

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Greenland in Arctic Defence Planning: Infrastructure and Early Warning

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Abstract

Renewed strategic attention toward Greenland reflects broader transformations in Arctic security and alliance defence planning. While existing scholarship often interprets Greenland through the lens of geopolitical rivalry or resource competition, this article conceptualises the island as a strategic infrastructural node within evolving transatlantic defence architectures. Using a qualitative case study approach, the article examines how geographic location, military infrastructure, and great power competition shape Greenland's role in Arctic defence planning. The analysis focuses particularly on Greenland's integration into surveillance, missile warning, and intelligence systems supporting NATO and NORAD operational coordination across the Arctic and North Atlantic. The article argues that Greenland's strategic significance increasingly derives from its role within networked early-warning and situational-awareness systems. By shifting attention from territorial geopolitics to infrastructural integration, the study contributes to debates on Arctic militarisation, alliance adaptation, and strategic space.

Keywords

Greenland; Arctic security; defence infrastructure; early warning systems; NATO; NORAD; alliance adaptation.

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Introduction

In recent years, Greenland has attracted renewed strategic attention within discussions on Arctic security. This development is most often interpreted through the frameworks of geopolitical rivalry, resource competition, or questions of sovereignty (Mortensen 2013, 93–97). Much of the existing literature approaches Greenland primarily as a space where great power interests intersect, or as a peripheral territory whose importance reflects broader shifts in the international system. While such perspectives offer valuable insights, they generally emphasise territorial and political dimensions of security, whereas the role of infrastructure and enabling systems remains comparatively underexplored.

Existing scholarship on Arctic security has developed along several interconnected lines of analysis. A substantial body of work examines the region through geopolitical and legal perspectives, focusing on sovereignty, maritime claims, and strategic interaction among major powers (Dodds 2010, 63–66; Byers 2013, 9–24; Tamnes and Offerdal 2014, 1–8). Another strand of literature emphasises the evolving strategic environment of the High North, including the role of Arctic states and the transformation of security policies in the North Atlantic area (Wegge 2020, 360–362; Zandee, Kruijver, and Stoetman 2020, 1–5; Lackenbauer and Koch 2021, 5–9). Interdisciplinary approaches have further broadened the concept of security by incorporating environmental, societal, and governance dimensions, thereby challenging earlier assumptions about the Arctic as an exceptional or predominantly low-tension region (Berkman 2012, 1–5; Østhagen 2016, 83–86; Hossain et al. 2017, 52–54; Gjørsv and Hodgson 2019; Gjørsv, Lanteigne, and Sam-Aggrey 2020). More recent analyses also emphasise the increasing complexity of Arctic security as a global issue shaped by technological change, infrastructure development, and the growing involvement of external actors (Marsili 2022, 139–142; Kraska and Baker 2014, 1–6).

A growing number of studies suggest that contemporary security environments are increasingly shaped by technological change, infrastructural dependence, and the integration of geographically dispersed defence systems. Research on Arctic security has already highlighted the importance of surveillance networks, early warning systems, and dual-use infrastructure in structuring regional dynamics. Yet, even where infrastructure is recognised as strategically significant, it rarely functions as the primary analytical focus and is more commonly incorporated into broader geopolitical or security-oriented interpretations. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to examining how infrastructural functions contribute to the organisation of strategic space and to shaping contemporary defence planning. In particular, insufficient analytical focus has been placed on the ways surveillance, connectivity, and early warning systems structure coordination processes and affect the time constraints associated with strategic decision-making.

Existing scholarship, therefore, continues to treat infrastructure primarily as a supporting element within broader geopolitical interpretations rather than as a constitutive feature of strategic space itself. This article addresses that limitation by conceptualising Greenland as an infrastructural node within evolving transatlantic defence architectures rather than primarily as a territorial asset or geopolitical object. In this article, the term “infrastructural lens” refers to an analytical focus

on the role of material and technological systems in enabling alliance coordination and strategic monitoring. Within this framework, surveillance systems, communication networks, and early warning infrastructures are understood as mechanisms that organise strategic coordination across geographically dispersed spaces, thereby extending security analysis beyond territorial control or interstate rivalry alone. Although infrastructure has been examined in both security studies and political geography, it has more commonly been incorporated into broader geopolitical interpretations than analysed as a primary analytical category in its own right. The analysis builds on existing insights from securitisation theory and geopolitical analysis while redirecting attention toward the infrastructural organisation of alliance security.

The article does not seek to establish a new theoretical paradigm, but rather to apply and further develop existing infrastructural perspectives within the context of Arctic defence planning and Greenland's role in alliance security architectures. Its contribution lies in examining how infrastructural systems shape alliance coordination and strategic responsiveness amid technological change and compressed warning times.

To examine these dynamics, the article adopts a qualitative case study approach that combines historical-institutional interpretation with analysis of contemporary defence infrastructure and early warning systems. The research draws on academic literature, policy documents, and strategic analyses related to Arctic security, NATO adaptation, and North American defence arrangements. This approach makes it possible to examine both the historical evolution of Greenland's role and its current integration into wider alliance security frameworks.

The article addresses the following research question: How do infrastructural systems shape Greenland's contemporary role within evolving transatlantic security architectures? It argues that Greenland's strategic importance increasingly derives not solely from its territorial position but also from its integration into surveillance, communication, and early-warning networks that support alliance coordination and operational continuity across Arctic and transatlantic security environments, under conditions shaped by technological change and reduced warning times.

The analysis also takes into account the broader political and societal context of Greenland. The island is not only a strategic location but also a political community shaped by internal developments, expanding autonomy, and its relationship with the Kingdom of Denmark. Considering these dimensions allows for a more balanced interpretation of how local priorities, external security structures, and alliance-level considerations interact in shaping Greenland's role in Arctic security.

The article is organised into four sections. The first examines Greenland's geographic position and historical integration into Arctic defence planning. The second focuses on the development and functions of military infrastructure and early warning systems. The third analyses the influence of external actors and contemporary patterns of strategic competition. The final section discusses the implications for NATO and European security, with particular attention to the growing importance of connectivity, surveillance, and situational awareness in contemporary defence planning.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative case study approach focused on Greenland as a critical site within contemporary Arctic security dynamics. The approach is appropriate given the article's objective of examining how specific geographic locations are integrated into broader defence architecture through infrastructural functions and alliance security coordination. Greenland is selected as an analytically relevant case due to its long-standing role in early warning systems and its continued integration into North American and transatlantic security frameworks. The case is particularly suitable for this analysis because it combines enduring geographic significance with evolving infrastructural functions across multiple phases of Arctic defence planning.

The analysis combines elements of historical-institutional interpretation with contemporary security analysis. The historical dimension traces the evolution of Greenland's role in defence planning, particularly its integration into Cold War early-warning systems and its subsequent adaptation to changing technological and strategic conditions. The contemporary dimension focuses on how current developments in military technology, alliance structures, and Arctic geopolitics shape the operational relevance of infrastructure located on the island. In this sense, the study adopts an interpretative qualitative approach centred on the relationship between infrastructure, strategic function, and alliance security coordination. The analysis examines how surveillance systems, early warning infrastructure, and communication networks support monitoring and decision-making across distributed defence architectures, with particular attention to the role of infrastructure in reducing strategic uncertainty and extending warning and response times amid technological change. The central unit of analysis is therefore the relationship between infrastructural systems and alliance-level coordination within contemporary Arctic security environments.

Empirically, the study relies on qualitative analysis of three categories of sources. The first includes academic literature on Arctic security, political geography, and alliance defence planning, which provides the study's conceptual and analytical foundation. The second category comprises policy documents, strategic assessments, and analytical reports produced by policy-oriented research institutions and defence-related organisations, particularly those that address NATO adaptation, North American defence systems, and Arctic security developments. These sources include NATO strategic documents and summit declarations, U.S. Department of Defense Arctic strategy documents, Congressional Research Service reports, and analyses produced by institutions such as the RAND Corporation (Chivvis et al. 2017), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and the Royal Danish Defence College. The third category includes publicly available analyses on infrastructure, early warning systems, and external engagement in Greenland, enabling the study to connect broader theoretical insights with specific empirical observations. Priority was given to academic literature, official strategic documents, and analytical reports from established research institutions to ensure analytical reliability and source credibility.

In addition, the study adopts a contextual perspective that accounts for the interaction between external security structures and Greenland's internal political and societal dynamics. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond purely geostrategic interpretations and to consider how

governance arrangements, autonomy, and local political priorities intersect with alliance-level security considerations. While the qualitative case study approach allows for a detailed and context-sensitive analysis, it also entails certain limitations. As a qualitative case study, the analysis prioritises contextual interpretation over statistical generalisation and instead seeks to contribute to a broader theoretical and analytical understanding of how infrastructural functions shape contemporary security environments. The study is further limited by its reliance on publicly available sources, which may not fully capture classified or operational aspects of defence planning. However, this limitation is mitigated by using diverse academic and policy-oriented sources that provide insight into both strategic thinking and institutional practices.

Geographic Position and Strategic Significance of Greenland

Greenland's contemporary security role reflects the continuing relevance of geographic constraints under changing technological and political conditions. These developments correspond with broader debates in Arctic geopolitics, where geographic factors are increasingly interpreted through legal regimes, technological change, and evolving strategic narratives rather than viewed as fixed determinants of power (Dodds 2010, 63–67; Heininen 2018, 172–176). The importance of legal frameworks in shaping Arctic geopolitical relations has likewise been emphasised in studies of Arctic governance and maritime jurisdiction (Byers 2013, 9–24). Greenland is not simply a remote Arctic territory but occupies a spatial position connecting North Atlantic maritime routes with polar air routes and, later, missile trajectories (Petersen 2011, 90–92). Its role within early warning and surveillance systems derives from its location along Arctic approaches that shorten the distance between North American and Eurasian strategic spaces, enabling earlier detection and providing additional temporal margins for decision-making in crisis situations (Petersen 2011, 90, 110–111; Taagholt and Hansen 2001, 35–36). Geographic position, therefore, does not operate as a static condition, but as a factor whose operational significance depends on its integration into evolving technological and strategic frameworks.

During the early Cold War period, this geographic logic became institutionalised through Greenland's integration into continental defence planning. The establishment of Thule Air Base in the early 1950s reflected a broader shift from perimeter-based defence concepts toward polar-oriented strategic thinking. As long-range bombers and later missile technologies redefined strategic reach, the Arctic ceased to function primarily as a barrier and instead became a corridor through which military capabilities could operate. Greenland's geographic position enabled the deployment of radar installations and warning systems capable of detecting potential threats at earlier stages, thereby strengthening deterrence through improved monitoring and early detection capabilities (Taagholt and Hansen 2001, 14–15, 35–36). Over time, this function became embedded within a distributed network of Arctic installations extending across Alaska, northern Canada, Iceland and Northern Europe, collectively forming a broader system of early warning across the northern hemisphere (Petersen 2011, 96–98).

Greenland's geographic position was important not only for air and missile defence considerations. Its proximity to the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap positioned the island at the intersection of Arctic and North Atlantic maritime strategy. During the Cold War, this maritime

corridor was a central element of NATO anti-submarine warfare planning, particularly for monitoring Soviet naval movements into the Atlantic (Wegge and Halsne 2022, 32). Although technological developments have expanded operational ranges and transformed naval capabilities, the underlying geographic constraints of the North Atlantic have remained relatively stable. Monitoring and situational awareness within the GIUK corridor, therefore, continue to play a significant role in tracking Russian naval movements across the North Atlantic and Arctic Ocean, even as Greenland's military functions have evolved since the end of the Cold War (Spence and Hanlon 2025, 4).

Greenland's geographic position must be understood in relation to its structural traits as a sparsely populated territory with limited administrative and defence capacities. These conditions have historically constrained autonomous defence, contributing to security arrangements where sovereignty, operational responsibility, and strategic control are distributed among different actors (Berry 2016, 103–108). Denmark retains formal sovereignty, while the United States plays a central role in defence infrastructure and operational integration within North American security systems. This layered arrangement reflects patterns in which smaller political entities operate within externally structured security environments, where strategic functions are shaped by both domestic capacities and alliance priorities.

Gradual sea ice reduction has further altered perceptions of Greenland's strategic environment by increasing accessibility to maritime routes and resource areas. Even where commercial exploitation remains uncertain, the expectation of increased activity has contributed to renewed attention from Arctic and non-Arctic actors. Greenland's central position in the Arctic and the anticipated growth of regional maritime activity have reinforced its broader security relevance within evolving Arctic dynamics (Wang and Degeorges 2014, 6–7). This shift reflects not only environmental changes but also evolving strategic interpretations, as states increasingly approach Arctic accessibility through a security lens intertwined with economic and environmental considerations.

External perceptions of Greenland's security role, however, are not fully mirrored in local political perspectives. Domestic political discourse has generally prioritised economic development, resource management, and the expansion of political autonomy, while defence-related concerns occupy a less central position (Ackrén 2014, 42–43). This divergence reflects a broader tension in Greenland's contemporary position. While external actors increasingly interpret the island in terms of its roles in surveillance, early warning, and alliance defence planning, local political attention remains focused on governance, development, and self-determination. These priorities are also closely connected to the perspectives of Inuit political actors and institutions, which have generally emphasised questions of autonomy, social development, and control over local resources, while military-strategic competition remains a secondary concern. Such differences illustrate how security agendas are often externally constructed and shaped more strongly by broader strategic logics than by Greenlandic political priorities (Gad et al. 2024, 227–228). At the same time, these dynamics reflect the historical legacy of asymmetrical relations between Greenland and external powers, in which security priorities have frequently been driven more by strategic considerations originating outside Greenland itself. Similar patterns have also been identified in broader analyses of Arctic governance, where local agency and external strategic interests interact in complex and sometimes competing ways (Keil and Knecht 2017).

Greenland should therefore be understood not only as a strategic location, but also as a political community shaped by processes of (de)securitisation, evolving autonomy, and the interaction between local agency and external security agendas. Denmark's security perspectives on the United States, China, and Russia increasingly reflect a need to balance external geopolitical pressures with recognition of Greenlandic agency within the Kingdom (Jacobsen and Lindbjerg 2024, 196–200). Debates over resource extraction and economic development are similarly connected to broader questions of sovereignty, as Greenland's pursuit of greater autonomy remains closely linked to control over and access to natural resources (Jacobsen 2018, 52–56). These dynamics are further shaped by changing identity narratives and enduring patterns of dependency, which influence how Greenland positions itself within both regional and global political structures (Jacobsen 2020, 170–176).

Taken together, these factors suggest that Greenland's contemporary security role cannot be reduced to renewed geopolitical competition alone. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between enduring geographic conditions and evolving technological and political dynamics. While the island's location between North American and European security spaces has remained constant, its strategic function has evolved in response to shifts in defence planning and technological development. Greenland's geographic position enables the monitoring of activity across the Arctic and North Atlantic approaches, thereby extending the time available for assessment and response through earlier detection and improved operational awareness. As contemporary defence planning increasingly emphasises continuous monitoring, infrastructural resilience, and networked coordination, geographic position once again acquires operational significance when translated into capability through systems of monitoring, detection, and communication. Against this background, the following section examines how these geographic advantages are operationalised through military infrastructure and integrated early warning systems.

Military Infrastructure and Early Warning Systems

Greenland's role in contemporary Arctic security is most visible in the infrastructural functions of military installations and their integration into surveillance, communication, and early-warning systems. Historically, its strategic significance has been defined by its contribution to systems designed to generate situational awareness, reduce strategic uncertainty, and extend the temporal horizon of decision-making across geographically dispersed theatres. While geographic position provided the underlying conditions for this role, the development of surveillance, intelligence, and early warning infrastructure transformed this spatial advantage into operational capability (Wegge and Halsne 2022, 32; Østhagen 2021, 55–57; Petersen 2011, 110–111).

The establishment of Thule Air Base in 1951 marked a decisive step in Greenland's integration into the evolving architecture of North American defence. Initially conceived as part of a broader system of Arctic military installations, the base later became associated with the development of early warning capabilities, including its integration into the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) during the late 1950s and early 1960s (Petersen 2011, 96–98; Taagholt and Hansen 2001, 35–36). This development reflects a gradual process through which Greenland's geographic position was incorporated into successive layers of defence infrastructure as strategic requirements evolved, rather than a single technological shift or isolated moment of adaptation. The operational logic underlying

this integration was shaped by the compression of warning times associated with long-range delivery systems, which increased the importance of forward-based detection and monitoring capabilities across Arctic approaches. Within alliance defence systems, such installations contribute to broader processes of information collection, interpretation, and strategic assessment. Detection capabilities not only increase the likelihood of identifying threats at earlier stages but also extend the temporal margin available for political consultation, verification, and coordinated response. Early warning systems thereby support strategic stability by reducing uncertainty under conditions in which decision-making time is inherently limited (Petersen 2011, 110–111).

In the contemporary security environment, the role of such infrastructure has expanded in parallel with technological developments and the growing complexity of modern operational environments. Systems located in Greenland are increasingly integrated into broader networks that support persistent monitoring, data exchange, and coordination across air, maritime, and space domains, rather than functioning as isolated radar installations (Wang and Degeorges 2014, 4–7; Morgan and Cohen 2020, xi–xiii). This transition from episodic detection to continuous strategic awareness reflects broader changes in defence planning, in which the ability to sustain information flows across multiple domains has become as important as identifying discrete threats.

The networked character of early warning systems also explains the enduring relevance of geographically remote installations. Once integrated into alliance structures, such infrastructure becomes embedded within operational routines, institutional arrangements, and data-sharing practices that extend beyond national frameworks. Greenland's installations, therefore, derive their strategic significance not only from geographic location but also from their role within a distributed system linking North American and European security environments. This perspective is consistent with analyses that emphasise the growing importance of integrated early warning and detection architectures in the face of compressed warning times and evolving missile technologies (Acton 2015, 214–215).

The evolution of infrastructure in Greenland further illustrates how Arctic strategic relevance has adapted to changing technological conditions. Over time, installations originally associated with bomber detection were adapted to support missile warning, space surveillance, and broader monitoring functions. This transformation reflects a broader pattern in which infrastructure in geographically advantageous locations maintains its relevance by adapting to evolving technological requirements. Greenland's infrastructure, therefore, demonstrates a form of strategic continuity in which successive technological layers build upon existing systems despite the broader transformation of the security environment after the Cold War (Wang and Degeorges 2014, 4–5, 13–14).

The persistence of such infrastructure highlights the structural constraints shaping Arctic defence architecture. Radar and surveillance systems require specific geographic conditions, including proximity to projected missile trajectories and unobstructed coverage of polar approaches. These characteristics limit the number of viable locations and make relocation or duplication both costly and operationally difficult. As a result, the installation at Thule Air Base, now known as Pituffik Space Base, remains an integral component of the broader U.S. and allied early warning architecture linking

North American and European security environments (Petersen 2011, 110–111; Congressional Research Service 2024; Spence and Hanlon 2025, 4). The enduring significance of these installations stems not only from geographic position but also from their integration into networked missile detection, space surveillance, and sensor systems that support contemporary defence planning and alliance situational awareness (Congressional Research Service 2024).

Beyond their operational role, these installations also reflect the interaction between defence requirements and political governance arrangements. Although Greenland remains part of the Kingdom of Denmark, the development and operation of key military infrastructure have historically been shaped through bilateral defence arrangements with the United States (Berry 2016, 103–108). This has produced a layered system in which sovereignty, operational control, and strategic interests are unevenly distributed among different actors. Such arrangements have periodically sparked political debate in Greenland, particularly regarding economic compensation, environmental impacts, and broader questions of autonomy and self-government (Gad et al. 2024, 228–233). At the same time, the continued centrality of early warning infrastructure underscores Greenland's enduring importance within alliance defence systems and the strategic value of its geographic position.

Recent technological developments have further reinforced the strategic relevance of these infrastructural functions. Advances in missile technology, including systems capable of operating at higher speeds and with greater manoeuvrability, have increased the need to maintain persistent surveillance and early detection capabilities across extended geographic areas (Acton 2015, 193–195). Although existing radar systems face limitations in tracking certain emerging threats, their integration within broader sensor and missile defence architectures continues to support initial detection and the functioning of layered defence systems (Schwartz and Baskaran 2026, 3). Contemporary analyses of defence planning similarly emphasise the growing role of integrated sensor networks, data fusion, and multidomain information sharing in responding to increasingly complex threat environments (Morgan and Cohen 2020, xi–xiii, 67–70). Installations in Greenland, therefore, continue to contribute to missile warning and space domain awareness, reinforcing their position as key nodes within contemporary defence networks. The island's role lies in supporting continuous monitoring across the Arctic and North Atlantic approaches, thereby linking geographically dispersed operational theatres within a broader strategic framework. It is precisely this infrastructural and operational relevance that positions Greenland within the broader dynamics of contemporary great-power competition, as addressed in the following section.

Great Power Competition, External Actors and Strategic Access

The renewed strategic attention directed toward Greenland reflects not only enduring geographic and military factors, but also broader changes in how security is organised and interpreted in the Arctic. Contemporary Arctic dynamics increasingly emerge from interactions among economic activity, infrastructure development, and security concerns rather than from direct military confrontation alone. Greenland is therefore viewed less as a conventional arena of geopolitical rivalry and more as a location where questions of access, investment, and infrastructural reliability become connected to wider alliance security arrangements (Wang and Degeorges 2014, 5–7). Traditional approaches in security studies have generally emphasised territorial control and the distribution of military capabilities as primary sources of power. Yet infrastructure matters not simply because of its physical presence, but because it enables access, creates dependencies, and shapes the long-term stability of strategic relationships. In Greenland, these dynamics are particularly visible in the relationship between local governance structures and external security actors, where formal sovereignty, operational control, and external strategic interests do not fully coincide. This layered configuration reflects broader hierarchical dynamics within international security systems, in which smaller political entities operate within externally structured security environments (Lake 2009, 7–11).

China's activities in the Arctic have combined economic investment, scientific cooperation, and infrastructure-related initiatives, although these efforts have frequently encountered political and regulatory constraints imposed by Arctic states (Pezard et al. 2022, iii–v, 63–76). Since publishing its Arctic policy in 2018, China has sought to expand its regional presence through scientific cooperation, infrastructure proposals, and participation in resource extraction projects (State Council 2018; Chen 2023, 30–32). Although these initiatives are generally presented in economic and developmental terms, Western actors increasingly interpret them through a security lens, particularly where infrastructure projects are viewed as having potential dual-use implications (Sørensen 2018). These concerns became particularly visible in debates surrounding proposed Chinese infrastructure projects in Greenland. One of the most discussed cases involved the interest of the Chinese state-owned company China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) in airport expansion projects in 2018. Although the projects were formally presented as civilian infrastructure initiatives, they raised political concern in both Copenhagen and Washington due to their potential strategic implications and the long-term influence of critical Arctic transport infrastructure (Sørensen 2018; Pezard et al. 2022, 63–76). Similar reactions emerged in connection with reports concerning Chinese interest in the former Danish naval facility at Grønnedal in 2016, where questions of investment and ownership became increasingly linked to broader security considerations (Jacobsen and Lindbjerg 2024). These cases illustrate how infrastructure projects in Greenland increasingly came to be interpreted through the logic of strategic access, infrastructural dependence, and alliance security rather than solely through economic or developmental considerations. Taken together, these cases indicate that restrictions on external involvement in Greenland's infrastructure increasingly constitute part of a broader, relatively consistent Western approach to protecting strategically sensitive Arctic infrastructure.

In Greenland, debates surrounding airport construction, mining activities, and satellite infrastructure demonstrate how economic engagement can become politically sensitive when it is perceived as influencing long-term access, technological integration, or relations with Western security structures. China's broader Arctic approach combines participation in existing governance frameworks with bilateral cooperation and selective investment, allowing Beijing to pursue its interests within a complex and evolving institutional environment (Fravel, Lavelle, and Odgaard 2022, 139–142). These developments suggest that Arctic competition is becoming less centred on direct territorial control and increasingly focused on access, infrastructure, technological integration, and long-term strategic influence. Such interpretations correspond with broader debates on Arctic security, which emphasise that the region cannot be understood solely through traditional models of geopolitical rivalry. Instead, contemporary Arctic dynamics reflect a combination of strategic competition, institutional cooperation, and evolving security practices shaped by both regional and extra-regional actors (Østhagen 2021, 55–58; Wegge 2020, 360–362). Within this broader context, China's growing presence can also be understood as part of a wider triangular relationship involving the United States and Russia, in which cooperation and competition coexist while simultaneously increasing the possibility of strategic miscalculation (Anthony and Su 2021, 1–2; Suslov and Kashin 2022, 3–6; Fravel, Lavelle, and Odgaard 2022, 139–142).

The concept of securitisation helps explain why infrastructure projects in the Arctic increasingly become associated with security concerns. Issues that are not inherently military may nevertheless be framed as security matters because of their perceived strategic implications (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). In the Arctic context, infrastructure has progressively been interpreted through strategic and defence-related considerations. Projects initially presented as developmental or commercial initiatives may subsequently be recast as elements of strategic competition when they are perceived as enabling influence over critical nodes within broader security architectures (Gad 2017, 108–111; Gad et al. 2024, 238–239). As a result, the boundary between civilian and military relevance becomes increasingly difficult to discern, particularly in geographically constrained environments such as Greenland, where viable infrastructure sites remain limited. At the same time, the scale of China's influence in the Arctic remains more limited than political discourse often suggests, and its role should not be overstated despite growing strategic attention from Arctic and Western actors (Lackenbauer, Lajeunesse, and Dean 2022, 80–83).

The role of the United States within this framework remains central and marked by considerable strategic continuity. Historically, American engagement with Greenland has been shaped by the logic of continental defence and by the need to prevent the strategic penetration of rival powers into the North American Arctic. Contemporary developments suggest continuity in this approach, but also a stronger emphasis on maintaining reliable access to critical infrastructural nodes and ensuring the resilience of surveillance, communication, and early warning systems (U.S. Department of Defense 2024, 7–11). Economic developments and foreign investments in Greenland are therefore rarely assessed in isolation, but rather in terms of their potential implications for long-term strategic access, infrastructural resilience, and alliance cohesion. Recent debates concerning the expansion of U.S. strategic influence and involvement in Greenland further illustrate the island's continued sensitivity within transatlantic security arrangements (Svendsen 2025; Bergmann et al. 2025). These discussions intensified following renewed statements by President

Donald Trump and broader debates within the United States regarding Greenland's role in Arctic security, missile defence, and transatlantic connectivity. More broadly, they demonstrate Greenland's renewed prominence within U.S. strategic thinking on Arctic defence, infrastructure security, and alliance coordination.

This renewed American attention to Greenland should not be viewed only as a symbolic geopolitical issue or as an example of territorial ambition. From the perspective of U.S. and allied defence planning, Greenland represents a location where questions of infrastructure, access, and long-term strategic reliability intersect. The island hosts systems linked to missile warning, space surveillance, and Arctic monitoring, which means that political uncertainty or growing external influence may be perceived as affecting the stability of wider transatlantic defence arrangements (U.S. Department of Defense 2024, 7–11; Bergmann et al. 2025, 3–5). In that sense, debates surrounding Greenland increasingly reflect concerns about the continuity and resilience of alliance infrastructure rather than questions of territorial control in the traditional sense. Similar conclusions are also present in recent Congressional Research Service analyses, which emphasise Greenland's role within broader U.S. Arctic strategy and North American defence planning (Congressional Research Service 2024). The issue also illustrates how contemporary alliance security increasingly depends on the political and infrastructural reliability of strategically important territories whose importance derives from their integration into wider surveillance and defence networks.

Russia's expanding military activity in the Arctic further reinforces Greenland's role within the changing regional security environment. The modernisation of Arctic bases, increased submarine operations, and the increasing scale and complexity of Russian military exercises have renewed strategic attention to the northern approaches to the Atlantic and to the need for continuous monitoring across the High North (Zysk 2020). Although Greenland itself is not a direct site of confrontation, its integration into surveillance, missile-warning, and monitoring networks gives it indirect yet significant strategic relevance to these developments. Its geographic position enables it to function as part of a broader system of monitoring and strategic assessment linking Arctic and North Atlantic security dynamics within an integrated operational framework.

Implications for NATO and European Security

Greenland's renewed role in Arctic defence planning carries implications that extend well beyond the Arctic region and increasingly shape broader NATO and European security considerations. As alliance defence planning adapts to an evolving strategic environment characterised by technological transformation and renewed great-power competition, the High North has re-emerged as a space in which geographic distance no longer guarantees strategic separation. Greenland's significance lies not in the concentration of military forces, but in its contribution to surveillance, intelligence, early warning, and operational awareness across the northern approaches to Europe and North America (Wegge and Halsne 2022, 32). Contemporary alliance defence planning increasingly emphasises the capacity to maintain continuous monitoring and coordinated response across geographically dispersed operational environments.

Recent developments within NATO further reinforce this transformation, particularly in light of the strategic priorities articulated in recent summit documents and the evolving role of the Alliance on its northern flank (NATO 2023; NATO 2024; Pesu 2023). The 2022 Strategic Concept identifies the Euro-Atlantic area as facing a more complex and contested security environment, emphasising integrated deterrence, resilience, and domain awareness across multiple operational environments (NATO 2022). Within this context, the Arctic is no longer treated as a peripheral region, but increasingly as part of a wider strategic space connecting North America and Europe. The accession of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024 represents the most significant transformation of northern European security architecture since the end of the Cold War (Friis and Tamnes 2024, 813–815; Kunz and Esser 2026, 1–4). These developments expand NATO's geographic reach in the High North while further increasing the need for coordination across Arctic and North Atlantic theatres. Infrastructure supporting surveillance, communication, and operational awareness across these regions consequently plays an increasingly important role in alliance coordination and defence planning.

Changing patterns of burden-sharing and defence integration within NATO further reinforce these developments. Contemporary alliance planning increasingly depends on integrating national infrastructures into shared systems of surveillance, communication, and operational coordination, while placing less emphasis on the permanent stationing of forces across all strategically relevant areas. In such arrangements, the reliability and resilience of infrastructural nodes become critical, since disruptions to surveillance or communication networks may simultaneously influence decision-making processes across multiple regions (NATO 2022, 6–8). Greenland illustrates how alliance security increasingly depends on locations that can sustain continuity across operational theatres, linking Arctic and North Atlantic security dynamics through systems of monitoring, communication, and coordination. These developments also point toward a growing division of labour among NATO members in the High North, in which different actors contribute distinct capabilities within an increasingly integrated northern security architecture (Pesu 2023, 2–7).

The growing importance of infrastructural resilience further highlights these dynamics. As military operations become increasingly dependent on integrated data exchange, satellite systems, and surveillance networks, the maintenance and protection of enabling infrastructure has become as important as more traditional military capabilities. Greenland exemplifies this transformation, since its contribution to early warning systems and surveillance networks supports alliance-wide monitoring and operational coordination across regions where geographic and environmental conditions would otherwise constrain operational effectiveness (Petersen 2011, 110–111). The island, therefore, functions less as a forward military position and more as part of a broader system supporting coordination, sensing, and decision-making across the alliance. These developments should also be understood within the broader context of North American defence priorities and continental security considerations, particularly the modernisation of North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) and the growing emphasis on integrated Arctic surveillance and missile-warning capabilities (IISS 2025, 14–15). Contemporary missile-defence and early-warning systems increasingly rely on networked architectures that combine sensing, data processing, and command functions, reflecting wider transformations in military technology and operational concepts. Recent analyses suggest that advances in sensing, targeting, and networked operational systems are reshaping the balance of military power by reducing the dominance previously enjoyed by Western forces and increasing

the importance of resilient and adaptive defence structures (Ochmanek et al. 2023, 9–12). These developments also affect broader questions of strategic stability, since changes in missile defence, sensing, and command infrastructures may influence deterrence relationships and escalation dynamics (Kühn 2023).

Recent Danish defence investments in the Arctic announced in October 2025 further reflect the growing importance of situational awareness, maritime monitoring, and infrastructural resilience in the High North. The announced measures included investments to strengthen Arctic situational awareness, maritime monitoring, and the long-term operational presence of Danish forces in the region (Danish Ministry of Defence 2025). Although primarily presented within the framework of national and alliance security adaptation, these initiatives also illustrate the extent to which Arctic security increasingly depends on maintaining integrated surveillance and infrastructure systems across geographically dispersed operational environments. In this context, Greenland's role becomes closely connected not only to military positioning but also to the continuity of monitoring, communication, and alliance coordination functions within the broader transatlantic security architecture. Changes in the Arctic security environment affect North Atlantic dynamics, reducing previous strategic separation between these spaces. Greenland's geographic position strengthens NATO's capacity to monitor developments across both Arctic and North Atlantic theatres, reinforcing its role within integrated systems of surveillance, sensing, and early warning. The island, therefore, contributes not only to territorial defence but also to alliance coordination and broader situational awareness across the North Atlantic region.

For European allies, Greenland's evolving role also raises broader questions regarding strategic dependence and long-term security planning. While the United States remains the principal actor responsible for key infrastructure on the island, the functions performed by this infrastructure increasingly support collective alliance security alongside national objectives. As a result, certain dimensions of European security depend on infrastructural systems located outside European territory, yet are essential for maintaining early warning capabilities, maritime domain awareness, and coordinated monitoring across the transatlantic space. Such arrangements further highlight the importance of maintaining reliable access to critical infrastructure within alliance defence systems. Recent analytical work emphasises the growing significance of the High North within broader Euro-Atlantic security planning amid renewed geopolitical competition (Bergmann et al. 2025, 3). Contemporary debates on Arctic and Nordic security continue to stress that long-term stability in the region depends on maintaining a balance between deterrence and reassurance, particularly in managing escalation risks in areas located near major powers (Cameron 2024, 363–365).

Greenland's political status adds further complexity to the strategic environment surrounding the island. The expansion of Greenlandic autonomy and continuing debates regarding potential future independence introduce additional uncertainty into long-term defence and governance planning. Although current arrangements remain relatively stable, any substantial change in Greenland's constitutional status could affect the distribution of security responsibilities within both the Kingdom of Denmark and the wider NATO framework. Domestic political discourse in Greenland has generally prioritised economic development, social governance, and questions of autonomy, reflecting a broader tendency toward the desecuritization of defence-related issues at the local level (Gad et al.

2024, 230–232). This divergence between local political priorities and alliance-level strategic assessments illustrates the difficulty of reconciling political autonomy with the long-term continuity of alliance security arrangements.

Conclusion

Greenland's contemporary security role derives less from territorial control itself than from the infrastructural functions that integrate the island into wider alliance security systems. Its role within surveillance, communication, and early warning networks supports operational coordination and strategic monitoring across Arctic and North Atlantic security environments under conditions shaped by technological change and compressed warning times. Geographic position, therefore, acquires operational significance not as an isolated factor, but through its connection to systems that support monitoring, detection, and alliance responsiveness across geographically dispersed operational spaces.

The article contributes to contemporary Arctic security scholarship by demonstrating how infrastructural systems influence alliance coordination and strategic adaptation beyond traditional territorial interpretations of security competition. The analysis approaches Greenland primarily through its role within contemporary defence architectures and the infrastructures that sustain operational continuity across Arctic and transatlantic security environments. This perspective also helps explain why economic activity, infrastructure development, and external investment initiatives in the Arctic are increasingly interpreted through security considerations within broader alliance frameworks.

The Greenlandic case further illustrates how contemporary strategic competition is increasingly organised through access, connectivity, and infrastructural reliability, while direct territorial confrontation plays a less central role. In this context, geographically remote locations may perform critical functions within broader security architectures when connected to systems of surveillance, communication, and early warning. Greenland's role, therefore, reflects the interaction of geography, infrastructure, governance arrangements, and alliance-level coordination, extending beyond conventional understandings of military presence or territorial control.

The study nevertheless has several limitations. The analysis relies primarily on publicly available academic and policy sources and therefore cannot fully address classified or operational aspects of defence planning. In addition, the focus on a single case study limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised across different regions or alliance systems. Future research could build on this analysis through comparative examination of other Arctic territories or by investigating how evolving missile technologies, sensor integration, and space-based capabilities may further reshape infrastructural coordination within NATO and transatlantic defence planning.

Taken together, the Greenlandic case suggests that contemporary Arctic security increasingly depends on the resilience and integration of infrastructures that sustain monitoring, communication, and coordinated response across geographically dispersed operational environments. Rather than relying primarily on territorial concentration of force, alliance security in the Arctic is increasingly organised through connectivity, sensing, and infrastructural continuity.

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