

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 2026-02

Testing Allies: The Greenland Crisis and Implications for South Korea

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2026-03-26

I. Introduction

In early January 2026, President Donald Trump’s renewed push for the United States to acquire Greenland sparked widespread alarm among NATO allies. Trump reiterated U.S. interest in asserting control over the semi-autonomous Danish territory, an idea he had previously raised during his first term, and framed the issue as essential to U.S. national security and Arctic strategy. As part of this approach, senior U.S. officials suggested that a range of options was under consideration, including the possible use of force.¹

These remarks quickly generated strong reactions across Europe. Denmark, Greenland, and other European governments condemned any suggestion of coercion against Danish sovereignty. At the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, Trump later stated that the United States would not use military force to seize Greenland and announced that discussions with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte had produced a “framework of a future deal.”² Nevertheless, by that point, the episode had already triggered deep anxiety within the transatlantic alliance.

At first glance, the Greenland crisis appeared to expose a structural weakness within NATO. Specifically, the alliance lacks clear mechanisms for responding to credible coercion by one member against another. Yet focusing solely on NATO’s institutional limitations risks overlooking a more important question. Why would the United States consider exerting pressure, political or threat of military force, on the territory of a NATO ally in the first place?

This Issue Brief argues that the Greenland episode reflects a deeper shift in U.S. expectations toward its allies. Washington increasingly expects partners to contribute more actively to shared security challenges. Trump’s rhetoric on Greenland was therefore not only about Arctic strategy, resources, or missile defense considerations. It also signaled growing frustration in Washington with what many U.S. policymakers perceive as insufficient European commitment to collective security responsibilities.

Understanding this crisis is important not only for Europe but also for U.S. allies in other regions, including South Korea. As the United States reassesses the distribution of responsibilities within its

alliances, questions of burden-sharing have become increasingly salient. The Greenland crisis therefore offers lessons for South Korea about alliance management and how to navigate uncertainty in U.S. policy.

To explore these issues, this Issue Brief addresses three key questions. First, why did President Trump raise the Greenland issue in 2026? Second, how did European allies respond, and what does their reaction reveal about transatlantic relations? Finally, what lessons does the episode offer for South Korea and the management of the ROK–U.S. alliance?

II. Why Greenland Became a Flashpoint in 2026

President Trump’s renewed focus on Greenland in 2026 arose from the convergence of numerous factors, many of which have been intensifying over the past decade. At the most basic level, Greenland’s growing importance stems from its geographic position at the intersection of North America, Europe, and emerging Arctic Sea lanes. As climate change accelerates the retreat of Arctic ice, new maritime routes are becoming more viable, raising concerns in Washington that critical shipping lanes could fall under Russian influence. At the same time, Greenland’s proximity to the United States makes it a key node in homeland defense. Any intercontinental missile trajectory from Russia toward the U.S. mainland would pass over the island, and existing U.S. early-warning infrastructure in Greenland already reflects its role in missile detection and space surveillance.

These structural factors have been further amplified by intensifying great-power competition in the Arctic. Russia has expanded its military footprint along its northern coastline and asserted regulatory control over Arctic shipping routes, while China has declared itself a “near-Arctic state”³ and increased its economic and scientific engagement in the region. Together, these developments have elevated Greenland’s strategic relevance within U.S. defense planning.

However, these long-standing strategic considerations alone do not explain why Greenland became a political flashpoint in 2026. Trump’s rhetoric is better understood in the context of growing U.S. frustration with allied burden-sharing. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, many in Washington perceived that European allies were slow to translate political support into sustained military contributions and long-term defense investments.

From this perspective, raising the Greenland issue served to highlight Arctic security concerns as well as to apply pressure on European allies to demonstrate more concrete commitments. One likely objective, therefore, was to strengthen Arctic security cooperation by encouraging European states, particularly Denmark and other Nordic countries, to increase investments in Arctic defense, surveillance, and infrastructure.⁴

Domestic political dynamics also played a role. Within segments of the U.S. political right, skepticism toward European allies has deepened, accompanied by a broader reassessment of alliance relationships. In this context, Trump’s remarks resonated with a narrative that longstanding allies benefit disproportionately from U.S. security guarantees while contributing insufficiently in return. Furthermore, the idea of acquiring Greenland also resonates with a broader vision of reinforcing American strategic dominance across the Western Hemisphere.

III. Europe's Strategic Dilemma

The European response to the Greenland controversy was shaped by a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, European governments sought to signal that Greenland's sovereignty and security were not open to coercion. On the other hand, they were careful to avoid escalating tensions with the United States, which remains the central security guarantor for Europe.

Denmark found itself at the center of the crisis. Although Greenland is a self-governing territory with extensive autonomy, it remains part of the Kingdom of Denmark and therefore falls under Danish sovereignty. Any suggestion that the United States might assert control over Greenland therefore directly raised questions about Danish territorial integrity. At the same time, Denmark faces an inherent strategic dilemma. As a small state, it depends heavily on the United States for broader security guarantees through NATO. Denmark also hosts critical U.S. military infrastructure in Greenland, including facilities related to missile warning and space surveillance.⁵ Confronting Washington too aggressively therefore risked undermining a key pillar of Danish security.

Denmark's response reflected this dilemma. Danish officials firmly rejected the idea that Greenland could be transferred or placed under U.S. control while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of continued U.S.–Danish cooperation in Arctic security. This approach sought to defend Danish sovereignty without triggering a direct political confrontation with Washington.

Other European states adopted a similar strategy of signaling resolve while avoiding escalation. Rather than responding with overt military countermeasures, European governments chose a combination of symbolic deployments and diplomatic messaging to underscore their support for Denmark. Denmark launched a military presence and planning exercise in Greenland, Operation Arctic Endurance, with participation from Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.⁶ While the scale of the deployment was modest,⁷ its significance was primarily political. By involving multiple European countries, the exercise effectively created a symbolic “tripwire,” signaling that any coercive action would implicate several European states simultaneously.

European leaders also used diplomatic messaging to reinforce this signal. French President Emmanuel Macron emerged as one of the most outspoken voices, warning at the World Economic Forum in Davos that Europe “must not capitulate to bullies” and reiterating his long-standing call for stronger European defense capabilities.⁸ At the same time, several European governments expanded their diplomatic presence in Greenland, with France and Canada announcing plans to open consulates on the island.⁹

IV. What the Crisis Reveals About U.S. Alliance Expectations

Beyond the immediate controversy surrounding Greenland, the episode offers insight into how U.S. alliance management may be evolving. Rather than simply exposing a weakness in NATO's institutional design, the crisis highlights a broader shift in both the expectations the United States places on its allies and the methods it is willing to use to shape their behavior. In particular, two dynamics stand out: the growing use of pressure to elicit allied contributions and a widening gap in U.S. and European relations.

From burden-sharing to coercive alliance signaling

The Greenland episode suggests not only that U.S. expectations toward allies are increasing, but also that the way in which those expectations are communicated is changing. For much of the post-Cold War period, the United States operated as the central security provider within its alliances, relying primarily on consultation and institutional mechanisms to maintain alliance cohesion.

In recent years, however, U.S. policymakers across administrations have emphasized that allies must assume greater responsibility for their own defense. What is notable in the Greenland case is that this expectation appears to be accompanied by a greater willingness to apply pressure that is more like coercion than coordination.

Trump's rhetoric regarding Greenland can be understood in this context. By raising the possibility of U.S. control over the island and publicly criticizing Denmark's level of investment in Arctic security, the administration effectively elevated a regional issue into a test of allied commitment. Thus, one of Trump's objectives was to signal dissatisfaction with existing burden-sharing arrangements and to press European allies to demonstrate more tangible contributions to Arctic and transatlantic security. While the details of the proposed "framework of a future deal" over Greenland have not been made public, Mark Rutte has indicated that it would involve greater efforts by NATO allies to enhance security in the Arctic. In this sense, Trump's coercive signaling appears to have had some effect. By elevating the issue and applying pressure, the United States was able to prompt greater European attention to Arctic security, particularly in relation to growing Russian and Chinese activity in the region.¹⁰

This reflects a broader pattern in which strategic issues are used not only to address external threats, but also to shape allied behavior. The Greenland episode therefore illustrates a shift from a form of alliance management based on coordination toward one that increasingly incorporates strategic pressure.

At the same time, the episode underscores that alliance cohesion ultimately depends on political trust. When pressure is perceived as excessive or misaligned with established norms, even highly institutionalized alliances can experience rapid strain. The strong reaction across Europe to the mere suggestion of coercion against Danish territory highlights how sensitive such dynamics remain.

A similar dynamic has been visible in other contexts. In the Strait of Hormuz, for example, Trump suggested that allies should escort vessels in order to "find out how they react,"¹¹ warning that NATO faced a "very bad" future if they failed to assist.¹² Seen in this light, the Greenland episode can be interpreted as part of a broader effort to test how far allies are willing to translate political alignment into tangible security commitments.

Diverging U.S. and European relations

The Greenland crisis also brought into sharper focus the growing divergence between the United States and Europe regarding the future of the transatlantic security relationship. These differences have been building over time, but the episode made them more visible and politically consequential.

From the U.S. perspective, many European allies have not contributed sufficiently to collective defense efforts. During the war in Ukraine, Washington provided the largest share of military assistance to Kyiv, reinforcing a long-standing perception that the United States continues to shoulder a disproportionate share of the defense burden.¹³ Although European contributions have increased, skepticism remains in Washington about Europe's willingness to sustain higher levels of defense spending and translate political commitments into long-term military capability.

European governments, by contrast, are increasingly concerned about the reliability and predictability of U.S. policy. This debate unfolds alongside Washington's reassessment of its global posture, which places greater responsibility on European allies and frames Russia as a threat that can be managed rather

than one that is existential.¹⁴ This has created a clear tension where European governments seek to avoid openly antagonizing Washington in order to preserve continued U.S. support, while at the same time acknowledging the risks of continued dependence on an increasingly uncertain partner.

These concerns have accelerated debates over European strategic autonomy. While the concept has been present in EU policy discussions since at least 2013, emphasizing Europe's ability to "decide and act without depending" on external capabilities,¹⁵ it has gained sharper political meaning in recent years. The 2016 EU Global Strategy framed autonomy as compatible with NATO, but subsequent developments, including Brexit and the first Trump presidency, pushed the concept toward a more explicitly political agenda.¹⁶ Statements by leaders such as Emmanuel Macron calling for a "sovereign Europe,"¹⁷ and Angela Merkel's remark that Europeans must "take our fate into our own hands,"¹⁸ reflected growing unease about U.S. reliability. More recently, debates have expanded beyond defense to include technology, supply chains, and economic security.

The Greenland episode further intensified these debates. In its aftermath, some European voices called for more ambitious steps, including proposals for a European army. At the same time, strong pushback emerged. Mark Rutte warned that Europe "cannot defend itself without the U.S.,"¹⁹ highlighting continued dependence on American military capabilities and nuclear deterrence. Other European officials, including French leaders, countered that greater European responsibility should be seen as reinforcing, rather than replacing, NATO.²⁰ Meanwhile, concerns have also emerged within Europe that overly ambitious autonomy initiatives could create duplication, inefficiency, or command fragmentation.²¹

Taken together, the Greenland crisis should be understood not as an isolated dispute over Arctic territory, but as part of a broader shift in alliance management and trans-Atlantic relations. As the United States recalibrates its expectations, allies are increasingly expected to adjust to a more demanding and less predictable security environment. This shift is directly relevant for U.S. allies in other regions, including South Korea.

V. Lessons for South Korea

The Greenland episode offers several lessons for South Korea. While the specific circumstances differ, the underlying issues shown by the crisis, specifically, shifting U.S. expectations, alliance signaling, and burden-sharing, are relevant to U.S. alliances globally.

First, the Greenland episode highlights the importance of clear and consistent alliance signaling. Alliances are not sustained solely through formal commitments or treaty obligations; they also depend on the signals that allies send regarding their willingness to contribute to shared security objectives.

As mentioned above, one of the frustrations repeatedly expressed by U.S. policymakers toward Europe is the perception that European governments often emphasize diplomatic rhetoric while being slow to provide sufficient material contributions to collective security efforts. Whether this perception is fully accurate or not, it has influenced debates in Washington about the distribution of responsibilities within alliances. In this context, Trump's approach can be interpreted as reflecting a logic along the lines of: if European allies are unwilling to take the lead in securing Greenland and the Arctic, the United States may act more directly to protect what it considers critical strategic interests.

While it is difficult to predict whether this logic will be applied uniformly across regions, it raises a relevant concern in the context of the Korean Peninsula. If Washington comes to view South Korea as insufficiently proactive in deterring North Korea, it may be more inclined to pursue its own preferred

approaches, whether through unilateral policy decisions, shifts in deterrence posture, or renewed diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang, potentially with limited alignment with Seoul's preferences.

For South Korea, the issue is therefore not only whether it contributes, but how those contributions are interpreted. As the United States confronts multiple strategic challenges simultaneously, expectations toward allies are becoming more specific and more demanding. These may include a clearer strategic position on China, a more proactive role in deterrence against North Korea, and greater participation in regional and global security initiatives. In this context, ambiguity carries increasing risks. If Seoul is perceived as seeking continued U.S. security guarantees while remaining noncommittal on issues Washington considers strategically central, it may reinforce concerns similar to those that Trump expressed toward some European allies.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that South Korea has already taken significant steps to contribute to the alliance. These include sustained increases in defense spending, large-scale investments in the United States, amounting to approximately \$350 billion, and growing cooperation in areas such as shipbuilding and defense industrial capacity.²² Framing these efforts more clearly as contributions to shared security objectives, rather than as parallel or purely economic initiatives, will be important in shaping perceptions in Washington.

Second, the European response illustrates how allies can manage disagreement with the United States without undermining the alliance itself. Denmark and other European states drew a clear line on sovereignty while continuing to emphasize cooperation with Washington. Importantly, they complemented diplomatic messaging with visible, albeit limited, actions, such as multinational deployments, that signaled commitment without escalating tensions.

A particularly notable feature of the response was the degree of coordination among like-minded European allies. Rather than acting individually, multiple states aligned their political messaging and participated in joint activities, reinforcing both deterrence and solidarity. For South Korea, this points to the importance of strengthening coordination with other U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific. Deepening cooperation with partners such as Japan, Australia, and New Zealand can help Seoul demonstrate that it is embedded within a broader network of security contributors, rather than operating solely within a bilateral alliance framework.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that alliance management is becoming more networked as well as more demanding. As U.S. expectations evolve, the challenge for South Korea will not only be to contribute more, but to do so in ways that are visible, strategically aligned, and reinforced through coordination with other like-minded partners.

VI. Conclusion: Greenland and the Future of U.S. Alliances

At first glance, the Greenland crisis appeared to be a dispute over Arctic territory and a crisis within NATO. Yet focusing solely on the institutional implications for the alliance risks overlooking the broader significance of the episode. The Greenland crisis reflects a deeper shift in how the United States views its alliances and the responsibilities of its partners.

For decades, the United States functioned as the central security provider within its alliance system in Europe and Asia. Increasingly, however, Washington expects its allies to assume greater responsibility for regional security and to demonstrate clearer commitments to shared strategic objectives. The crisis surrounding Greenland revealed how frustrations over burden-sharing and perceived gaps in allied contributions can manifest in unexpected ways.

In this context, the Greenland episode should not be interpreted primarily as evidence that NATO is on a path to internal division or that U.S. alliances are fundamentally weakening. Rather, it illustrates the growing tensions that can emerge as the United States recalibrates expectations within its alliance network. As these expectations evolve, moments of political friction between Washington and its allies may become more frequent. These tensions may arise not only over Greenland or the Arctic, but also across other strategic issues that feature prominently in Trump's foreign policy agenda, including the Panama Canal or Cuba, and the broader U.S. engagement in the Western Hemisphere.

For South Korea, the central lesson is that managing alliance expectations and sending clear signals will become an increasingly important task. As the United States encourages its partners to assume a more active role in regional and global security, allies will need not only to demonstrate credible contributions, but also to communicate their strategic intentions clearly. At the same time, it will be equally important for Seoul to articulate what it is already providing within the alliance, most notably its central role in deterring North Korea, which remains one of the United States' core security priorities.

In addition, South Korea should place greater emphasis on coordination with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners. Strengthening alignment with countries such as Japan, Australia, and New Zealand can help ensure that responses to shifting U.S. expectations are not managed in isolation, but collectively. Acting in concert with other partners can both reinforce shared commitments and provide a degree of balance in managing U.S. demands, allowing allies to engage Washington from a position that is coordinated rather than purely bilateral.

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