

Why Greenland Matters

by George Friedman - January 12, 2026

U.S. President Donald Trump has demanded that Denmark turn Greenland over to the United States. This raises the question of why Greenland matters. It's true that Greenland has some natural resources, including rare earths, that would benefit whoever controls them, but it's also true that the island is strategically and militarily important – and this latter point is far too often overlooked.

During the Cold War, NATO had a contingency plan whereby, in the event of a Soviet invasion, it would block Moscow's advance to the west while keeping open German and French ports on the Atlantic. The strategic logic was that the U.S. would use these ports to reinforce and resupply the troops it already had in Europe. The reinforcements – and especially the logistical support – were the basis of winning a prolonged conflict with the Soviet Union because in Washington the belief was that the longer such a conflict dragged on, the more likely it was that Moscow would lose. In short, NATO's strategy to block an initial Soviet attack depended on a foundation of reinforcements and resupply.

To stand any chance of winning this theoretical war, the Soviet Union would have had to sever the supply lines between the U.S. and Europe, which meant taking a degree of control of the Atlantic. That would involve the use of aircraft and submarines. Defense against Soviet airstrikes was, in theory, achieved by anti-air systems. Defense against Soviet submarines was more difficult. Defensive strategies focused on the GIUK Gap – the waters between Greenland and Iceland and Iceland and the U.K. that connect the Atlantic to the Barents Sea. It was the only route through which Soviet submarines could pass into the Atlantic. Plugging the GIUK Gap was essential for defeating a Soviet invasion of Europe.

Toward that end, NATO developed SURTASS – the Surveillance Towed Array Sensor System – which was designed to detect submarines and task anti-submarine weapons in the GIUK Gap. If the U.S. failed to detect them, the subs could jeopardize its supply lines. The likely Soviet preface to any war, then, would be to take Iceland and Greenland, while also hitting British anti-submarine bases. It's unlikely that this alone ever truly deterred Moscow; there were many other reasons for not invading Europe. But the fact remains that throughout the Cold War, Greenland was part of an essential warfighting system, and though Russia is no longer the threat the Soviet Union was, Greenland still matters. (As it happens, SURTASS is still in use, and it is still evolving.)

In fact, a new security issue has emerged that implicates the greater Atlantic and Greenland in particular: the use of the Arctic as a thoroughfare for Russia and China to attack North America. Greenland has now become an essential base from which to interdict airstrikes and naval threats. However unlikely such an attack might be, Russia and China are developing transpolar systems, so the U.S. is compelled to create sensors and weapons to counter them. Greenland is therefore a strategic imperative. With it, the U.S. would have another defensive tool, one that could be kept out of the hands of potential adversaries who could use it to project power into the Western Hemisphere. Again, this is an unlikely scenario, but so was Pearl Harbor.

I assume Trump has refrained from saying as much so that he doesn't come off as alarmist. But that isn't really his style. Just as likely, his demands on Greenland have to do with NATO. The U.S. commitment to European security is the bedrock of NATO. Trump may be trying to reshape the alliance such that it can be responsible for coming to the assistance of the U.S. in the event of war. This would be a startling and unpleasant idea for Europe, which has always seen the U.S. as responsible for its own security. Demanding Denmark – a NATO member – cede its territory is significant not just because of the emergence of Arctic warfare but because it seems to undermine the idea that NATO (as indicated in the name North Atlantic Treaty Organization) exists to protect Europe and North America, of which Greenland is a part.

It's strange to demand that Denmark allow Greenland to become a U.S.-held nation; if it simply wanted what was under the ground there, the U.S. could have just as easily entered negotiations to mine its natural resources. The strategic importance of Greenland is one for which intentions would possibly be kept secret, although it is hard to imagine that U.S. defensive systems deployed on Greenland could be kept secret.

While I can understand the importance of Greenland, it is hard to see why it cannot remain in Danish hands, since Denmark is a member of NATO, while serving as a U.S. base, especially when there is already a U.S. base there. I cannot know if the strategic dimension is part of Trump's plans to annex Greenland, but the potential strategic importance of Greenland should be noted.

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