
THE UNEXPECTED SILVER LININGS FOR EUROPE AS A RESULT OF THE GREENLAND CRISIS

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Abstract: In early 2026 United States president Donald Trump's proclamations regarding the need for his country to acquire Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), including potentially through the use of military force, sparked an unprecedented diplomatic crisis, which was regarded by a number of analysts as likely to cause significant ruptures within NATO and even compromise the future of the alliance. While Trump's comments pertaining to the necessity of the USA gaining full control over the autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark were initially dismissed, even in expert circles, as constituting little more than rhetorical exercises, by mid-January 2026 Trump's threats that he would take over Greenland by any and all means at his disposal came to be viewed as credible, causing alarm in Denmark and among the other member states of NATO. Subsequently, Operation Arctic Endurance was launched, which constituted a Danish-led deployment of military personnel from various member states of NATO intended to establish a presence in Greenland, ostensibly in response to Chinese and Russian ambitions in the Arctic, but in practice constituting a deterrence exercise aimed at the United States. The paper employs qualitative methodology, which is reliant on the integrated analysis of a vast collection of primary and secondary sources that fall within the international relations, political science, and sociology disciplines. It advances a threefold argument. Firstly, it contends that Operation Arctic Endurance demonstrated that Europe is not to be underestimated when it comes to its capacity for decisive action, with the military activity in question successfully dissuading Trump and allowing the European countries to essentially emerge unscathed from the crisis. Secondly, from the standpoint of Denmark, the Greenland crisis may actually turn out to be beneficial in terms of further enhancing the prospects for the retention of the status quo between Greenland and metropolitan Denmark. Thirdly, the military exercise on the territory of Greenland may offer a blueprint for a successful European troop deployment in Western and Central Ukraine, even without the explicit or implicit permission of the United States, in case the momentum in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war decisively shifts in favor of Russia or a sufficiently robust security guarantee has to be provided to Ukraine in the context of an initially unsatisfactory peace settlement. Thus, in addition to staving off the presumably imminent threat to Greenland, at least in the short-term, Arctic Endurance may in the medium- to long-term allow for a psychological decoupling of Europe from the United States and bring about a boost to the strategic autonomy of European countries.

Keywords: Denmark, Greenland, NATO, Ukraine, Donald Trump

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of Donald Trump's first term as President of the United States the patterns of the USA's interactions with the other sovereign states in the international system have undergone a number of profound changes, becoming less predictable and to a certain extent leading to an increased blurring of the lines between allies and adversaries. (Ryan, 2025) One such manifestation of Trump's transactionally realist approach to conducting foreign policy (premised on a zero-sum materialist worldview and a penchant for rejecting the constraints of multilateral institutions) (Brandtjen, 2026) that seemed inordinately difficult to predict, even by the most politically astute scholars of international relations, concerned the triggering of a diplomatic crisis during which the status of Greenland would be at the forefront. Frequently regarded as either an autonomous subnational island jurisdiction of Denmark or simply as one of the three constituent nations of the Danish realm (alongside Denmark proper and the Faroe Islands), (Grydehøj, 2020) the rising geopolitical interest in the Arctic over the course of the last twenty years, in part due to the effects of global warming, which have resulted in expanded shipping traffic, has elevated the strategic importance of Greenland. (Hardt, 2025) The self-governing territory also holds strategic significance attributable to its ballistic missile early warning system, especially given that the shortest route from Europe to North America runs via the island. (Holland et al., 2025) From the US perspective, an acquisition of Greenland would virtually guarantee US control over both the northwestern and northeastern flanks of Arctic North America, (Zellen, 2025) enabling the Americans to hold almost insurmountable geostrategic advantages over rival great powers such as Russia and China and enjoy access to a treasure trove of largely untapped natural resources. Discussions regarding a potential US acquisition of Greenland date back to the 19th century, with United States secretary of state William H. Seward, who had negotiated the Alaska Purchase from the Russian Empire in 1867, displaying an interest in including Greenland in his plans for American expansionism, (Zellen, 2025) and have resurfaced during various periods of US history, but gained new prominence in the late 2010s after Donald Trump

was first elected to the White House. There are indications that as early as 2017, Trump had voiced an interest in purchasing the island (Holland et al., 2025) and in August 2019 he raised the matter with Denmark – however, after being rebuffed by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, the US president decided to cancel a planned visit to Copenhagen. (Walker, 2019) In 2025, shortly after his return to the White House, Trump clearly set his sights on exploring the options for seizing Greenland. In March 2025 US vice president JD Vance travelled to the Pituffik Space Base in the north of the Arctic island and publicly scolded the Danish authorities for not being up to the task in terms of taking care of the safety of the Greenlanders. (Trofimov, 2025) In December 2025, cognizant of Trump’s ambitions pertaining to Greenland, in an unprecedented move given the long-lasting ties between the two allies, the Danish Defense Intelligence Service decided that the United States merited the designation of a potential security risk. (Martisiute & Schacke-Barfoed, 2026) The situation escalated in the beginning of 2026 when the US president, possibly emboldened following the US military’s successful capture of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro on 3 January 2026, (Bose et al., 2026) made a number of thinly veiled threats directed against Denmark, rejected any concessions that fell short of the US establishing control over the island (Blake, 2026) and refused to rule out the possibility of deciding on a military solution. (Abécassis, 2026) In a quick fashion, what was for a long time perceived as a fanciful notion, reflective of a real estate whim of the US president, became an open strategic problem, (Devesa, 2026) causing alarm that any attempted use of force to annex Greenland in addition to violating Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter, would also necessitate the invocation of NATO’s Article 5, but with the ominous caveat that the violator would be the (by far) most dominant military power within the alliance, thus shattering NATO’s cohesion, (Brandtjen, 2026) potentially heralding the full disintegration of the alliance (Jack, 2026) or in Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk’s words, causing “the end of the world as we know it”. (Devyatkin, 2026)

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper utilizes methods that fall within the scope of qualitative research, providing rigorous analysis based on both primary and secondary sources of information that cover a variety of topics within the social sciences, thus making use of the insights offered by political scientists, sociologists, international security experts, and statisticians. The brief literature review that essentially doubles up as the introduction of the article intends to properly contextualize the issue under discussion. In the subsequent sections there is an immersion into specific circumstances and settings (Lim, 2025) in order to demonstrate how the propositions and theoretical conjectures developed in the beginning are in alignment with the evidence. An attempt has been made to take into account the degree of self-reflexivity with regard to the subjective values and inclinations of the researcher (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017) as well as the dynamic nature of the phenomena under examination, as a result of which there is a tendency to avoid overly authoritative assertions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On 14 January 2026, a meeting held in Washington, D.C. between US vice president JD Vance and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, on the one hand, and Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the foreign minister of Denmark and Vivian Motzfeldt, his Greenlandic counterpart, on the other, failed to resolve the “fundamental disagreements” between both sides. (Meredith, 2026) In the following days, at the behest of Denmark, a number of European member states of NATO, including France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, at a remarkably short notice, (Heaphy, 2026) launched a military deployment dubbed Operation Arctic Endurance, which was concentrated in the Greenlandic capital of Nuuk, for the purpose of engaging in joint military exercises. While Søren Andersen, the head of the Joint Arctic Command, emphasized the need to be able to respond to potential Russian subversive activities and clarified that an invitation to participate had been extended to the United States as well, (Gronholt-Pedersen & Laizans, 2026) the overarching expert consensus pointed towards these troops being stationed there in order to serve as a tripwire force against the US, raising the political stakes in terms of any potential resort to force on the part of the Trump administration. (Abécassis, 2026) The presence operation, which is ongoing, can so far be assessed as successful by virtually any measure – in terms of the attainment of its core purpose, less than a week since the start of the military exercise, on 21 January 2026, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Trump ruled out the use of military force as a way to achieve his goals in Greenland and even though on 17 January 2026 he had announced that the countries whose military planning staff had journeyed to Greenland would have their imports subjected to new tariffs, he reversed this threat as well. (Francis, 2026) The presence operation managed to tick all the boxes with regard to offering a happy mix - it was a projection of strength on the part of Europe that could not go unnoticed and fail to send the right message, but at the same time the language it was coached in did not involve undue provocation, allowed Trump to save face, (Vinjamuri, 2026) with the US president stressing the benefits that would accrue to the US as a result of the new “framework for a future deal” on Greenland agreed upon in Davos with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, (Fried, 2026) which according to analysts actually

seems to entail no substantial advantages for the USA relative to the status quo, (Blake, 2026) and did not result in a breakdown in the relations between the European countries and the Trump administration, (Deyl, 2026) as evidenced by the follow-up NATO Arctic Sentry mission that began on 11 February 2026 and included the United States. (Jack, 2026) Also, the Europeans appeared to be mindful regarding the inherent risks of sudden U-turns on the part of Trump, thus they hedged their bets by conveniently announcing that Arctic Endurance would last until at least the end of 2026, (Sjölin & Wass, 2026) with Canada and France declaring that they would be opening consulates in Greenland as a way to send a “political signal”. (Vinjamuri, 2026) In a more general sense, Operation Arctic Endurance arguably represented a moment of truth that signaled the end of the Europeans’ tactic of strategic acquiescence towards the US president, which in previous months had to a large extent failed to bear fruit, (Global Post, 2026) as evidenced, for instance, by the EU-US trade deal signed in July 2025, which has been criticized for being markedly skewed in favor of the Americans, (Rankin, 2026) or the European countries’ footing of the bill for US weapons deliveries to Ukraine, (Francis, 2026) and had only served to entrench the perception of the European Union (EU) constituting a paper tiger in international relations (Duval, 2025) Also, from a purely theoretical standpoint, the decision by the Europeans to dispatch soldiers was actually very much in line with the reasoning of experts on deterrence, such as American political scientist Robert Jervis. In Jervis’ view, when facing a revisionist state that is determined to subvert the international order, showing one’s mettle by acting upon the threats and displaying a willingness to neutralize them is more appropriate than relying on a strategy of appeasement, which would likely encourage further demands on the part of the adversarial power and may invite military aggression. (Düben, 2026) Trump’s remarks that downplayed Denmark’s historical claims to Greenland and depicted the island as “essentially American” (Brandtjen, 2026) in many respects mirrored the rhetoric of Putin’s Russia (a quintessential example of a revisionist rather than a status-quo-oriented state) in relation to Ukraine. For all intents and purposes, Operation Arctic Endurance appears likely to have affected the calculations of some members of Trump’s inner circle, (Bose et al., 2026) strengthening the hand of dissenting voices such as congressional Republicans skeptical of Trump’s push for Greenland (Stein, 2026) while isolating “Greenland hawks” such as political advisor and deputy chief of staff for policy Stephen Miller. (Ciobanu & Dazio, 2026) Perhaps most crucially, it also offered ample evidence that its prioritization of soft power notwithstanding, Europe is very much aware of the need for certain red lines pertaining to sovereignty and territorial integrity to be defended with the uttermost resolve, so it will not always shy away from employing hard power tools. (Gnesotto, 2026)

Another fall-out (working in favour of the Danes) from Trump’s strong interest in taking possession of the autonomous territory concerned the paving of the ground for bringing Greenlanders closer to Denmark. The first underlying assumption when it comes to this thesis is that a retention of the status quo (with Greenland remaining in some shape or form part of the Kingdom of Denmark) benefits the Danish state. There are a multitude of arguments worth considering here. In addition to the emotional attachment to the island because of the strong historical links between Danes and Greenlanders, unlike in the case of other countries with territories in the Arctic, Denmark’s continued presence in the highest latitude regions of the globe is dependent on retaining some degree of authority over Greenland. (Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2011) Without the world’s largest island, Denmark as a small state would have to let go of a unique geopolitical feature, losing opportunities to rub shoulders with great and middle powers such as Russia, the United States, and Canada (Jacobsen, 2016) in terms of the taking of fundamental decisions surrounding the future of the Arctic realm. Characterized as the “Greenland Card”, during the Cold War years Greenland’s strategic location permitted Denmark to enjoy outsized influence over US policymakers, allowing it to maintain lower defense spending than would otherwise be demanded of a NATO ally. (Gronholt-Pedersen & Jacobsen, 2026) In terms of Europe as a whole, albeit still very much a thought experiment at this stage, it is worth noting that an independent Greenland could technically withdraw support for NATO operations in the Arctic, which would in some respects diminish the alliance’s capacity to wield power, for instance in terms of closing the Denmark Strait to submarines. (Ash, 2021) Greenland’s aspirations for self-determination have seen an uptick since the former Danish colony obtained a higher degree of autonomy, including its own parliament in 1979. A 2009 agreement that granted Greenland much more comprehensive self-rule and recognized Greenlandic as the sole official language also explicitly acknowledged that Greenlanders had the right to pursue independence. (Gronholt-Pedersen & Jacobsen, 2026) However, the gravity of the threat posed by the Trump administration has helped ease tensions between Greenlanders and Danes, providing novel opportunities for salvaging the not always harmonious relationship between the two nations, (Trofimov, 2025) forging what has been described as a spirit akin to wartime solidarity, (Bryant, 2026) vividly exemplified by the large turnout at the Hands off Greenland protests held on 17 January 2026 in both Denmark proper and Greenland. Trump’s policies have also been engendering shifts to Greenland’s political landscape – both politicians and ordinary citizens have become more willing to tone down their demands for the pursuit of “now-independence”, preferring to emphasize the gradual nature of the process, (Gronholt-Pedersen et al., 2026) with Prime Minister of Greenland Jens-Frederik Nielsen stressing the need to, for

the time being, stand united in the Kingdom of Denmark. (Ibid) While the vast majority of arguments against the prospects for Greenland to become a fully fledged sovereign state have been connected to the economic viability of independence, (Hansen, 2023) the Greenland crisis has contributed to bringing into sharp focus the occasionally neglected security dimension as well, further taking the wind off the sails of the staunch proponents of a quick path to independence. Many Greenlandic politicians are increasingly coming to grips with the realization that without Denmark's support, Greenland's chances to continue to successfully navigate the current crisis (or a future challenge of a similar nature attributable to the expansionist ambitions of other global powers) and avoid the involuntary incorporation into the territory of a country less magnanimous than Denmark would be rather slim. Thus, aided by the increase in the presence of Danish military assets in Greenland and the more frequent official-level contacts between Danish and Greenlandic political figures, the stage has been set for at least a temporary reversal with regard to the trends dating from the late 1970s towards a loosening of the ties between metropolitan Denmark and Greenland. (Pugliese, 2026)

Trump's Greenland gambit, in addition to strengthening the bonds between Danish people and Greenlanders, has also unwittingly given a boost to European unity as a whole. The US president's overtures to fully control the self-governing territory have prompted calls for anchoring Greenland within the European constitutional space and for Denmark to "complete its European integration", for instance by dropping its permanent opt-out from the euro and becoming more actively involved in the area of freedom, security and justice. (Devesa, 2026) According to a Eurobarometer survey from February 2026, support for the EU has markedly increased in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland (three EU member states in the geographic vicinity of Greenland), with over 67% of EU citizens expressing a desire for a stronger and more assertive EU. (Van Middelaar, 2026) The perceived irrationality of Trump's demands has also brought together unlikely allies, with many right-wing to far right parties in countries such as France, Italy, and the UK that had previously praised Trump's no-nonsense approach to foreign policy, finding themselves on the same side of the fence as their mainstream counterparts on the center-left and center-right of the political spectrum. For instance, Jordan Bardella, president of France's National Rally, has vigorously denounced Trump's imperialist ambitions and his blackmailing of Europe. (Zerofsky, 2026)

The bold stance adopted by the Europeans in order to thwart Trump's campaign to seize Greenland may provide them with a playbook for acting even more decisively in relation to the war in Ukraine, if the need arises. The experience gained in terms of coordinating support for Ukraine has already been regarded as applicable to the dynamics of the USA-Europe standoff on Greenland, for instance due to the possibilities envisioned for replicating the Ukraine contact group by forming an Arctic coalition of European countries to synchronize certain policies pertaining to the Danish autonomous territory, such as those related to security and political signaling. (Kobzova et al., 2026) While the Ukrainian military forces continue to offer valiant resistance and a wholesale collapse of the front lines is far from a likely scenario, (Simonet, 2026) there are a number of recent developments that may turn out, from the standpoint of the Ukrainians, to be stumbling blocks in terms of the continued successes on the battlefield. In addition to the persistent difficulties pertaining to manpower and ammunition shortages, (Litra, 2025) since the start of the second Trump term it has become clear that offering support for Ukraine "as long as it takes" is no longer a guiding principle of US policy, with Europe expected to step up to the plate and assert itself as the major security backer. (Chevreuil et al., 2026) The ongoing war in Iran may also work to the detriment of Ukraine with regard to obtaining weapons and diplomatic support, due to potentially reducing the availability of critically important air-defense systems, altering the flow and price of oil (in a way that is beneficial to the Russian Federation) and turning Western attention away from the conflict. (Person, 2026) If Ukraine does not manage to hold on to the Donbas "fortress cities" of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, which constitute crucial links in the country's defense, (Desch, 2026) or, somewhat more likely, is eventually forced to give them up to Russia as part of a peace settlement – possibly due to pressure by the Trump administration - it may find itself in an untenable position in terms of its overall security. During the infamous White House meeting between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Donald Trump on 28 February 2025 that saw heated exchanges between the two presidents, Trump asserted that Putin had broken deals with George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden, but respected him enough in order not to renege on any promises made to him, (Licon, 2025) and has on a multitude of occasions ruled out the possibility of sending US troops to Ukraine to enforce a potential peace deal. Even if a tentative agreement on ending the war is reached, stationing Western European troops within Ukraine may not be palatable from the standpoint of Putin (and Trump may prefer not to insist that the Russians accept such a condition), so Ukrainian security guarantees might simply hinge on Trump's belief that his personal warning to Putin not to restart the war would in itself be sufficient to deter the Russians. In such eventuality European countries will most likely have to fill the void in order to reassure the Ukrainians, which could be achieved by stationing a tripwire force within the territories in Western and Central Ukraine, thus virtually guaranteeing that the fighting will not spread beyond Eastern and Southern Ukraine, precluding a scenario of the capital Kyiv once again coming under threat, as it happened over the course of the

initial stages of the full-scale Russian invasion in early 2022. The success of Operation Arctic Endurance during which the Europeans were proactive in confronting the hegemon within their own orbit, which was far from a risk-free choice and under slightly different circumstances might have seen a more forceful response on the part of Trump, may encourage the European supporters of Ukraine to rise to the occasion and volunteer such a force over the objections of the Russians and even without the USA giving the green light. Similarly to the plausible deniability displayed by Europe pertaining to Operation Arctic Endurance, which, as mentioned previously, purportedly reflected concerns about Sino-Russian activities in the Arctic, the Europeans could justify such a course of action in terms of their duty to guarantee the safety of NATO citizens, referring to Russian actions such as their violations of Estonian airspace for over 10 minutes on 13 September 2025, courtesy of their use of MiG-31 fighters, as well as the Russian military planners' decision to strike critical infrastructure in Western Ukraine on the night of January 8–9, 2026, with a hypersonic Oreshnik missile, at a distance of a mere 70 km from the Polish border. (Simonet, 2026) There is currently an emerging consensus among analysts that a fundamental European shift in the way to support Ukraine may be needed, (Chevreuil et al., 2026) with the Europeans' ability to draw a line in the sand in relation to Greenland arguably paving the way for them to become less hesitant in throwing down the gauntlet to Russia, even in situations when the Americans' explicit or even implicit endorsement may not be coming.

4. CONCLUSION

In some respects the escalation of the Greenland crisis in January 2026 almost came out of the blue from the standpoint of leading American and European politicians across both sides of the pond. Europe's show of force, albeit of course somewhat of a symbolic one, managed to achieve the desired aims in terms of forcing Trump to back away from involving the US military while allowing him a save-facing off-ramp from the conflict, in part due to Rutte's efforts. The EU has by no means just overnight managed to become a superpower remotely comparable to the United States, but the passing of the Greenland test provides at least some tacit evidence that Europe is capable of its own decisive unilateralism, a confidence-building lesson that may ultimately turn out to be a valuable one with regard to the future course of the war in Ukraine.

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