

The Crisis Around Greenland and the Test for NATO and the European Union: Legal Limits of Territorial Claims and Tools Against Coercion

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Abstract – The study analyzes the geopolitical crisis surrounding Greenland as a fundamental test of the sustainability of the international legal order and the institutional capacity of NATO and the European Union (EU). The focus is on the conceptual clash between the outdated model of “territory purchase” and the modern liberal legalism affirming the right to self-determination of the Greenlandic people. The methodology includes a legal and normative analysis of the 2009 Act on Greenland Self-Government, a comparative study of the evolution of the Monroe Doctrine, and an analysis of cases of geoeconomic coercion in the Arctic. The results of the study identify critical risks arising from the increased Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation and the vulnerability of critical infrastructure to foreign investment. The main conclusions reject the treatment of territory as a commodity and emphasize that sovereignty is inextricably linked to the will of the population in Nuuk. The article recommends, on the one hand, institutionalizing NATO's role by strengthening its European pillar and eliminating the “alliance dilemma” by conducting a specialized Arctic mission, and on the other hand, activating the EU's defense mechanisms against economic coercion and strictly adhering to the democratic procedures for changing the status, as set out in the 2009 Act. The study establishes Greenland as an active security entity, whose defense is a litmus test for the ability of Western allies to uphold the principle of sovereign equality and to implement an innovative approach in a “zero to one” perspective.

Keywords – Arctic, European Union, International Law, NATO

I. INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the study is determined by the growing tension in the Arctic, which transforms the region from a zone of low tension into a field of geostrategic competition, questioning solidarity in NATO and the

European Union (EU). In this context, the revitalization of American interest in Greenland, often interpreted as a modern update of the Monroe Doctrine, puts transatlantic solidarity and the international legal order to the test. The case of Greenland, which occupies a central place as the “Arctic gateway” of North America, is not just a bilateral dispute between Washington and Copenhagen. It is a fundamental test of the international legal order and the ability of Western institutions to protect the sovereign equality of their members against instruments of geopolitical coercion. In view of the fact that Greenland is becoming a “transshipment point” for strategic interests, it ceases to be a simple geographical territory and becomes a test of the sustainability of the international order.

Therefore, in this publication, the object of study is the contemporary geopolitical and international legal status of Greenland in the context of the transformation of the Arctic into an operational theater of global strategic rivalry. This includes the dynamic relations in the USA-Denmark-Greenland triangle and the role of the island as a critical element in the design of security in the North Atlantic. The subject of the study focuses on the legal boundaries of territorial claims to Greenland, which outline the boundaries of permissible territorial and economic claims in the 21st century, analyzed through the clash between state-centric realism and liberal legalism. Special emphasis is placed on the right to self-determination, enshrined in the 2009 Act on Greenland Self-Government, and the specific political and legal instruments of NATO and the EU to counteract geopolitical and economic coercion. In this sense, the aim of the article is to prove that in the modern era of liberal legalism, territorial integrity is inextricably linked to the right to self-determination, which makes the classic models of “buying and selling” of territories legally null and void. The article also seeks to outline the role of NATO and the EU as guarantors of preserving the status

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quo in the Arctic by combining military modernization and economic sustainability.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study draws on a rich corpus of official materials, including the UN Charter, the Act on Greenland Self-Government (2009), the treaties governing NATO's presence in the region (the 1951 Agreement), and EU strategic documents on combating economic coercion. Analyses by leading experts in polar law and international security, as well as reports by the US Space Force and the Danish government, are used. The main research methods include:

- Legal-normative method: To analyze the legitimacy of territorial claims in relation to jus cogens norms and the constitutional mechanisms of the Kingdom of Denmark.
- Institutional analysis: To assess the capacity of NATO and the EU to respond to the "alliance dilemma" and external pressure on critical infrastructure.
- Case studies: On the securitization of Greenlandic airports and resource competition with China to illustrate the practical dimensions of coercion.

For the purposes of the study, an interdisciplinary approach has been implemented, combining political science analysis with theories of international relations, game theory, "broken windows" theory, and concepts from the entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as Peter Thiel's concept of building the future "from zero to one".

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Historical context and the Monroe Doctrine as a framework for US "external" security

The US interest in Greenland is not an isolated diplomatic episode of the Trump administration era, but rather a manifestation of a long-term geostrategic constant, established since the early 19th century. At the heart of this relationship is the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which arose as a request for separate spheres of influence (America vs. Europe), the principles of non-colonization and non-intervention, and as a warning against European re-intervention in the New World. But in the 19th century, the doctrine underwent a significant evolution – from a defensive declaration against European colonialism to an instrument for consolidating American influence in the Western Hemisphere. Although historically addressed to Latin America, the doctrine became a broader strategic matrix, based on the idea that US security requires preventing a hostile military-political establishment in adjacent spaces, as well as in relation to key approaches to the continent [1], [2].

In the Bulgarian historiographical perspective, the Monroe Doctrine is often seen as the "symbolic capital" of American foreign policy. Even when the US formally avoids "European" conflicts, it considers it vital to prevent a hostile hegemony that would compromise the security of the American continent. It is significant that in the Bulgarian scholarly context the doctrine is used as an explanatory framework for Washington's perceptions of

strategic threats, including in periods of global competition [3], [4].

As Sexton [5, p. 5] points out, the doctrine became a flexible framework through which the US legitimized its territorial and economic ambitions, presenting them as a matter of national security. In this context, Greenland began to be seen not simply as a far northern territory, but as a strategic flank, control of which was essential to prevent foreign interference in the American sphere of influence.

It should also be noted that the interest in Greenland is not a "new topic" but has a long history that often "returns" to public debate in each more intense cycle of competition. The first official expression of this interest dates back to 1867, immediately after the purchase of Alaska and with the American discussions about the North Atlantic spaces that emerged during this period. The then Secretary of State William Seward commissioned a report that assessed Greenland's resources and its strategic location [6], [7, p. 263]. The government report "A Report on the Resources of Iceland and Greenland" (1868), prepared for the State Department, is indirect evidence that as early as the late 19th century, Washington viewed Iceland/Greenland as a resource and strategic asset in the North Atlantic arc [8]. On this basis, in this article we use the report as a starting point for an analysis that connects the assessment of resources with the geostrategic logic of the US for the North Atlantic and the Arctic.

The second key point is the 1946 offer, when the Harry Truman administration offered Denmark \$100 million in gold to purchase the island. The motive was dictated by the lessons of World War II, during which Greenland was de facto under American protection to prevent Nazi infiltration [9, pp. 9-10]. Copenhagen's refusal did not end US interest, but transformed it from a request for a territorial purchase to the construction of a large-scale military infrastructure. This can be clearly traced in the official diplomatic documentation of the period, which shows that the American side clearly argued the "vital importance" of Greenland for US security [10], [11]. Modern think tanks also recall this continuity and connect it to today's tensions in transatlantic relations [12].

The real transformation occurred during the Cold War, when the concept of the "Arctic as a geostrategic security multiplier" became dominant and the Arctic became an operational theater of strategic deterrence, as polar routes shortened the trajectories of strategic bombers and subsequently ballistic missiles. This "geographical advantage" turned Greenland into a frontline of the confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and at the same time a key element of the northern defense architecture.

The transformation of the Arctic into a critical element of strategic deterrence led to the Greenland Defense Agreement (1951) between the United States and the Kingdom of Denmark, in the context of NATO, which also served as the legal basis for the American presence. Scholarly analysis of the negotiations reveals an

asymmetry of interests and “bargaining power” in the early Cold War context. Denmark sought collective defense and guarantees of sovereignty/legitimacy, while the United States insisted on operational freedom commensurate with the perceived threat [13]. In this sense, the text of the treaty (in publicly available archives) regulates the creation and use of “defense zones” and cooperation on the defense of the island [14]. The defense agreement thus signed between the United States and Denmark allows for the construction of the Thule Air Base (renamed Pituffik Space Base in 2023).

As noted in the analyses of a number of Bulgarian authors, the Arctic should be considered as a space for power projection, in which control over sea routes/communications and airspace becomes crucial for strategic competition and the balance of power [15], [16], [17, p. 49]. The Thule base is located 1200 km north of the Arctic Circle and is a critical element of the US Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS). It serves as the “eyes of the North”, providing surveillance of outer space and protection against potential strikes through the North Pole – a route that remains the shortest route for intercontinental missiles between Russia and the US today [18], [19].

At the beginning of the 21st century, interest in Greenland was revived under the influence of climate change and the increased presence of Russia and China in the region. Modern American diplomacy revitalizes the idea that Greenland is America’s “Arctic gateway”. This is a clear indication that the Arctic is not “disappearing” from the strategic map, but attention is being reoriented due to a combination of: a) military-strategic competition; b) climate change and new routes; c) resource expectations; and d) technological transformation of defense (radar, space, communication systems). The American National Strategy for the Arctic Region (2022) explicitly places homeland security and defense, international law, and work with allies and partners among the leading interests [20].

The historical context shows that the dispute does not start with “one administration”, but relies on the logic of the northern flank of American security and on contractual-institutionalized mechanisms within NATO, which have been built for more than a century. The pressure for closer integration of the island into the economic and political sphere of the United States reflects the desire to limit Chinese investments in critical infrastructure (rare earth minerals and airports), and in analytical terms this can be interpreted as an “Arctic” update of the Monroe Doctrine [21], [22], [23]. Against this background, today’s political messages about “acquiring” Greenland can be interpreted as a radicalized rhetorical form of an older strategic intuition that control (or at least guaranteed access and operational freedom) over key northern strongholds reduces the risk of strategic surprise.

B. The legal dilemma: “Who owns Greenland?”

The question of Greenland’s belonging is often misunderstood through the prism of the classical sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark. In the contemporary legal architecture, however, the answer is

much more complex and is rooted in the dynamics between territorial integrity and the right to self-determination. This requires a precise balance between classical international law and the contemporary paradigm of indigenous rights. In this sense, we can point out that the “clash” is not only diplomatic, but also conceptual: between state-centric realism (the state as a territory that can be traded) and liberal legalism (the right of peoples to determine their own destiny) [24].

In international law, territory is not an object that is “owned” as private property, but a space over which a state exercises sovereignty and jurisdiction. This distinction is key when political actors come to the fore and talk about “buying” Greenland. In this sense, there is a transfer to public law of concepts inherent in private law and which are difficult to reconcile with modern norms of self-determination and territorial integrity. It is emblematic that as early as 1971, the International Law Commission (ILC) noted that the classic “cession” (including by purchase) was “increasingly obsolete” and its validity is today assessed through additional conditions, including consultation with the population.

The idea of purchasing Greenland draws on historical precedents such as the Louisiana Purchase (1803) [25] or Alaska (1867) [26]. These historical “territorial purchases” are classic examples of cession between states by treaty, in an era when international law treated territorial transfers much closer to the logic of a transaction and geopolitical exchange. In the era of decolonization and the establishment of the UN Charter, however, this transactional model is a legal anachronism. According to the principle of territorial integrity and the prohibition of the acquisition of territory by force (Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Charter), sovereignty is no longer a commodity. In this sense, political coercion through “offers to purchase” comes into direct conflict with Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat to the territorial integrity of any state.

The right to self-determination is a *jus cogens* norm in international law. It is both:

- a founding principle in the UN Charter (included as the UN’s purpose to develop friendly relations “on the basis of ... self-determination of peoples”) [28];
- a human right in the universal human rights covenants – in both the ICCPR and the ICESCR the first article begins with “All peoples have the right to self-determination” [29], [30].

The strongest contemporary legal argument against the idea that Greenland’s future can be decided “between capitals” is the 2009 Act on Greenland Self-Government. The regime’s practical legitimacy is strengthened by the fact that the Act on Self-Government itself was preceded by a referendum in 2008, in which some 75.5% supported the introduction of self-government [31], [32, p. 103].

The preamble to the Home Rule Act explicitly recognizes that the people of Greenland are “peoples under international law” with the right to self-determination [33].

And this is not just a political declaration, but is also reflected in Denmark's official notification to the UN Secretary-General [34]. In addition, Article 21 of the Home Rule Act itself is categorical that the decision on independence is made by the people of Greenland. If such a decision is made, negotiations follow between the Danish government and Naalakkersuisut (the government of Greenland), and the final agreement requires: the consent of the Inatsisartut (the parliament of Greenland), a referendum in Greenland and the consent of the Danish parliament [33].

Sovereignty over the territory currently belongs to the Kingdom of Denmark (within the state "Kingdom of Denmark/Realm", comprising Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands) [31], [35]. This has also been confirmed within the framework of the UN, including through the adoption of the constitutional integration of Greenland in 1953 as an act of self-determination [36], [32]. An essential detail is that in the bilateral defense framework, the US has historically recognized Danish sovereignty over Greenland. The Greenland Defense Agreement (1951) explicitly speaks of US rights in "defense areas" "without prejudice" to the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark [14]. In the context of the crisis, this has a double effect. On the one hand, it legally "anchors" the recognition of sovereignty, and on the other, politically it makes it even more difficult to legitimize claims for the transfer of sovereignty, especially if they are perceived as a threat or pressure.

Although Danish sovereignty remains the "legal envelope" of the territory, Denmark's domestic constitutional mechanism is designed to make the self-determination of Greenlanders a crucial condition for any change in status. This is why the claim that "Greenland can be bought" sounds like a conflict not only with political reality but also with positive law. In international law terms, this means that the legitimacy of any future change in status (independence, free association or integration elsewhere) in modern international law depends on the right to self-determination of the people of Greenland – i.e. on the democratically expressed will of the people in Nuuk and the rest of the island [33].

In this context, the purchase offer can be interpreted not as a business transaction, but as a form of geopolitical coercion that undermines the sovereign equality of states (Denmark) and the political will of recognized peoples (Greenlanders).

C. The geopolitical triangle: USA – Denmark – Greenland

If the legal dilemma determines who has the right to make decisions, the geoeconomic reality shows how those decisions are manipulated through investment. Greenland has become a testing ground for "soft power," where the struggle for rare earth elements and control of transportation infrastructure is used as a tool for geopolitical coercion.

The US proposal to "buy" Greenland (publicly articulated in 2019 and subsequently re-updated as political

pressure) acted as a catalyst that forced Copenhagen to rethink simultaneously: (a) the financial model of the relationship with Nuuk (from block grants to targeted infrastructure and social packages) and (b) the security architecture around the island (from a limited presence to accelerated investments in surveillance, maritime/air capabilities, and resilience of critical infrastructure). This is happening against the backdrop of three structural drivers of Arctic competition: Russian military resurgence, Chinese geoeconomic expansion, and climate transformation that is opening up new routes and making resources more accessible [37].

The Danish reaction begins with an almost textbook example of economic securitization – airports. The project to expand the airports in Nuuk and Ilulissat is "unspectacular" as a civil infrastructure, but it becomes geopolitically sensitive because, on the one hand, it is important for independence (tourism, connectivity), on the other, it is a symbol of defense coordination with the US and, last but not least, a potential point of Chinese influence. When the Chinese state-owned company China Communications Construction Group (CCCC) was proposed as the contractor, the US exerted unprecedented pressure on Denmark. In his article for SWP, Michael Paul explicitly describes how the Danish Prime Minister in 2018 proposed a package with a dual purpose: financing and reducing American fears of "excessive Chinese investment" [37]. The direct financial intervention from Copenhagen to block Chinese influence is defined by analyst Martin Breum as a turning point in the realization that infrastructure in the Arctic is a matter of national security, not just economics [38].

Another important aspect regarding China's geoeconomic expansion is related to the monopoly on rare earth elements. The melting ice sheet is opening up access to some of the world's largest deposits of rare earth elements (REE), critical for green energy and high-tech defense. The Kvanefeld project has become a symbol of this struggle. The Chinese company Shenghe Resources has acquired a significant stake in the project, which has raised concerns in Washington and Brussels. As an analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) points out, China is not simply seeking profit, but rather maintaining its global monopoly on the supply chain, using investments in Greenland as leverage against the West [39].

It should also be noted that after the failed rhetoric of buying the island (2019), the US strategy has shifted towards economic engagement. The report "America's Arctic Moment" emphasizes that in order to counter China's "Polar Silk Road" initiative, the US should invest in civilian projects that reduce Nuuk's dependence on external authoritarian capital [40, pp. 14, 35-36]. This turns economic aid into a tool for "defensive geopolitics." However, this U.S. framing should be considered in the context of China's official narrative.

China's official posture frames its Arctic engagement primarily through the language of international law, scientific cooperation, sustainable development, and connectivity. Within this narrative, the "Polar Silk Road"

is presented as an economic and logistical extension of broader connectivity policies rather than as a security project. The strategic tension, therefore, stems less from China's stated intentions and more from the structural effects of infrastructure finance: ports, airports, mining, and digital connectivity can generate long-term dependencies and dual-use concerns. This divergence explains why U.S. policy reads Chinese investments as a strategic lever and responds by "securitizing" civilian projects that would otherwise be treated as ordinary economic activity [41], [42].

From the perspective of American defense, the Arctic is the "northern approach" to the homeland and includes allied territories (Canada, Kingdom of Denmark/Greenland) where aerospace and maritime warning capabilities (NORAD) are located. The Pentagon's 2024 strategy describes the Arctic not only as a region for local defense, but also as an avenue for power projection to Europe and vital to transatlantic sea lines of communication [43].

For its part, Denmark is "rewriting" its vision of security from limited surveillance to a multi-domain presence. This is clearly evident from the Danish military modernization, which is developing in stages:

- 2021: Agreement on Arctic Capabilities – framed as a response to "increasing Russian activity and military build-up", with investments in radar, long-endurance drones, space surveillance and a ground station [44].
- 2025–2026: First/Second Agreement on the Arctic and North Atlantic – illustrates a qualitative leap in terms of strengthening security and defense: more Arctic ships (with icebreaking capability), maritime patrol aircraft with potential for anti-submarine missions, new radars (incl. East Greenland), an underwater cable in the North Atlantic and strengthening the Joint Arctic Command in Nuuk. It is important to note that the document links these investments directly to NATO and to the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap as an area for maritime situational awareness [45].

In parallel with all this, it should be noted that the Arctic governance environment is already fragmented after the invasion of Ukraine. Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic is at a standstill/on pause, and regional forums are finding it difficult to function fully – which increases the risk of misunderstandings and escalation [46]. And in this context, when a major ally (the United States) uses the rhetoric of territorial coercion, the result can be twofold: (a) political distrust between allies and (b) an incentive for Russia to exploit the rift informationally and operationally. In this regard, the example of increased military cooperation between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, including joint exercises in the Arctic, is indicative. In 2022 and 2023, ships of the PRC and the Russian Navy operated jointly in international waters off the coast of Alaska, and the Chinese Coast Guard and the Russian Federal Security Service signed a memorandum of understanding on the implementation of maritime law. These activities could

open the door for further Chinese presence in the Arctic and along the Northern Sea Route [43].

As a conclusion to the analysis, we can summarize that in the Arctic environment of competition and climate change, the idea of "buying" transforms the US-Denmark-Greenland triangle into an accelerator of changes that would otherwise be slower and technocratic. Denmark responds not only with a diplomatic "no", but with real money and capabilities.

D. NATO and EU – From "(non) zero-sum" game to the "zero to one" perspective for Greenland

If we use an analogy from the entrepreneurial ecosystem, linked to Peter Thiel's concept of building the future "from zero to one", we can try to change the way we think and act towards Greenland in the context of the new geopolitical and geo-economics realities. According to the technological entrepreneur, when something that already exists is upgraded and modified, the movement is from "one to n", while when something new, an innovation, is created, the movement is from "zero to one". He examines the concept in the context on the one hand of: technology, placing it in the vertical dimension of intensive progress, as it requires the creation of something that no one has done before, and on the other hand of: globalization, placing it in the horizontal or extensive dimension of progress, as it boils down to copying ideas that work [47].

To date, despite leading global players such as Russia, the United States, and China claim that they are creating a new world order, in practice, they are undermining the existing one established after World War II, shaped by the Bretton Woods system and the Cold War, and based on international law, liberal democracy, the market economy, and multilateral cooperation. Their actions, in fact, reproduce familiar patterns from the past such as the competition, instability, autocracy, protectionism, mistrust, and Hobbes' world of the war of "every man against every man". Thus, we are witnessing a return to the paradigms of realism and neorealism rather than constructive innovation in international relations that would lead to prosperity for humanity or, in particular, a better far-sightedly perspective for Russian, American, and/or Chinese citizens.

It appears that in the context of Greenland and the changed security environment, neither the zero-sum nor the non-zero-sum strategy has worked so far. The impact of climate change and rapid ice melt on the world's largest island lead to rapid opening of once-inaccessible shipping routes, lowering the cost and difficulty of extracting abundant natural resources, disrupting local wildlife and marine ecosystems, and reshaping the map in ways that increase human access – including for security and defense activities [48]. Another reason that is rarely mentioned among the motivating factors for the US are tech giants' and the wider digital economy's growing need for physical space and resources, related incl. to the Data centers that are experiencing an unprecedented surge in demand for energy, water and cooling, largely driven by the rapid growth of artificial intelligence, cloud computing and digital services. This factor matters because the "digital economy" has a material geography: data centres and AI

infrastructure require concentrated electricity supply, cooling, water, resilient cable connectivity, and a predictable regulatory environment, while their spatial concentration produces measurable infrastructure vulnerabilities and strategic dependencies [49]. Under Arctic conditions, climate and space can indeed generate comparative advantages for hosting compute capacity, yet they simultaneously turn the questions of “who finances, who builds, and who operates” into strategic issues of sovereign control, security standards, and long-term resilience. In this sense, Big Tech interest aligns with the broader securitization of infrastructure: decisions on digital projects are no longer merely economic, but increasingly embedded in policies designed to reduce external dependencies and constrain potential levers of influence—particularly in the wider context of competition around the “Polar Silk Road” [49]. Notably, Greenland has debated a foreign investment screening framework covering sensitive sectors, and the discussion has explicitly extended to large-scale investment proposals linked to digital infrastructure [50]. Consequently, Big Tech should be treated as an emerging non-state “power actor” that accelerates Greenland’s transformation into a critical node where security, infrastructure, and geoeconomic competition converge.

In the case of a non-zero-sum game, the parties’ interests align to produce mutual benefit – Denmark has control over constitutional matters, foreign policy, security and defense in Greenland, while the US has its bases and the opportunity to expand their scope. However, this “win-win” situation no longer satisfies the Trump administration due to the changing resource, geographic and transportation landscape, and he is signaling an intention to impose hard power.

In the potential case of zero-sum game, Greenland would become a potential new “battlefield” for nation states. An interesting fact is that of the so-called “Arctic Eight” (Canada, Russia, the US, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Iceland), only Russia is not part of NATO. Without claiming to be exhaustive, potential points of tension outside the US-Denmark-Greenland triangle are as follows: 1) NATO could block Russia’s Baltic Fleet at the Skagerrak Strait, as was considered during the Cold War; 2) Tensions may arise between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea. Norway has expressed claims over the Gakkel Ridge as an extension of its Exclusive Economic Zone, while Russia disputes these claims based on its own position regarding the northernmost territories on Earth, particularly the Svalbard (Spitsbergen) Islands. Although most states recognize Norwegian sovereignty, the growing presence of Russian migrants and the formation of a Russian community there could serve as a useful instrument for future Russian claims over all the Spitsbergen Islands; 3) Potential rivalry between the United States and Russia over the Bering Sea, the Arctic Ocean, and the northern Pacific; 4) Possible disagreements between the United States and Canada over offshore oil rights and access to the waters of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago; 5) A dispute between Canada and Denmark over Hans Island, located in the Nares Strait between

Greenland and Ellesmere Island. As the foreign policy expert and journalist Tim Marshall underlines – all disputes over sovereignty in Arctica stem from the same desires and fears, namely the desire to protect military and commercial shipping routes, the desire to control the region’s natural resources, and the fear that others may gain where you lose [51]. Among the Alliance’s member states, only the US has openly expressed intentions to violate NATO’s core logic, namely the protection of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its members, which provoked the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen to question the future existence of NATO by underlining that: “everything would stop” in the event of a US attack on another NATO country; a US takeover of Greenland would mean the end of the NATO military alliance [52].

a) NATO and the “alliance dilemma”

The “Broken windows” theory of Wilson and Kelling (from 1982) argues that visible disorder in a neighborhood – like broken windows, graffiti, or loitering – signals neglect, creates fear, weakens social control, and ultimately leads to serious crime. The idea is that addressing signs of disorder early is a quicker, cheaper way to prevent larger crimes [53]. In classic broken windows theory, disorder comes from external neglect or low-level incivility that invites crime, but what if the windows are broken from the inside? In this way the logic changes as the source of disorder is not outsiders and this suggests erosion of trust from within, institutional failure, social controls weakening because people no longer believe in the system. The use of the metaphor as an analogy for the behavior of the US Trump’s administration in NATO, is intended to highlight signals indicating the need for a timely response to the actions of a member of the Alliance in order to prevent more serious consequences.

If the early signs of erosion are not addressed in time, the question will increasingly be raised whether a hypothetical “transfer of sovereignty” over Greenland would unravel the idea of a unified West and turn what some call “NATO 3.0” into something closer to the Warsaw Pact than to the Alliance’s original design [54]. For this reason, as a result of the US actions, on the one hand Denmark began with diplomatic shuttle efforts, and on the other hand - France, Germany, the UK, Norway, Netherlands and Sweden symbolically sent small contingents of troops to Greenland in a so-called a reconnaissance mission, in order to boost security and reinforce Danish sovereignty. The Danish-led joint exercises called Operation Arctic Endurance were seen by senior diplomat Olivier Poivre d’Arvor, as a mission which is sending a strong political signal: “This is a first exercise... we’ll show the US that NATO is present” [55].

In contrast to the Russia’s war against Ukraine, which has motivated traditionally neutral countries such as Finland and Sweden to join the Alliance in 2023 and 2024, by significantly strengthening the Northern Flank and the Arctic, the US, through its behavior towards Greenland and Denmark is creating vulnerability by undermining NATO’s security and weakening trust between allies. While, in October 2024, the Chair of NATO’s Military Committee

stated: “NATO will defend its interests in the Arctic. We have a responsibility to protect all our Allies, including the seven here in this region... and uphold the international rules-based order, which includes freedom of navigation” [56], today the allies are facing the so called “alliance dilemma” as the pressure from a leading ally distorts the logic of the collective defense. This dilemma, often referred to as the “abandonment-entrapment” dilemma, describes the central tension in security alliances where a state worries that its ally may fail to provide the promised protection (abandonment) or, conversely, that the partner or the alliance may pull it into an unwanted conflict (entrapment). Thus, the alliances require constant management of commitment levels and present a political relationships shaped by fear, bargaining, and perception. According to Glenn Snyder the alliances are not only about deterring enemies, they are also about managing anxieties between allies [57]. In this regard, preserving and respecting the principle of multilateralism and initiating a special NATO Arctic mission will help overcome the “alliance dilemma” through collective defense commitment as well as by creating a better perception of trust among the allies.

In their book “The Triangle of Power: Rebalancing the New World Order” and during the discussions in Davos, impacted by the Greenland issue, the Finnish president Stubb contrasted a “multipolar world”, driven by transactions, where countries focus on making deals, leveraging power and dividing spheres of influence reminiscent of the XIXth century, with a multilateral order based on strong institutions, rules, and norms – the model Finland supports and believes most countries favor [58]. In a joint statement, the Nordic foreign ministers of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden reaffirmed their commitment, as Arctic states and NATO allies, to: strengthening security, stability and cooperation in the Arctic; supporting increased NATO presence and investment in regional defense; stressing respect for fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law, including the inviolability of borders; recalling Denmark’s long-standing defense cooperation with the US, and underlining that matters concerning Denmark and Greenland are for Denmark and Greenland alone to decide [59].

In the context of publicly declared intentions by US President Donald Trump to impose control over Greenland, the Prime Minister of Canada likewise outlined a new approach in his historic speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, stating that: “a rupture in the world order ends a pleasant fiction and ushers in a harsh reality where major powers act without limits. Nevertheless, countries, especially middle powers like Canada, are not powerless and they can help build a new order grounded in human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Carney emphasized the rules-based international order is fading and outlined how Canada was adapting through “value-based realism” by building strategic autonomy (being pragmatic) while maintaining values like human rights and sovereignty (being principled). He called for middle powers, such as his own,

to work together to counter the rise of hard power and the great power rivalry, in order to build a more cooperative, resilient world [60].

The reaction of the EU and other “middle powers” to such an approach would determine whether it will lead to “extensive” (to copy ideas from the past experience) or “intensive” (to embrace the innovativeness) progresses in the future. If the EU builds a true European Defense Union – being equipped with EU military and defense capabilities, having steadily independence from US armament and technologies as well as forces to safeguard its European sovereignty, so its dependence from United States, incl. in the framework of NATO, would be significantly diminished. This would also lead to a much stronger European pillar in the Alliance that could counterbalance a potential increase in the use of US hard power and to the strengthening of EU defense capabilities in the High North. At the same time, the institutionalisation of NATO’s role through a special NATO Arctic mission will help overcome the “alliance dilemma” and refocus attention on addressing the challenges of deterring Russian ambitions and continuously monitoring China’s growing interest, as well as on a farsighted pursuit of a “zero to one” perspective for Greenland.

b) EU, Greenland’s status vis-à-vis the Union and the Musketeer “one for all, all for one” principle

Greenland left the European Economic Community in 1985 after a 1979 home-rule referendum driven by fishing rights, becoming the first territory to withdraw and thereafter an EU Overseas Country and Territory associated through Denmark under the 1985 Greenland Treaty. Although no longer in the EU, Greenlanders remain Danish and thus EU citizens. Today, EU-Greenland relations, governed by the Greenland Treaty and the 2021 Overseas Association Decision, focus on fisheries, education, and increasingly green growth and sustainable raw materials, with €225 million allocated for 2021-2027, a proposed doubling for MFF 2028-2034, a new political visibility marked by an EU office in Nuuk (in March 2024) and a November 2023 MoU on sustainable raw materials value chains. Fisheries remain central through preferential market access linked to EU fishing rights, renewed in a 2025-2030 protocol, while Greenland also participates in EU programmes such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, InvestEU, and INTERREG [48].

Unlike NATO where the territory of Greenland is covered by article 5 and 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty, in the EU the territory is not part of it, so the mutual defense clause under article 42.7 TEU does not clearly apply, yet its people are citizens of the Union. In this regard, the Musketeer “one for all, all for one” principle in EU is reflected more in terms of economic and development instruments, investing in people, showing solidarity in addressing climate change and promoting multilateralism. The soft power actions of the EU in Greenland are of key importance for the stability and security of Greenland. Considering that the Greenland’s 31-seat parliament (Inatsisartut) includes the Democrats (social-liberal, cautious on independence – 10 seats), Naleraq (strongly

pro-independence – 8 seats.), Inuit Ataqatigiit (left-leaning, pro-independence – 7 seats), Siumut (social-democratic, pro-independence – 4 seats), and Atassut (conservative, pro-union with Denmark – 2 seats) [61], working closely with the local population and political parties, most of which support independence, is essential, as alongside threats of purchase, pressure, or coercive power, an additional front is opening in the form of cognitive warfare targeting the minds and hearts of local and Indigenous people by exploiting the trauma of the colonial past and its legacy's impact.

Greenland's internal political dynamics suggest that the debate over the U.S. presence and external pressure on the island is not binary ("for" or "against"), but is filtered through the interconnected issues of independence, economic resilience, and the terms of foreign investment. In this context, the positions of local political leaders and institutions operate as a "legitimacy filter": even when security arguments point toward a stronger transatlantic footprint, public acceptance remains conditional and politically contested – especially where pressure is perceived as constraining Greenlandic autonomy [62]. Public opinion data reinforces this point by indicating widespread rejection of scenarios involving accession to the United States, supporting the broader claim that any durable arrangement depends on local democratic legitimacy rather than externally imposed "deals" [63]. Consequently, the geopolitical triangle should be analysed not only through state strategies (U.S.–Denmark) but also through Greenland's domestic legitimization of security choices, which ultimately shapes their sustainability over time.

Adopted in October 2021 and undergoing renewal, the EU's Arctic Policy promotes peaceful cooperation, climate action and sustainable development, guided by priorities of protecting the climate and environment, supporting sustainable development, and promoting peace, stability and cooperation, with a strong focus on Indigenous Peoples, local communities and future generations, while its strengthened presence highlights education (90% of funding), renewable energy, biodiversity, sustainable tourism, research cooperation and critical raw materials as central to a partnership supporting Greenland's development [64], [65].

c) Tension in transatlantic solidarity and EU instruments against economic and political coercion

On 17 January US president Trump announced he would apply an extra 10% tariff on Denmark the UK and six other European countries (Finland, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden). This would begin on 1 February, and increase to 25% on 1 June 2026. The tariffs he said would apply "until such time as a Deal is reached for the Complete and Total purchase of Greenland". He said he was applying tariffs to these countries because they had "journeyed to Greenland, for purposes unknown", that this was "a very dangerous situation for the Safety, Security, and Survival of our Planet", and that "these Countries, who are playing this very dangerous game, have put a level of risk in play that

is not tenable or sustainable" [62]. In a joint statement on January 18, the EU countries Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, together with Norway and the United Kingdom affirmed their commitment as NATO members to strengthening Arctic security, as a shared transatlantic interest, through the pre-coordinated Danish exercise with Allies, expressed full solidarity with the Kingdom of Denmark and the people of Greenland, stood ready to engage in dialogue based on the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, warned that tariff threats risk a dangerous downward spiral in transatlantic relations, and affirmed they are committed to upholding their sovereignty [66].

The European Union, for its part, also expressed its support for Denmark and Greenland through its supranational institutions, with the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council issuing a joint statement where they emphasized that: territorial integrity and sovereignty are fundamental principles of international law essential for Europe and the wider international community, and while the EU underscores its shared transatlantic interest in Arctic peace and security through NATO, supports the pre-coordinated Danish exercise with allies, stands in full solidarity with Denmark and Greenland, and calls for continued dialogue with the US, it warns that tariffs would damage transatlantic relations and reaffirms Europe's unity and commitment to its sovereignty [67]. In addition, the European Commission president von der Layen underlined in Davos speech that "EU response will be unflinching, united and proportional" to US tariffs, in full solidarity with Denmark [68]. Informally, voices were heard calling also for the EU's "trade bazooka". The Anti-Coercion Instrument, which entered into force on 27 December 2023, enables the EU to deter and, if necessary, respond to situations where a third country seeks to pressure the European Union or a Member State into making a particular choice by applying or threatening measures affecting trade or investment, allowing the European Commission, after examination, a Council determination, and efforts at dialogue, to adopt response measures such as restrictions on access to the EU Single market, in line with public international law [69].

As a result of the messages and actions of the Arctic countries in NATO, the European institutions, and the potential of the Anti-coercion toolbox protecting the EU and its Member States from third countries' economic coercion, President Trump has softened his tone and abandoned plans to raise tariffs. On 21 January during a speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos, President Trump said: "I don't want to use force. I won't use force. All the US is asking for is a place called Greenland. You can say yes, and we will be very appreciative. Or you can say no and we will remember." He also called for "immediate negotiations to once again discuss the acquisition of Greenland by the United States". Later that day, following discussions with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Mr Trump announced he would no longer be imposing the tariffs after "a very productive meeting" in which they "formed the framework of a future deal with respect to Greenland and (...) the entire Arctic Region"

[62]. Thus, at the informal meeting of the members of the European Council, 22 January 2026 on recent developments in transatlantic relations and their implications for the EU, President Costa stressed that the EU and US share interests in the Arctic through NATO, affirmed the EU's stronger role in the region, stressed that only Denmark and Greenland can decide their affairs, and reiterated the EU's commitment to the principles of international law, territorial integrity and national sovereignty [70].

Although the European Union understands the laws of physics, it also knows the lessons of history. For this reason, it would apply Newton's third law in international affairs with great caution. The EU tries to lead by example, namely by promoting multilateralism, which is part of its DNA.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

The analysis of the current situation around Greenland allows us to make a systematic assessment of the risks and derive strategic recommendations for dealing with the crisis. The main risk lies in the fragmentation of the Arctic governance environment and the potential use of the rhetoric of territorial coercion to undermine allied confidence in NATO. Increased military cooperation between Russia and China in international waters off Alaska and along the Northern Sea Route creates the risk of strategic surprise and operational exploitation of political rifts between Western partners. In parallel, economic vulnerability from "excessive" external investments in critical infrastructure and the monopoly on rare earth elements require immediate countermeasures to protect sovereign equality.

In this regard, from an academic and strategic perspective, we would outline the following recommendations:

- Institutionalizing NATO's role in the Arctic: Formalizing collective defense mechanisms in Greenland through a specialized mission to ensure security without compromising Danish sovereignty and Greenlandic self-government. Due to the rapidly evolving nature of the issue, it is worth noting that a recommendation advanced in this article was effectively overtaken by events, as NATO launched the specialized mission "Arctic Sentry" to increase its military presence in Greenland while the paper was being prepared. Nevertheless, the recommendations for strengthening NATO's European pillar, preventing the "alliance dilemma", promptly addressing signals of disorder and "window breaking" within the Alliance itself, and preventing erosion of trust among allies towards US remain valid.

- Activating EU instruments for economic, educational, and sustainable development and resilience-building: Using the EU's Anti-Coercion Instrument to support Greenland in negotiations for strategic resources and protection from external pressure. Even though cautious in applying Newton's law, the EU has a "trade bazooka" at its disposal to deliver a proportionate response. Doubling the funding for education, sustainable development, economic

diversification, climate and cognitive security in the next EU budget post 2027 is also necessary. The cognitive battlefield and FIMI should not be underestimated, as although they are under the "military radar", they create conditions for polarization in the European democratic societies. Given that the majority of parties in the Inatsisartut want independence, which would happen through a referendum, and in light of the colonial legacy of the Indigenous population, which is often invoked by third countries, With the support of the EU, Greenland should enhance its resilience in anticipation of an additional front of geopolitical and hybrid challenges.

- Prioritizing the right to self-determination: Any change in the security architecture or the status of the island must be firmly based on the democratic will of the people of Nuuk, as enshrined in the 2009 Act of Self-Government.

Greenland is extremely well suited for demonstrating an innovative approach in a "zero to one" perspective and the international players have the historical chance to show up. As Tim Marshall emphasizes through the lens of "Prisoners of Geography", conflicts often begin from fear and greed, but the Arctic may be different. History shows that when one side gains, another usually loses, shaped by geography and human nature. However, technology has helped us overcome geographic limits. In today's globalised world, we can use this progress to ensure the Arctic benefits everyone, overcoming our more exploitative instincts and turning this "great game" into a shared good [51]. The global community needs creativity, strategic empathy towards humanity, and an innovative approach more than ever before, because, as Sir Ken Robinson teaches us the creativity is the process of developing original ideas with value [71]. Innovation is the process of putting new ideas into practice, and one potential such idea is the "zero to one" perspective for Greenland.

In conclusion, the crisis surrounding Greenland is a litmus test for the sustainability of the international legal order and the ability of Western institutions to adapt to the new geopolitical reality. It proves that in the modern world, territory is not a commodity that can be bought or sold, but a sovereign space whose legitimacy is rooted in human rights and the will of the population. The future stability of the Arctic depends on the synchrony between NATO's military power and the EU's political and legal protection, which together must ensure that the region remains a space of law, not geopolitical coercion. Greenland remains the key front on which to decide whether the principle of sovereign equality will prevail over narrow realism.

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