

The Great Game of the Arctic, Denmark, Greenland and the US Empire

Peter Fibiger Bang
Rasmus Mariager



Credit: CANVA

Table of contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	4
The language of international politics	4
Denmark, client of the American Empire	4
The US already has its way in Greenland	5
Panic, neglect – or fears of independence?	6
Dignity and honour	7
Endnotes	7

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Peter Fibiger Bang is a professor of history at the Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen and has an interest in empire, security politics and global history.



Rasmus Mariager is a professor of history at the Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen and has an interest in empire, security politics and global history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / DISCLAIMER

The support the European Policy Centre receives for its ongoing operations, or specifically for its publications, does not constitute an endorsement of their contents, which reflect the views of the authors only. Supporters and partners cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Executive summary

Why does the United States want to take over Greenland when it already enjoys military supremacy on the island? Is the motivation economic, strategic or driven by fear of Greenlandic independence? Whatever the answer,

we argue that the relationship between the US and its NATO partners is better understood as imperial rather than an alliance of equals.

Introduction

Shock, disbelief and confusion have dominated reactions in Europe to the Trump administration's foreign-policy turn. Among the most baffling developments is the repeated assertion, now backed by the appointment of a special envoy, that Trump wants to take Greenland from the Kingdom of Denmark, one of Washington's closest and most loyal allies.

For what is it that the US wants to take over? The funding of a large, Scandinavian-style welfare state, with free public health care and school tuition, all the way to university level? Surely not! It is clearly not the domestic side of Greenlandic life that has attracted the attention of the US government.

The language of international politics

The messaging from Washington, however, has been mixed. At times, economic motives dominate: access to raw materials, including strategically important rare earths and minerals. More often, though, security arguments prevail. "We need [Greenland] for national security", Trump has declared repeatedly, while Vice-President JD Vance has pointed to Denmark's alleged military weakness.¹

These statements reflect rising and genuine US concerns about the aspirations and increased activity of both China and Russia in the Arctic. In this emerging 'great game', tiny Denmark is clearly an inadequate guardian. But that is nothing new: Denmark has never exercised full control over Greenland. For decades, the US has been the island's effective military hegemon. Formal sovereignty may rest in the Danish constitutional monarchy, but Washington already has supreme imperial power over the Danish Inuit Arctic.

But we lack the language to articulate this, ironically not least because of the language of statehood elevated to a global norm by US governments since President Woodrow Wilson. The language of international politics recognises only sovereign states and individual peoples; it knows of no nobler ambition than the desire for independence and self-determination. This is why Ukraine's struggle to resist Russia's invasion resonates in so many Western societies.

Still, independence is only half the story. Besides national resistance, Ukraine's survival also depends on imperial intervention. Without US military support and pressure on its subordinate European allies, Ukraine would likely already be back in the Russian fold. For instance, many in Germany thought that Russian supplies of gas were far more important than Ukraine joining the western alliances. To his credit, President Trump understood the dangerous dependency to which this exposed Europe better than many EU leaders during his first term.

'Independence' for many states rests on imperial protection – a much-overlooked fact among politicians and foreign policy pundits.

'Independence' for many states rests on imperial protection – a much-overlooked fact among politicians and foreign policy pundits. No European country illustrates this more clearly than Denmark.

Denmark, client of the American Empire

Since the end of the Cold War, Denmark has aimed to become one of the most unambiguous allies of American power. When the US adopted a doctrine of pre-emptive strikes and military interventions, Denmark restructured its military away from territorial defence towards expeditionary force designed to support US-led operations abroad, from Afghanistan to Iraq.

The loyalty was unflinching. Of course, when these interventions fell out of favour in the metropole, Denmark also found itself engaged in debate about the

policy and probing its reasons: The Danish Parliament, for instance, requested one of the authors to chair a committee investigating why Denmark had sent soldiers on a string of military expeditions in faraway theatres. Put simply, Denmark, a country with a mere six-million person population, had obviously not suddenly developed a strong independent desire to wage distant wars. If we want to understand why a small state would engage in such aggressive behaviour, the answer is inescapable. It is clearly not an expression of an alliance between equal and independent nations. It is because

DANISH INVOLVEMENT IN US-LED MILITARY OPERATIONS:

The First Gulf War (1990-91) saw Denmark deploy a naval vessel to the Persian Gulf. This decision marked the inception of a pattern of military engagement that has endured over the last three decades. In 1998, for instance, Denmark decided to join the US and NATO in the military intervention in Kosovo, despite the absence of a clear UN Mandate. Following the 9/11 attacks, Denmark's commitment

to the US intensified, leading to its involvement in a disastrous 20-year-long war in Afghanistan. Denmark's contributions were among the highest, and Denmark suffered more losses than almost all other western nations involved in the expeditionary force, when adjusted for population size. Despite the absence of a UN mandate, Denmark also participated in the US war in Iraq.

Denmark is a subordinate part of the global American empire and tried to honour the price of its alliance by providing auxiliary troops to the hegemon.

Empire is a difficult word; it has become synonymous with tyranny and oppression – just think Star Wars and 'the evil empire'. Yet, empires also depend on compromise and collaboration with local elites. In return for loyalty, subject-elites are offered protection by the military overlord. Nationalism is normally perceived as having rendered this protective bargain illegitimate. National elites, after all, want their independence. However, it is one of the remarkable achievements of what we term here the American empire to have established itself as the ultimate guarantor of small and mid-sized states of Europe. Domination has been achieved with the consent of the nation.

Denmark is a subordinate part of the global American empire and tried to honour the price of its alliance by providing auxiliary troops to the hegemon.

The historical roots of this arrangement stretch back to 1941. With the European part of the Danish Kingdom occupied by Nazi Germany, Greenland became of enormous strategic importance to the US. It was both a source of cryolite, a rare mineral used in the production of aluminium required in military aircraft and a hub for airplanes flying to Europe. Acting solo, the Danish envoy to Washington signed a (strictly speaking) unauthorised agreement granting US forces access to Greenland and the right to establish bases.

Since then, Greenland has served as a strategic cornerstone in the American empire, with a significant permanent base, tying Denmark closely to the United States.

At times, Denmark has even absorbed the political costs of US actions on the island. After the 1968 crash of an American B-52 bomber carrying nuclear weapons near Thule Air (now Pituffik Space) Base, the United States declined to assume public responsibility for the incident. Consequently, the Danish government, rather than the United States, became the target of Greenlandic and Danish discontent. To date, the Danish authorities have repeatedly been blamed for US nuclear weapons in Greenland – an arrangement that endures because Denmark enjoys protection by the US.²

The US already has its way in Greenland

This protective bargain has now been called into question. Empires have, as we say, relied on cooperation with local elites, but rising competition with Russia and China may have prompted the US to be less generous and renegotiate the terms of the arrangement. But in doing so, the new US administration seems to have forgotten that a successful hegemon will take care not to be the sole beneficiary of its empire, but safeguard its members. Threatening loyal allies is strategically self-defeating: Does the US administration believe that Europeans will continue to support the US's global role if the US bullies its subjects – particularly when it need not do so?

The truth is that the US already gets what it wants in Greenland. This has been the reality since 1941, and this will not change in the future. The Trump administration only needs to transmit a request to Copenhagen and Nuuk. Why provoke conflict to obtain control that already exists?

Even so, the new US government has declared its ambition to assume control of Greenland, describing Denmark as a bad ally and as failing to fulfil its obligations, both in relation to Greenland and NATO.³ But such accusations are misplaced. In recent decades, Greenland has evolved into a modern welfare state



Greenland's Head of Government Jens-Frederik Nielsen addresses Members of European Parliament in October 2025.

Credit: FREDERICK FLORIN / AFP

with Denmark's support. This positive development is evidenced by the fact that the average age of Greenlanders has increased almost twofold from 37 to 70 years since the Second World War while the population has basically doubled to reach 57,000 people.⁴ Home rule has expanded for six decades, as have aspirations for independence or a more agential role for Greenland in

its federation with Denmark. In terms of security policy, Denmark's primary responsibility has been to proclaim its formal sovereignty over Greenland's territory. The now much-ridiculed dog sled patrols are evidently not intended as a serious wartime defence but are an efficient way of showing the flag in some of the most forbidding and empty spaces on earth.⁵

Panic, neglect – or fears of independence?

Over the last decade, however, Russia and China have increased their military presence in the Arctic and the environs of Greenland. This raises an uncomfortable question: given its role as the primary security provider and effective hegemon in Greenland, is it not the United States, rather than Denmark, that has been negligent in its duties?

Given its role as the primary security provider and effective hegemon in Greenland, is it not the United States, rather than Denmark, that has been negligent in its duties?

Paradoxically, Washington itself has scaled down its Arctic engagement in recent years. Is the desire to acquire Greenland simply a belated panic reaction – a sudden realisation that the US has failed to develop an adequate Arctic response and strategy?

An even more awkward possibility: is the trigger not Russia or China per se, but concern over the prospect of future Greenlandic independence? Almost a decade ago, negotiations between authorities in Greenland and China about building airports on the island reached an advanced stage. This caused alarm in both Washington and Copenhagen, prompting coordinated action to block these plans and replace it with their own alternative project.

If such considerations are behind the current drive for Greenland, the proposed response is disproportionate. Unlike other cases now preoccupying the US

administration, including the deal currently under debate to transfer sovereignty over the Chagos Islands, which hosts a major US-UK military base, from the UK to Mauritius, Greenland is only aspiration.

After more than 15 years of expanded self-government, the government of Greenland has been remarkably hesitant in activating its option of assuming additional areas of domestic administration from Denmark. While pro-independence rhetoric has grown louder in recent

years, these aspirations have not been accompanied by a corresponding desire to claim responsibility. The March 2025 election saw moderation and incrementalism emerge as the victor.

There is, after all, a long history of close cultural and familial ties between Denmark and Greenland – ties also visible in the sizable Greenlandic community living in Denmark.

Dignity and honour

As Europeans continue to ponder the motivations and implications of the current US posture, it is worth recalling an observation made in 1947 by James Burnham, an unrepentant advocate of American empire:

*“If the United States wants to be first among nations, it will not succeed most easily by insisting that all other nations humble themselves before the Bald Eagle. On the contrary, it will do best if it demonstrates that other nations, through friendship with the United States, increase and guard their potential dignity and honour”.*⁶

It is our contention that this assessment of US power still holds true. Writing not from the perspective of Washington, but from a small and friendly dependent nation makes this even clearer. Empires may act capriciously and aggressively. However, we have learned that the empire may also be a source of freedom and protection and be the stronger for it. It is that logic which the current clash over Greenland risks to undermine, leaving us all, subject ally and imperial metropole, weaker in the long run. Let us try to find each other on a mutually more productive path.

¹ Mackintosh, Thomas. “[‘We need Greenland’: Trump repeats threat to annex Danish territory](#)”, *BBC*, 5 January 2026.

² E.g. Langergaard, Jens, “Grønland vil have kulegravet hele Thule-sagen”, *Berlingske Tidende*, 30 June 1995; Kuttner, Michael, “USA afviser strålingsfare”, *Berlingske Tidende*, 2 March 1995.

³ Reiterated this week: Kola, Paulin, “[Vance criticises Denmark and Europe’s handling of critical Greenland](#)”, *BBC*, 8 January 2026.

⁴ Barfod, Cf. Pia, «Dødelighed og gennemsnitlig levealder i Grønland», *Tidsskriftet Grønland* (1954); *Statistisk årbog 2010*; *Danmarks Statistik 2011*; *Grønlands statistik* (accessed 8 January 2026).

⁵ Beszlej, Franciszek Jozef, “[Trump mocks Greenland’s dog-sled teams – Denmark’s elite Arctic unit](#)”, *TVP World*, 8 January 2026.

⁶ Burnham, James, *The Struggle for the World*, New York: 1947, pp. 188.

The **European Policy Centre** is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on sound evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.

The **Europe in the World (EiW) Programme** scrutinises the impact of a changing international system on Europe and probes how the EU and its member states can advance their interests and values on a regional and global level. It examines the EU's relations with both major and middle powers around the world, and how Europe can continue to contribute to a rules-based global order. Secondly, the Programme focuses on the role of the EU in fostering reform, resilience and stability in neighbouring regions and looks closely at developments in Turkey and Ukraine, among other countries. Thirdly, the Programme examines and seeks to advance the development of Europe's security and defence policy.

With the strategic
support of



King Baudouin
Foundation

Working together for a better society

