal to 20% of Greenland's GDP in the same year (Picture 1).



Picture 1. Greenland's 2023 GDP in current prices, by component (*Anna Fleck, 2025⁵⁷*)

Moreover, Denmark covers the costs of key government functions such as law enforcement, defense, the courts and environmental protection, thus highlighting the necessity of financial assistance for the economy to work properly.

In addition to traditional Danish subsidies, Greenland's economic vulnerability has attracted attention from the United States. According to Reuters, U.S. officials have discussed the possibility of offering direct financial payments to Greenland's population as part of broader considerations on reshaping the island's political and economic orientation. While hypothetical, such proposals illustrate how economic instruments may be used to influence governance structures in strategically important regions (*Reuters, January, 2026⁵⁸*).

Even though fishing dominates the economy, the tourism sector is gaining momentum, and securing its position as a major player. Based on the data published by Visit Greenland in 2024, tourism accounted for 4.9% of the GDP of Greenland and

⁵⁷ Anna Fleck. (2025) *Greenland's Economy Depends on Fishing and Danish Subsidies.*

<https://www.statista.com/chart/34175/greenland-gdp-in-current-prices/>

⁵⁸ Reuters has learned that the US may pay Greenland residents up to \$100,000. (2026)

<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/01/2026/695ff0009a79470c58b3c416>



created approx. 1,800 jobs; the economic value of the sector locally exceeded 1.2 billion Danish krone. This development is attributable to both an increasing number of tourists from overseas and the upgrading of facilities (e.g. cruise routes and new airports), thereby bringing a greater variety of revenue sources (*Traveltrade, May 2025*⁵⁹).

Why interest in Greenland is growing: geopolitics and climate

The rise in overseas attention to Greenland can be attributed to both geopolitical and climatic factors interconnected, causing a radical change in the importance of the Arctic region within the global security framework. Not long ago, Greenland was considered a remote and economically underdeveloped territory, but the trend now is that it is increasingly becoming a geopolitical asset, thus affecting the power balance among the major powers (*Danica Kirka And Stefanie Dazio, January, 2026*⁶⁰).

The main reason is climate change that has led to unraveling the glaciers of the Arctic at a much faster rate. Subsequently, this has resulted in opening up of new shipping lanes particularly the Northern Sea Route and the potential transit corridors from/to Europe, North America, and Asia. To control these routes is to enjoy lower logistics costs, have greater command over trade, and increase one's military presence in the Arctic. Hence, Greenland's location between North America and Europe is very strategically important (*Kersten Knipp, 2025*⁶¹).

The next factor is the military build-up in the Arctic. Russia is not only developing its northern military facilities but also re-activating its Cold War era bases and thus tightening its grip over the Arctic coast. In response, NATO sees the Arctic as a risk-prone area where any potential missile threat to the North Atlantic area could be detected early. It is here that Greenland is vital, moreover with the American base at Thule Air Base, which forms part of the US missile defense system (*Jennifer Spence, 2025*⁶²).

Thirdly, Greenland is believed to possess substantial deposits of critical minerals, including rare earth elements, lithium, and uranium, which are essential for defense technologies, clean energy systems, and advanced manufacturing. Given the concentration of global supply chains—particularly China's dominance in mineral extraction and processing—U.S. access to Greenland's resources is viewed as a means of reducing strategic dependence on potential competitors.

⁵⁹ **Traveltrade.** (2025) *Visit Greenland has just published the first official Tourism Satellite Account (TSA)*
<https://traveltrade.visitgreenland.com/latest-news/visit-greenland-publishes-the-countrys-first-tourism-satellite-account/>

⁶⁰ **Danica Kirka And Stefanie Dazio.** (2026) *Why Greenland is strategically important to Arctic security?*
<https://apnews.com/article/greenland-denmark-security-trump-arctic-north-6066195d0c6b9e1bbe6da27d55b26ece>

⁶¹ **Kersten Knipp.** (2025) *China, Russia, USA: the strategic battle for the Arctic is already underway.*
<https://www.dw.com/ru/kitaj-rossia-ssa-strategiceskaa-borba-za-arktiku-nacalas/a-72076704>

⁶² **Jennifer Spence.** (2025) *Explainer: The Geopolitical Significance of Greenland*
<https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/explainer-geopolitical-significance-greenland>



So, beyond security considerations, Greenland holds increasing significance in U.S. strategic thinking due to its long-term economic and infrastructural potential. Trump's interest reflects a broader shift toward geo-economics, where access to resources, supply-chain resilience, and infrastructure control are treated as components of national security rather than purely commercial concerns.

Infrastructure development constitutes a parallel strategic concern. Control over ports, airports, telecommunications, and energy networks in the Arctic confers disproportionate influence over both economic activity and military mobility. U.S. opposition to Chinese-backed infrastructure projects in Greenland reflects apprehension that civilian investments could evolve into long-term strategic leverage or dual-use facilities.

Despite these prospects, economic development in Greenland faces significant environmental, regulatory, and financial constraints. Extraction costs are high, infrastructure is limited, and domestic political resistance remains strong. Nonetheless, Trump's rationale prioritizes long-term strategic positioning over immediate profitability, underscoring an approach in which economic engagement serves as a tool for sustaining U.S. strategic influence in the High North.

National security of US

Donald Trump's persistent assertion that Greenland is crucial to U.S. national security is based on a long-standing American strategic logic that sees the Arctic as a crucial front line in the struggle for global dominance, not just verbal provocation or a commercial real estate impulse. Greenland's geographic position between North America and Eurasia places it along critical missile, air, and maritime corridors, rendering it a pivotal node in the United States' early-warning and strategic defense architecture (*Department of Defense Arctic Strategy, 2019*⁶³). Trump's formulation reflects a pragmatic mindset in which control over strategic chokepoints, military advantage, and geography take precedence over traditional standards of sovereignty or diplomatic sensitivities.

Greenland occupies one of the most strategically valuable positions on the planet. Situated between North America and Europe, it dominates the GIUK Gap (*IISS, 2019*⁶⁴) (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom) — a maritime and aerial corridor historically used to track and deter Soviet, and now Russian, naval and air movements into the North Atlantic.

From a U.S. defense perspective, Greenland functions as a natural forward operating platform, as it lies directly along the shortest ballistic missile trajectories between Russia and the United States, it enables early detection of intercontinental ballistic missile launches from Eurasia and it serves as a monitoring point of Europe

⁶³ **Department of Defense Arctic Strategy.** (2019) *Report to Congress.*

<https://media.defense.gov/2019/jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-dod-arctic-strategy.pdf>

⁶⁴ **IISS.org.** (2019) *The GIUK Gap's strategic significance.*

<https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2019/the-giuk-gaps-strategic-significance/>



and for Russian submarine activity, especially nuclear-armed submarines transiting into the Atlantic.

Trump's public statements echo long-standing Pentagon assessments that control or guaranteed access to Greenland is indispensable for maintaining U.S. homeland defense.

The presence of the U.S. Pituffik Space Base (*Department of Defense, 2020*⁶⁵) further institutionalizes Greenland's role within American missile-defense, space surveillance, and deterrence systems. Within the context of intensifying great-power competition, particularly amid Russia's expanding Arctic militarization and China's growing economic and scientific engagement in the region, Trump's position reflects a preventive security logic aimed at minimizing strategic vulnerabilities along the United States' northern approaches.

Trump's emphasis on Greenland intensified alongside his broader push for missile defense modernization and the militarization of space. In this context, Greenland is not simply a territorial asset but a keystone node in U.S. strategic deterrence architecture.

Loss of guaranteed U.S. influence in Greenland — or increased presence by rival powers — would, in Trump's view, represent an unacceptable vulnerability in America's defensive shield. "We've been dealing with Denmark, we've been dealing with Greenland, and we have to do it. We really need it for national security. I think that's why NATO might have to get involved in a way, because we really need Greenland for national security. It's very important," Trump told NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte as they sat side-by-side in the White House Oval Office for talks (*Reuters, March 2025*⁶⁶).

Denmark's position

Denmark frames U.S. interest in Greenland primarily as an issue of sovereignty, international law, and alliance governance rather than strategic bargaining. Greenland is an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark under the 2009 Self-Government Act, which grants extensive internal autonomy while reserving foreign and defense policy to Copenhagen; any change in status must therefore be based on Greenlandic self-determination (*Government of Denmark, 2009*⁶⁷).

Denmark's position reflects a rules-based and institutionalist approach to international relations, emphasizing respect for territorial integrity and the prohibition of coercive territorial acquisition under international law (*United Nations, 1945*⁶⁸). While acknowledging Greenland's strategic importance, Copenhagen supports U.S. military presence through NATO frameworks and bilateral

⁶⁵ **Department of Defense.** (2020) *Defense Space Strategy*. https://cspas.aerospace.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Defense%20Space%20Strategy%20Summary%2017Jun20_0.pdf

⁶⁶ **Reuters.** (March 2025). *Trump tells NATO chief the US needs Greenland*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-expresses-confidence-that-us-will-annex-greenland-2025-03-13/>

⁶⁷ **Government of Denmark.** *Act on Greenland Self-Government*. <https://english.stm.dk/media/4vqewyoh/gl-selvstyrelse-uk.pdf>

⁶⁸ **United Nations.** *United Nations Charter*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>



defense cooperation rather than sovereignty transfer (*Danish Ministry of Defense, 2022*⁶⁹).

As a small NATO member, Denmark relies on international law and multilateral institutions to mitigate power asymmetries with larger allies. Danish officials have therefore warned that unilateral U.S. claims risk undermining Arctic stability and legitimizing power-based territorial revisionism, potentially weakening existing governance arrangements in the High North (*Wivel and Jakobsen, 2021*⁷⁰). Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has said her country faces a “decisive moment” (*Mette Frederiksen, January 12, 2026*⁷¹) over the future of Greenland after United States President Donald Trump renewed his threats to seize the Arctic territory by force.

Moreover, “Sweden, the Nordic countries, the Baltic states, and several major European countries stand together with our Danish friends,” Kristersson told a defense conference in Salen, in which the US general in charge of NATO took part (*Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, January 12, 2026*⁷²).

Some analysts argue that European policymakers should seriously consider contingency scenarios that were previously regarded as implausible, including the potential erosion of Danish sovereignty over Greenland and a fundamental weakening, or even dissolution, of NATO as it currently exists. From this perspective, repeated U.S. statements questioning alliance commitments and asserting unilateral strategic interests signal a shift away from collective security toward a more transactional and power-based approach to international relations.

Experts emphasize that even if formal annexation of Greenland remains unlikely, sustained pressure or de facto U.S. dominance could undermine existing legal and institutional arrangements. Such developments would challenge Europe’s long-standing assumption that transatlantic security guarantees are stable and unconditional. Consequently, European states may need to accelerate efforts toward strategic autonomy, including independent defense planning, Arctic policy coordination, and enhanced EU-level security mechanisms.

The argument is not that NATO’s collapse is inevitable, but that Europe can no longer treat it as immutable. Preparing for scenarios involving reduced U.S. commitment, contested Arctic governance, and intensified great-power rivalry is increasingly viewed as a matter of prudence rather than alarmism. In this interpretation, Greenland serves as a test case for broader structural changes in the transatlantic security order.

⁶⁹ **Danish Ministry of Defense.** *DEFENCE AGREEMENT 2018 – 2023.*

<https://www.fmn.dk/globalassets/fmn/dokumenter/forlig/-danish-defence-agreement-2018-2023-pdf-a-2018.pdf>

⁷⁰ **Wivel and Jackson.** *Denmark and NATO: The Problem of a Small State in a Collective Security System.*

https://ideas.repec.org/a/cup/intorg/v10y1956i03p390-401_00.html

⁷¹ **Mette Frederiksen.** *Denmark’s PM says Greenland showdown at ‘decisive moment’.*

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/12/denmarks-pm-says-greenland-showdown-at-decisive-moment>

⁷² **Ulf Kristersson.** *Denmark’s PM says Greenland showdown at ‘decisive moment’.*

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Conclusion

Greenland's transformation from a peripheral Arctic territory into a focal point of great-power competition illustrates the profound structural changes underway in the international system. Donald Trump's explicit framing of Greenland as indispensable to U.S. national security reflects not an isolated political impulse, but a broader strategic logic rooted in geography, military deterrence, resource security, and long-term infrastructural control. As climate change accelerates access to Arctic sea lanes and mineral deposits, Greenland's strategic value is likely to intensify rather than diminish.

For the United States, sustained influence over Greenland reinforces homeland defense, preserves strategic depth in the North Atlantic, and mitigates perceived vulnerabilities arising from Russian militarization and Chinese economic engagement in the Arctic. For Denmark, however, U.S. pressure raises fundamental questions about sovereignty, alliance asymmetries, and the durability of a rules-based international order. Denmark's reliance on international law and multilateral institutions underscores the tension between legal norms and power-based strategic behavior among allies.

At the European level, Greenland exposes the fragility of assumptions underpinning transatlantic security. While NATO remains the cornerstone of European defense, recurring U.S. signals of conditional commitment compel European states to contemplate contingency planning, greater strategic autonomy, and more coherent Arctic governance. Importantly, this does not imply the inevitability of NATO's collapse or Greenland's annexation, but rather the erosion of certainty that has historically characterized the alliance.

Ultimately, Greenland serves as a strategic litmus test for the future of Arctic governance and transatlantic relations. How the issue is managed—through law, cooperation, or unilateral pressure—will shape not only the security architecture of the High North but also broader norms governing sovereignty, alliance solidarity, and great-power competition in the twenty-first century.

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