

An American Greenland could strengthen Europe

It would secure a militarily strategic location

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At the NATO summit this week in Ankara, Turkey, President Trump revived his demand that Greenland “be controlled by the United States, not by Denmark.”

He warned that Washington could withdraw its forces from Europe because of the continent’s resistance. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen replied that Denmark was ready to defend “every inch” of its territory and that the island was not for sale.



The exchange read as another rupture in the alliance. Beneath the heat sat a question no one in Europe had answered.

How would Europe defend Greenland without the United States? That no one has answered this matters, because NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte then said Mr. Trump “absolutely has a point” on keeping China and Russia out of the Arctic.

So Europe grants the danger while rejecting the arrangement that would address it.

Denmark holds undisputed legal sovereignty over Greenland, but the strategic substance of that title is thin. The claim no longer matches the power to defend it, and the result is a dangerous ambiguity: Denmark holds the title, Greenland runs its own domestic affairs, and the U.S. provides the decisive layer of protection through Pituffik Space Base, which delivers missile warning for all of North America.

If Greenland is ever attacked, American blood will most likely defend it. In a country weary of foreign wars, what appetite will the public have to fight over a territory it does not control?

We are reminded that only Greenlanders may decide their own future, and most reject the idea of joining the United States. That opposition deserves respect, and no honest proposal pretends otherwise.

Yet self-determination is hard to exercise when superstates can pour resources into shaping the outcome.

Russia has bent politics in neighbors such as Georgia and Moldova and has faced accusations of interference in Greenland. A population of 57,000 cannot indefinitely hold off that kind of pressure alone.

Greenland sits on the western edge of the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap, the corridor through which Russian naval forces would move from the Arctic into the North Atlantic. Any arrangement that loosens NATO's grip on that space serves Moscow.

The Norwegian archipelago Svalbard exemplifies the pattern: Norway holds sovereignty, but treaty rights give Russia a foothold at the Svalbard settlement of Barentsburg and a pretext to accuse Oslo whenever it secures its own ground.

Where sovereignty is unclear, Russia tests the limits. China's threat is quieter: not invasion, but infrastructure and influence over airports, telecommunications and minerals. Such influence could compromise the very systems that allow NATO to detect missile launches.

A candid case must concede what already exists.

Under the 1951 defense agreement, Washington already holds wide latitude to operate across Greenland with Danish consent — a fact critics argue makes ownership unnecessary.

Yet this is exactly where ownership earns its keep. Rights granted by treaty can be curtailed, renegotiated or withdrawn as governments change, and the Ankara threat to quit Europe shows how quickly the political weather can change.

Ambiguity is the vulnerability that Moscow and Beijing probe. Ownership removes it.

None of this requires 19th-century imperial administration. In 1921, the League of Nations awarded the Swedish-speaking Åland Islands to Finland while guaranteeing their language, culture, autonomy and neutral status. The settlement has held for a century. The Compacts of Free Association that the U.S. maintains with Pacific island states offer a modern version of the same bargain. What Greenlandic schools teach is no concern of Western security.

Whether China builds a port there is. A Greenland transfer would impose real costs on Denmark: territory, Arctic standing and a centuries-long bond with the island. To make it palatable, Denmark could be given substantial compensation, relief from its \$630 million annual block grant and firm guarantees preserving cultural, educational and commercial ties.

Greenland could keep its parliament, its language and its domestic autonomy under binding protection. Most important, ownership would give Washington a permanent stake in Europe's northern frontier precisely as it reconsiders commitments elsewhere.

A president who threatens to leave a continent he merely garrisons will not abandon territory he holds. That is the paradox Ankara revealed: The surest way to keep American power anchored to Europe's defense is to give America something of its own to defend.

Far from breaking the alliance, such a settlement would reset it. Security and compensation for Denmark, protected self-government for Greenland and permanent responsibility for the United States.

The purpose is not to pull Greenland out of Europe, but to bind American power more firmly to it.

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