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Realism or Real(estate)ism? Making Sense of Trump and Greenland

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Because the pendulum of public opinion swings so easily from extreme complacency to extreme apprehension, from utopian reliance on "good will" to disillusioned faith in naked force only, it is particularly important to be wary of any simple panacea, even of one that parades in the realist garb of a policy guided solely by the national security interest.

Arnold Wolfers (1952)¹

Donald Trump has recently returned to the notion that the United States "need[s] Greenland from the standpoint of national security."² "It is vital for the Golden Dome that we are building," the US president insists, and "if we don't do it, Russia or China will take over Greenland, and we're not going to have Russia or China as a neighbour."³ While the US already neighbours Russia across the Bering Strait, the Americans also have controlled the Pituffik Space Base (formerly Thule Force Air Base) in Greenland since its construction began in 1951. This strategic installation enables missile defence of the US homeland and provides domain awareness that will help enable the "Golden Dome" system. The Kingdom of Denmark – of which Greenland is a part – is a longstanding and reliable ally to the United States, being a founding member of NATO in 1949, with an extensive defence agreement giving the United States the right to operate their military in Greenland since 1951. Nonetheless, Trump and his inner circle now intend to acquire Greenland, whether Greenlanders and Danes "like it or not," refuse to rule out using military force to do so.⁴ Alleging that "Greenland is covered with Russian

¹ Arnold Wolfers, "National security" as an ambiguous symbol," *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1952): 502.

² Thomas Mackintosh, "'We need Greenland': Trump repeats threat to annex Danish territory," *BBC News*, 5 January 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g0zg974v1o>.

³ "'Unacceptable' for Greenland not to be in US hands, says Trump," *The Guardian*, 14 January 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/14/greenland-us-trump-talks-denmark>.

⁴ "Trump says U.S. will acquire Greenland 'whether they like it or not'," *Global News*, 9 January 2026, <https://globalnews.ca/news/11607227/trump-greenland-us-takeover-force/>.

and Chinese ships all over the place,” Trump asserts that neither Denmark nor NATO could defend the island in case of an attack – even though the US is part of the alliance.⁵ The US President is adamant that his country, alone, can repel an armed invasion and that, in order to do so, it must own Greenland outright rather than relying on its existing treaties. “You defend ownership. You don’t defend leases,” Trump has declared. “And we’ll have to defend Greenland.”⁶

Trump’s expansionist designs on Greenland seem to fit with a larger strategy articulated in the recent US *National Security Strategy*,⁷ as well as the Heritage Foundation’s *Project 2025*⁸ that many experts hold as the wellspring of the Trump administration’s worldview to use hard power (military and economic force) to establish an American sphere of influence across the Western Hemisphere, where all interests are subservient to US national security. Soft power (the ability to influence others through persuasion rooted in appealing values), long-term alliances such as NATO, and international institutions designed to promote cooperation are to be eschewed in favour of the primacy of the state. This has led some commentators to explain Trump’s fixation on owning Greenland using the realist school of international relations theory.

Realism is not a foreign policy, but a way to understand the world. While there are different variants of realism, they all see the world as a dangerous place and share the state as the major actor in international relations. According to its tenets, the primary concern of all states is to protect themselves, and they do this through developing hard power. Realism assumes states to be “egoists” who put their own security before all others. Powerful states will do what they can to protect themselves, even at the expense of other (even friendly) states. The major calculation for realism is thus an assessment of a state’s relative gains of power through its interactions with others. If a state calculates that cooperation with another state will benefit the other state more, it will not because making that state relatively stronger means it could be a greater threat in the future. Hence realism is wary of international trade imbalances (Trump is always concerned about being “ripped off” on trade) and institutions that promote long-term cooperation, such as NATO or the UN, which benefit every state involved but to various degrees. Instead, realists tend to favour hard power and short-run alliances rooted in mutual national security interests, if necessary, to offer temporary protection from a larger threat.⁹

Of course, there are more than two states in the world. If one state moves to protect itself at the expense of another, its actions might cause additional states to act against it from gaining power it could later use to threaten them. This is called the *security dilemma*, where a state’s actions to protect itself can essentially

⁵ Sarah Shamim, “Do Russia and China pose a national security threat to the US in Greenland?” *Aljazeera*, 7 January 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/7/do-russia-and-china-pose-a-national-security-threat-to-the-us-in-greenland>

⁶ “Trump says U.S. will acquire Greenland ‘whether they like it or not’,” *Global News*, 9 January 2026, <https://globalnews.ca/news/11607227/trump-greenland-us-takeover-force/>.

⁷ National Security Strategy of the United States of America, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

⁸ *Mandate for Leadership 2025: The Conservative Promise: Project 2025 Presidential Transition Project* (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2023).

⁹ See classics on Realism such as Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Columbus, Ohio: McGraw-Hill, 1979); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: WW Norton, 2003).

backfire and make it less secure.¹⁰ Ultimately, it is a simple cost-benefit analysis from the point of view of the state: if the costs are more than the security benefits, the state will not take the action. On the surface, the focus on states, national security achieved through hard power, and a concern with relative gains seem to line up with Trump's simple panacea of Western Hemispheric dominance in the realist garb of national security interests.

We should be wary of such simplistic characterizations of "America First" and its national security interests. Do the basic tenets of realism explain Trump's declared need for Greenland on these grounds? Given realist aversion to long-term alliances, let us put aside NATO Articles 1 and 5, as well as the 1951 defence agreement with Denmark that has enabled the US to build, expand, and sustain its Pituffik base. Let us also put aside soft power and the concern of PRC and Russian influence on Greenland,¹¹ given that realism is built on the accurate assessment of foreign hard power capabilities and neither the PRC nor Russia have the ability to seize Greenland militarily and then defend it from either a NATO or solo US counterattack. There is no evidence to support Donald Trump's assertion that there are Russian and PRC ships all around Greenland.¹² Such an invasion would require Pituffik to be directly attacked, provoking a US response which would cause a general war. Indeed, the US would likely act to intercept an invasion force during its long journey through the Bering Strait if launched by China, or NATO would do so off the coast of Norway if launch by Russia – in both cases before the invading force even got close to Greenland. Either the US or NATO would also cut off the long and exposed supply lines that would enable any such invasion force to operate. Both the PRC and Russia would have much more to lose than to gain in doing this – a classic example of the security dilemma.

This leads us to the question of Pituffik Space Base: could the Kingdom of Denmark force the Americans to leave if they decide suddenly that the American "lease" is up? The US obviously believes that they could not. After all, senior advisors have asserted that Denmark and its European NATO allies do not have the will to fight the US militarily over the future of Greenland.¹³ Furthermore, if Denmark nor NATO (minus the US) are not strong

¹⁰ See, for example, Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the security dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214.

¹¹ See, for example, Ulrik Pram Gad, Naja Dyrendom Graugaard, Anders Holgersen, Marc Jacobsen, Nina Lave, and Nikoline Schriver, "Imagining China on Greenland's Road to Independence," *Arctic Yearbook 2018* (Akureyri: Arctic Portal, 2018): 1-23, https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2018/China-and-the-Arctic/1_AY2018_Gad.pdf; Justin Barnes, Heather Exner-Pirot, Lassi Heininen, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, eds., *China's Arctic Engagement: Following the Polar Silk Road to Greenland and Russia* (Peterborough/ Akureyri: NAADSN/Arctic Yearbook, 2021), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NAADSN-engage3-ChinaAY-JB-EXP-LH-PWL-upload-rev.pdf>; Marc Jacobsen, Ole Wæver, and Ulrik Pram Gad, *Greenland in Arctic Security:(De)Securitization Dynamics Under Climatic Thaw and Geopolitical Freeze* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024); and Adam Lajeunesse and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Selling the 'Near Arctic' State: China's Information and Influence Operations in the Arctic* (Washington: Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2024), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/SellingNearArctic-4.pdf>. For context, see also Martin Breum, *The Greenland Dilemma: The Quest for Independence, the Underground Riches and the Troubled Relations with Denmark* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College, 2015); and Elizabeth Buchanan, *So You Want to Own Greenland?: Lessons from the Vikings to Trump* (New York: Melville House, 2025).

¹² See, for example, Stefanie Dazio, River Zhang and Emma Burrows, "Trump repeats false claims when discussing Greenland's security in the Arctic," *AP News*, 13 January 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-greenland-denmark-trump-arctic-security-russia-china-6346aa8e86be594e467e8cc18f98357b>.

¹³ Jude Sheerin and Gabriela Pomeroy, "US discussing options to acquire Greenland including using military, White House says," *BBC News*, 7 January 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyg1jg8xkmo>.

enough to prevent an extremely complex invasion launched from distant shores by Russia or the PRC, they certainly could not force entrenched American troops to leave the island. No matter what happens – status-quo, some new arrangement, or a US invasion of Greenland – the US forces at Pituffik are not going anywhere. From a realist point of view, needing Greenland to support current deterrence and a future Golden Dome is a moot point. The US could only leave if they choose not to defend “the lease.”

No matter what option Donald Trump ultimately decides on, the US does not gain national security by owning Greenland from a realist point of view. The US cannot be forced to vacate Greenland and neither Russia nor the PRC could currently take the island by force. Even if they spent years building the capability to do so (at great opportunity costs to their core ambitions elsewhere), they would clash with NATO forces and provoke a general war.

The US will put itself in a security dilemma if Donald Trump forces American ownership of Greenland. After a US military invasion of the country, former NATO allies would begin taking steps to defend themselves from future US aggression. On a grand scale, this would mean the US would lose partners with mutual national security interests who are useful to check Russia in Europe and the PRC in the Indo-Pacific from using similar methods to enhance their hard power. This outcome would have negative repercussions for Trump’s “Golden Dome” and the US’ evolving integrated deterrence strategy. Missile defence systems benefit from defensive depth – that is, the farther out aerospace awareness systems are based, the more effective the system becomes. International partners would be less willing to host such American systems or contribute data to them. Rather than helping to facilitate a future Golden Dome that provides the US with information dominance and decision-making superiority, “owning” Greenland could harm it.

Ultimately, realism does not offer a convincing argument for why the US would want to “own” Greenland. Instead, it offers substantive warning about the consequences of acquiring the island by coercion or outright military conquest. Commentators should remember that Donald Trump comes from the world of New York real estate, not international relations. “I think that ownership gives you a thing that you can’t do with, you’re talking about a lease or a treaty,” he told the *New York Times* on 7 January. “Ownership gives you things and elements that you can’t get from just signing a document.”¹⁴ Venezuela offers an interesting case study as to what these elements could be.

Trump’s conflict with Venezuela was predicated on stopping the flow of drugs, but after the capture of Nicolás Maduro, the US President’s attention focused on that country’s oil.¹⁵ The US does not “own” Venezuela, but declares that it will “manage it” through the vassalage of Delcy Rodríguez.¹⁶ Trump’s meeting with US oil officials to get them to reinvigorate Venezuelan oil production, however, resulted in some major companies deeming

¹⁴ “Trump Lays Out a Vision of Power Restrained Only by ‘My Own Morality,’” *New York Times*, 7 January 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/08/us/politics/trump-interview-power-morality.html>.

¹⁵ Anton Troianovski, “Trump’s Plans for Venezuelan Oil Run Headlong into Reality,” *New York Times*, 12 January 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/12/us/politics/trump-venezuela-oil-dominance-influence.html>.

¹⁶ Akayla Gardner and Vaughn Hillyard, “U.S. plans to sell Venezuela’s oil and control proceeds,” *MS Now*, 7 January 2026, <https://www.ms.now/news/venezuela-oil-trump-administration>.

that country “uninvestable.”¹⁷ While this intervention did not benefit the US oil sector writ large, it likely does appeal to smaller actors and sectors within that overall industry.¹⁸ Could the same go for Greenland?

Greenland contains significant concentrations of “rare earth elements” and other natural resources which both the previous and current Trump administrations have also cited as a reason why they are focused on Greenland. “This is about critical minerals,” Trump’s National Security Adviser Mike Waltz told Fox News in January 2025. “This is about natural resources.”¹⁹ Experts explain, however, that Greenland’s status in the Kingdom of Denmark “is not what’s stopping the United States from tapping the island’s treasure trove,” but rather the isolated location of its mineral deposits and the reality of a “mile-thick polar ice sheet” where “darkness reigns much of the year.” Malte Humpert, a senior fellow at The Arctic Institute, recently quipped that “the idea of turning Greenland into America’s rare-earth factory is science fiction. It’s just completely bonkers. You might as well mine on the moon. In some respects, it’s worse than the moon.”²⁰ Furthermore, Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark have repeatedly stated that they would welcome American investment in this sector. Chinese actors have not secured control over these resources – quite the opposite.²¹ But these sobering realities have not stopped Trump from seeking to advance the interests of specific Trump-aligned actors who would benefit from American “ownership” of the country and, most importantly, full control over its regulatory regimes.²²

Investigative journalists have tracked the influence and money behind the idea of acquiring Greenland, revealing the notion did not emanate from the national security community. According to former U.S. national security adviser John Bolton, billionaire Ronald Lauder (the heir of the Estée Lauder empire) planted the idea of “buying” Greenland into Donald Trump’s mind in 2017 or early 2018²³ and then offered to act as a mediator with Denmark to secure a deal. A major investigation by Danish newspaper *Politiken* published on 30 November 2025

¹⁷ Adam Cancryn, “‘It’s ‘uninvestible’: Trump’s Venezuela pitch met with skepticism from oil executive,” *CNN*, 9 January 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/09/politics/oil-executives-venezuela-white-house> and Spencer Kimball, “What the Big Oil executives told Trump about investing in Venezuela,” *NBC News*, 10 January 2026, <https://www.nbc.com/2026/01/10/what-the-big-oil-executives-told-trump-about-investing-in-venezuela.html>.

¹⁸ See, for example, Rebecca F. Elliott, “U.S. Refiners to Profit as Trump Asserts Control Over Venezuelan Oil,” *New York Times*, 14 January 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/14/business/energy-environment/refineries-trump-venezuela-oil.html>

¹⁹ Kelly Rissman, “Tech moguls who invested in Greenland mining also gave Trump campaign \$243m: report,” *The Independent*, 15 April 2025, <https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/greenland-trump-tech-moguls-donations-b2734045.html>.

²⁰ Matt Egan, “‘Completely bonkers’: Trump’s Greenland mining dreams collide with reality,” *New York Times*, 12 January 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/12/business/greenland-trump-venezuela-mining>.

²¹ Anders Christoffer Edstrøm, Guðbjörg Ríkey Th. Hauksdóttir, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Cutting Through Narratives on Chinese Arctic Ownership* (Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs Arctic Initiative, June 2025), <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/china-arctic-investments>.

²² See, for example, Iías Thorsson, “Trump ally who inspired Greenland purchase idea quietly invests in Greenlandic companies,” *Arctic Today*, 3 December 2025, <https://www.arctictoday.com/trump-ally-who-inspired-greenland-purchase-idea-quietly-invests-in-greenlandic-companies/> and Martina Di Licosa, “These Billionaires Bet Big On Greenland—After Trump Took Interest,” *Forbes*, 9 January 2026, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/martinadilicosa/2026/01/09/these-billionaires-bet-big-on-greenland-after-trump-took-interest/>.

²³ Tom Burgis, “How a billionaire with interests in Greenland encouraged Trump to acquire the territory,” *The Guardian*, 15 January 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jan/15/ronald-lauder-billionaire-donor-donald-trump-ukraine-greenland>.

found that Lauder has since taken ownership stakes in Greenlandic companies such as Greenland Water Bank and through the Greenland Development Partners, a Delaware-registered investor consortium that has bought into Greenland Investment Group with myriad interests across the country. Analysts said that it would be naïve to view Lauder’s investments as purely commercial considering his longstanding relationship with Trump and his role in encouraging the president to acquire control over the island. Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard of the Danish Institute for International Studies observed how Trump’s decisions often reflect the ideas seeded and germinated by wealthy confidants such as Lauder through informal channels, leaving good reason for Greenlanders and Danes “to be on guard.”²⁴

Follow the money. American and international reporters and analysts provide ample evidence that Trump’s insistence on the need for annexation and his approach to it as essentially a real estate deal links directly to “wealthy investors who have eyed [Greenland] as a potentially lucrative venue for mining metals and minerals.” Many of those same figures also gave hundreds of millions of dollars to Trump’s 2024 campaign. “Some of Donald Trump’s biggest campaign donors and investors... are positioned to potentially profit from any American takeover of Greenland,” *The Guardian* reported in April 2025, “raising even more ethical questions around Trump’s controversial pursuit of the Arctic territory.”²⁵ The newspaper’s analysis of campaign finance records and corporate filings revealed a gaggle of tech moguls who have invested in mining companies operating in Greenland, as well as oil executives and crypto tycoons who seek to pursue business ventures there. “All stand to profit if only they can cut out any pesky Danish or Greenlandic authorities from regulating or restraining their operations,” Michel Casey wrote in a 13 January 2026 story in the left-leaning *New Republic*. “A ‘closed loop’ of ‘investors, billionaires, [and] Trump’ have emerged to circle Greenland, swirling it like a committee of vultures, eyeing which parts of Greenland to pluck clean.”²⁶

Alleged national security imperatives are a convenient, if unconvincing, pretext for Trump wanting to “own” Greenland. The security costs of taking ownership of Greenland far exceed the benefits, and therefore a realistic calculus instructs the US not to do this. More compelling is Trump’s self-interested prodding by a cluster of billionaire influencers who funded his campaign and have invested in Greenland on the promise that he will secure complete access to the island. Ironically, realism tells us that should Trump continue with his real(estate)ism, US national security will suffer.

²⁴ Kristian Corfixen, Jesper Thobo-Carlsen, and Carl Emil Arnfred, “Stenrig Trump-støtte har købt sig ind i grønlandske virksomheder,” *Politiken*, 30 November 2025, <https://politiken.dk/internationalt/art10619933/Stenrig-Trump-st%C3%B8tte-har-k%C3%B8bt-sig-ind-i-gr%C3%B8nlandske-virksomheder>. Summarized in English in Elias Thorsson, “Trump ally who inspired Greenland purchase idea quietly invests in Greenlandic companies,” *ArcticToday*, 3 December 2025, <https://www.arctictoday.com/trump-ally-who-inspired-greenland-purchase-idea-quietly-invests-in-greenlandic-companies/>.

²⁵ Kate Kelly, “Trump Is Eyeing Greenland. His Commerce Nominee Has Financial Ties There,” *New York Times*, 29 January 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/29/business/howard-lutnick-greenland.html>.

²⁶ Casey Michel, “The Oligarchs Pushing for Conquest in Greenland,” *The New Republic*, 13 January 2026, <https://newrepublic.com/article/205102/oligarchs-pushing-conquest-greenland-trump>.