

## **Greenland, Strategic Denial, and the Survivability of U.S. Nuclear Forces**

**By**  
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Greenland's strategic importance lies not in symbolism, climate change, or future economic potential, but in its role at the center of modern deterrence. The island anchors the ability of the United States and its allies to deny Russian and Chinese forces access through critical Arctic and North Atlantic air and sea gaps. That denial mission is essential to preserving the survivability of U.S. nuclear forces and with it, the credibility of extended deterrence that underwrites security in both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.

Deterrence does not rest solely on possessing nuclear weapons. It also depends on the assurance that those weapons cannot be neutralized, constrained, or rendered ineffective by an adversary's ability to maneuver, surveil, or strike first. Geography, therefore, matters. In the emerging strategic environment, Greenland occupies one of the most consequential geographic positions in the world.

### **Denial as the Foundation of Nuclear Survivability**

The survivability of U.S. nuclear forces, particularly the sea-based leg of the nuclear triad, is the cornerstone of strategic stability. Ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) provide the most secure retaliatory capability precisely because they operate undetected at sea. But stealth is not automatic. Submarines must transit known maritime corridors to reach patrol areas, and those corridors create opportunities for adversary interference.

For U.S. and allied forces operating in the Atlantic and Arctic, two choke points are decisive: the GIUK Gap (Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom) and the Bear Gap between Greenland and Svalbard. These routes connect the Arctic Ocean to the North Atlantic and serve as the primary pathways for submarines moving between bastion areas and open-ocean operating zones.

If Russian or Chinese submarines could transit these gaps freely, they would be able to threaten NATO SSBNs, target transatlantic sea lines of communication, and position themselves for nuclear or conventional strikes against NATO territory and U.S. nuclear forces. Denying that access—rather than reacting after the fact—is what preserves nuclear survivability. Greenland makes such denial far more feasible.

### **Greenland as a Strategic Gatekeeper**

Greenland's location enables persistent surveillance, early warning, and anti-submarine warfare operations across the Arctic–Atlantic interface. Sensors, airfields, space and radar infrastructure, and command-and-control nodes associated with Greenland enable the United States and NATO to monitor adversary movements and constrain their ability to maneuver undetected.

This is not about tactical confrontation; it is about strategic denial. Greenland's geography makes it exceedingly difficult for Russian or Chinese forces to move quietly from the Arctic into the Atlantic, increasing the likelihood that such efforts would be detected, tracked, and, if necessary, intercepted. When combined with American technology, Greenland adds

uncertainty, constrains their options, complicates operational planning, and reduces incentives for escalation.

### **Russia's Arctic Strategy and the Olenya Complex**

Russia's own posture reinforces Greenland's importance. Moscow has invested heavily in the Arctic, [operating 32 bases](#), expanding air and missile defenses, and increasing submarine activity across the High North. The Kola Peninsula hosts a substantial portion of Russia's nuclear forces, supported by infrastructure such as the Olenya nuclear weapons storage facility, which underpins long-range aviation and missile operations.

Russia's objective is twofold: to shield its own nuclear forces within a protected Arctic bastion, and to enable submarines and aircraft to push outward into the Atlantic when required. Those outward movements would be designed to threaten NATO's reinforcement routes, hold allied territory at risk, and directly threaten U.S. strategic forces and American cities.

By enabling the U.S. and NATO to better monitor and deny access through the Arctic gaps, Greenland limits Russia's ability to mobilize and deploy [40 percent of its submarine force](#). This denial mission directly strengthens Euro-Atlantic security by reducing the coercive value of Russian nuclear signalling or capacity for destruction.

### **China, the Arctic, and Global Deterrence**

Although China is not an Arctic power by geography, it increasingly behaves like one strategically. Beijing's naval expansion and interest in Arctic routes reflect its ambition to operate on a global scale. Chinese submarines operating in cooperation with Russia, or benefiting from shared intelligence and surveillance, could complicate the maritime balance in the North Atlantic.

Preventing Chinese submarines from accessing these waters is therefore as important as containing Russian forces. Even a limited Chinese presence would require diverting allied assets and introducing new strategic risks. Greenland helps pre-empt that outcome by reinforcing allied control over Arctic approaches and denying adversaries the ability to open a northern axis of competition.

This denial function links Greenland directly to Indo-Pacific security. The same U.S. nuclear forces that deter conflict in Asia depend on freedom of manoeuvre and survivability in the Atlantic and Arctic. If those forces are threatened in one theatre, credibility erodes in all others.

### **Air, Missile, and Early Warning Dimensions**

The Arctic is also a critical domain for air and missile operations—America's planned "Golden Dome." Long-range bombers and ballistic missiles generally follow polar trajectories to maximize range and payload and minimize warning time. Greenland's position enables early detection, tracking, and integration into broader air and missile defense architectures.

By denying adversaries access to Arctic airspace, Greenland reinforces strategic stability by reducing incentives for first-strike calculations over the North Pole. This capability is essential in an era of increasingly [compressed decision timelines](#).

## Conclusion

Greenland matters because it enables strategic denial by denying Russian and Chinese submarines, aircraft, and missiles access through the Arctic and North Atlantic gaps that connect global theatres. That denial preserves the survivability of U.S. nuclear forces, protects allied homelands, and sustains the credibility of extended deterrence across both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.

In an age defined by competition over access and geography, Greenland is not peripheral but essential to maintaining the balance of power and preventing great-power conflict.

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