

Opinion **Global Insight**

Donald Trump's icebreaker leaves Greenland and Denmark adrift

US president-elect's gambit in the Arctic has unnerved Nuuk and left Copenhagen struggling to respond

RICHARD MILNE



Donald Trump Jr's jet lands in Greenland on Tuesday for the president-elect's oldest son's 'private visit' to the island © Emil Stach/Ritzau Scanpix/Reuters

Richard Milne, Nordic and Baltic Correspondent 13 HOURS AGO

The first time Donald Trump offered to buy Greenland in 2019, Danish politicians were apoplectic, branding him and his proposal a joke.

This time around, after the US-president elect renewed his interest in controlling the geopolitically crucial Arctic island, the government in Copenhagen has been much more circumspect.

Trump's off-the-cuff policymaking has a way of unnerving even the closest allies, particularly when his moves come close to trolling. On Tuesday his son Donald Jr made a "private visit" to [Greenland](#), supposedly to admire the snowy beauty of the vast island of just 56,000 people.

The president-elect's latest proposal places politicians in both Copenhagen and the Greenlandic capital of Nuuk in a great bind. How can they respond to what increasingly looks like a serious play by the US, their main security guarantor, as it tussles with Russia and China for influence in the Arctic?

Mette Frederiksen, Denmark's prime minister, called Trump's offer "absurd" in 2019. Lars Løkke Rasmussen, now Denmark's foreign minister, said that "it must be an April Fool's Day joke". Trump promptly cancelled a state visit to the Nordic country.



Trump Jr, second right, during his visit to Nuuk, Greenland. His father has renewed his calls for the US to buy the Arctic island © Emil Stach/Ritzau Scanpix/AP

Their tone on Tuesday was rather different. Frederiksen did insist that Greenland, an autonomous part of the kingdom of Denmark, [“is not for sale”](#). But she also underscored that Denmark wanted to co-operate with the US. “We have a clear interest that it’s the US that plays a large role in that region, and not, for example, Russia,” said Frederiksen, who remains responsible for Greenland’s foreign and security policy.

That awkward attempt to avoid offending [Trump](#) even before he starts his second term was far from universally popular in Copenhagen. Pelle Dragsted, political spokesperson for the far-left Enhedslisten, criticised Frederiksen sharply for failing to call out Trump’s “disrespectful and dangerously neocolonial” language.

“The answer from our prime minister is obviously that Trump can do whatever he wants with regards to Greenland and Denmark,” he added.

Trump himself seemed to sense this, telling a press conference on Tuesday that he could not rule out military coercion or tariffs against Nato ally Denmark if he did not get his way on Greenland.

Trump’s comments [touch a nerve](#) in Denmark precisely because Copenhagen has long appeared to undervalue and even mistreat Greenland. Experts say Denmark was slow to appreciate the geopolitical significance of Greenland, perhaps the most important

Arctic landmass and a potential big future source of minerals as the ice melts.



Recent revelations about the mass forced sterilisation of indigenous Greenlandic women in the 1960s have hurt relations with Denmark and increased the rhetoric about trying to be free from the “shackles of the colonial era”, as Greenland’s Prime Minister Múte Egede recently said.

Frederiksen herself conceded on Tuesday that Greenland appeared to be edging towards independence, even if she wants to keep the kingdom of Denmark — which also includes the autonomous Faroe Islands — together.

But Trump’s proposal is far from straightforward for Greenland either, and demands a different [balancing act](#) from politicians in Nuuk.

Egede has consistently underscored that Greenland “will never be for sale”. There is little desire on the island to swap one colonial power for another. But the prime minister and other Greenlandic politicians have stressed that the island is open for business and keen to attract foreign, and particularly US, investment.

Egede is also keen for independence from Copenhagen, using his new year’s speech to step up his rhetoric on the issue ahead of elections in April. The biggest barrier to that is Greenland’s economic dependency on Denmark, and its annual economic grant of Dkr3.9bn (\$540mn) — almost \$10,000 per Greenlander.

For all the focus on oil and mineral wealth that could be unlocked by climate change on Greenland, the existing projects have progressed relatively little in the past decade. A Greenlandic business person once put it this way: “There is potential, but it always seems to be around the corner.”

Opposition politicians have accused Egede of doing little to promote independence during his time in office, and some are worried that Trump’s proposal could overshadow other issues in the upcoming elections.

All of this is likely to be to the US president-elect’s liking as he keeps traditional allies from Europe to Canada off balance with various transactional ploys. Greenland and Denmark will be busy guessing what might be enough to buy Trump off.

But Egede, speaking on Tuesday, tried to underline that the future of one of the world’s most strategically important landmasses belonged solely to the 56,000 people of Greenland.

“Our future and fight for independence is our business. While others, including Danes and Americans, are entitled to their opinions, we should not get caught up in the hysteria and external pressures distracting us from our path. The future is ours, and ours to shape,” he [said](#).

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