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Geopolitics

Trump's Greenland bid is really about control of the Arctic and the coming battle with China

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When Donald Trump first offered to buy Greenland in 2019, he was widely ridiculed and nothing much came of it, apart from a canceled state visit to Denmark. Fast forward six years and Trump's renewed "bid" for the world's largest island is back on the table.

And with renewed vigour at that. In an [interview](#) on January 7, the incoming US president refused to rule out the use of force to take possession of Greenland and he [dispatched](#) his son, Don Jr, "[and various representatives](#)" there on January 8, 2025, to underline his seriousness. With Elon Musk [on board](#) as well, money may not be an obstacle to any deal that Trump envisages.

Trump is not the first US politician to try to buy Greenland. The earliest documented attempt to acquire the island goes back to [1868](#).

The last serious pre-Trump effort is that by President Harry S. Truman's government in [1946](#). Trump's renewed interest in Greenland thus stands in a long tradition of American efforts of territorial expansion.

Even without this historical background, Trump's latest bid is less irrational today than it may have seemed back in 2019. On the one hand, Greenland is exceptionally rich in so-called "critical minerals". According to a 2024 [report](#) in the Economist, the island has known deposits of 43 of 50 of these minerals. According to the [US Department of Energy](#), these minerals are essential for "technologies that produce, transmit, store, and conserve energy" and have "a high risk of supply chain disruption".

The latter certainly is a valid concern given that China – a key supplier of several critical minerals to global markets – has been [increasing restrictions](#) on its exports as part of an [ongoing](#) trade war with the US. Access to Greenland's resources would give Washington more supply chain security and limit any leverage that China could bring to bear.

Strategic value

Greenland's strategic location also makes it valuable to the US. An existing US base, [Pituffik Space Base](#), is key to US missile early warning and defence and plays a critical role in space surveillance. Future expansion of the base could also enhance US capabilities to monitor Russian naval movements in the Arctic Ocean and the north Atlantic.

US sovereignty over Greenland, if Trump's deal comes to pass, would also effectively forestall any moves by rivals, especially [China](#), to get a foothold on the island. This may be less of a concern if Greenland remains part of Nato member Denmark which has kept the island economically afloat with an annual grant of around US\$500 million (£407 million).

Greenland's [independence](#) – support for which has been steadily growing – could open the door to more, and less regulated, foreign investment. In this case, [China](#) is seen as particularly keen to step in should the opportunity arise.

Add to that [growing](#) security cooperation between Russia and China and the fact that Russia has generally become more militarily aggressive, and Trump's case looks yet more credible. Nor is he the only one to have raised the alarm bells: [Canada](#), [Denmark](#) and [Norway](#) have all recently pushed back against an increasing Russian and

Chinese footprint in the Arctic.

So, the problem with Trump's proposal is not that it is based on a flawed diagnosis of the underlying issue it tries to address. Growing Russian and Chinese influence in the Arctic region in general is a security problem at a time of rising [geopolitical rivalry](#). In this context, Greenland undeniably poses a particular and significant security vulnerability for the United States.

The flaws in Trump's plan

The problem is Trump's "America first" tunnel vision of looking for a solution. Insisting that he wants Greenland and that he will get it – even if that means exceptional tariffs on Danish exports (think [Novo Nordisk's weightloss drugs](#)) or the [use of force](#).

Predictably, [Greenland](#) and [Denmark](#) rejected the new "offer". And key allies, including [France](#) and [Germany](#), rushed to their ally's defence – figuratively for now.

Rather than strengthening US security, Trump is arguably effectively weakening it by, yet again, undermining the western alliance. Not only does the irony of doing so in the north Atlantic appear to be lost on Trump. But it also seems that there is an even more fundamental problem at work here in that this kind of 19th century-style territorial expansionism reflects Trump's isolationist impulses.

"Incorporating" Greenland into the US would likely insulate Washington from the disruption of critical mineral supply chains and keep Russia and China at bay. And signalling that he will do it whatever the cost is an indication that, beyond the kind of bluster and bombast that is normally associated with Trump, his approach to foreign policy will quickly do away with any gloves.

Rather than investing in strengthening security cooperation with Denmark and the rest of its Nato and European allies to face down Russia and China in the Arctic and beyond, Trump and his team may well think that the US can get away with this. Given that what is at stake here are relations with the US's hitherto closest allies, this is an enormous, and unwarranted, gamble.

No great power in history has been able to go it alone forever – and even taking possession of Greenland, by hook or by crook, is unlikely to change this.

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