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Uncertainty, Bombast, and Disruption: Anticipating the Impacts of Trump 2.0 in the Arctic

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In December 2024, Trump [reiterated proposals](#) that he had made during his first presidency for the United States to purchase Greenland, calling “ownership and control of Greenland ... an absolute necessity.” Reaction was swift. “We are not for sale and will never be for sale,” Greenland’s Prime Minister Múte Egede responded in a [Facebook post](#): “Greenland belongs to the people of Greenland.” When a reporter asked Trump at a 7 January 2025 news conference whether he would rule out using “military or economic coercion” to acquire Greenland (or Panama, which Trump also considers a core interest), [the president-elect responded](#), “No, I can’t assure you on either of those two, but I can say this: We need them for economic security.”

This comment may be a prime example of Trumpian bombast, but it also speaks to policy uncertainty and unpredictability as the world braces for Donald Trump’s return to the White House this month. The incoming president’s previous foreign policy platforms were based on widespread disengagement, zero-sum thinking, and isolationism, questioning American multilateralism while habitually [praising autocratic leaders](#) and criticizing US [friends and allies](#). The twice-impeached President-elect’s transactional approach to diplomacy is already spilling over into the [Arctic](#) at time when the North faces increasingly [complex security challenges](#) compounded by the ongoing effects of climate change. His recent comments about acquiring Greenland reflect a larger neo-imperialist impulse which directly affect the United States’ North American Allies and their Circumpolar Arctic agenda more broadly.

Climate Change

Climate change policies represent one of the most visible policy divides between the Democratic and Republican parties in the US, especially after Trump became the dominant voice in the latter. [Prior](#) to becoming a presidential candidate, Trump had derided climate change as a fiction, framing efforts to curb carbon emissions as directly contrary to US political and economic interests. During his first term in the White House, his administration [overturned](#) several domestic environmental rules and protocols and pulled the United States [out](#) of the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement. His administration derailed the Arctic Council's now-notorious May 2019 Ministerial meeting in Rovaniemi when the American delegation [refused](#) to [support](#) any joint declaration which even mentioned climate change, leading to the first occasion when the body failed to release a joint declaration. (Secretary of State Mike [Pompeo's "verbal thunderstorm" against Canada, China, and Russia](#) also made the event particularly memorable.)

President Joe Biden attempted to reverse these policies, bringing the US back to the Paris Agreement upon assuming office in 2021 and making climate change [one of four pillars](#) in his administration's [Arctic policies announced in October 2022](#) (along with security, sustainable development and regional and international cooperation). But signs have already appeared that President-elect Trump is again seeking to push forward a denial policy, including [removing](#) the United States from the Paris agreement again and pursuing a [fossil fuel-centred](#) energy policy ("[drill, baby, drill](#)") while [downgrading](#) clean energy policies. The incoming government could also [pull the US out](#) of the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change ([UNFCCC](#)), which would further ostracize Washington from global climate change dialogues and likely also diminish American policy voices in the Arctic.

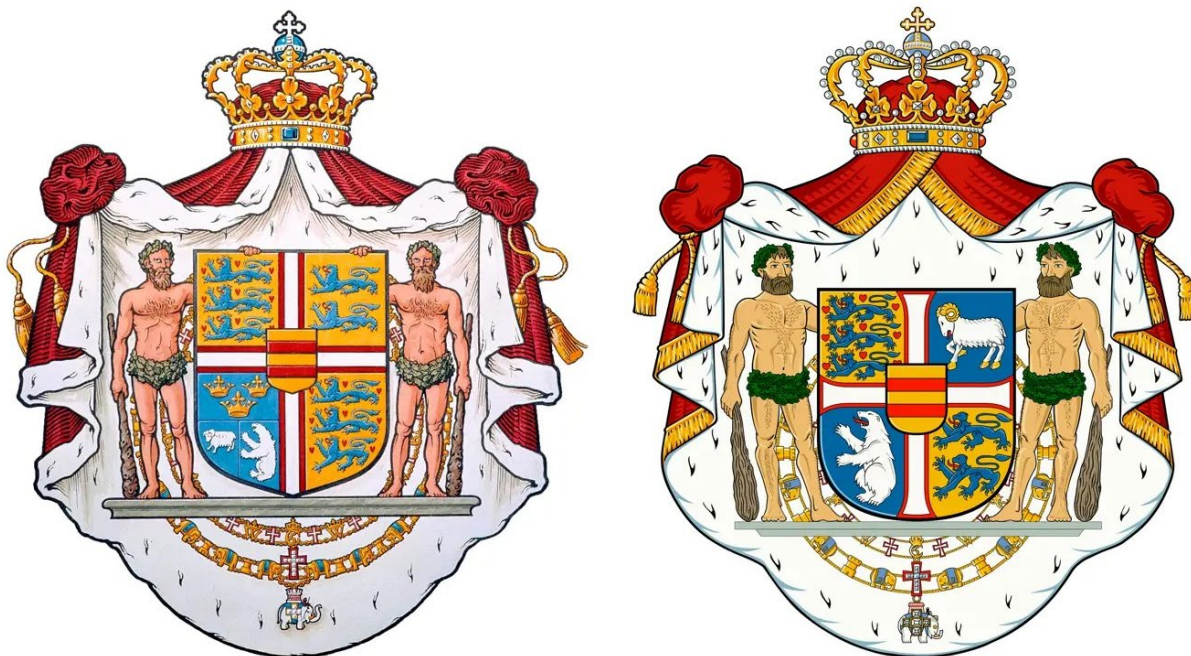
Alaska, which [voted solidly](#) for Trump in this election, is likely to be another environmental front line, especially over oil and gas drilling. After the first Trump government sought to open up protected areas in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to fossil fuel extraction. In early November 2024 the Biden administration started taking steps to '[Trump-proof](#)' the refuge by complicating any attempts by the next government to open up drilling projects there. In response, the State of Alaska has filed a [federal lawsuit against the Biden administration](#) for what it calls violations of a congressional directive to allow oil and gas development in a portion of the federal Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).

"America First" and North American Arctic Allies

During the first Trump government, the US sought a more unilateral Arctic policy which dismissed environmental concerns and placed emphasis on assuring great regional security and American economic interests. The results were mixed at best, starting with the [tragicomic proposal](#) in 2019 by the Trump government that the US should [outright purchase](#) the island of Kalaallit Nunaat – Greenland – from the Kingdom of Denmark. This would have contravened the 2009 [Greenland Self Government Act](#), especially Section 21(1): "Decisions regarding

Greenland’s independence shall be taken by the people of Greenland.” Greenlandic and Danish leadership repudiated Trump’s purchase proposal, prompting the US president to [call off a scheduled trip to Denmark in August 2019](#). That affair further illustrated both the transactional and low information aspects of the first Trump administration. [When the President-elect resurrected these ideas in December 2024](#), rebukes from Nuuk and Copenhagen were swift. Nonetheless, Trump’s comments prompted the Danish Government to announce more [defence spending on Greenland](#) to provide the Kingdom with a “stronger presence in the Arctic,” and to [update the Danish royal coat of arms](#) by providing Greenland and the Faroe Islands with their own field, to affirm that they are a core part of the Danish Realm.

On 7 January 2025, Donald Trump Jr. (the president-elect’s eldest son) [landed in Greenland](#) for “a private visit” – with an entourage including conservative activist Charlie Kirk and Trump Sr.’s personal director Sergio Gor. “Don Jr. and my Reps landing in Greenland. The reception has been great,” the incoming president [posted](#) on his Truth Social network shortly before his son landed. “They, and the Free World, need safety, security, strength, and PEACE! This is a deal that must happen. MAGA. MAKE GREENLAND GREAT AGAIN!” Then, when a reporter asked Trump if he would rule out using military or economic force to secure this outcome, the president-elect said he could not.



The old Danish royal coat of arms on the left and the new one, released on 1 January 2025, on the right. *Source:* [Kongehuset](#)

Commentators were quick to explain US interests in Greenland, including its key geostrategic location in North America, the Arctic, and the North Atlantic, coupled with its resource wealth. [Ulrik Pram Gad](#), a senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies, explains that the US seeks to ensure that “no hostile great powers control Greenland, because it can be a foothold for attacking the US.” The US has core interests in the Pituffik Space Base (formerly the Thule Air Base), the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap that secures maritime access from the European High North to the North Atlantic (and vice versa), and Greenland’s critical minerals and energy resources. Pituffik is a major strategic asset for the defence of North America, playing a role in the United States’ Ballistic Missile Early Warning System since the 1950s, boasting a deep-water port and massive airfield, and supporting space-based missions.

As [Sara Olsvig observes](#), the 2020 negotiations regarding Pituffik positioned Greenland in a new and more direct relationship with the United States. “Greenlandic politicians became more stringent in their decision making and manoeuvrings in the negotiations with the United States,” she explains. Broader competition between China and the US with respect to strategic resources and infrastructure have amplified interest in Greenland, given China’s interests in rare earth elements, uranium, and Greenlandic airports and ports. Olsvig noted in a [2024 article](#) that “the relationship between Denmark and the United States has been free of diplomatic conflict for decades,” but Trump runs the risk of disrupting this with his exhortations that Denmark should hand over Greenland, a self-governing entity inside its kingdom, or the US under his leadership “[would tariff Denmark at a very high level.](#)”

Trump’s blunt statements and veiled threats, which completely disrespected Greenland’s right to self-determination, did not win the hearts and minds of Greenlanders. Denmark Parliament member [Aaja Chemnitz reiterated on CNN](#) that Greenland “is not for sale” and that “the majority in Greenland find it quite scary and quite uncomfortable ... that the US, in a disrespectful way, is showing that they would like to be buying Greenland or controlling Greenland. Greenland is not MAGA. Greenland is not going to be MAGA.” Danish national broadcaster DR’s Nuuk correspondent [Steffen Kretz also observed](#) that Greenlanders who watched Donald Trump’s 7 January press conference were left “quite shaken,” with “very few people here who are dreaming about becoming subjects of a new colonial power led by Donald Trump.” Kretz noted that having “the leader of Denmark’s closest ally refuse to rule out the use of military force against Greenland and Denmark to claim a part of the Danish kingdom’s territory ... lays the groundwork for what could become Denmark’s greatest foreign policy crisis in modern times.”

European leaders responded quickly. “I don't think it's a good way forward to fight each other with financial means when we are close allies and partners,” [Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen](#) noted, graciously welcoming Washington’s greater interest in the Arctic but emphasizing that it would “have to be done in a way that is respectful of the Greenlandic people.” She told national broadcaster TV2 she did not believe Trump’s pursuit would result in military action and called for a sober assessment of the situation. Germany emphasized

that borders must not be changed by force, with German Chancellor [Olaf Scholz reiterating](#) that the inviolability of borders is "fundamental international law." French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot [told France Inter radio](#) that "there is obviously no question that the European Union would let other nations of the world attack its sovereign borders, whoever they are." While he did not believe that the US "would invade Greenland," Trump's comments confirmed that we have returned to an era when some world leaders 'might makes right.' Chief EU Commission [Spokesperson Paula Pinho](#) was more evasive, describing the US president-elect's statements about Greenland as "wild hypothetical stuff" while reiterating that the sovereignty of states must be respected "as a matter of principle."

While Trump's remarks evoked concern and rebukes in Europe, they found a welcome reception in Russian circles. Prominent pundits supported the president-elect's statements which they saw as validating the Kremlin's expansionist ambitions in its perceived sphere of influence. For example, Russian TV personality and Kremlin ally [Vladimir Solovyov hosted a debate](#) on his primetime show, claiming that Trump's position authorized Moscow to demand the restoration of its former Soviet empire, including the Baltic states. "What Trump is doing benefits us greatly," Solovyov asserted, by "totally destroying any illusions that anyone might have still had about the summit of democracies, about respecting opinions of NATO allies." Other pro-Kremlin pundits on the panel said that Trump's ambitions validated Russia's "special military operation" against Ukraine by justifying the use of force to secure geopolitical ambitions. All of this is predictable, given Russia's established strategic narratives using "[whataboutism](#)" to brand the US as a hypocritical belligerent, discredit NATO, legitimize its own revanchist behaviour.

There is also the question of how Trump's threats will be interpreted in [China](#), given that Beijing has frequently been cited as using 'sharp power' and geo-economic strategies, namely the use of economic coercion in diplomatic disputes, such as previously with Australia, Lithuania, Norway, and South Korea as well as Canada. The threat of tariffs on Denmark to pressure its government into ceding Greenland to American control also opens up Washington to charges of double standards.

The Northwest Passage: Will Sleeping Dogs Be Allowed to Lie?

During Trump's first administration, the [longstanding and well-managed disagreement](#) between Ottawa and Washington over the legal status of the Northwest Passage spilled into public view during the 2019 Arctic Council Rovaniemi Ministerial meeting when [Pompeo lumped Canada in](#) with Russia and China as examples of countries making "illegitimate claims" in the Arctic. There is a distinct possibility that the hitherto well-managed dispute will again complicating cross-border relations under a new Trump administration. [Canada's longstanding position](#) holds that the waters of Canada's Arctic Archipelago, including the Northwest Passage, are historic internal waters and that Canada's Arctic sovereignty encompasses land, sea and ice. "Canada intends to continue to act as a responsible sovereign of its Arctic territories and waters, relying on the rules-

based international order and supported by historical and scientific evidence,” [Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy](#) released in December 2024 explains. “Canada’s commitment to ensuring that maritime claims are addressed in a manner that is consistent with international law is one of its key enduring priorities in the Arctic.”

While Canada and the US have “agreed to disagree” on the status of these waters for decades, there is no guarantee that this mutually beneficial understanding will hold during the second Trump administration. [Rob Huebert and Adam Lajeunesse warned in 2019](#) that “with discussion of Arctic freedom of navigation voyages for the US Navy becoming commonplace, and the old diplomatic safeguards breaking down in favour a new zero-sum foreign policy approach, Canada may soon face a new challenge to its Arctic sovereignty.” While this did not come to pass during Trump’s first stint in the White House, the president-elect’s willingness to accept the advice of clear-headed advisors who seek to preserve the United States’ legal position and to maintain the country’s “[premier partnership](#)” with Canada is uncertain. Although Trump has ruled out using force to make Canada the 51st state, he noted on 7 January 2025 that he would [use “economic force”](#) to coerce Canada into joining the United States – an indicator of disrespect for Canada’s distinctiveness and for the enduring bilateral relationship. [Public opinion in Canada for joining the US is very low](#), and Trump’s bullying is more likely to alienate Canadians than it is to win their support.

The ICE Pact

The icebreaker debate is likely to be revived under the new administration, as well as a resumption of the [erratic approach to the issue](#) seen during the previous Trump regime. In 2020, a [Memorandum on Safeguarding U.S. National Interests in the Arctic and Antarctic Regions](#) included orders for a ‘[fleet](#)’ of new icebreakers be in place by 2029. It directed US government officials to explore “viable polar security icebreaker leasing options, provided by partner nations, as a near- to mid-term (Fiscal Years 2022-2029) bridging strategy,” and stipulated that, “in advance of any bid solicitation for future polar security icebreaker acquisitions, the Secretary of State shall coordinate with the Secretary of Homeland Security to identify partner nations with proven foreign shipbuilding capability and expertise in icebreaker construction.” Thus far, no new icebreakers have been deployed. Of the two polar-capable ice vessels the US Coast Guard currently operates, the heavy icebreaker [Polar Star](#) was commissioned in the early 1970s, and the *Healy* had to undergo extensive repairs before [resuming its work](#) in the fall of 2024.

In July 2024, the Biden government endeavoured to address this shortcoming and promote greater cross-border Arctic cooperation by [co-signing](#) the [Icebreaker Collaboration Effort](#), also known as the ICE Pact, with the governments of Canada and Finland. The Arctic allies would jointly build icebreakers for their use, as well as potential sale to other regional allies and partners. Moscow continues to develop its own icebreaker fleet, with Russia’s newest nuclear-powered icebreaking ship, *Chukotka* (Чукотка) [launching](#) in early November 2024, and China’s fourth icebreaker, the *Jidi* (极地) / *Polar Region*, was [completed](#) in June of that year.

Whether this agreement will withstand a Trump presidency's derision for multilateral cooperation, especially in strategic matters, is an open question. Retired U.S. Naval Officer [Peter Rybski astutely noted](#) that "the ICE Pact is not a continuation" of Trump's earlier efforts. "The Trump Administration was specifically pursuing a deal that involved allied construction of icebreakers," Rybski observes, "but this did not mean building all of the ships overseas. One proposal under consideration involved the construction of a lead icebreaker (or icebreakers) quickly in a proven allied shipyard alongside shipbuilders from a partnering American shipyard. Once the immediate need was met, production would then shift to the partnering American shipyard which would then have the benefit of recent icebreaker construction experience." Rybski suggests that, "if the Second Trump term follows the first, the ICE Pact could become the vehicle to build and/or lease icebreakers for the U.S. Coast Guard outside of the United States."

It remains to be seen whether Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), the Senate Armed Services Readiness Subcommittee's top Republican and a supporter of the ICE Pact, was correct in speculating that Trump would continue the arrangement given the plans to [expand America's icebreaker fleet](#) under the first Trump Administration. "President Trump, you never know what's going to happen now, but he got the whole icebreaker initiative — that went directly to him," [Sullivan noted](#) in a November 2024 interview. On 7 January 2025, [Trump told the news media](#) that he had said to Prime Minister Trudeau that "We don't really want to have a partner in the buying of icebreakers. We don't need a partner." Does this portend his intention to scuttle the ICE Pact, which seeks to advance industrial cooperation, workforce development, and investments in U.S. shipyards? Or is Canadian Public Services and Procurement Minister [Jean-Yves Duclos correct in his claim](#) that it will be "relatively easy" to convince Trump to implement the trilateral agreement?

Collective Defence in Question?

The future of NATO under a Trump presidency is also cloudy, given his history of antipathy towards the alliance and the preference of some within his inner circle to [downgrade](#) Europe as an American security priority in favour of the Asia-Pacific. Trump had even weighed the possibility of the United States [leaving NATO altogether](#), an option which may return despite attempts by the US Congress to set up a [legal firewall](#) against such a possibility.

In February 2024, Trump openly called for Russia '[to do whatever the hell they want](#)' to any NATO member seen as lagging behind on increases to national defence spending. Last year, six out of the seven NATO states in the Arctic have spent more than the preferred two percent of GDP minimum. Canada [is the exception](#) at about 1.34%, and with the Justin Trudeau government calling for the country to reach the two percent threshold [in 2032](#). Furthermore, Conservative leader [Pierre Poilievre has refused](#) to commit to the 2% target if he becomes prime minister, citing budgetary constraints. These positions are sure to raise ire with the incoming US

administration, with Trump and various Republican allies chastising Canada for being a “freeloader” under the US defence umbrella.

A related concern is how the incoming Trump government will shift policies towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a presidential candidate, Trump vowed that he could end the conflict [within twenty-four hours](#). Critics have worried that this would mean a peace deal which would validate Russian land seizures and possibly keep Ukraine [out of NATO](#) and thus perpetually vulnerable to future attacks, especially since Trump has consistently refused to openly condemn the Putin regime for seeking to annex Ukraine. Commentators also speculate that the incoming US government may [ease sanctions](#) on Russian Arctic liquified natural gas (LNG) projects. Even if the new administration does not follow through on its threat to leave the alliance, trans-Atlantic relations are likely to become more brittle, at the time when NATO is starting to pay [much closer attention](#) to Arctic regional threats.

The Arctic Council

As the Rovaniemi summit illustrated, the incoming Trump government’s relationship with the Arctic Council may be precarious. In 2025, the chair of the group will rotate from Norway to Denmark, (with [debates](#) ongoing as to what degree [Greenland](#) should participate), with the Russia question likely hovering over those proceedings. [Russia engagement with the Council](#) has been limited since early 2022, and reports surfacing in late 2024 that Russia was [purposefully withholding](#) climate change data from elsewhere in the region has been a direct knock on the Council’s main mandate to promote environmental protection and stewardship in the Circumpolar North.

Meanwhile, since its full invasion of Ukraine two years ago, Russia has been [more open](#) to closer Arctic cooperation with [China](#), [India](#), and potentially other fellow members of the recently-expanded [BRICS group](#). American disengagement from the Council could place the group in a much weaker position, both in terms of its abilities to address Arctic environmental challenges and to act as a town hall for regional summitry.

Facing Uncertainty

To what extent will the incoming US president’s bombastic and often undiplomatic rhetoric become policy after he takes office? We anticipate that his aggressive strategy of promoting “America First” at the expense of longstanding alliances, coupled with a transactional mentality that seeks quick-win better deals for the US with little regard for secondary and tertiary implications, will affect the Arctic on several fronts. “This level of disrespect from the coming US president towards very, very loyal allies and friends is record-setting,” Danish Conservative MP [Rasmus Jarlov posted](#) on social media after Trump’s belligerent posts and statements. We are worried that this will backfire on the US – with direct or collateral damage on its North American Allies.

At a [briefing in Paris on 8 January 2025](#), U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken dismissed President-elect Trump's threat to possibly annex Greenland. "I think one of the basic propositions we've brought to our work over the last four years is that we're stronger, we're more effective, we get better results when we're working closely with our allies, not saying or doing things that may alienate them," Blinken told reporters. "The idea expressed about Greenland is obviously not a good one, but maybe more important, it's obviously one that's not going to happen, so we probably shouldn't waste a lot of time talking about it."

It is not a waste of time, however, to ponder the underlying logic behind the president-elect's pursuit of what he perceives to be immediate US national interests – and, perhaps more importantly, what he can present as personal victories. "[Donald Trump's imperialist designs](#) on Greenland, Canada and Panama often sound like the ramblings of a real estate shark who equates foreign and trade policy to a hunt for new deals," CNN analyst [Stephen Collinson explains](#). "But there's method in his expansionist mindset. Trump, in his unique way, is grappling with national security questions the US must face in a new world shaped by China's rise, the inequalities of globalization, melting polar ice and great power instability." Noting that Trump's "attitude also embodies the 'America First' principle of using US strength to relentlessly pursue narrow national interests, even by coercing smaller, allied powers," Collinson also cautions that the incoming president's "21st century neocolonialism is a huge risk and appears certain to run headlong into international law," as well as "compromis[ing] America's power by trashing alliances built up over generations and alienating its friends." The president-elect's recent statements demonstrate that the United States' Northern American Arctic allies are in his sights – and the Arctic is tied into his preoccupations with ensuring US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.

Some sections of this report are based on Marc Lanteigne, "[A Sharp Right Turn: The Arctic Faces Trump 2.0](#)," posted on 9 November 2024 in [Over the Circle](#).