

# Trump's Greenland Gambit Is a Masterclass in Statecraft

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The settlement Kulusuk in the Sermersooq municipality, southeastern Greenland, in a file photo. Johannes Plenio/Unsplash.com

OPINION

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## Commentary

Donald Trump is serious about boxing China out of the Arctic. A month before assuming the U.S. presidency for the second time, Trump notched another geopolitical win in the Arctic competition space and set the tone for the next four years. On Dec. 29th, Trump [revived](#) his 2019 proposal to purchase Greenland from

Denmark, [saying](#) U.S. ownership of the largest island in the world “is an absolute necessity.” A week before the inauguration, Trump’s son Don. Jr. [traveled](#) to Nuuk, Greenland to discuss Trump’s interest, leading to further speculation about the incoming President’s intent. In 2019, few supported Trump by publicly describing Greenland’s [strategic importance](#)—and reminding that the U.S. [twice attempted](#) to purchase Greenland from Denmark. Others warned about China’s expanding presence and influence in Arctic affairs, highlighting Beijing’s desire to build [airports](#) in Greenland. Still, during Trump’s first term, most claimed his interest in acquiring Greenland was “[absurd](#).”

Not much has changed today with pundits casting Trump as impulsive—as they [did](#) in 2019—and lacking knowledge of geopolitics. This time even the Danish Prime Minister chimed in saying “[Greenland is not for sale](#)” tacitly hinting at Trump’s perceived neocolonial provocation. Weeks later, Denmark reversed the message and indicated interest in [discussing](#) Greenland’s future with Trump. While Greenland’s future is yet to be determined, the mainstream narrative is naïve—Trump’s masterclass in statecraft is now in session—and Beijing is taking note.

Where the media focuses on Trump’s [claim](#) to use the military to acquire the island, they miss the effect of the rhetoric. The reality is this was a deliberate strategic provocation few will see or acknowledge. In poking Denmark about his intent to purchase, or even forcefully acquire the island, Trump gave a masterclass in geostrategic chess, saving the U.S. billions, furthering deterring China from staking a claim on Greenland, and improving U.S. national security in the process. As the dialogue progresses, the stakes could evolve further.

Critics mocking Trump’s fixation on Greenland fail to account for the underlying significance to U.S. and NATO defense. European countries have long underinvested in their own defense. NATO enjoys the warmth of the U.S.-provided security blanket absent the corresponding commitments. The Danish government dismissed Trump’s idea and critics mocked his supposed naivety. Yet, Trump’s renewed Greenland pitch might have been more calculated than it appeared. Denmark’s subsequent [announcement](#) of a \$1.5 billion defense investment in Greenland reveals a sophisticated dynamic: the rhetoric may have been a strategic gambit to prompt Denmark into strengthening Greenland’s security infrastructure, effectively achieving U.S. strategic goals without direct expenditure.

# Greenland's Strategic Importance in the Arctic

The Arctic region is critically important for U.S. homeland defense. Greenland occupies a pivotal position at the crossroads of key Arctic waterways and serves as a gateway to the North Atlantic. The Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap is considered one of the most **consequential** strategic corridors for Russian submarine approaches to the eastern U.S. and Canadian coastlines.

The U.S. presence at **Pituffik Space Base** (formerly Thule Air Force Base) in northwest Greenland is the only U.S. military installation north of the Arctic Circle. It is small; lacks offensive power projection capabilities; and is an inadequate posture to **deter geopolitical rivals** in China and Russia. From “**enormous unexplored stores of natural resources**” and the Chinese Communist Party's public interest in presence in Greenland, the autonomous island under Danish control is one of the most valuable pieces of real estate on the planet.

Some in Washington see Greenland as a strategic vulnerability requiring more attention, lest it create an opportunity for adversaries. Declining relations with China and Russia elevate Greenland's geostrategic utility value for Washington, making its defense and security among the pressing security challenges of the incoming Trump administration. Thus, recognizing Greenland's significance, Trump's revived rhetoric about purchasing the island is more than a proposed property deal by a real estate tycoon.

It is a geopolitical statement underscoring America's recognition of Greenland's critical role in Arctic security. Yet, proposing such a move — whether sincerely or as a negotiating tactic — placed pressure on Copenhagen to either step up its own commitments to Greenland or risk appearing negligent.

## Cost-Free Arctic Security

Trump's approach is fiscally savvy. Operating in the Arctic is expensive. Everything takes longer, costs more, and breaks faster. Burden sharing is sound strategy and a necessary element of NATO's security architecture. NATO has long grappled with calls for equitable contributions among member states—with Trump 1.0 repeatedly **threatening** consequence for NATO countries failing to meet the required 2 percent GDP mandate. In this way, Trump's latest jab was an effective catalyst toward tangible defense commitments by a NATO ally that was long overdue.

Trump's approach to Greenland illustrates a key principle of effective statecraft: leveraging rhetoric to influence allies and adversaries alike. By framing Greenland as a strategic asset of unparalleled importance, Trump compelled Denmark to prioritize investments aligned with U.S. interests. Moreover, this episode highlights the utility of unconventional proposals in diplomacy. Ideas that initially seem outlandish can serve as valuable tools to reshape conversations and drive action. In this sense, Trump's Greenland rhetoric transcends traditional transactionalism, embodying a broader vision for Arctic security.

While the idea of buying Greenland may never have been realistic, the strategic impact of Trump's rhetoric prevails. By provoking Denmark into investing in Greenland's defense, Trump achieved a key U.S. **objective**: enhancing Arctic security without direct financial outlay.

Trump's approach underscores the necessity of bold thinking and unconventional tactics as tools of the trade. As the Arctic continues to reemerge as a focal point of geopolitical competition, the Greenland episode will stand as an example of how strategic provocation and perception management can shape outcomes on the international stage. Whether by design or by happenstance, Trump's rhetoric catalyzed a renewed focus on and commitment to Arctic defense and security and is a testament to the enduring power of statecraft in advancing national interests.

*From [RealClearWire](#)*

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