



## PROFESSOR STEN RYNNING ANSWERS A RANGE OF QUESTIONS ABOUT GREENLAND AND PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP'S SHOCKING PROPOSALS

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### Abstract:

Professor Sten Rynning answers various questions posed by UNISCI regarding the crisis sparked by Donald Trump's interest in annexing Greenland. He discusses how Greenland and Denmark have reacted, the importance of Greenland to international security, the expansion of the Danish military presence, as well as the symbolic significance of the allies' military presence and the Operation Arctic Endurance. He also considers the implications for the North Atlantic Alliance of Trump's statements and policies implemented, as well as the actions and reactions of the US's allies.

**Keywords:** Greenland, Denmark, Donald Trump, Arctic, NATO, NORAD, missile defense, Golden Dome, strategic resources, preemptive diplomacy, military force, hybrid warfare, influence warfare, the new West

**Titulo en Español:** *El profesor Sten Rynning responde a una serie de preguntas sobre Groenlandia y las sorprendentes propuestas del presidente Donald Trump*

### Resumen:

*El profesor Sten Rynning responde a diferentes cuestiones presentadas por UNISCI acerca de la crisis inducida por el interés de Donald Trump en anexionar Groenlandia. Expone cómo han reaccionado Groenlandia y Dinamarca, la importancia de Groenlandia para la seguridad internacional, la ampliación de la presencia militar danesa, el significado simbólico de la presencia militar de los aliados, la Operación Arctic Endurance, así como las implicaciones para la Alianza Atlántica de las declaraciones de Donald Trump, las actuaciones estadounidenses y las y reacciones de los aliados*

**Palabras Clave:** *Groenlandia, Dinamarca, Donald Trump, Ártico, OTAN, NORAD, defensa antimisiles, Cúpula Dorada, recursos estratégicos, diplomacia preventiva, fuerza militar, guerra híbrida, guerra de influencia, el nuevo Occidente*

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-270>



## I President Trump's interest in the annexation of Greenland. Denmark and Greenland reaction

**1Q.-** During his first term, he stated that the United States should buy Greenland. Both the Danish government and the Greenland government rejected this proposal. Later, after being elected to a second term, President Trump reiterated his interest in controlling this territory for reasons of national security. What aspects did this national interest encompass? What changes have been introduced?

*President Trump made a first reference to his desire to purchase Greenland in 2019, which led to a public relations clash with the Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen. The president's desire was poorly explained, though widely covered, and it came to be seen as an erratic decision. Upon his election in November 2024, the Danish government realized that Trump was intending to return to the issue, and in mid-January 2025, the president and PM Frederiksen had a confidential but much talked-about phone conversation in which Trump, allegedly, spoke in very harsh terms about his desire for acquiring Greenland. The Prime Minister has refused to discuss the nature of the call, but observers have described the government as being in crisis mode from this point on.*

*For about a year, the government's approach was to operate behind the scenes partly to understand the reasoning behind the presidential agenda, partly to quietly mobilize opposition to it from friends in the United States and in Europe. This effort lasted until January 2026 when the government assessed, based on confidential intelligence, that the United States was about to undertake some sort of military mission in Greenland. Denmark then activated a military mission of its own, presented as an exercise, Arctic Endurance, to preempt such a US military maneuver. It was an unprecedented time of crisis where Denmark effectively prepared to confront militarily the United States. It was accompanied by a high-profile mission of negotiation by the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, to Washington, where he agreed with Vice President Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio to open a diplomatic track on the issue. This diplomatic track is currently where things develop.*

*Through this dramatic year, it has remained rather obscure what exactly it is that President Trump seeks to address with a possible acquisition of Greenland. At some points he invokes national security and hemispheric defense, which would notably involve Greenland's role in the surveillance and missile defense of the continent – including the Golden Dome project of the president. At other points he speaks of the increased presence of Russia and China around Greenland, which, and even if Denmark and allies have not observed this presence, points to a type of geopolitical competition reasoning. Trump also hints at the strategic resources of Greenland (rare earth metals, uranium, and other critical minerals), which his special envoy to Greenland, Jeff Landry, has been eager to turn into business opportunities. And finally, many wonder whether Greenland is not a personal prestige project for the President who, were the United States to acquire Greenland, would make the largest territorial acquisition in all US history.*

*The short answer is therefore that we do not know the firm reasoning of President Trump but that the affair has been of very high intensity for the Kingdom of Denmark.*

**2Q.-** Do you think the Danish government's initial response was appropriate to counter these ambitions, in particular given what President Trump said in his first speech to a joint session of Congress during his second term? "I also have a message tonight for the incredible people of Greenland. We strongly support your right to determine your own future. And if you choose, we welcome you into the United States of America. We need Greenland for national security



and even international security. And we're working with everybody involved to try and get it. But we need it, really, for international world security. And I think we're gonna get it—one way or the other, we're gonna get it”.

*The Danish government's response has been appropriate in multiple ways. First, it has avoided a political “street fight” with President Trump – a public spat that Trump would be sure to win because he is capable of escalating public feuds to higher levels than his colleagues. The Prime Minister chose this option after the January 2025 phone call, and the Foreign Minister de facto confirmed it during his January 2026 mission to Washington. Second, the activation of military force in January 2026 was a signal that the United States would have to take Greenland by active military force, if it sought to act. Denmark thus deflated any hope of a Venezuela-type operation—quick, easy, and without any blood spilled. Third, Denmark was able to capitalize on its quiet diplomacy as it got a number of allies to send (limited but symbolically significant) troops to the Arctic Endurance ‘exercise’, and as allies publicly condemned the President's heavy-handed campaign to take control of another country's territory. The culminating point of this diplomatic campaign was the Davos Meeting in January 2026, including Canadian Prime Minister Carney's speech about “the end of the pleasant fiction” of US-led order and the “harsh reality” that medium-sized powers now must come together to resist great power brutality.*

*The preemptive diplomacy of Denmark has also been internal to the Kingdom. Greenland enjoys home-rule, and there is a growing movement for independence. By the 2009 self-government act, Greenland can choose to hold a referendum on independence. Managing this underlying movement while preempting US action has led Prime Minister Frederiksen to coordinate closely with the political leader of Greenland, Jens-Frederik Nielsen. In a tightly coordinated effort, they two remained on message through the critical phases. The Danish PM stated “Greenland is not for sale,” while her Greenland counterpart underscored the same message, adding “Greenland does not want to be owned by the United States. Greenland does not want to be ruled from the United States. Greenland does not want to be a part of the United States.”*

*Getting NATO involved also serves Danish interests. With its Arctic Sentry mission that began in January 2026, Denmark secured both the involvement of the alliance and an added arrow in its quiver to bring the debate on Greenland from the public domain into the corridors of diplomacy. While observers would agree that when it comes to the Arctic, the Russia problem is located in the Barents Sea off the coast of Norway, they would also agree that NATO's Greenland mission is necessary to counter allied fragmentation.*

**3Q.**-A Danish poll in January 2025 showed that 85% of Greenlanders opposed joining the US. Following the elections in Greenland in March 2025, the Democrats and Naleraq parties increased their seats. Both favour independence from Denmark. However, the four-party coalition government, excluding the ultra-nationalist Naleraq, favours a more measured and cautious approach to independence. Will this coalition actually be able to endure, or might it prove an easier target for more radical pro-independence movements given its divisions?

*The coalition partly broke up in March 2026 when Siumut, who held the ministerial post for foreign relations, left the government. Vivian Motzfeldt of Siumut had accompanied Foreign Minister Rasmussen to Washington in January 2026, among other things. Siumut's departure does not signal the end of the government where the three remaining parties now have a majority of 19 of 31 seats.*

*Siumut along with Naleraq now make up the official political opposition, and it could lead to a hardening of positions on independence. The political leader, Jens-Frederik Nielsen,*



*thus expressed regret that Siumut chose to step out at a time when such change could only encourage those outsiders (i.e., the Trump administration) that seek the division of the country. The urgency of national security and the threat of hostile US action have pushed Greenland's parties to agree to a moderate path of tight coordination with Copenhagen, but the durability hereof will become a question. The government stands and so does the political line, but tensions have grown.*

**4Q.-**What roles might US tactics- described as 'hybrid warfare' or 'influence warfare'- play in swaying the population towards independence from Denmark and towards inclusion within the US sphere of influence? What role might Jeff Landry, the US special envoy to Greenland, play? How might this discord lead to hybrid warfare or influence warfare by non-NATO states in Greenland and Denmark? What has the Danish government done to address this problem, given that the Greenland government is neither prepared nor equipped to deal with this kind of manipulation effectively?

*The United States has actively sought to influence opinion in both Greenland and Denmark. To illustrate: among foreign policy and defense analysts in Denmark, it has become widespread knowledge that US diplomats actively solicit their thinking on Danish foreign and defense, and that not all these diplomats may be diplomats. In Greenland, there have been reports of influence campaigns, though the extent of these is hard to gauge from open sources. There are occasional MAGA (Make America Great Again) enthusiasts in Greenland, and they tend to be highlighted, but it is doubtful that these 'true believers' are the principal means of US influence-seeking. Danish intelligence, one might infer, is actively monitoring the situation.*

*Jeff Landry is the public front of a US campaign to highlight economic opportunities. Reportedly, he will be in Greenland for a business conference in late May 2026, though his participation stirs controversy. How closely he coordinates with associates of Trump, how they coordinate economic interests, how much Landry hopes to have his home state, Louisiana, involved as a hub for processing rare earth minerals, and how big an impact these connections are having politically, remains an object of speculation, but a notable one.*

*The Danish approach to counter this campaign consists in the main of emphasizing benefits to Greenland of staying within the Kingdom. That is, across the political spectrum, prominent Danish politicians underscore the welfare benefits Greenlanders enjoy because of their inclusion in the Kingdom, from health and educational benefits to development opportunities. Denmark and Greenland signed an economic cooperation agreement in late 2025 by which Denmark will enhance investments in Greenland's infrastructure, including in airports and deep-water harbors, just as Denmark will cover medical expenses for advanced treatment in Danish hospitals.*

## **II Threat Assessment**

**5Q.-**President Trump claimed that the US needed to take possession of Greenland for national and international security. What does the US actually want that it cannot achieve by expanding its bilateral defence agreements with Denmark? Why does the US consider NATO's plans for the defence of Greenland and the Arctic to be of little relevance?

*The threat assessments of the Trump administration are difficult to gauge. As mentioned, the administration and in particular the President refer variously to multiple threats, the inconsistency of which leads to the speculation that the President is motivated also not least by the personal prestige of the project.*

*The current diplomatic negotiations, which were boosted following the high stakes meeting in Washington in January 2026, seems to be settling on an expanded US military*



*presence in Greenland. Such an expanded presence was always possible within the existing treaty framework whereby the United States could choose to expand its military footprint on Greenland following consultation with authorities in Greenland and the Danish government. This permissive treaty framework was established back in 1951 and renewed in 2004. In the latest edition, the treaty between the kingdom and the United States identifies just one US base in Greenland (the air and space base at Pituffik, formerly Thule) and foresees an opportunity for expansion by way of consultation and information. Current negotiations center on three new military installations in addition to Pituffik, an expansion that was always possible and which in no way required all the drama of presidential threats to Danish sovereignty.*

*President Trump has labeled it “vital” for its Golden Dome plans that the United States gets access to Greenland. How its radar and interceptor systems will evolve, and how much they will depend on access to Greenland, remains to be seen. However, Greenland’s position as an early warning location between North American and Russia is indisputable, just as Greenland enables the tracking of satellites in space. Finally, considering the forward interests of the United States in the Barents Sea (where Russia’s nuclear submarine fleet is located), the country will want to establish integrated and secure lines of communication in the entire region, and Greenland could again be central to this effort.*

*It is likely an element within the US decision-making process that US regional commands are not in full alignment. In particular, the European Command (of its military chain of command), EUCOM, is integrated with NATO and its head in fact runs the NATO military chain of command (as Supreme Allied Commander Europe, SACEUR). In contrast, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) is focused on the air, space, and maritime approaches to the United States (it is a binational command with Canada), and Pituffik Space Base in Greenland belongs to NORAD. It is plausible that NORAD’s preference is for building up US NORAD defenses in and around Greenland as opposed to entrusting added defense capabilities to the multinational leg of EUCOM, and that this can be a complicating factor in US decision-making.*

**6Q.-**What key factors need to be taken into account to highlight Greenland’s importance in international security, given that the risk of conflict and warfare is higher in regions closer to the Baltic states and the Kola Peninsula than in Greenland? Is the United States perhaps concerned that its European allies might fall behind, be unable to meet the challenges of transformation, and ultimately become incompatible?

*EUCOM is investing in allied cooperation in Europe’s north and thus in countering threats to the Baltics and the Barents Sea. The enlargement of NATO to Sweden and Finland has facilitated this focus: the two new allies have integrated not NATO’s central European command but its northern European command. NATO has thus organized a new land command in Mikkeli, Finland, with Sweden serving as the framework nation for its principal task group. US forces, alongside forces from the UK, Denmark, and Norway, are assigned to the command as well.*

*The United States has likewise extended its network of Defense Cooperation Agreements in the region, granting it privileged access to range of facilities and infrastructure, including the capacity to preposition equipment and train forces. Even Iceland, which has no armed forces, is experiencing increased US defense investments, notably at its Keflavik airbase where US surveillance and reinforcement assets are located.*

*At this military level, the United States is investing in its allies. Its allies have in return agreed to the DCAs and made them contingent on continued NATO cooperation. This NATO dimension of their relationship is written into the DCAs. The question is whether the United*



*States is prioritizing the region politically. President Trump's interest in Greenland is indicative that yes, this is indeed the case.*

*What is much less clear is the strategic framework within which this prioritization takes place. If the strategic framework is one of hemispheric defense, as evidenced by the President's interest in Canada, Venezuela, Panama, and Cuba, then it matters less whether NATO emerges strengthened from the ordeal, and whether the DCAs entered with individual allies cohere inside NATO. If the framework is rather one of strategic competition, meaning the United States competing with Russia and China, as evidenced by the President's decisions to act against countries and proxies within their network, such as Venezuela and Iran and its proxies throughout the Middle East, then the transformation of NATO into a more agile and fit-for-purpose alliance remains important. The lack of clear signaling contributes to both allied disarray and a degree of competition, as mentioned, between NORAD and EUCOM.*

**7Q-** How has Denmark expanded its military presence in Greenland? Is this a credible deterrent?

*Denmark has adopted two large defense policy packages related to Greenland and the Arctic region, including the Faroe Islands. A first package was adopted in January 2025, a second in October 2025. The timing tells a story: the government has been pushed by President Trump to do more, and it has responded with some urgency. The initial package had been in the making before the election of Donald Trump, of course, but there is a recognition that planning had been slow and cumbersome. While the packages have been adopted and the money allocated, there remains the challenge of turning the political intentions into military reality.*

*The Danish military presence is mostly focused on the air and maritime domains, consisting of long-endurance drones, satellite access, coastal radars, the construction of a subsea cable between Greenland and Denmark, Arctic naval vessels, and research on the construction of larger ships with improved command capabilities. The land forces will gain a unit of Greenlandic rangers.*

*The purpose of these investments is to enhance the kingdom's ability to protect and assert its sovereignty and to reinforce NATO's deterrence and defense posture. There is no intention of building a deterrence posture where Denmark would be able to control escalation in a confrontation with either Russia or China. The build-up is about awareness and protection and then alliance relationships.*

*The designed effort is significant in its own right: the two packages come at a multi-annual cost of nearly DKK 88 billion, which is slightly below a full annual defense budget at 3,5% of GDP (that is, DKK 98 billion). Denmark is meeting the 3,5% NATO target and intends to sustain it. Denmark is experiencing a number of challenges in translating this financial effort into military capability. The decision to invest in new naval vessels has led to an intense competition among the principal European producers of navy ships as well as South Korea, and the government has yet to allocate the contract. It has so far mainly designed a construction strategy whereby investments will have to be made in Denmark. Another challenge concerns the ability of the armed forces to man intensified naval patrols around Greenland: reportedly, Danish military vessels go on missions with a shortage of staff around 25-30%, which is taxing on the existing staff and could trigger enhanced resignations. Managing the personnel side of the defense increase has thus become a core challenge, even if recruitment is working well (there is mandatory military service, and many sign up voluntarily).*



### III Wider perspectives

**8Q.-**What would you highlight regarding the reactions of the Danish and Greenland governments? Do you consider them appropriate? And which aspects do you think are the most controversial?

*As mentioned, the Danish and Greenland governments have managed the 2025-2026 crisis with skill, effectively preventing the Trump administration from dividing them. In a larger perspective, though, it is clear that Denmark and Greenland must address the question of Greenland's independence.*

*Greenland, which ceased to be a colony and became a regular administrative unit of the kingdom in 1953, gained a peoples' right of self-determination in the 2009 act of self-government. Thus, it is up to the people of Greenland whether they would like to become independent and thus sovereign. Politically, considering the history of Denmark and Greenland, this made sense, and the line that "the future of Greenland must be decided by the people of Greenland" has been a trusted favorite of the Danish prime minister throughout the 2025-2026 crisis.*

*However, this promise of self-determination is a vulnerability in a charged geopolitical environment. The total population of Greenland is around 55,000, and it covets vast natural resources in addition to its geostrategic location. For security analysts, the question is not whether Greenland can gain sovereignty; it is which outside country will be the patron of it. The United States will not allow Greenland to balance freely among itself and China, and neither China nor Russia will be minded for respecting Greenland's political sovereignty. In short, if Denmark is not in, someone else will be.*

*The 2009 act of self-government makes Copenhagen a weak player in this game: effectively, it has handed the initiative to Greenland. For sure, for as long as Greenland remains in the kingdom, Copenhagen runs foreign and defense policy for the kingdom (in consultation with Greenland). But the biggest question of them all, on sovereignty, is not in the hands of Copenhagen.*

*Structurally speaking, this is an incentive for outsiders—be it the United States or someone else—to get involved in Greenland politics and shape the opinion. The best Denmark and Greenland can do is to look to long-term deals that solidify the opportunities and the welfare that Greenland derives from the kingdom. Both parties should likewise invest in political dialogue and the continued evolution and outlook of Greenland's political parties so that Greenland's politics will remain acutely aware of the consequences of desiring to go it alone.*

**9Q.-**Which measures have various European countries and Canada introduced to support Denmark? How would you evaluate their effectiveness? What is your assessment of Operation Arctic Endurance?

*Allies and partners of Denmark understood fully what was at stake when the Greenland crisis reached its climax in January 2026: they spoke clearly of the political stakes, and they resisted. Some sent military representatives to Greenland, all supported the idea that this was a step too far. The Greenland crisis and the Davos summit thus became the point in time when Europeans and Canada drew a red line in response to Trump's policies.*

*However, Europe and Canada are still searching for a path forward. Saying 'no' to Trump is just a step; what comes next is elusive. This has also been the case in Greenland. The military presence of partners was symbolically important but militarily insignificant (though*



*France did step up). Operation Arctic Endurance was as much about political deterrence as meaningful defense: it would have been exceptionally embarrassing for the United States to shoot at or detain troops from France, Britain, Germany, or other of the allied countries, in addition to Danish troops.*

**10Q.-**What was the role of NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte? What is the framework of the future deal? What does it involve? Why does President Trump continue to disagree?

*Mark Rutte is walking a very fine balance between persuading Trump that NATO is worth its salt, while convincing allies that he, Rutte, is acting in the interest of all allies. At times, he has come across as someone who is too close to President Trump, too eager to please, and too unbalanced in the approach to the alliance's collective interests.*

*The NATO mission, Arctic Sentry, which was established in the wake of the Davos summit, was a positive step. It signaled unity at a time of very deep divisions, and it offered a framework for managing allied tensions moving forward. It was a fig leaf behind which the United States could claim that it had kicked the allies into taking Greenland and the Arctic seriously, and behind which other allies could claim to have changed US policy from hostile take-over to allied cooperation. Arctic Sentry is thus a mission of the highest political value for NATO, but militarily speaking, it is secondary to more important flash points, notably in the Baltic and the Barents Seas.*

**11Q.-**The implications of Donald Trump's claims for the Atlantic Alliance

*Trump's negotiation style is one of shock and awe followed by dealmaking. The problem in NATO is that Trump is all shock and awe. Whatever deal he would like to make is simply not clear. Some argue that the 5% spending commitment from the 2025 Hague summit is a really important deal, which to an extent is true, but it is all about means, not political ambition. Where NATO should go, how it should 'Europeanize', and how the United States would like NATO to look ten years from now is simply not clear.*

*The grand effect of this posturing is to paralyze NATO. More money is being channeled into European defense, but the big players are sitting tight, not daring to rock the boat. They have a point: if they speak up, if they envisage a stronger Europe, it might trigger condemnation from President Trump and a renewed NATO crisis. The war in Iran is a case in point: Trump did not consult ahead of the war, the war has severely damaged Europe's economies, but criticism is being kept moderate and in low voice because tensions could flare.*

*Ultimately, Europeans will have to speak up and preferably in cooperation with a US administration minded for long-term reform in NATO. President Trump is unlikely to become the hub for this conversation. Possibly, the political situation in Washington following the mid-term elections in November 2026 could further a more mature dialogue on long-term perspectives for the alliance. It is in the European interest to further it, irrespective of how difficult the political scene may look, as NATO's current condition of political paralysis is damaging to the continent's security.*

**12.-**Summing up

*Greenland has become an important facet of a changing transatlantic relationship. The old NATO, the old West, is dying. This was a West led by the United States, which as a self-conscious European power stepped forward to support cooperation in Europe as well as Europe's defense. This West is dying, and it is not coming back.*



*A new West might be emerging where Europeans step forward to take charge of both the defense of the continent and the shape of institutional cooperation. They will have to do this in cooperation with the United States. If they seek to do it in opposition to the United States, they will fail, and the West will falter.*

*Europeans along with Canada have begun the hard work of investing in defense. They are much less clear on the shape of institutional cooperation. What should a Europeanized NATO look like, and how can it cater to European, Canadian, and American interests? It is of great urgency for the allies to address these questions.*