

# SWP Comment

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## America's Fixation on Greenland

Implications and Policy Options for Europe

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The acquisition of Greenland has repeatedly been a topic of discussion within US government circles since the 19th century. That is because of the island's strategic location and its resources. In the summer of 2019, US President Donald Trump made his first bid to purchase Greenland from the Kingdom of Denmark. Since then, he has declared ownership and control of Greenland to be an "absolute necessity" for US national security. For their part, the Danish intelligence services have responded by identifying the United States – for the first time ever – as a potential threat to the security of the Kingdom since Washington is no longer ruling out the use of military force even against allies. But is Trump really concerned about security or simply acquiring what he sees as the world's largest possible real-estate asset? How should his bid for Greenland be assessed? And what are the implications and policy options for Europe?

As the acquisition of Louisiana from France in 1803 and of Florida from Spain in 1819 shows, land purchases (or territorial exchanges) were not that unusual as recently as 200 years ago. But following the experience of colonial rule and two world wars, the right of peoples to self-determination has become the foundation of relations between states and a core principle of the Charter of the United Nations. For this reason, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen was right when, in 2019, she described Donald Trump's proposal to make Greenland part of the United States as "absurd", while Greenland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded succinctly in a tweet: "We're open for business, not for sale." At the same time, Frederiksen assured

the United States that Denmark would welcome "enhanced strategic cooperation in the Arctic". In a lengthy speech to the US Congress on 4 March 2025, Trump explicitly acknowledged Greenland's right to self-determination but once again stressed that ownership of the island was necessary for US national security and even international security.

Thus, on the one hand, Trump not only confirmed that he was aware of the right to self-determination but also conceded that the Greenlandic people were entitled to decide their future themselves. On the other hand, it was clear that acquiring Greenland had become an *idée fixe* of the US president. Trump insists that the US will "get" Greenland one way or the other.



## Security interests or real estate?

Trump's argument about the precarious security situation in the Arctic – North Atlantic region is based on the claim that Greenland is besieged by Chinese and Russian vessels.

It is true that in summer 2025, several Chinese icebreaking ships were deployed in the Arctic Ocean, providing further visual proof of China's growing strategic interest. It is also true that the "Polar Silk Road" is an important component of China's Arctic strategy. But there are no indications that Beijing intends to establish a military presence in the region in the near future. And while the possible deployment of Chinese strategic submarines in the region has been a recurring topic among security experts for years, such a move would require more advanced submarines and more detailed knowledge of the ocean.

Russia is the largest actor in Arctic. Yet, even during the Soviet era, it showed little interest in Greenland. The Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation is itself rich in resources, and securing and developing it already presents considerable challenges for Moscow. Right now, Russia does not need another such challenge in the region. However, like China, it remains a lingering threat.

With regard to the Greenland issue, Trump appears to be simply following his own instincts and sees the island as the largest possible real-estate deal of his life. Its acquisition would be an ideal-typical implementation of his "Make America Great Again" slogan and would leave Canada – which he has identified as the next candidate for takeover – strategically encircled.

On the other hand, the bid for Greenland makes sense if the geostrategic objective of the Trump administration is to establish a US-controlled North American hemisphere protected by a comprehensive defence system ("Golden Dome"). Significantly, this is a project that Ronald Reagan failed to realise 40 years ago. To this day, not even the outline of a convincing plan for such a defence system has been made public. That should come as no surprise since what has long been

seen as the impossibility of erecting such an all-encompassing shield is more likely to be the reason for such an omission than the new lack of transparency at the Pentagon.

Moreover, unrestricted US ownership of Greenland could enable the creation of libertarian "freedom cities" in which national sovereignty and the rule of law would be replaced by the dominion of a far right, unregulated tech elite. The attractiveness of this vision for the ideologues who stand behind the president would be another plausible explanation for the persistence with which Trump clings to the idea of acquiring Greenland.

## A danger for Europe and the transatlantic alliance

While the acquisition of Greenland is not a new idea, Trump's initiative is particularly explosive in the current geopolitical context. If the United States, as NATO's leading and most powerful member, were to use its military strength to annex parts of territory of one of its allies by force, this would pose a genuine danger to Europe and the Alliance. NATO itself is based largely on the UN Charter; and under the NATO founding treaty, all member states commit themselves to settling disputes by peaceful means and refraining from the threat or use of force. If a NATO member were to violate the territorial integrity of an ally, the very foundations of the treaty would be undermined. After all, NATO is meant to protect its members, not turn them into the victims of an overbearing hegemon.

However, the United States will continue to depend on cooperation with its allies in the North American Arctic. Washington, too, has neglected security in the Arctic for too long; and the challenges presented by the region are enormous. Difficult geography and extreme climatic conditions create operational environments that can be managed only through cooperation with others. Consequently, the NATO capabilities of Nordic states such as Norway remain crucial for the United States in terms of both

operational deployment and the monitoring of Russian activities.

## **Possible consequences for NATO, the EU and Germany**

The current transatlantic alliance crisis is of Washington's own making. In Moscow and Beijing, there is likely to be considerable delight over this unexpected gift. The fragmentation and eventual dissolution of NATO is among the most ambitious of the desired scenarios entertained by the two countries and would facilitate both the neo-imperial ambitions of the Russian president and the continued rise of China.

Against this background, Berlin is coming under pressure on two fronts — foreign and security policy. The United States is needed politically and militarily to secure negotiations with Moscow and bring about an end to Russia's war against Ukraine. Moreover, even the most rapid rearmament of the Bundeswehr could not close the significant gaps in strategic sensors and effectors. Thus, it will be necessary for US capabilities to continue to fill those gaps in the short and medium term.

Long-standing assumptions of German policy no longer correspond to the prevailing reality. How should an alliance act when the the leading and most powerful member itself becomes a threat? America has suddenly changed its role — from benevolent hegemon to unscrupulous marauder. Europe must therefore be mindful not only of the best-case but also of the worst-case scenarios. Nevertheless, it will be important in the coming years to keep the United States anchored in Europe (something that is also in the US strategic interests). At the same time, European members of NATO must assume greater responsibility for their own security and defence as quickly as possible. Only in this way can the consequences of the new unpredictability in Washington — the hallmark of Trump's political style — be offset. This applies as much to Eastern and Central Europe as it does to Greenland.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has rightly pointed out that Europe must rethink its role. It is paradoxical, he argues, that 500 million Europeans require 300 million Americans to defend themselves against 140 million Russians, who have not been able to defeat 40 million Ukrainians. Europe must be aware of its own potential and position itself as a global power.

Replacing the United States as the main pillar of NATO's military power is not the only challenge, however. The EU must become a new life insurance policy by developing stronger security and defence capabilities. NATO must be preserved — with or without the United States — as the institutional framework in Brussels and Mons for the organisation of collective defence. The problem is not money for buying and deploying weapons. The difficulties begin with the issues of time and structure: how much time do the European NATO allies have to build a European defence? And how strong should that defence be and under what kind of new leadership? Relocating allied command structures from, for example, Norfolk to Northwood and from Mons back to Rocquencourt would be a comparatively minor logistical challenge, but is Europe ready for new military leadership structures under British — German — French direction? And is it ready for a German SACEUR? These are difficult, existential questions that must now be answered, above all, in Berlin, London and Paris, as well as in Rome and Warsaw. They concern not only the Arctic — North Atlantic region but European security as a whole. Thus, Greenland serves both as a warning signal and as a possible baptism of fire for a new European willingness to shape global affairs.

## **Nuuk-Copenhagen-Washington: The need for a balance of interests**

Greenland's guiding principle — “Nothing about us without us” — is central to the country's self-perception. Any “dictate”, whether from Copenhagen or Washington, is perceived as neo-colonial aspiration. This



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is one of the explanations for the high level of rejection of Trump's bid to acquire the country: 85 per cent of the population stated in January 2025 that they did not wish to become part of the United States. As regards the right to self-determination, dependence on Denmark cannot be replaced – either seriously or seamlessly – by a new dependence on the United States. Under Article 21.1 of the Self-Government Act of June 2009, the decision about Greenland's independence lies with the people. However, that decision must be preceded by a formal process (including a referendum on the constitution, which is currently under discussion). Only then can a sovereign government in Nuuk decide on the country's future and possible models of association.

The joint position of European governments in response to the Trump administration's threats is an important sign of solidarity, making clear to Washington that Europe rejects unlawful annexation. At the same time, there must be coordination between Copenhagen and Nuuk over which and how many European assets are needed in Greenland so that both the China-Russia threat perceived by Trump and any military action by the US can be countered. Initially, the intention is to explore "framework conditions for possible military contributions to support Denmark in ensuring security in the region" – for example, capabilities for maritime surveillance. As in the case of the Cyprus conflict, the entanglement of the colonial legacy and geostrategic significance of an island is once again threatening to weigh on cooperation within NATO. But Greenland does not have to become a detonator for the Alliance. In the long term, all parties would be best served if NATO were to take over the reactivation and equipping of former US military bases in Greenland, such as Kangerlussuaq. Maritime surveillance in the Arctic – North Atlantic region could thereby be improved, and the Alliance would be contributing to the protec-

tion of Greenland as part of collective security (for which EU programmes could be put to use where appropriate). This would largely correspond to the expectations Denmark had upon joining NATO in 1949 – expectations that even back then had foundered on US national interests.

In the US Congress, several senior Republican lawmakers have spoken out against military action. Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, together with the ranking Democratic member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Jeanne Shaheen, has introduced a bill (the NATO Unity Protection Act) prohibiting the use of public funds for annexation by force and emphasising the importance for the United States of preserving the NATO alliance. Opposition within the United States itself is now significant, too: more than 73 percent reject using force to appropriate Greenland, while a majority does not wish to see an expansion of US territory.

It is now up to, above all, the governments in Copenhagen, Nuuk and Washington to reach a compromise on the basis of the 1951 agreement that is to remain in force for the duration of the North Atlantic Treaty and already grants the United States extensive access to Greenland. However, Denmark and Greenland will need the support of their European allies in this endeavour. An increased political and diplomatic presence and more military exercises on the island would make sense and be welcomed.

Whether viewed through the lens of a reactivated and expanded Monroe Doctrine or the "Golden Dome" defence project, it is to be expected that US interest in Greenland will continue well beyond 2029. The island remains America's geopolitical *idée fixe* and is Europe's first unexpected geopolitical challenge.

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