

# From Melos to Nuuk: Denmark's Strategy of Persuasion Towards the United States

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## Resumé

Denne artikel undersøger Danmarks diplomatiske reaktion på præsident Trumps fornyede ambitioner om at erhverve Grønland efter hans genvalg i 2024, fortolket gennem Thukydids' Meliske Dialog. Artiklen beskriver Danmarks tilgang som en "overtalelsesstrategi" – en metode for småstater til at omformulere en stormagts mål for at opnå gensidigt acceptable resultater uden tvang eller underkastelse – i kontrast til appeasement og bandwagoning. Artiklen viser, hvordan København søgte at bevare alliansens sammenhængskraft med USA, håndtere grønlandske selvstændighedsaspirationer og forebygge eskalation, samtidig med at der blev påtaget strategiske og økonomiske omkostninger, især til arktiske forsvarsinvesteringer. Undersøgelsen argumenterer for, at overtalelsesstrategien på kort sigt bevarede dansk suverænitæt over Grønland, men samtidig fremskyndede forfatningsændringer, der i sidste ende kan muliggøre grønlandsk og færøsk uafhængighed.

IN 416 BC, the Athenians laid siege to the city of Melos. As Thucydides tells the story, Athens sought to secure the island due to its geopolitical significance on the sea route to Sparta. When the Athenian strike force arrived, the citizens of Melos were offered an alliance with Athens, which meant that the island would pay tribute to the Delian League. If Melos refused, as the Athenian diplomats suspected the city would, since the Melians were related to the Spartans and had insisted on remaining neutral in the confrontation between the two Greek superpowers, Athens would lay waste to the city. The outcome of the confrontation between the small island republic and the great power with an empire encompassing most of Greece was given in advance. But precisely for that reason, Thucydides made a point of showcasing the difference

in perspective between a small power and a great power in what is perhaps his most famous dialogue. The Melian dialogue also serves to illustrate the hubris inherent in great power politics. Thucydides wanted us to understand that even if the Melians were unable to convince the Athenians not to subdue the city, the Melians were, in fact, correct in arguing that Athens undermined its own power by transforming the Delian League from a defensive alliance into a means of coercion serving Athenian interests. By pursuing what was, in effect, an imperial policy, the Athenians eroded the very foundation of their power, Thucydides tells us.<sup>1</sup>

The inability of the outgunned citizens of Melos to persuade the Athenians that might does not make right is perhaps the most invoked scene in international relations – a story retold in countless graduate seminars

and the starting point for many a strategic analysis, including Graham Allison's prediction of a war between China and the United States.<sup>2</sup> So, even if a US Navy task force did not appear in the Nuup Kangerlua outside Nuuk in 2024 when President-Elect Donald Trump asserted that American 'ownership and control' of Greenland were essential for US national security, Mr Trump's claims on Greenland immediately resonated with a tradition of great powers doing what they can and small states suffering what they must. For opposition to the Trump administration, the president's desire to acquire Greenland shows a case of imperial hubris straight out of Thucydides. For Europeans, the Greenland issues thus became emblematic of a more 'imperial' presidency. For the Danes, the Greenland issue was a more tangible challenge to their relationship with the United States, as well as a catalyst for Greenlandic aspirations for independence, which the president helped energise.

The 'Danish dialogue' that resulted from President Trump's claims on Greenland thus laid bare the way the United States perceived its power, as well as the way a smaller ally could handle US power projection. The alliance with the United States became a risk and a problem in its own right for Denmark. On one hand, Greenland becomes a liability because it provokes a conflict with the United States that jeopardises Denmark's relationship with the United States at a time when the renewed threat from Russia means Denmark has a more immediate need for the United States' protection than at any point since the Cold War ended. From this perspective, Danish security would be better served by transferring sovereignty of the territory to the United States. On the other hand, the Trump administration's designs on Greenland demonstrate to the Danish government that the United States is shift-

ing its relations with allies in a way that suggests the United States is becoming a predatory hegemon. In this case, it is by no means certain that Denmark can purchase a new lease on the American security guarantee by surrendering Greenland. In these new circumstances, giving in to President Trump's demands is equivalent to appeasement, and standing up for Danish interests and Greenlandic self-determination is a way to assert European values in the face of US imperialism.

This article will describe how the Danish government has pursued a strategy of persuasion vis-à-vis the United States, following President Donald Trump's focus on the US acquiring Greenland after his 2024 re-election. First, the article outlines the workings of persuasion strategy and then demonstrates how the Danish government has used persuasion to manage Team Trump's demands. Secondly, the article outlines the price the Danish government is paying for trying to persuade the United States instead of giving in to US demands for transferring sovereignty over Greenland. The Danish government may be saving Greenland at the price of the Kingdom's current constitutional order. This article deals with events in 2025. As such, it cannot claim to tell the whole story about Team Trump's attempt to acquire Greenland and its possible consequences. It can, however, describe the strategy adopted by the Danish government in response to President Trump's ambitions for Greenland – and speculate on the consequences of that strategy.

## Persuasion Strategy

What if the Melians had persuaded the Athenians not to lay siege to their city? One might imagine that instead of vainly trying to convince the Athenians to adhere to law and morality, the Melians would have

found ways for Athens to achieve its strategic objectives without subjugating Melos. Instead of confrontation, the Melians could have opted for persuasion. It would not have made for as dramatic a dialogue in *The Peloponnesian War*, but it just might have saved the community on Melos. The Melians could have offered to contribute to the Delian League, contribute some triremes for the Athenian navy, and perhaps even erect a statue of Pericles in the town square. This strategy of persuasion was, in many ways, the strategy the Danish government adopted. Instead of dismissing Mr Trump's claims on Greenland, as the government did in 2019, Copenhagen sought to engage with Washington in a manner that would make it clear that the US could attain its stated objectives *without* acquiring sovereignty over Greenland. Essentially, the Danish government insisted that nothing significant had changed in the relationship. However, geopolitical shifts call for new initiatives, argued the Danish government: but we can manage that within existing agreements without turning Greenland into part of the United States. 'The 1951 agreement offers ample opportunity for the United States to have a much stronger military presence in Greenland. If that is what you wish, then let us discuss it,' stated Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen on 30 March 2025.<sup>3</sup>

Persuasion is a strategy where a weaker state, faced with demands from a stronger power, uses diplomacy to convince that power that a mutually acceptable solution can serve its interests without resorting to coercion or conflict. A persuasive approach is usually more effective when it relies on a well-established prior relationship between the coercer and the coerced. Persuasion is not about moral appeals for mercy or passive hopes for justice; it is a pragmatic negotiation strategy employed by small states

to align with the interests of great powers while maintaining their own independence. A strategy of persuasion involves the weaker state taking the initiative to reframe the great power's demands into a cooperative venture. Therefore, it can be regarded as a risk reduction strategy aimed at managing the relationship with the great power so that this diplomatic relationship helps to resolve the issue rather than the issue leading to the breakdown of the relationship. Since small states have an inherent interest in their relationships with great powers being guided by rules rather than capabilities, maintaining the relationship within a diplomatic framework and through alliance relations reduces the risk that the great power will use force to achieve its objectives. A strategy of persuasion thus requires a certain diplomatic deftness: the small state must neither appear defiant nor purely subservient but instead present itself as a helpful partner. The crux is convincing the stronger side that 'you will achieve your aims more easily with us as allies than by treating us as enemies or subjects.'

The language of persuasion is quite different from the plea of appeasement. In appeasement, there is no real acceptance of the great power's argument, only an acknowledgement of its superior power. The language used in appeasement is, therefore, necessarily utilitarian. It dismisses lofty arguments based on rights and values in favour of the decision-maker's assessment of whether conflict is worth the cost. For that reason, appeasers do not have to like the government they appease or agree with its aims; they simply need to recognise the balance of power and accept the resulting policies. Persuasion relies on the language of acceptance. It not only endorses the great power's rationale but adopts it to the extent of apologising for the fact that its wishes are not being fulfilled. The language of persuasion thus promotes

harmony of interests – ‘in the final analysis, we want the same thing; please let us help you make that real,’ is what the persuading government conveys. This approach works best when the great power’s objectives are limited or pragmatic (e.g., military access, security concerns, economic opportunities) and can be achieved without outright conquest. It is less likely to succeed if the great power is ideologically committed to dominance or if it doubts the small state’s capacity to keep promises. In the case of Melos, Athens’ mistrust and desire to make an example of Melos ultimately undermined any persuasive efforts.

As a strategy, persuasion differs from appeasement, even though both can appear similar, as they involve accommodating a superior power. Persuasion aims to influence and achieve its goals without submission, unlike appeasement, which involves making unreciprocated concessions of vital interests to pacify a stronger power, as seen in Munich in 1938. Appeasement is reactive, driven by fear, and often merges into defensive bandwagoning, where weaker states align with stronger ones under pressure, as Walt describes.<sup>4</sup> It is frequently seen as a choice – perhaps Britain and France could have stood up to Germany in 1938. For smaller powers, confrontation is not a real option; persuasion offers a way to shift the focus from military might to the strength of the case. While this requires accepting the objectives of the stronger power, it’s a more creative strategy because it shifts the initiative away from the great power. The smaller state seeks negotiations that consider both sides’ interests without surrendering its sovereignty. Denmark’s response to the Trump administration’s Greenland proposal during Mr Trump’s first term illustrates this difference—rather than ceding land, they offered expanded military access under the 1951

defence agreement, meeting U.S. Arctic security goals while retaining control.<sup>5</sup>

Persuasion is not just another form of bandwagoning, hedging, or binding, all of which aim to reduce risks for smaller powers within an international system dominated by a great power. Since balancing a great power can be too costly, states often align with the stronger power’s agenda for protection.<sup>6</sup> Persuasion involves close alignment with a great power but emphasises what happens after the alliance is established. Schweller appears to believe that the function of an alliance depends on its formation, but as the Greenland case illustrates, a great power can redefine the ‘price’ for an ally to join. In such situations, the subordinate faces a choice: accept or argue. Arguing can lead to persuasion, shaping the conditions for alignment and maintaining agency. Cheng-Chwee Kuik describes hedging as involving strategic ambiguity—cooperation and counter-preparation—while persuasion aims to turn mismatched goals into a mutually acceptable deal.<sup>7</sup> John Ikenberry states that binding commits a great power to institutions and rules, whereas persuasion focuses on current interest-based negotiations.<sup>8</sup> Overall, persuasion is a tool for a state that lacks the power to coerce but still refuses to yield—an active effort to transform power into partnership, avoid coercion, and preserve dignity. A bandwagoning state aligns with the dominant power strategically, while a persuading state seeks an alignment that also satisfies its own needs. For example, if Melos had bandwagoned with Athens, it would have simply joined the Delian League, likely as a tribute-paying subject or troop provider. Many smaller Greek states did so out of fear or belief that Athens was the winning side. Melos would have become just another satellite. If Melos had persuaded Athens, it might still have joined the al-

liance, but on favourable terms negotiated by Melos—such as retaining local autonomy or securing protection in exchange for contributions. That would be bandwagoning with conditions, initiated by Melos. Similarly, Denmark is already closely aligned with the United States, being a key US ally in NATO and other efforts. Generally, it follows the alliance leader closely, which is typical for small powers in alliances.

Persuasion is therefore a distinct strategy through which smaller powers can negotiate power asymmetries. It demonstrates that much of alliance theory is developed from a ‘great power’ perspective, primarily by ‘the Athenians’, focusing on how major powers perceive international relations. This is especially relevant to the body of theory attempting to explain alliance formation after the Cold War, a period when the main concern for alliance theorists was the lack of challenge to the United States. Consequently, alliance theory aimed to explain the absence of conflict rather than how conflicts *within* alliances are managed. Diplomatic historian Paul Schroeder even argues that ‘all alliances in some measures are pacts of restraint, restraining or controlling the actions of the partners in the alliance.’<sup>9</sup> In fact, one might argue that the Trump administration recognised this and actively sought to ease the restraint allies could impose on the US government, while simultaneously aiming to increase the ‘prize’ of bandwagoning by demanding, and receiving, a higher European contribution to NATO. From this perspective, the Danish attempt to persuade the US administration to adopt a more restrained approach to Greenland was a test of whether the European allies could continue to persuade, shape and occasionally restrain US policy. As the dialogue between the Melians and the Athenians defined the ideological framework for Greek geopolitics,

so did the dialogue between the Danes, the Greenlanders, and the Americans define future transatlantic relations. In the following, we will focus on how the Kingdom of Denmark tried to persuade its powerful American ally.

## With Friends Like These

Shortly after his victory in the 2024 presidential election, President Trump declared that American ‘ownership and control’ of Greenland were vital for US national security. In a Truth Social post on 23 December 2024, Trump stated that ‘for purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the World, the United States of America feels that the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity’. This statement coincided with his appointment of a new ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark. It indicated that the incoming administration’s priority in its relationship with Denmark was to acquire Greenland, a self-governing territory within Denmark. It echoed his 2019 proposal to purchase Greenland, which was then dismissed as ‘absurd’ by Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen.<sup>10</sup> In 2024–25, President Trump’s ambitions regarding Greenland were less confrontational, yet expressed with a geopolitical resolve that would have earned approving nods from the Athenians’ diplomats in Thucydides’s account. In early March 2025, the President doubled down on his statements about Greenland when he asserted in a speech to a joint session of Congress that ‘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 going to get it. One way or the other, we’re going to get it.’<sup>11</sup> In spite of the President’s assurances that his government ‘strongly support’ the

Greenlandic people's right to determine its own future,<sup>12</sup> Greenlandic public opinion was firmly opposed to Mr Trump's plans, with 85 per cent of Greenlanders against becoming a US territory. However, the poll also showed that 43 per cent regarded the increased interest in Greenland's status as an opportunity. This aligned well with the Greenlandic government's desire for full sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Greenland's Prime Minister Egede stated on Facebook in response to President Trump's speech that 'Americans and their leader must understand that we are not for sale and cannot simply be taken. Our future will be decided by us in Greenland.'<sup>14</sup>

The Danish government's top priority was to reduce the potential for conflict—between Copenhagen and Washington as well as between Copenhagen and Nuuk. In a conflict, the power imbalance would mean that Denmark would have the terms of a status for Greenland dictated to it. If conflict were avoided in favour of a negotiated settlement, which might be seen as beneficial to all parties, Denmark would have the chance to persuade the President that the United States could achieve its aims without Denmark losing control of the island or the Greenlandic people losing their ability to decide their own future. This meant ensuring that the Greenland issue did not become a transatlantic quarrel, where Europeans could vent their distaste for President Trump on an issue that, unlike defence spending and the Ukraine war, had no immediate consequences for them. When a French government minister suggested to a local French radio station that France might deploy troops to help the Danes defend Greenland against the United States,<sup>15</sup> this was precisely the type of support the Copenhagen government would prefer to do without. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen thus toured European capitals in January 2025 in highly choreographed visits

with firm handshakes and little engagement with the press.<sup>16</sup> The important thing was to project that the European powers supported Denmark without getting into specifics. Only Chancellor Scholtz was unable to restrain himself and offered a barb against the US president when, at a press conference with Ms Frederiksen, he noted to 'whom it may concern' that 'borders must not be moved by force'.<sup>17</sup> *Financial Times* reported on 28 January 2025 that Denmark had explicitly requested its European allies not to engage in the Greenland issue. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte arguably took this hands-off approach further than the Danish government might have wished when he declared that NATO did not care one way or the other how the US dealt with the Greenland question at a press availability in the Oval Office on 13 March.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Frederiksen continued to elicit symbolic support from European allies in the month ahead, culminating in President Macron's visit to Greenland on 15 June 2025 on his way to the G7 Meeting in Kananaskis in Canada.

Visiting Greenland as a way to demonstrate commitment without specifying what that commitment involved in practice was a strategy first used by Team Trump. On 7 January 2025, Mr. Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr, undertook a 'private' visit to Nuuk as a follow-up to his father's Truth Social post. In another 'private' visit, Ms. Vance, the vice-president's wife, planned to visit Nuuk to take part in a dog-sledge race. However, the planned visit had to be cancelled when the advance team became convinced that local opposition to Ms. Vance's visit was so widespread that rather than symbolising the administration's commitment to acquiring Greenland, the visit would instead symbolise Greenlandic opposition to the United States.<sup>19</sup> The visit was rescheduled to Pituffik Space Base, located in the sparsely populated



northern part of Greenland, where the vice president addressed a group of US military personnel. Even if that audience was likely easier to manage, the base commander was dismissed following the visit when she sent an email to base personnel, which in Washington was interpreted as distancing herself from the administration's policy.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps this reaction demonstrated the administration's realisation that they had overplayed their hand with the Vance visit. No further high-level American visits took place.

This was a tactical victory for the Danes. It demonstrated that the Americans could not appeal to the Greenlandic people over the heads of the governments in Nuuk and Copenhagen. It also showed that the campaigning approach which Team Trump had adopted towards Greenland was ineffective. The president's ambitions for Greenland had been expressed in campaign language, and Trump Jr. visited the island on the campaign plane. However, the Greenlanders could not be convinced to vote for America in the same manner as Americans had been persuaded to vote for Trump. This highlighted the profound cultural differences between the Kingdom of Denmark and the American Republic. One example of this was the repeated US argument that if the US acquired Greenland, American investment would ensure jobs for the island's inhabitants. For people living with the services of a Scandinavian welfare state, this argument simply did not carry the weight the Americans obviously thought it carried.

The United States thus adopted a much less confrontational approach to Greenland, which reduced the level of conflict and allowed the issue to be dealt with differently. This constitutes a significant success for Danish diplomacy, as it, for the time being at least, defined the Greenland issue as some-

thing that should be discussed diplomatically through proper channels.

## A Good Ally

Harmony of interest forms the foundation of a persuasion strategy – the weaker power must persuade the stronger that, since they both desire the same outcome, the great power does not need to exert its strength to achieve it. The emphasis on the relevance of the alliance is the weaker power's strongest leverage because, as long as the stronger power accepts this, the discussion remains civil, and there are limits to the types of measures that can be used to coerce the weaker power. The Danish government thus did its utmost to emphasise that Team Trump's interest in Greenland did not jeopardise the alliance. Tongue in cheek, the Danish government even argued that it welcomed the American interest in Greenland as a way to invigorate security cooperation. Knowing full well that the Trump administration was less committed to allies and alliances, Copenhagen nevertheless chose to interpret the administration's policy as one of innovation rather than a challenge to existing alliances. Thus, the Danish government followed the script adopted by the NATO allies, whereby they welcomed President Trump's insistence on increased defence spending as a way to ensure the future of the alliance, thereby committing the President to the Alliance.

A strategy of persuasion can therefore be seen as a means to reduce alliance volatility. In many respects, the Danish government viewed itself as the rightful guardian of the alliance with the United States. The Danes sought to persuade the US government that the alliance would continue to serve as a foundation for further cooperation, as resolving the crisis within an alliance framework provided some guardrails

for the process, which would be absent if it were regarded as a purely state-to-state relationship. Danish diplomats believed that the alliance with the United States would persist and that the Greenland issue, as it had been before, was a temporary challenge that the parties could overcome together. Although the relationship was strained at present, it would develop into something new and more substantial, the argument went. In so doing, the Danish government had to acknowledge the US argument that the US had further, legitimate claims on Greenland.

This was a delicate balancing act, where the Danish government had to find a middle ground between being firm on sovereignty and maintaining a strong commitment to the alliance. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen both publicly emphasised that Denmark values its US alliance. Frederiksen responded to U.S. criticism by stressing that Denmark is ‘a good and strong ally’. Likewise, Mr Løkke Rasmussen – while criticising Washington’s hostile tone – pointedly reminded everyone, ‘These are very harsh words, and I am a little offended when you think that Denmark has always been there for the USA.’<sup>21</sup> By criticising the US wording and ‘tone’, but not directly opposing Team Trump’s ambitions on Greenland or the alliance itself, Denmark signalled resolve against undue pressure without severing ties or outright insulting the U.S. Speaking out against tone also reflected Danish political debates, where complaints about the opposition’s tone are a standard way of calling a political argument out of line. This point was probably lost on the American government, but the Danish electorate heard it loud and clear. Hence, the government was able to earn domestic support for standing up to the US without appearing to alienate the Americans.

Precisely because maintaining the alliance was central to the persuasion strategy, the Danish government was sensitive to being accused of being ‘a bad ally’, as Vice-President Vance did in March 2025. The Danish government had to strongly counter this accusation because if Denmark was perceived as ‘a bad ally’, then the persuasion strategy would weaken. In her most forceful statement to date, the Prime Minister emphasised that more than 40 Danish soldiers had died fighting alongside the Americans in Afghanistan as evidence of Denmark’s commitment as an ally: ‘This is not a fair characterization. For years we have stood with the US under very difficult circumstances.’<sup>22</sup> The Prime Minister called for a ‘fair’ assessment of Denmark’s commitment to the alliance and its capabilities. This was not only a reminder to Team Trump of Denmark’s historical commitments and sacrifices for the common cause but also a signal for US decision-makers to recognise that the Kingdom’s resources were more limited than America’s. Therefore, the defence investments in the Arctic region, which the Danish government announced at various times in spring 2025, were to be recognised as a significant contribution to the security and defence of the area from a Danish perspective. In April 2025, when she announced increased defence spending together with the newly elected Greenlandic leader Jens-Frederik Nielsen on the HMDS Vædderen in Nuuk harbour, the Prime Minister reiterated the argument of the persuasion strategy when she, speaking in English, noted that ‘the US is a big country, and Denmark is a small one.’ The Prime Minister went on to describe Denmark’s admiration for the United States and how Denmark had done its best to give back to the US for how the Americans had ‘created prosperity and progress, peace and freedom.’ Prime Minister Frederiksen thus recognised the power imbalance in the rela-



tionship, evoked shared values, and described how Denmark had earned friendship with the US. On that basis, she emphasised that Denmark would not be bullied. However, such behaviour was quite unnecessary, according to Ms Frederiksen: 'If you want to be more present in Greenland, Greenland and Denmark is ready. And if you would like to strengthen the security in the Arctic – just like us – then let us do it together'.<sup>23</sup> Demonstrations of current capabilities complemented these investments in future capabilities. In July, the army's light infantry regiment, XIII Schleswig Regiment of Foot, conducted exercises in Southern Greenland.<sup>24</sup> Media coverage suggested that the army exercise aimed to show resolve against a potential US invasion, but this was definitely not the intended message. On the contrary, the exercises aimed to show that Denmark was a 'good ally', taking its security responsibilities in the Arctic seriously.

Demonstrating the Kingdom's credentials as a good ally was emphasised when the US Senate on 23 July 2025 passed a resolution praising the alliance with Denmark.<sup>25</sup> Although such a resolution has little political substance, it formalises Denmark's status as a 'good ally' and thus provides another means to ensure that the Greenland issue is addressed on alliance terms, enabling a persuasion strategy. The military investments were aimed at persuading the American public that Denmark had acted in accordance with Team Trump's desire for a stronger presence in Greenland. The Danish government may not have much hope that the President's ambitions for Greenland will change, but they can remove as many grounds for complaint as possible. Without the security policy substance, President Trump's claim on the island appeared as naked imperialism. As the Melians before them, the Danes would point out the disadvantages of an imperial policy.

## The End of Empire

The Danish critique of Team Trump's imperialism was notably weakened by the Danish government's own vulnerability to criticism of colonialism. Greenland is a self-governing nation within the Kingdom of Denmark, which, apart from Denmark and Greenland, also includes the Faroe Islands, another Arctic nation. Greenland and the Faroe Islands are represented in the Folketing (the parliament) in Copenhagen. Both nations receive substantial subsidies from the Danish state budget, and the role these transfers of funds play in the viability of both nations is central to an ongoing discussion on whether the 56,000 Greenlanders and 54,000 Faroese can function as independent states. President Trump's offer to acquire Greenland thus placed itself at the centre of the discussion between Copenhagen and Nuuk on the future of the partnership between the Danish and Greenlandic nations. By offering an alternative to Danish sponsorship, the United States provided Greenland with new options.

The debate of Greenlandic independence was no longer a choice between independence under austere conditions or the welfare state funded by Denmark. Team Trump proposed an alternative development model based on mining capitalism, which would generate wealth by allowing US investment in the island's rich resources. While the Danish government would point out that US investments were most welcome within the current governance structures, this was somewhat beside the point. Team Trump envisioned a transformation of Greenland's political economy, shifting from a welfare model to one based on mining capitalism. As such, the president offered a competing vision of independence to the one advocated by the dominant pro-independence parties in Nuuk, which based their analysis of the

current situation on a post-colonial worldview and had a distinct left-wing vision for an independent Greenland. The American ambitions for Greenland transformed the island's political economy – at least in theory. While the politics were dramatically altered, Team Trump's Greenland ambitions changed next to nothing in the day-to-day. The US might have the ability to change Greenland's status in the long term, but in the short term, the Danish government held most of the economic cards. The government thus initiated infrastructure investments to demonstrate the Danish commitment to the island. It was crucial for the government in Copenhagen to proceed without being accused of interfering in Greenlandic politics, so these initiatives had to wait until an election in March 2025 changed the government in Nuuk. The March 2025 election resulted in a broad coalition, excluding Naleraq, the most independence-minded party. The newly elected Greenlandic Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen stated that 'We don't want to be Americans. We don't either want to be Danes in the future. We want to be independent. But right now we are part of the Kingdom of Denmark and that's how it's going to be.'<sup>26</sup>

Being a Greenlander might mean that one was not Danish, but it did not exclude one from being a subject of King Frederik X. When he ascended the throne on 14 January 2024, the King naturally had to introduce himself to all his subjects, which served to emphasise the bonds between the different nations within the Danish realm. In June 2025, King Frederik X visited both Arctic nations, arriving in Nuuk the King told reporters that he 'felt at home' in Greenland.<sup>27</sup> By emphasising his 'love for Greenland',<sup>28</sup> the King eased some of the tension in the relationship by creating a space beyond day-to-day politics where it was permissible to

focus on what unites rather than divides Danes and Greenlanders. The King symbolised unity among the diverse peoples within his realm beyond day-to-day politics. The identity the King referred to was about belonging and understanding, serving as a reminder of shared bonds rather than contested differences. Frederik X could only do so by recognising that those differences existed. It might be that the King presented what transcended those differences, but that did not make the differences less real. The King's intervention was thus a placeholder for the promise of a renegotiation of the constitution with a view to granting greater independence to the Faroe Islands and Greenland. In fact, the way the King was mobilised implied that the government in Copenhagen was ready to consider transforming the Kingdom into something more like the British Commonwealth with independent nations under one monarch.

In May 2025, MP Sjúurður Skaale from the Faroe Islands wrote 'I sit in a parliament that does not legislate for my own constituents. I can make decisions for Danish voters and impose burdens on them.'<sup>29</sup> Skaale's formulation of what in the UK is called the West Lothian question—whether members from Scotland and Wales should vote on English issues—was a way to provide the Danish electorate with an argument for giving independence to the Faroe Islands. This was a clever way to express the views of the not insignificant part of Danish public opinion that did not share the King's affection for Greenland to the extent that they were prepared to suffer accusations of colonialism; while also feeling they were paying the cost of running Greenlandic and Faroese society. Greenlandic politicians seldom recognised this reaction to their ambitions of independence, but Mr Skaale made a point of trying to mobilise this silent, Danish majority behind

a reform of the Kingdom's constitution. He, too, was engaging in a strategy of persuasion.

The Danish government effectively maintained a united front with the governments of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. This cohesion was vital for pursuing a strategy of persuasion towards Team Trump. However, maintaining unity did not come without a cost. The Danish government could only sustain foreign policy unity by tolerating domestic disunity within the Kingdom. Not only had President Trump's offer to the Greenlanders created new prospects for independence, but it also demonstrated that if push came to shove, the government in Copenhagen would not oppose independence. At that moment, if the Danish government attempted to coerce the government in Nuuk, it would open the possibility for the American government to step in on the side of 'the Greenlandic people' and make a deal without involving Copenhagen. If Denmark were to remain a factor in Greenlandic politics, it would have to allow Greenland to set the agenda. In the long run, this would probably not be acceptable to the Danish electorate. Mr Skaale had realised as much. President Trump accelerated the disintegration of the Kingdom, a process once expected to be gradual, potentially leading to a new constitution and possible independence for Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

## Price of Persuasion

Even a successful persuasion strategy incurs significant costs. To convince Team Trump that Denmark is serious about Arctic security, Denmark has invested heavily in Arctic military capabilities—capabilities that could arguably be used more effectively to defend Denmark against Russia in the Baltic. These defence investments seem even more excessive if Greenland and the Faroe Islands are

expected to gain independence within the next 10-20 years. In such a scenario, one might fear that Danish taxpayers have wasted their money on defending territories that would prefer to defend themselves. The counter-argument, of course, is that the relatively small populations might not be able to mount their own defence. Thus, the defence investment might serve as a way to maintain a 'defence union' with Greenland and the Faroe Islands after independence. Whether the Danish population will accept spending money on the defence of territories no longer part of their state remains to be seen.

Currently, the cost of Danish rearmament is higher, and the results are arguably lower, because Denmark must invest in capabilities in both the Arctic and the Baltic. This means that the Danish armed forces are unable to concentrate their efforts as needed for a small country with limited military resources. During a period of conflict, Denmark will face difficult decisions about whether to focus on the Arctic or the Baltic. The debate over this prioritisation has been overshadowed by the diplomatic imperative to demonstrate a defence commitment in Greenland. As a result, the strategy of persuasion aimed at the United States has led to a diminished focus on Denmark's broader strategic plans.

This prioritisation of short-term diplomatic efforts over long-term strategic goals is perhaps an unavoidable outcome of pursuing a strategy of persuasion, which by its very nature involves subordinating one's own interests to those of another power. In this case, sacrificing the long term for short-term gain becomes quite ironic, as the Danish government has felt the need to commit itself to constitutional changes that allow for greater independence for the Kingdom's Arctic nations in the near term and for full independence in the longer term. This is not a new

stance for the Danish government, which has previously supported the idea of national self-determination for Greenland and the Faroe Islands, should their inhabitants wish for it. However, in practice, Denmark has never truly committed to facilitating the process of independence. Denmark has also maintained that sovereignty is indivisible – the concept of Greenland and the Faroe Islands becoming sovereign within the Kingdom has been dismissed as unconstitutional and politically unfeasible. Nevertheless, to present a united front to the United States, these positions seem to have been forsaken in favour of a looser constitutional framework more akin to the British Commonwealth – with a shared head of state and armed forces. One would presume that the Danish taxpayers will be expected to foot the bill for this new arrangement. It is by no means certain that the Danish public will accept this, and thus, in the end, it might be the Danes who press for the complete independence of Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

No matter which route leads to independence, the actual outcome of Team Trump's ambitions for Greenland might be that the nation is better equipped for eventual independence than it would otherwise be. Greenland's geopolitical realities mean the island will always have to depend on the United States, which will never permit a territory in its strategic backyard to pursue an independent foreign and security policy. While it is clear that independence from

Denmark will likely increase reliance on the United States, Greenland can achieve independence in ways that make managing this reliance easier than others. US Senator Ted Cruz has suggested that perhaps the best course for the Danish government is to negotiate a deal with the Trump administration to secure the most favourable terms for Greenland.<sup>30</sup> By rejecting the idea of 'selling' Greenland and instead adopting a strategy of persuasion, Denmark has, in effect chosen to prioritise Greenland's interests above its own. In doing so, Denmark is creating the best possible conditions for Greenland's independence – thus making independence more feasible and therefore more probable. Depending on perspective, this can be seen as payback, however inadequate, for centuries of colonialisation, or be regarded as a conscientious foreign policy by a country that will not compromise its values for short-term gains and has the confidence to persuade a superpower that might does not make right.

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