

## Can Denmark Defend Greenland from Trump?

By

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The renewed attention on Greenland did not begin with Arctic ice melt or the quest for rare earth minerals. It began with discomfort, specifically, American discomfort with a long-standing European contradiction: claiming sovereignty over strategically vital territory while outsourcing its defense to others.

That contradiction has come into sharp relief during the presidency of Donald Trump, whose blunt interest in Greenland exposed what European diplomacy had long obscured. The controversy was framed as eccentricity or provocation, but the underlying grievance was familiar. For decades, the United States has underwritten European security while European governments reduced their defense investments in favor of generous welfare systems and subsidized industry, confident that the American half of the alliance would absorb the risk. The Greenland crisis has simply made that imbalance visible.

### Greenland's Strategic Reality

Greenland occupies a unique strategic position. It sits in the western hemisphere astride the Arctic approaches to the "GIUK Gap," hosting critical space and missile-warning infrastructure essential to NATO's early-warning architecture. The 2004 Defense Greenland Agreement between the United States and Denmark, Amending and Supplementing the Agreement of April 27, 1951, explicitly limits the US defense area in Greenland to Thule (Pituffik) Air (Space) Base only.

With Arctic sea lanes opening and undersea infrastructure becoming a focal point of competition, Greenland's strategic importance is no longer peripheral but central. The question now confronting Europe is whether the small Kingdom of Denmark and, by extension, Europe, can demonstrate even minimal sovereignty over a territory it insists is non-negotiable but has left undefended for some 250 years.

Article 3 of the NATO Treaty states: "In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." Put plainly, Denmark is obligated to maintain—on its own and on a continuous basis—the capacity to defend all its territory. By that standard, Denmark has failed to meet its Article 3 responsibilities for a very long time, if it ever has.

Despite its strategic importance, Greenland remains vulnerable and economically neglected. This is not an accident or a bureaucratic oversight. It is the result of a long-standing assumption—that the United States would indefinitely guarantee European sovereignty and sustain its social-economic model. That assumption no longer holds. Strategic competition is shifting away from open confrontation toward constant pressure, probing actions, and fait accompli. In this world, sovereignty is not something you can merely declare. It is something you must demonstrate.

## **Trump, Europe, and the Sovereignty Question**

Trump’s narrative about Greenland was widely dismissed as transactional or unserious. Stripped of tone, however, the message was structural: As the Arctic presents opportunity, Greenland is even more strategically vital to North American security than ever before, and someone must take responsibility for securing and developing it.

This tension among NATO allies reflects a broader post–Cold War pattern. Europe expanded its regulatory, economic, and political influence while allowing NATO military funding and capability to atrophy. The resulting system elevated process, norms, and legalism over hard power security, sovereignty, and deterrence.

The renewed United States demand for Greenland exposes the limits of that model. If Denmark cannot even mount a minimal defense of its own territory, the problem is not American overreach, but European credibility.

## **The UK Corollary**

In a striking act of geopolitical idealism, the United Kingdom has agreed to cede sovereignty over Diego Garcia to Mauritius—an “own goal” that harms US interests. Long regarded as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” Diego Garcia has been a cornerstone of US and UK power projection across the Middle East, East Africa, South Asia, and beyond for decades.

After years of legal and diplomatic pressure—culminating in adverse rulings from international courts and the United Nations—the UK concluded that continued unilateral control of the Chagos Archipelago was politically unsustainable in this rules-based international order. In 2024, London agreed to transfer sovereignty to Mauritius, a state increasingly influenced by Beijing, while attempting to preserve military access through a long-term, UK-funded lease.

On paper, operations continue. Leverage shifts from occupant to owner. Sovereignty matters: once surrendered, access rests on political permission rather than power. A future Beijing-aligned Mauritius could abrogate agreements or revoke leases, leaving the US and UK strategically stranded, “out of runway” and out of business in the Indian Ocean.

Like Diego Garcia, Greenland’s strategic value lies in assured access. Trusting that allies will always act in America’s best interest is folly. Access without ownership is always conditional; sovereignty without power is fragile. Both cases reveal the same risk—vital territory left exposed at a moment when great-power competition demands clarity, presence, and resolve.

## **Sovereignty Requires Adequate Organic Defense**

Defending Greenland does not require national militarization on Cold War terms. It does not require large permanent formations or aggressive posturing. But it does require capability, presence, and integration of real forces tied to real geography. The fantasy of the [European] Liberal [global] Rules-based order is no longer sufficient alone.

A credible defense posture requires permanent ground, air, and naval forces. Presence must be sufficient to assert territorial control, secure the Arctic approaches, and protect key infrastructure. Additionally, it requires fifth-generation airpower, supported by NATO enablers sufficient to project air sovereignty and assert control over the airspace of the GIUK, along with integrated maritime and subsurface awareness to control approaches, advanced air and missile defense for critical nodes, and the logistics infrastructure required to sustain operations in an Arctic environment.

This is not an escalation; it is the minimum viable defense posture for the territory Denmark claims sovereignty over, NATO depends upon, and the Western Hemisphere demands. Anything less than that is not restraint; it is abdication.

### **What Denmark Can Do**

For Denmark to retain its kingdom, it must fervently acknowledge that China and Russia are expanding their Arctic ambitions and that continuing to ignore or neglect this threat risks losing Greenland to another great power's orbit. Denmark does not need to defend Greenland alone, but it must lead and meet its Article 3 responsibilities. Sovereignty cannot be subcontracted. First, Denmark must accept that a visible, persistent presence is non-negotiable. A battalion-sized force and a fighter squadron on Greenlandic soil are not a burden; they are a declaration of responsibility.

Second, Denmark must align force posture with geography. Arctic defense is not a side mission; it is central to Denmark's strategic responsibilities and credibility. That requires prioritizing basing, sustainment, and readiness over symbolic deployments there or elsewhere.

Third, Denmark must integrate defense with economic development. Resource extraction, energy production, and infrastructure are not separate from security; they are its foundation. Without an economic base, defense remains episodic and less affordable. For the collective West, energy and critical element security is national security. If Denmark cannot execute these steps—even with allied support—then sovereignty is no longer exercised; it is merely asserted.

### **How Europe Can Contribute Without Posturing**

Greenland offers Europe an opportunity to demonstrate what regional shared deterrence looks like. Contributions need not be equal in scale, but they must be meaningful in effect. Rotational air defense units, maritime patrol aircraft, icebreaking capacity, logistics support, and infrastructure investment tied directly to defense requirements would materially strengthen deterrence without grandstanding.

This is where Europe's economic power must finally align with its strategic claims. Shared deterrence is not about symbolism or declarations. It is about complementary capability and sustained commitment.

### **Can Europe Move Fast Enough?**



The decisive variable is time. Ten-year roadmaps and aspirational targets are irrelevant. Greenland's exposure is immediate. The longer Europe delays, the more it reinforces the perception that sovereignty exists only on paper. Delay only serves to validate President Trump's strategic demand.

Credible deterrence must begin within weeks, not months or years. Initial deployments need not be perfect, but they cannot be symbolic political statements devoid of the credible military capacity required for the mission. They need to be visible, permanent, and expandable.

### **The Consequences of Failure**

Failure in Greenland would reverberate far beyond the Arctic. If Denmark cannot defend Greenland with allied assistance, then European claims of strategic autonomy collapse and NATO's credibility fractures geographically. The United States will either act unilaterally or disengage selectively. Resource development will proceed without European leverage. Most damaging of all, failure would confirm a lesson Europe can no longer afford: that idealism and process cannot substitute for balance-of-power realism, and that international norms cannot enforce themselves. Where previous US presidential administrations relied on alliances, basing agreements, and quiet influence, President Trump has framed the issue in transactional terms: if Greenland was strategically vital, someone had to take responsibility for securing and developing it.

### **Conclusion**

Greenland is not a crisis invented in Washington. It is the result of allied neglect and free riding. Persistent underinvestment in defense, miscalculation of threats, and a readiness among many allies to subordinate their sovereignty to international norms have produced a growing crisis of confidence in the United States. This can only be reversed with real power projection and a NATO commitment to peace through strength.

Denmark does not need to match American power. It needs to demonstrate agency, urgency, and empathy. Denmark and greater NATO must listen to its most powerful ally and address its security concerns with great alacrity. Rather than escalating the rhetoric, Denmark should admit its negligence and mitigate the shortfall now. Europe does not need to replace the United States or drive it out of the alliance. It needs to stop pretending that sovereignty is cost-free or that it can be reliably substituted with treaties in perpetuity.

This President demands more of the alliance to defend America's northern approaches. If Denmark and the rest of NATO cannot meet that demand, the United States will. What is being asked is reasonable. The Arctic is now NATO's second front. If Europe cannot meet that demand here, it has become sovereignty insolvent and should stop speaking of autonomy elsewhere. Because in the end, reality does not respond to intention, only to real and persistent power.

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