

World at Crossroads: From Scenarios to Action

These short summaries and discussions address highly complex global, regional, and translocal developments occurring up to March 2025, involving numerous actors, perspectives, and nuances. They do not offer comprehensive accounts or detailed analyses, and inevitably may overlook certain events, developments, or viewpoints. Instead, their purpose is to help stakeholders critically engage with the four RESPACE scenarios, stimulating reflection, strategic foresight, and deeper exploration of transformative possibilities for collaboration. Each RESPACE scenario outlines distinct, plausible future pathways but is explicitly not predictive. Users are encouraged to continuously adapt and update these Dialogue Inputs to reflect evolving contexts and emerging understandings.

Greenland, Denmark & the United States - Sovereignty Showdown in the Arctic

May 2025

Summary & Context

In late 2024, as he geared up for the US presidential election, Donald Trump revived the old idea that the United States should own Greenland. A defence agreement between Denmark and the United States from 1941 had for decades secured a US military presence in Greenland. It even provided the United States with minerals necessary for constructing war planes during WWII.

After winning in November, Trump wasted no time. By January 2025, he declared Greenland a must-have for US security and vowed he would get it one way or another, even hinting at military or economic coercion. This shocking stance jolted Greenland and Denmark as two parts of the Danish commonwealth and alarmed European allies. The United States immediately began overtures. President-elect Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr, made a publicised private visit to Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, trying to charm locals with MAGA hats and promises – a move widely seen as meddling. Prime Minister Múte B Egede of Greenland quickly reassured citizens that the country is not for sale and their future is up to

them, framing Trump's push as an assault on the self-determination of Greenland.

Trump doubled down in March, using his first address to Congress to invite all 57,000 Greenlanders to join the United States, with promises of safety and wealth. The overture fell flat. A January poll already showed that roughly 85% of the people in Greenland oppose becoming part of the United States. The Danish government, led by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, has stressed that only Greenlanders can decide their own future. European leaders are similarly dismayed by Trump's aggressive tone, seeing it as a test of both Western unity and the sanctity of sovereignty. Would the most powerful NATO member really undermine the territorial integrity of a smaller ally? That once-unthinkable question is now being asked in Copenhagen and Brussels.

Facing this pressure, the leaders of Greenland moved to assert their voice. Egede called for elections according to schedule, with the 11

March 2025 vote becoming a de facto referendum on how to respond to Trump. Voters delivered a surprise outcome. The centre-right Demokraatit party, led by Jens-Frederik Nielsen, surged to first place (with around 30% of votes) on a platform of strengthening the Greenlandic economy and firmly rejecting US annexation. Close behind was the pro-quick-independence Naleraq party (with around 25% of votes), which welcomed US interest as leverage for more autonomy from Denmark, although even they opposed outright control by the United States. Crucially, no party campaigned to join the United States, while all foresaw the future of Greenland as an independent country. The message to Washington is clear: Greenlanders across the political spectrum reject any US takeover and insist on determining their future on their own terms.

During all this, the strategic attraction of Greenland has only been growing. Climate change is opening Arctic sea routes and exposing valuable resources under Greenlandic ice – oil, gas and critical minerals such as rare earth elements. The location of the country is equally pivotal: it hosts a US military base at Thule (Pituffik), just 950 miles from the North Pole, a linchpin for missile defence and space surveillance. Washington argues it cannot lose Greenland, pointing to Chinese interest in Arctic ports and minerals. Indeed, Russia and China have been expanding their Arctic presence, heightening US urgency. Caught in this great-power scrum, the government of Greenland is walking a tightrope. Welcoming investment and cooperation but insisting on respect for its autonomy and environment. Egede even hinted that if the United

States pushes too hard, Greenland might seek other partners as counterweights.

By late March 2025, tensions reached a boiling point. The White House announced a high-profile delegation visit to Greenland – with US Vice President JD Vance’s wife, Usha Vance, alongside top national security and energy officials – ostensibly to build partnerships and celebrate Greenlandic culture. The timing was poor and no invitation had been extended by either Greenland or Denmark. In fact, both the outgoing and incoming Greenlandic leaders blasted the visit as a provocation during a sensitive government transition. Caretaker Egede refused to meet the Americans, calling the trip highly aggressive and saying he could no longer trust the United States after Trump’s annexation threats. Jens-Frederik Nielsen, then the likely next PM, likewise warned that Greenland must not be forced into a power game that they themselves did not choose.

Caught off-guard by the backlash, the US delegation insisted they were only there to learn and show respect. But the damage was done. Trust between Greenland and the US government was badly fraying. What began as an offhand remark to buy Greenland had escalated into a serious diplomatic showdown. It raised stark questions about the future. Could NATO survive one member effectively threatening the territory of another? How will Denmark, the EU and others uphold the principle of self-determination in this new era of power politics? And above all, what future do the people of Greenland see for themselves amid this tug-of-war?

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

Trump’s gambit in Greenland exemplifies a Walls scenario mindset: a powerful nation acting unilaterally to claim territory and security advantages with little regard for either the sovereignty of a much smaller population or international norms. His brazen insistence that ‘Greenland is ours’ echoes a might-makes-right ethos, drawing comparisons to Putin-style land grabs. This event also reveals the limits of such Walls thinking. Push back from Greenlanders displays Bridges dynamics of grassroots empowerment and solidarity. Instead

of bowing to great-power pressure, Greenlanders across the political spectrum have united to defend their right to self-determination; notably, through a high-turnout democratic election the results of which firmly reject Trump’s offer. Civil society and indigenous leaders are amplifying their cause on the global level, framing the plight of Greenland as a fight against neo-colonialism. This surge of local agency and transnational support – classic Bridges traits – slows the momentum of Trump’s Walls approach.

The world response shows some Maze characteristics, along with limitations. Denmark and other allies are invoking the principle of self-determination (Denmark even appealed to the UN decolonization committee). Importantly, no country openly backs the US bid, indicating that global norms still hold sway. Formal multilateral action remains muted, however. Key actors such as the UN or the Arctic Council offer little beyond statements, illustrating how a determined superpower can sideline collective rules in a Walls-driven moment. Instead, the crisis shifts to the regional arena, reflecting Towers dynamics of bloc politics and realignment. Denmark is rallying support from the EU and NATO, while Washington frames its moves as vital security measures to counter the threats posed by China and Russia in the Arctic. NATO is also put in an awkward position: the most powerful member of the alliance is effectively threatening the sovereignty of territory under the protection of another member. Some Danish and European strategists consider the possibilities of courting other partners – for instance, boosting EU investments in Greenland or tacitly cooperating with China – if US pressure goes too far. This essentially means playing one big power

off against another, which is a strategy fraught with danger. Caught in the crossfire, Greenland gains bargaining leverage by being so highly coveted but also risks becoming a pawn on a global chessboard.

The Greenland showdown is a vivid intersection of all four RESPACE scenarios. Trump's confrontational zero-sum instincts (Walls) have collided with firm local resistance and global censure, opening space for community empowerment (Bridges) and invocations of international norms (Maze), even as regional power plays intensify (Towers). The outcome remains uncertain. Will negotiation and respect prevail, leading to a cooperative solution (as a Bridges or Maze future envisions)? Or will great-power rivalry harden, forcing Greenland to choose sides or risk its autonomy (a slide toward Walls or a harsh Towers split)? The choices made now by Greenlandic, Danish and US actors, along with other stakeholders, will set a precedent for how such disputes are handled in an era of renewed geopolitical competition. It is a test of core values in the 2020s – imperial ambition and security obsessions versus democracy, community agency and rule of law.

Discussion Questions

- **For Local Communities and Indigenous Leaders in Greenland:** How can everyday Greenlanders safeguard their rights, their land and their political priorities amidst a great-power tug-of-war over their land? What strategies will strengthen local resilience (economic, cultural, political) against outside pressure, while ensuring that any future agreements or developments truly benefit both the people and environment of Greenland?
- **For Danish and European Policymakers:** What approach should Denmark and the EU take to support Greenlander self-determination without inflaming tensions – loudly internationalize the issue (for example, at the UN or the Arctic Council) or engage in quiet diplomacy with Washington? How can Europe stand firm against any attempt to coerce or purchase Greenland (perhaps via joint Arctic investments or security assurances), while preserving unity in the transatlantic alliance?
- **For International Peacebuilders and Multilateral Institutions:** How can international institutions (from the UN to NATO) step up to deter or mediate unilateral territorial ambitions by major powers? Do we need new global rules or agreements to address scenarios such as this? For example, clearer norms on buying/selling sovereign territory or protections for autonomous regions? What lessons does the Greenland standoff offer for preventing similar great-power disputes over vulnerable territories in the future?

- **For the Private Sector and Arctic Investors:** How can businesses with interests in Greenland responsibly navigate this volatile situation, so that investment supports local well-being and does not simply become a tool of geopolitical agendas? What risks do companies face if they get entangled in the United States–Greenland–Denmark clash? For instance, sanctions or reputational backlash. How could a more transparent community-focused approach to investment help mitigate those risks?
- **For Activists and Advocates (Indigenous, Human Rights, Climate and Peace):** How can activists galvanise public opinion and political pressure to affirm that Greenland is not merely a commodity to be traded by powerful states? How can this crisis be reframed as an opportunity to advance broader goals – from strengthening Indigenous sovereignty to protecting the Arctic environment? For example, pushing for an Arctic peace zone. What can civil society – in Greenland, Denmark, the United States and across the globe – do to challenge coercive tactics and turn the plight of Greenland into an inspirational moment that reinforces respect for self-determination over might-makes-right?

Explore the RESPACE scenarios here.

