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An Analysis of the Trump Administration's "Greenland" Strategy from a Constructivist Perspective

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Abstract

Historically, Greenland, an autonomous region of the Kingdom of Denmark, attracted little attention from other countries except for its significance in the North American defense during the Cold War. Since the Trump administration expressed interest in purchasing Greenland in 2019, the island has become more involved in the discussions about Arctic competition. Consequently, its importance has shifted from a geographical perspective to a strategic one. The United States' attitude towards Greenland focuses on preserving and expanding its influence in the Arctic area. By using the existing military bases and alliances, they hope to get supportive measures and put Greenland into the context of great power rivalries, treating it as an essential place for ensuring the security and strategic interests of the US. From a constructivist angle, this policy cannot be completely explained by military or natural resources. Through depicting great power competition, the US tries to re-establish itself as the main Arctic power; at the same time, by deploying military forces and participating in institutional activities, it pushes the Arctic system towards a more competitive form instead of a cooperative management. This shows the interaction between individuals and systems. Influenced by geopolitical disputes, the Greenland policy may reinforce the Lockean idea of anarchy in the Arctic and increase the uncertainty of the institutions. Therefore, China should think carefully about its participation in the Arctic governance, promote multilateralism and cooperation, keep its strategic balance and policy flexibility, and protect its own development interests.

Keywords

constructivism, Trump administration, Greenland strategy

1. Introduction

At the end of 2017, the U.S. government released the National Security Strategy, stressing the significance of great-power competition in the national security policy and treating China and Russia as "revisionist countries" which oppose the present international order [1]. Due to the change of strategic emphasis from anti-terrorism to geopolitics, the Arctic has been mentioned again in the national security discussions. In 2019, President Trump expressed his interest in buying Greenland, considering it important strategically. But this proposal was objected to by Denmark and was highly criticized [2]; consequently, Greenland has re-entered into international concern.

During the Cold War, Greenland played a significant part as a military base; in the twenty-first century, it is actively involved in Arctic affairs. Earlier, Greenland was not regarded as an important country by the United

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States according to their list [3]. American troops are still mainly stationed for early-warning and strategic defence. However, for President Trump, Greenland is not only a military area. At present, it is considered a region for resource exploitation, the existence of shipping routes and holding strategic positions in the competition among the major countries. This means not only a change in the importance of a geographic location, but also a transformation in the strategic views and identities. According to Wendt, interests are not objective; they are influenced by social relationships and ideological systems [4]. The change in the perspective of Greenland from a Danish territory to a key centre of the Arctic reflects this alteration.

The decrease of Arctic sea ice and the possibility of new sea routes has turned the area into not only a place for handling common international issues, but also a new battleground for states. By integrating Greenland into the context of great power competition, the administration of President Trump has shown a political intention to rebuild American advantages in the Arctic [5]. Therefore, this paper goes beyond the usual discussions which concentrate on resources and military strength, and raises three points: Why is Greenland considered an important region now? How does the United States establish itself as a leader in the Arctic? And what changes might this approach bring about to the international system and the state of anarchy in the Arctic? Emphasizing the formation of concepts, identity and the interaction between individuals and social structures, the discussion investigates the ideological basis of America's Greenland policy and its potential effects on the new Arctic order.

2. The Conceptual Evolution of the Greenland Strategy

Greenland long remained relatively peripheral to mainstream geopolitical debate despite its unusual location. Because the warming has caused the retreat of Arctic ice and opened up northern maritime routes, the major powers have developed a greater interest in the Arctic, attracting more attention towards Greenland [6]. As the world's largest island, it connects North America with the Arctic approaches to Eurasia and Russia. Its important geographical position has made it more significant in international relations [7].

Trump's mention of a “Greenland issue” led to the establishment of a new strategic viewpoint concerning the island. He thought that Greenland was important for monitoring the Russian naval activities, maintaining the United States' security interests and securing Atlantic shipping [6]. The appearance of new routes because of the decreasing ice, along with oil, gas and mineral resources, might make it a strategically important asset too. Hence, increasing the U.S. influence in Greenland is one method to reinforce America's security status in the Arctic [8].

This understanding has not been universally accepted. Denmark and Greenland’s self-government have repeatedly rejected U.S. acquisition proposals and defended their authority over the island’s future [9]. Greenland’s designation as a strategic asset is thus not merely a consequence of physical geography. It has emerged through policy practices and competing narratives within a wider contest over influence and the Arctic order. As in other questions of Arctic security, the meaning attached to Greenland is continually revised through interaction among states. Its strategic status reflects geopolitical conditions, but also the subjective process through which governments construct priorities and interests [10].

3. The Trump Administration’s Greenland Strategy

3.1 Background and Development of the Greenland Strategy

During the Cold War, U.S. Arctic policy was dominated by the perceived Soviet security threat. In the decades following the Cold War, resource use and international cooperation became more prominent in U.S. discussions of the region. Climate warming, retreating sea ice, and the possibility of new maritime routes later changed the context. Against this background, Trump revived the idea of acquiring Greenland in 2019. The proposal caused an immediate public controversy and indicated that an island long treated as a post-Cold War strategic periphery had returned to the center of great-power debate.

American interest in Greenland predates Trump. During U.S.–Soviet rivalry, the United States established an important facility there, formerly known as Thule Air Base and now called Pituffik Space Base, which has long supported missile warning and defense. In the twenty-first century, Greenland’s mineral and energy resources have added an economic dimension to its strategic value [1]. In this reading, the idea of “buying

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Greenland" is less about a conventional real-estate purchase than about controlling a strategic node, securing a favorable position in future Arctic development, and limiting other powers' access to critical resources. The administration expected such control to strengthen its competitive position relative to Russia and China [2].

The renewed attention to Greenland brought its military and economic significance together in U.S. strategic thinking. Rather than viewing the Arctic solely through the lens of Cold War confrontation, the administration considered it in terms of geoeconomics and the restructuring of global politics. It envisioned Greenland as a security barrier, a resource base, and a potential lever over important maritime routes in the decades ahead [3].

3.2 The Substance and Strategic Positioning of the Greenland Policy

The administration's Greenland policy had two principal objectives. One was to strengthen American control or influence over the island and thereby improve U.S. leverage in Arctic energy affairs. The other was to use Greenland as a base for closer security cooperation with Denmark and other Arctic states, with the broader aim of preserving U.S. regional predominance.

The objective went beyond possession of territory. Bringing Greenland more firmly within the U.S. security system would also strengthen Washington's claim to leadership in the Arctic order. From the administration's perspective, the issue involved not only access to resources but also the protection of geopolitical standing in a more multipolar international system [11]. The Greenland strategy linked mineral development, Arctic shipping, and military security to a broader assertion of American interests. It did not, however, obtain international acceptance. Denmark and Greenlandic authorities rejected the acquisition proposal and reiterated Greenland's constitutional relationship with Denmark. The controversy therefore highlighted the island's status as a complex strategic asset entangled with sovereignty, geopolitics, and legal disputes [12].

In this sense, the Greenland strategy marked a new phase in U.S. perceptions of Arctic geopolitics. The region was no longer viewed simply as a Cold War security outpost but also as a site of global energy competition. The strategy was intended to reinforce U.S. influence and could have lasting implications for regional security and governance [13].

4. A Constructivist Analysis of the Trump Administration's Greenland Strategy

4.1 Collective Identification with "America First"

Constructivism studies the influence of social structures in international politics on the behavior and interests of states. The "America First" concept was the main basis for the U.S. administration's view that Greenland was a strategic resource, based on its geographical position, mineral wealth and involvement in Arctic security issues. By considering it as a national security problem, the administration aimed to strengthen the U.S. leadership in the world. In the president's statements, Greenland gained a special significance in national security which indicated a revision of America's global strategic status [14]. This proposal also showed modifications in the U.S. views about the competition in geopolitics and the access to resources. Presenting Greenland as a negotiable factor in the rivalry between great powers was one of the efforts to enhance the American influence. According to the administration's perspective, the importance of the island was associated with the agreement on U.S. leadership and political values. This interpretation contributed to the reconstruction of the international position which the United States desired to hold [8].

4.2 The Subjective Construction of Greenland as a Strategic Concept

A constructivist viewpoint states that the definition of a concept by political actors influences their perception of identity and interests. Even though Greenland had already possessed considerable military importance, the proposal for purchase gave the name a new public and political meaning. In the U.S. strategic discussion, the island was presented from the aspect of its own interests and the changing competitive situation [15]. Its value was not limited to the resources and maritime passages, but also to its role in the Arctic security. Therefore, the proposed acquisition meant more than just the access to raw materials; it was intended to strengthen the U.S. status in the world security system [16]. Changing Greenland from a local geographical

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issue into a key point of great power competition was in accordance with the general purpose of promoting the "America First" policy.

4.3 Mutual Constitution of Agency and Structure: Greenland and the Arctic Order

In the constructivist theory, the states and the international structures in which they operate influence each other. The Greenland policy of President Trump provides a good example to study this relationship. By trying to change the island's position and establish a new policy towards it, the U.S. policymakers have changed the discussion terms about the Arctic governance. Compared with the methods which paid more attention to international collaboration, the administration of Trump paid more importance to single country actions and the national interests in a limited sense [17]. This change has made the Arctic more important in the U.S. and altered the general debate about the regional governance.

The idea of buying Greenland was considered as a reply to the competition from Russia and China and as a way to increase the American security position by using single country measures [12]. It has enhanced the geographical and economic reputation of the island but has also put pressure on the previous cooperation systems in the Arctic. According to this viewpoint, Greenland is used as a means by the United States to protect its international status, thus promoting a more competitive and militarized agenda in the regional field.

4.4 The Greenland Strategy and Cultures of Anarchy

For constructivists, international behavior does not follow a particular pattern. Interaction among states may result in different cultures of anarchy such as Hobbesian, Lockean or Kantian. With Greenland becoming an important strategic location, the competition around it might promote a Lockean culture, which is the rivalry among states that still regard each other as legitimate participants. This competition may include strategies of balancing and mutual restraint, and at the same time increase the security dilemmas [18].

Trump's suggestion to take possession of Greenland is considered an important event in the re-emerging competition in the Arctic region. It has shown the political and economic significance of the island and has contradicted the traditional methods of regional administration. The efforts to integrate Greenland more closely into an American control zone may interfere with the international collaboration and enhance the geopolitical conflict. From the viewpoint of "America First", a place formerly linked with cooperative management has been portrayed as the boundary of great power contest. Such a revision may promote military activities and aggravate political disputes.

With the competition among the United States, Russia and China still continuing, the strategic importance of Greenland might strengthen a Lockean relationship. Joint efforts in energy and shipping are still possible, but the U.S. unilateral actions, especially in security matters, may intensify the rivalry and raise uncertainty in the Arctic institutions [19]. Actions from Russia and China which give more attention to military power or some forms of regional administration may deepen the competitive situation. Nevertheless, the final result will be influenced by future interactions rather than solely by geographical factors.

5. Potential Implications for China and Policy Responses

5.1 China's Position in Global Arctic Competition

The renewed geopolitical focus on Greenland emerged partly from the Trump administration's strategic framing of the island. Its location, natural resources, and potential relevance to future shipping routes make it significant in Arctic affairs. For China, the issue concerns energy and maritime interests as well as the proposed Polar Silk Road. As climate change affects Arctic navigability, northern routes may become increasingly relevant to international trade and energy transportation.

China's substantial energy demand and maritime trade give it a practical interest in the future accessibility of Arctic routes. Routes connecting the Arctic to European and other markets could offer additional transport options and influence China's economic and energy-security calculations. At the same time, moves to expand U.S. control or military activity in Greenland may create constraints on Chinese participation in regional cooperation, mineral development, and shipping. China therefore needs to assess these possible consequences with attention to freedom of navigation, resource governance, and opportunities for collaboration.

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The Belt and Road Initiative creates opportunities for economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation with relevant Arctic states. Engagement in these fields may help China participate constructively in debates over Arctic governance and in the responsible development of shipping and resources. In the longer term, Greenland and its surrounding region may become one area of China's wider international cooperation, although the scope of any such role will depend on local and international legal and political conditions.

5.2 U.S. Unilateralism and China's Multilateral Cooperation Strategy

Trump's proposal to purchase Greenland reflected an ambition to increase U.S. influence in Arctic affairs through measures centered on American strategic priorities. The administration treated the island as an important security asset. Unilateral initiatives of this kind can place pressure on multilateral practices and regional governance arrangements when the interests of Greenland and Denmark are not sufficiently taken into account.

China, by contrast, has presented the Belt and Road Initiative as a vehicle for mutually beneficial cooperation. In the Arctic, it could work with Russia, Iceland, Canada, and other relevant states on resource development, energy transportation, maritime safety, and scientific exchange. The argument advanced here is that cooperative arrangements could reduce potential disputes and provide additional channels for legitimate Chinese participation.

Looking ahead, China could expand its contribution to polar governance, especially in climate research, environmental protection, and sustainable resource use. Maintaining bilateral dialogue while supporting multilateral institutions would help strengthen cooperation and offer a basis for long-term stability and prosperity in the Arctic.

5.3 Maintaining Strategic Patience and Deepening Polar Silk Road Cooperation

China ought to react to the American activities in Greenland and the surrounding Arctic through strategic patience. The construction of the Polar Silk Road needs a step-by-step method. The fluctuating ice conditions, potential navigation routes and mineral resources will influence the ultimate prospects of Chinese transportation and energy interests. Greenland may provide chances for future cooperation, but these should be considered based on the environmental, economic and political situations.

The proposed Polar Silk Road aims to enhance cooperation, especially with northern European countries, in terms of shipping, energy and related infrastructures. China may utilize its experience in infrastructure construction, environmental technology and financial matters to propose plans which meet common needs and safeguard its lawful economic interests.

U.S. unilateralism may interfere with China's Arctic activities, but by adopting flexible diplomacy and continuing cooperation with Arctic countries, the pressures can be handled. China ought to promote more open and inclusive governing systems, proper resource exploitation and eco-friendly methods. To accomplish these goals, much patience, practical collaboration and observance of existing international regulations are necessary.

6. Conclusion

The American Greenland strategy was part of a broader effort to preserve U.S. influence in the Arctic and its position in global competition. By changing the importance of a geographical position, the government gained benefits in obtaining resources and in the future strategic negotiation. For China, Greenland is concerned with not only its resources and military geography but also with supply-chain security, energy security and the opportunities of the Polar Silk Road. The U.S. actions bring difficulties to Chinese interests, but they also highlight the significance of cooperation in the framework of the Belt and Road and of participation in peaceful Arctic administration.

In answering to American military and diplomatic proposals, China ought to take non-reactive measures and carry out practical cooperation which is consistent with its own interests and international responsibilities. The Arctic is getting more significant in the relations between the major powers, and China has an opportunity to take part in establishing a more open and inclusive regional governing system. A flexible foreign policy,

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continuous dialogue and cooperation with other countries will be necessary to safeguard the long-term interests while minimizing the chances of rivalry.

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