



ENHANCING SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC ARCTIC

Part Two in a Series on the North American
Arctic

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This brief is the second in a series examining the potential sources of instability in the North American Arctic and strategies to mitigate these risks in collaboration with U.S. allies and partners. Looking northward from the United States mainland, the primary threat vectors to the North American homeland, as perceived by NORAD/USNORTHCOM, are viewed at roughly the 10, 12, and 2 o'clock positions. The [first Executive Brief](#) in this series examined security issues in the North American Arctic from the perspective of the U.S.-Canada defense

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*relationship—the 12 o’clock position. This Brief examines the North Atlantic approach, with a focus on Greenland, which represents the 2 o’clock position.*¹

The North Atlantic Arctic is an area of enduring strategic importance for the United States, its allies, and partners. It constitutes a critical sea line of communication between North America and Europe. Additionally, the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap (GIUK Gap) is a key bottleneck for tracking the movement of increasingly quiet Russian submarines, particularly the Yasen class, from the Northern Fleet’s homeport in northern Russia.

Reflecting this significance, on June 17, 2025, the Department of War (DOW) transferred Greenland—an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark—from the U.S. European Command area of responsibility (AOR) to the U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) AOR via a change to the Unified Command Plan (UCP). This change elevates Greenland from a secondary European outpost to a cornerstone of U.S. security posture in the North Atlantic amid increasing competition in the Arctic and growing threats worldwide from Russia and China.²

Greenland’s location—which geographically links North America, the Arctic, and the North Atlantic—is important for U.S. national security, particularly as relates to anti-submarine warfare and missile defense.³ Placing it under USNORTHCOM allows for a streamlined command structure for threats approaching the United States from the entire Arctic region. In addition, moving command oversight of Greenland to USNORTHCOM ensures that assets located at Pituffik Space Base (formerly Thule Air Base), such as missile warning, satellite control, and space surveillance, are integrated with other North American aerospace defense monitoring mechanisms.⁴ This recategorization, and enhanced prioritization, of Greenland is only the latest move reflecting a longstanding U.S. interest in, and presence on, the world’s largest island.

¹ Information for this Executive Brief was drawn from presentations to NORAD/USNORTHCOM during an unclassified briefing conducted by the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies.

² [Pentagon Shifts Greenland to US Northern Command in Shakeup](#). *Defense News*. 17 June 2025.

³ Carafano, James Jay. [Greenland and Trump’s strategy to deal with China and Russia](#). *G/IS*. 26 February 2025. For a summary of the move, see, e.g., U.S. Northern Command. [Greenland Now In U.S. Northern Command Area of Responsibility](#). *Official Press Release*. 17 June 2025; Bertuca, Tony. [DOD Approves New Unified Command Plan, Transfers Greenland to NORTHCOM](#). *Inside Defense*. 17 June 2025. Ferran, Lee and Roque, Ashley. [Trump Shifts Greenland From EUCOM to NORTHCOM’s Responsibility](#). *Breaking Defense*. 17 June 2025.

⁴ Pickenpugh, Lt. Col. Joseph and Peplinski, Larry. [Pituffik Space Base: Strengthening US Defense Capabilities in the Arctic](#). *The Watch*. 4 March 4 2025.



Historic U.S. Interest in Greenland

The importance of Greenland in U.S. strategic thinking dates back to the late 19th century. Explorers Robert Perry and Matthew Hensen conducted five voyages to Greenland between 1891 and 1902, culminating in an American claim to the northern portion of the territory. Throughout the 20th century, proponents of this claim viewed Greenland as crucial to the United States, as rapid advances in air and sea travel were “shrinking” the separation between the old world and the new, reducing the Atlantic Ocean’s value as a strategic buffer.

With these concerns in mind, President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially shifted Greenland into the U.S. definition of the Western Hemisphere pursuant to an April 9, 1941 defense agreement between Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Danish Ambassador Henrik de Kauffmann, who acted without authorization from Denmark’s then-Nazi-occupation government. The move was a key part of the U.S. policy of hemispheric defense during World War II, as Greenland’s location was vital for protecting North Atlantic shipping lanes, establishing airfields as “stepping stones” for aircraft delivery to Great Britain, and preventing Germany from establishing weather and submarine bases that could threaten North America. The U.S. ultimately constructed over 30 bases and stations on Greenland during World War II, in part to protect the mining of cryolite, a critical mineral used in aluminum production and the manufacture of military aircraft.

In the war’s aftermath, the Truman Administration offered Denmark \$100 million in gold bullion for Greenland, which Copenhagen declined. Nonetheless, the United States continued to strengthen defense cooperation with Greenland and Denmark, including through the 1951 “Defense of Greenland” Agreement (commonly referred to as the “1951 Agreement”) and the 1991 Memorandum of Understanding, which established a Permanent Committee that provides an annual forum for discussing civil and military cooperation between the United States, Greenland, and Denmark.⁵ The 2003 Dundas Agreement addressed the return of the U.S. military site at Dundas, Greenland “as is” to the Danish government. In 2004, the parties amended the 1951 Agreement by, among other items, establishing Pituffik as the sole defense area and acknowledging Greenland’s Home Rule Government and its role in domestic affairs.

Operating Environment

The operating environment in Greenland is characterized by its extreme geography and unique logistical and temporal complexities. Spanning 1,660 miles from north to south, Greenland covers three, and sometimes four, time zones, posing operational challenges.

⁵ Reuters. [Washington’s New Envoy to Denmark Pledges More US Support for Greenland](#). *Arctic Today*. 8 December 2025.



Logistically, the environment is dominated by ice and challenging geography. The land is vast – 836,330 sq. miles. This is 43% greater than the total land area of Alaska. There is also a dearth of connecting infrastructure; no two communities are linked by roads or railroads, necessitating transportation almost exclusively by flight or ferry.

For about nine months of the year, Greenland’s waters are locked by ice, limiting access to the land by sea. Pituffik itself is locked in until mid-June, which marks the first time its deep-water port is reliably navigable for summer cargo. Logistics are therefore dependent on ferries in the summer and costly air cargo in the winter. Furthermore, the combination of high humidity and cold creates challenges that impact air operations, such as rime ice, which forms when supercooled water droplets freeze onto surfaces.

Geopolitical Dynamics

Once characterized as an area of “low tension,” the Arctic today is a region of strategic competition. The varying, at times contradictory, perspectives of the key players active in the North Atlantic Arctic are as follows:

The Russian Perspective. Russia’s military presence and regular operations in the Arctic—either solo or with the CCP—are the primary source of increased tension across the Arctic. Russia views itself as a “Polar Great Power” and has identified the Arctic as a high-priority region for its prosperity and security.⁶ Russia views the North Atlantic Arctic region as critical to its bastion defense, which involves preserving its operating space and protecting access to the homeport of its strategic submarines and the wider Northern Fleet. It is also focused on exploiting the vast economic resources of the Arctic region, including hydrocarbons and fisheries.

The CCP Perspective. The CCP has tried to increase its investment in the region, and it has sought to normalize its presence in the Arctic, although many of its infrastructure, research, and mining projects in Greenland have been put on hold or cancelled in recent years, as both Nuuk and Copenhagen have become more circumspect about Chinese intentions. The country remains the main market for Greenland’s fishery exports.⁷ Although the CCP and Russia have engaged in joint military exercises near Alaska and elsewhere in the Arctic, there have been no such exercises reported near Greenland to date.

⁶ Jouan, Nicholas, Zelezny, Jan and Rod, Zdenek. [Cracks in the Ice: Why Engaging China Can Check Russian Power in the Arctic](#). *Rand Commentary*. 25 September 2025.

⁷ Dalziel, Alexander. [Exposure Risks: Greenland, China, and Economic Security in the North American Arctic](#). Macdonald-Laurier Institute. 09 October 2025.



The U.S. Perspective. The United States increasingly views Greenland as key to maintaining stability in the North American Arctic. The primary U.S. interests are denying the CCP and Russia the ability to hold at risk the sea lines of communication in the North Atlantic and prevent them from exploiting Greenland’s wealth of critical minerals.⁸ The stated aim of U.S. policy is to ensure the Arctic remains “peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative” – a goal that requires maintaining military readiness, exercising tailored presence, and preventing competitors and adversaries from enhancing their political and/or military influence in the North Atlantic. Safeguarding maritime routes and maintaining freedom of navigation are as paramount for the United States as they are for its historic allies and partners. Nonetheless, renewed interest in purchasing Greenland on the part of the United States has increased tension in the region and across the wider NATO alliance.

The Greenlandic Perspective. The Greenlandic perspective is shifting on security and defense. Some Greenlandic leaders have been interested in exploring the possibility of independence from Denmark, although the available surveys suggest Greenlandic public opinion is not supportive of U.S. interest in acquiring Greenland. Greenland’s February 2024 security and defense strategy demonstrates a desire to gain more control over its diplomatic relations.⁹ The title of the strategy makes its intentions transparent: “Greenland in the World—Nothing About Us Without Us”—a clear statement that decisions concerning Greenland’s territory and people must be made with the active involvement of the Greenlandic government. The strategy seeks to form stronger links with other North American states and territories, and calls for the establishment of an Arctic North American forum to enhance cooperation. It has also committed to the transatlantic security architecture, stating that, “Greenland will continue to cooperate with the defense authorities of Denmark and the United States [and seek]...the most beneficial way to maintain a military presence and installations in Greenland.”¹⁰ Agreeing on “the most beneficial way” is the crux of heightened tensions among Washington, Copenhagen, and Nuuk.

The Danish Perspective. Denmark is engaged in a delicate balancing act with the United States, NATO allies, and Greenland. It wants to maintain control of the entire Kingdom’s defense and foreign policy while simultaneously respecting Greenland’s

⁸ Congressional Research Service. *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*. R41153. 14 July 2025; Tekeli, Maya and Jeffrey Gettleman. “[Danish Intelligence Report Raises Concerns About U.S.](#)” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2025.

⁹ [Greenland in the World-Nothing About Us Without Us: Greenland's Foreign, Security and Defense Policy 2024-2033 -An Arctic Strategy](#). February 2024.

¹⁰ Nielsen, Rasmus Leander and Strandsbjerg, Jeppe. [Nothing About Us Without Us: What Can We Learn From Greenland's New Arctic Strategy 2024-2033?](#) *Arctic Yearbook Briefing Note*. 2024.



autonomy. In late 2025, Denmark pledged approximately US\$4.26 billion to, among other things, bolster its defense presence in the Arctic.¹¹ Also, in a historic shift, the Danish Defense Intelligence Service latest outlook report classified the current strategic posture of the United States as a security risk and potential source of uncertainty.¹²

Denmark is, of course, also a member of NATO, making growing tensions between the United States and Denmark problematic for the alliance, seemingly playing into the hands of Moscow, which has long sought to sow dissension within NATO. Nonetheless, at an operational level, NATO continues to actively modernize its posture, with Joint Force Command-Norfolk prepared to command and control operational-level joint and multi-domain operations under NATO's new Regional Plan Northwest, which is focused on deterrence and defense across the North Atlantic and European Arctic. NATO formalized the inclusion of Denmark, as well as Sweden and Finland, in JFC-Norfolk's area of responsibility in December 2025.

The Canadian Perspective. While also a NATO member, Canada primarily views this subregion through two lenses: maintaining binational hemispheric defense through NORAD and the protection of its own sovereignty. Canada recognizes Greenland's vital role in North American security by virtue of Pituffik. Canada is also a key partner in NORAD modernization, which is slated to invest billions over a twenty-year timeframe to upgrade continental defense systems, including over-the-horizon radar systems that complement early warning capabilities based in Greenland. The Canadian Armed Forces routinely participate in joint Arctic exercises, such as Operation Noble Defender, alongside U.S. forces, often deploying through Greenland's airspace.

Beyond defense, sovereignty is a core concept for Canada in the North American Arctic. Canada not only wants to control access to mineral resources and waterways, but it is eager to deepen ties with the Kalaallit (the Indigenous people of Greenland) to ensure regional stability. The Canadian perspective strongly supports Greenlandic sovereignty and stresses that a stable Arctic requires prioritizing the Kalaallit, with whom Canada's Inuit share deep cultural and familial links.¹³ Plans to open a consulate in Nuuk announced in Canada's December 2024 Arctic Foreign Policy document reflect these intentions.

¹¹ Edvardsen, Astri. [Denmark to Strengthen Arctic Defense by DKK 27,4 Billion](#). *High North News*. 15 October 2025.

¹² Roussi, Antoaneta. [Danish Intelligence Classifies Trump's America as a Security Risk](#). *Politico*. 11 December 2025.

¹³ Smith, Joanna. [Canada backs 'sovereignty and territorial integrity' of Greenland: Carney](#). *The Logic*. 6 January 2026.



Conclusion

The addition of Greenland to USNORTHCOM's AOR underscores the strategic importance of the North Atlantic Arctic region to the United States, as well as to its allies and partners. To capitalize fully on this change, NORAD/USNORTHCOM can consider the following options to further strengthen deterrence in this subregion:

Capability Modernization. Pursue an integrated operating picture and incentivize burden-sharing efforts, ensuring that requirements are divvied up in a way that is efficient and logical, prioritizing maritime domain awareness and expanding and integrating surface, sub-surface, and other surveillance capabilities across the GIUK Gap and the North Atlantic Arctic. This could include deploying an enhanced system of anti-submarine warfare sensors, sonobuoys, and uncrewed and underwater vehicles to track the activities of our competitors in the North Atlantic.

Deterrence and Competition. Strengthen joint multi-domain operations and exercises with NATO in this subregion. These exercises could focus, for example, on logistical sustainment in Greenland's harsh environment or the rapid deployment of forces across the GIUK Gap.

Northern Infrastructure Development. Support the development of more dual-use infrastructure in Greenland, such as upgrading airfields and ports, to support year-round military and cargo operations and improve communications infrastructure.

Operational Continuity Among the United States, Canada, Greenland, and Denmark. Enhancing communication and deepening information-sharing and updated threat perceptions with long-standing U.S. allies whenever possible is important. This is evidenced by the meeting between the Commander of NORAD/USNORTHCOM and the Chief of Danish Defense Command in October 2025, which considered opportunities for deepening collaboration between NORAD and the Kingdom of Denmark. Maintaining operational continuity is important even in times of tension at the political level.

USNORTHCOM could consider leveraging the Ted Stevens Center to convene defense and security stakeholders from the involved nations to identify mutually-beneficial, cooperative approaches to enhancing operational continuity in the North Atlantic Arctic. This dialogue, formal or informal, could go some distance toward mitigating instability, enhancing burden sharing, and bolstering deterrence and homeland defense across this increasingly strategic region.

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