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Greenland faces a crucial decision

Trump's bid for Greenland is shaping the island's parliamentary elections — possible dependence on the US could become the decisive election issue

Before Donald Trump caused new transatlantic storm clouds to gather, Copenhagen had already experienced a perfect storm in January. Danish diplomats were shocked and bewildered by what seemed like an unforeseeable natural event: an American president ignoring all the rules of propriety, diplomacy and fairness.

For the second time, Trump made the kingdom an indecent proposal to purchase Greenland – a move reminiscent of dark colonial times. But this time he combined his request with an undisguised threat that was highly undiplomatic among allies. By acting in this way, he not only damaged the credibility of the US on the world stage, but also undermined a central pillar of American might: *soft power*.

This is primarily derived from three sources, as identified by Joe Nye: its culture (if it is attractive to others), its political values such as democracy and human rights (if it lives them) and its policies (if they are seen as legitimate). Trump is threatening to dry up all three wells. This puts him in the ranks of autocrats, who impose the law of the jungle on smaller states rather than standing up for the rule-based order once established by the United States, and the strength of the law.

Back in August 2019, Donald Trump tried to strike some kind of real estate deal with Denmark – an approach that the then newly elected Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen rejected as 'absurd'. Trump seemed to take this rejection personally, which may explain his brusque manner during his phone call with Frederiksen in January 2025.

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It was foreseeable that Trump would continue to exploit the weaknesses of other states in his second term and treat them not as partners but as objects of transactional politics. As early as November 2020, the US ambassador to Denmark had called in an opinion article for

the country to address worrying shortfalls in its armed forces. Four years later, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has promised to take action. However, the fact remains – and Trump's criticism is not unfounded here – that Denmark has historically underinvested in its armed forces and therefore does not have sufficient resources to independently ensure the security and sovereignty of the world's largest island.

Trump's dramatisation of this problem in terms of security policy is nevertheless exaggerated. Greenland is not currently under military threat and therefore does not pose an acute security risk to the US. However, security issues are not Trump's only concern. His intervention in the Greenland question is largely motivated by domestic political considerations.

Players on the scene

In Trump's world, Greenland would be the largest possible land grab – and thus the perfect confirmation of his '*Make America Great Again*' policy. Canada, on the other hand, does not fit into this scheme, although it could theoretically represent a more attractive expansion as a larger territory. The reason: with Canada, Trump would gain an immense land mass, but at the same time bring into the country one of the most liberal electorates in North America. As the 51st federal state, Canada would therefore be completely unsuitable for Trump to push ahead with his domestic political restructuring of the US. By contrast, Greenland is home to just under 57 000 people, who have the lowest level of education in the Nordic countries. Here, investment in education and the economy is needed as a matter of priority; liberal thinking is a rare luxury here.

Few people know that 15 years ago, the Kingdom of Denmark was still courting Asian states to invest in Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Copenhagen hoped that Asian investment would improve the domestic political relationship with its imperial territories and weaken centrifugal forces in the kingdom. In contrast to the interests of other Arctic states at the time, China was therefore granted observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 and access to important infrastructure projects in Greenland.

As an important infrastructure project, the expansion of airports falls within the competence of the government in Nuuk, which, by virtue of the extended autonomy statute, can regulate most aspects of political and

economic life itself. It had recognised the new airport as an integral element of national development and capital city planning. However, since security policy for Greenland remains with the Kingdom, Copenhagen was able to classify the construction project as a security-related problem and intervene in the awarding process in line with Washington.

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The concern was the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), which had been shortlisted by the Greenlandic airport company Kalaallit Airports for potential partners in the construction and financing of airport projects. CCCC is 70 per cent state-owned and involved in the *Belt and Road Initiative*, through which Beijing aims to expand its influence globally. The company also maintains military properties for the Chinese armed forces.

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Here, too, Trump is following effective domestic policy patterns. Vladimir Putin could feel vindicated in his approach of running Russia like a family business in the future – perhaps his daughters will soon be travelling to 'New Russian' territories, just as Donald Trump Jr has already done in Greenland.

Strengthening the independent movement

Before Trump, Greenland did not play a significant role in Russian Arctic discourse. However, this could change if the island were to become a militarily relevant location and thus be perceived as a potential threat to Russia's nuclear second-strike capability. This capability is protected by the Russian Northern Fleet in the Arctic.

Such a development could result in difficult negotiations between Copenhagen and Washington – as well as domestic political debates in Nuuk. This is because the deployment not only of sensors at the *Pituffik Space Base* (formerly *Thule Air Base*), which is used by US forces, but also of weapons systems such as long-range missiles would be in clear

contradiction to the Greenlandic Arctic strategy.

It also contradicts the indigenous narrative that the Inuit are a peace-loving people who see military conflicts as a problem imported from outside. Accordingly, Greenland's Foreign Minister Vivian Motzfeldt emphasised in Greenland's Arctic strategy that she did not want an 'arms race in the Arctic'.

The country of the Greenlanders (*Kalaallit Nunaat*) benefits domestically from these debates by attracting new attention and putting further pressure on Denmark. So far, Trump has done a lot of good for the independence movement, said Greenland's former foreign minister Pele Broberg of the radical independence party *Naleraq*, whose members want to separate from the kingdom as soon as possible.

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Trump is also providing free election support to Prime Minister Múte Bourup Egede and his party, *Inuit Ataqatigiit* (IA), which, with Egede, can only become the first prime minister since the introduction of the national self-government in 1979. In the upcoming parliamentary elections on 11 March, the environmental party IA is competing against its current coalition partner, the social democratic *Siumut* ('Forward'). It could want to lower the limits introduced by the IA for uranium-containing substances in mining again and thus finance independence in the long term.

Unlike the 2021 election, when environmental protection was more important than independence for the Greenlandic electorate, the question of possible dependence on the US is likely to be the decisive factor in the election this time. Greenland is seeking to break away from the Danish kingdom, but it is unlikely to be willing to sacrifice the goal of independence to a new American order under the maxim of *America First* – especially if neither the right to self-determination nor environmental protection are sufficiently respected.

Greenland faces a crucial decision: will it be associated as an independent country on an equal footing with the European Union and Denmark – or will it fall into a new dependency on Trump's US, which, under the *America First* doctrine, puts the interests of all other states behind its own?

The United States already made its choice. But as long as the US

Congress respects its own constitution and the country does not develop into a neo-imperial colonial power along the lines of Putin's Russia, Greenland will not become a 'Red, White & Blueland' in the sense of US Congressman Earl L 'Buddy' Carter – its national flag will remain as it is: red and white.



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