Defending Against Help in the North American Arctic: Greenland, Canada, and the Limits of Small-State Strategy under Narrative Warfare

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President Donald Trump threatened a long-time ally, the Kingdom of Denmark, with military and economic force to compel the surrender of Greenland, insisting that only American ownership could protect the island from Chinese and Russian encroachment. He has levelled a structurally similar accusation against Canada, asserting that it cannot defend itself while repeatedly suggesting it become the "51st state." Read together, the two cases suggest that "undefended Arctic" rhetoric now functions as a general instrument of sovereignty pressure against North American allies. Smaller states can pursue "defence against help," persuading a larger power that they are strong enough to defend themselves against its potential enemies. This strategy, however, presumes an objective threat environment in which both states can gauge the threshold of military credibility. Drawing on securitization theory, we argue that Washington's campaign was a securitizing move its relevant audiences refused to accept. Furthermore, allied governments refuted claims that Chinese and Russian ships were "all over" Greenland, and Greenlandic, Danish, European, Canadian, and American publics rejected coercive annexation. The September 2026 agreement among the United States, Denmark, and Greenland accommodated U.S. defence requirements within an amended 1951 framework bound to NATO, demonstrating that the ostensible security problem never required American ownership. Yet President Trump's subsequent boasts that Denmark "gave us Greenland" suggest that the narrative has outlived the settlement. Where a large power substitutes unfalsifiable narrative for objective threat assessment, defence against help loses its empirical ground, and smaller Arctic states must pair material investment with a collective, multilateral contest over the narrative itself.

Introduction

Since the start of his second term, President Donald Trump has escalated his campaign to acquire Greenland, an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark (KoD) and, through Denmark, a NATO ally of the United States. What began in August 2019 as what appeared to be a dismissible aside, when Trump told reporters that buying Greenland was "essentially … a large real estate

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deal," strategically interesting but "not No. 1 on the burner," (Associated Press, 2019) had hardened by January 2025 into the president-elect's overt refusal to rule out the use of military or economic coercion to acquire the Arctic territory (Roll Call Factbase, 2025). After US forces seized Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on 3 January 2026, Trump's renewed insistence that the US "needs" Greenland fuelled fresh anxiety about an American "Greenland grab," and Washington's campaign to acquire the island escalated sharply (Sprenger, 2026). This prompted a formal Danish rebuke, a joint statement by European leaders affirming that "Greenland belongs to its people," European troop deployments to Greenland, and warnings from Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen that if the US attacked another NATO country "everything ends," including NATO itself (Gronholt-Pedersen & Jacobsen, 2026; Prime Minister's Office Denmark, 2026; Thorsson, 2026a). Trump grounded the drive for annexation in the language of American national security: Greenland, he argued, was "covered with Russian and Chinese ships all over the place" that Denmark could not repel, and only US ownership could close the gap. His appeal to Greenland as "vital for the Golden Dome that we are building" also folded the island into a broader narrative of continental defence, even though Pituffik Space Base's envisaged role in that layered homeland-defence architecture is that of a sensor and warning node rather than an interceptor base, a role already accommodated under existing defence arrangements (Bouffard et al., 2026; Ciobanu & Dazio, 2026; Trump, 2026). Trump later ruled out the use of force at Davos on 21 January 2026 and announced the "framework of a future deal," (Kurtzleben, 2026) which culminated in a trilateral agreement among the United States, the KoD, and Greenland signed on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly on 22 September 2026 (White House, 2026b).

This article situates Trump's Greenland campaign within "defence against help," a strategy first articulated by Nils Ørvik in the 1970s and subsequently applied to explain how Canada managed its exposure to US strategic interest in the Arctic as an avenue of approach during the Cold War. It argues that defence against help, as classically conceived (Ørvik, 1973), presumes a shared, roughly objective reading of the threat environment between the smaller and larger state. The Greenland case breaks that presumption: Washington's stated rationale for annexation was repeatedly and specifically refuted by Danish and other allied sources, yet the rationale persisted unmodified. To explain this, we bring the defence against help literature into conversation with Copenhagen School securitization theory, which treats threats as constructed through speech acts whose success depends on acceptance by relevant audiences. This suggests a shift from transparent threat assessment to narrative warfare (the construction of a threat as a rhetorical device rather than a falsifiable claim) and a corresponding shift in what a small state must do to protect its sovereignty. We extend the analysis to Canada, where Washington is directing a structurally similar critique of unpreparedness and Ottawa has responded with substantial investments intended to demonstrate its capacity to defend its own Arctic territory. Together, the two cases suggest that when allegations of vulnerability function as instruments of narrative pressure rather than empirically testable assessments, material capability-building must be paired with deliberate, collective efforts to contest the narrative itself.

The argument carries a measure of self-reflection. One of us concluded in 2020–21 that defence against help no longer offered a viable primary justification for Canadian strategic decision-making, and that a refocused relationship should no longer see the United States as a potential sovereignty and security threat (Lackenbauer, 2020; Lackenbauer 2021). The events of 2025–26 have forced a reassessment, and a revival of the concept is already underway in Canadian strategic commentary

(Lagassé & Massie, 2025; Olsvig and Charron, 2026). Our purpose is not simply to resurrect Ørvik but to specify the conditions under which his strategy works, and those under which it cannot. We begin by revisiting the origins and assumptions of defence against help, then introduce the securitization framework and our understanding of narrative warfare. We next analyze the Greenland case, the audiences that rejected Washington's securitizing move, and the September 2026 agreement. Finally, we examine the Canadian parallel in greater depth before drawing out implications for policy and theory.

Defence Against Help: Origins and Assumptions

Ørvik's concept was designed to explain small-state strategies toward an assertive neighbour, drawing initially on the Finnish experience with the Soviet Union. "Even a very small force might be fully credible, provided its objectives are within the limits of its capabilities," Ørvik argued. "One credible objective for small states would be, while not attempting military resistance against a large neighbour, to persuade him that they are strong enough to defend themselves against any of the large neighbour's potential enemies. This could help to avoid the actual military presence of the great neighbour on one's territory for reasons of military 'help' and assistance" (Ørvik, 1973, p. 228). Ørvik suggested the concept might apply to Canada, and it was Canadian scholarship that developed it most fully. In 1981, political scientist Donald Barry argued that Canada, in light of its own national security interests, could not ignore US security requirements nor can it isolate itself from the consequences of American strategic policy decisions (Barry, 1981). That same year, Ørvik himself proclaimed defence against help to be "the basic issue in Canadian national security" (Ørvik, 1981; Ørvik, 1973). Canadian defence spending on continental air defence and northern surveillance could thus be understood as oriented, at least in part, toward establishing enough credibility that Washington would have no pretext to garrison Canadian territory itself to ensure that America was defended against an existential military threat that might pass over or through Canada. Given that polar trajectories made Canada's Arctic the natural avenue of approach for Soviet bombers or missiles targeting the northern continental US, the concept's Canadian point of application was the Arctic: the same theatre now implicated in Trump's rhetoric about Canada (Barry & Bratt, 2008; Lagassé, 2010; Lackenbauer, 2021).

In its classic incarnation, defence against help represents a trilateral equation consisting of an external threat (or threatening context), a smaller state whose security is inextricably linked to the perceived security of a larger neighbour, and the larger power itself. The smaller state's policy decisions are determined by how and what the larger state perceives as threats, whether the smaller state's territory, airspace, or maritime zones can play a role in offsetting or meeting those threats, and whether the smaller state can feasibly sustain enough military credibility to ensure that the larger power does not infringe on its sovereignty in meeting them (Lackenbauer, 2020, pp. 2-3). Canadian history offers ample illustration. In 1938, with a European war looming, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt publicly promised American "help" if Canada were ever attacked, and Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King offered a reciprocal pledge that Canada would take adequate steps to ensure that an enemy could not use the country as a military corridor to the United States (Lackenbauer, 2020, p. 5). Through the early Cold War, Ottawa insisted that guarantees of Canadian sovereignty accompany tightening bilateral defence ties, from the 1955 Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line agreement to the binational North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) agreement of 1957–58, which embedded senior Canadian officers in

continental decision-making and ensured that US activities over Canadian territory would occur within a joint framework rather than unilaterally, essentially creating "no boundaries upstairs" (Jockel, 1987; Bercuson, 1990, p. 155; Lackenbauer, 2021).

The concept has never lacked critics. Andrea Charron and James Fergusson argue that defence against help has always been an inappropriate framework for understanding Canada's defence relations with the US, insisting that Canada's defence decisions have been motivated not by a desire to avoid unwanted help but by a strategy of borrowing help from its larger ally (Charron & Fergusson, 2020, pp. 104–107). Philippe Lagassé observed that Ørvik's concept was prescriptive rather than descriptive: "when Ørvik wrote about Canada and defence against help, he was telling Canadian governments what they ought to do in matters of continental defence, not evaluating what they were already doing" (Lagassé, 2010, p. 464). Nordic and Greenlandic scholarship has recently returned to the concept from another direction. Political scientists Sara Olsvig and Andrea Charron apply Ørvik's framework to Kalaallit Nunaat's defence futures, reading his small-state options as acquiring "Borrowed Power," increasing power, or making do with symbolic power. For most of its modern history, they show, Kalaallit Nunaat had to borrow help from the US on terms set unilaterally in Copenhagen and Washington, with the 1951 agreement giving the Americans "carte blanche to construct, operate, and defend military facilities" on the island. Their critique of Ørvik is instructive for our purposes: his theory assumes full sovereignty and treats help as flowing in one direction, from the large state to the small state, whereas the island's strategic location gives it leverage "that can allow Kalaallit Nunaat to determine the limits of Borrowed Help" (Olsvig & Charron, 2026, pp. 137–138). Their framing also suggests a way to reconcile Charron and Fergusson's critique with Ørvik's original insight: borrowing help and defending against help are not mutually exclusive, and a small state may do both at once, accepting the great power's presence while contesting the terms on which it is delivered. Danish political scientist Ulrik Pram Gad, meanwhile, identifies a distinctive variation in Greenland's response to Trump: lacking the capacity to field military forces of its own, the Government of Greenland accepted Danish efforts to enlist European allies as "help to defend against U.S. help" (Gad, in press).

Whatever its descriptive merits, defence against help rests on three linked assumptions. First, the threat motivating a great power's interest in a smaller ally's territory is measurable: capabilities and stated intent can be assessed by both parties, even if imperfectly. Second, the smaller and larger state can converge on a general sense of what capability is "enough" to deter or manage that threat. Third, a smaller state's investment in its own defence (spending, exercises, military presence) can reduce the larger state's rational justification for direct involvement. The strategy is, in other words, a bargaining move within a shared factual frame. It offers the smaller state a way to trade investments in self-defence for continued sovereign control, precisely because both sides are notionally arguing about the same threat. The Greenland case tests each of these assumptions, and securitization theory helps explain why they failed.

Securitization, Audiences, and Narrative Warfare

Copenhagen School securitization theory has long recognized that threats are partly constructed through the speech acts that name them. In Ole Wæver's formulation, security is not an objective condition so much as a practice: by labelling something a security issue, an actor claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to address it (Wæver, 1995). Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde developed this into a framework in which a securitizing actor presents an issue

as an existential threat to a referent object, thereby seeking to justify extraordinary measures that break free of the rules of normal politics. Crucially, they distinguish between a securitizing move and a successful securitization. A discourse that presents something as an existential threat "does not by itself create securitization—this is a securitizing move, but the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 25). As Marc Jacobsen, Wæver, and Gad note, "even the most powerful actor declaring an emergency situation cannot be sure that it gets away with it"; the audience is "both decisive … and passive," since only an explicit denial allows an analyst to conclude that a securitizing attempt has failed (Jacobsen et al., 2024, p. 10).

Subsequent scholarship has emphasized that audiences are plural and context-dependent, and that securitizing actors must often satisfy several audiences with different capacities to enable or block extraordinary measures (Balzacq, 2005). This insight is particularly relevant in the North American Arctic. Jacobsen and Olsvig trace how the United States portrayed Greenland as a security concern over two centuries, and how Danish officials and, increasingly, Greenlanders gained opportunities to accept or challenge those interpretations (Jacobsen & Olsvig, 2024; Jacobsen et al., 2024, p. 29). Political scientist Scott Watson's analysis of the Cold War Canadian Arctic likewise shows how an overarching macrosecuritization can rank competing security claims, presenting measures that enhance security in one sector (continental military defence) as threats in another (Canadian sovereignty), producing a "securitizing dilemma" that political elites must manage (Watson, 2013). In both cases, the larger power's securitizations of Arctic territory were historically accepted, at least formally, by the governments of the smaller states, which in turn bargained over the terms on which American help would be delivered.

Securitization theory thus compliments defence against help. Ørvik's strategy implicitly assumes that the threat both parties are bargaining over is an objective referent object against which military credibility can be measured. Securitization theory reminds us that threats are always, in part, intersubjective constructions. Yet the distinction between a construction that remains tethered to observable capabilities and one that floats free of them matters a great deal for small states. We use the term narrative warfare to describe the latter: the deployment of a hypothetical, imagined future as though it were an assessed present danger, aimed less at deterring the named adversary than at pressuring the ally accused of failing to prevent that adversary's advance. Narrative warfare draws on the broader repertoire of strategic narratives, through which political actors seek to construct shared meanings of the past, present, and future of international politics in order to shape the behaviour of domestic and international audiences (Miskimmon et al., 2013). What distinguishes narrative warfare is its resistance to falsification. What distinguishes narrative warfare is that contrary evidence does not discredit its central argument; instead, proponents adjust the story to preserve it. In securitization terms, a securitizing move constructed in this way may fail to win audience acceptance and yet persist, because its purpose is not to persuade an audience of a threat but to sustain pressure on the referent object of the securitizing actor's ambitions.

Greenland: Threat as Assertion, Not Assessment

Trump's public justifications for acquiring Greenland centred on the repeated and erroneous claim that Russian and Chinese vessels were operating extensively around the island (Ciobanu & Dazio, 2026; Doan, 2026; Stallard, 2026), at times specifying destroyers from both countries and Russian submarines. On 14 January 2026, the president declared that the US "needs Greenland for the purpose of National Security," that the island was "vital for the Golden Dome that we are

building," and that "IF WE DON'T, RUSSIA OR CHINA WILL, AND THAT IS NOT GOING TO HAPPEN!" Anything less than American control, he insisted, was "unacceptable" (Trump, 2026; *Reuters*, 2026b). These assertions were not accompanied by evidence or a timeline for the alleged Chinese or Russian "design" on the territory that annexation was meant to forestall. In securitization terms, the move was constructed backwards: the extraordinary measure of American ownership had been articulated long before the existential threat and emergency necessary to justify it were supplied.

Other NATO allies directly and repeatedly contradicted this claim. Two senior Nordic diplomats with access to NATO intelligence briefings told the *Financial Times* that there had been no sign of Russian or Chinese ships or submarines around Greenland in recent years. "It is simply not true that the Chinese and Russians are there," one explained. Another added: "There are no ships, no submarines" (*Reuters,* 2026a). Actual Chinese and Russian naval and air activity has been concentrated elsewhere, including in the Bering Sea and around Alaska, where bombers conducted joint operations in the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone for the first time in 2024 (Lamazhapov & Østhagen, 2025). Following a White House meeting with Vice President J.D. Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Danish foreign minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen stated bluntly that "it's not a true narrative that we have Chinese warships all around the place," adding that "according to our intelligence, we haven't had Chinese warships in Greenland for a decade or so" (Tomazin, 2026). For his part, Swedish defence minister Pål Jonson called the claim "an exaggeration according to the assessments that we do for the region," and Swedish public broadcaster SVT's own verification found no Russian-flagged vessels around Greenland (Rothwell, 2026; Sköld & Krona, 2026).

Denmark's response was not confined to rhetorical rebuttal. Since 2019, Copenhagen has committed to concrete Arctic capability packages: an initial DKK 1.5 billion from the 2019 Supplemental Agreement to the Danish Defence Agreement, translated into new surveillance and training initiatives in 2021, was followed by a DKK 14.6 billion package of Arctic naval vessels, long-range drones, and satellite capacity in January 2025, and a further DKK 27.4 billion Second Agreement on the Arctic and North Atlantic in October 2025 covering additional Arctic vessels, a maritime patrol aircraft capability, and a new Joint Arctic Command headquarters in Nuuk (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2021; Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025a; Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025c). Alongside this Arctic-specific build-up, a February 2025 agreement established a DKK 50 billion Acceleration Fund to put Denmark above 3 percent of GDP in allocated defence spending in 2025 and 2026 (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025b). Thus, while Danish Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen acknowledged in January 2025 that Denmark had "neglected for many years to make the necessary investments in ships and in aircraft," by October 2025 he could claim that "we have this year significantly increased our defence presence in the Arctic," and in January 2026 his ministry announced a further expansion of Danish military presence and exercises in and around Greenland in cooperation with allies (Gronholt-Pedersen et al., 2025; Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025c; Danish Ministry of Defence, 2026).

European allies also backed Denmark's national efforts, affirming that Greenland's security was a matter of NATO collective defence rather than a solely American concern. "NATO has made clear that the Arctic region is a priority and European Allies are stepping up," the leaders of Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom declared on 6 January 2026. "It is

for Denmark and Greenland, and them only, to decide on matters concerning Denmark and Greenland" (Prime Minister's Office (Denmark), 2026). Germany, France, Sweden, Norway, Finland, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands subsequently sent personnel to Greenland to help Denmark prepare for larger exercises later in the year (Gronholt-Pedersen & Jacobsen, 2026). These modest deployments were a visible demonstration of collective capability: precisely the kind of credibility-building that defence against help theory predicts should ease a larger power's stated rationale for direct control. They also carried a less publicized purpose, as subsequent reporting revealed that Danish soldiers deployed to Greenland in January carried explosives to disable the runways at Nuuk and Kangerlussuaq should US forces attempt to land troops on the island (Gettleman et al., 2026). Allied "help" to defend Greenland against Russia and China thus doubled as a tripwire against American "help": Gad's "help to defend against help" in material form.

In this case, however, credibility-building did not produce the restraint the model predicts. The Trump administration's response, articulated most bluntly by White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, was not to engage the capability question at all but to dismiss Denmark's standing to hold the territory in the first place. Miller questioned "the basis of their territorial claim," insisted that "nobody is going to fight the U.S. militarily over the future of Greenland," and later declared that "Denmark is a tiny country with a tiny economy, and a tiny military," adding: "They cannot defend Greenland" (Ciobanu and Dazio, 2026; Luciano, 2026; Tolentino, 2026). This illuminates the crux of the problem. Defence against help assumes that closing an observable capability gap will change the larger state's calculus. In Greenland's case, the gap was closed or at least reduced by Denmark's own account of its Arctic capability packages, and by the independent judgment of allied intelligence services. Washington, for its part, had already moved Greenland from US European Command's area of responsibility into US Northern Command's on 17 June 2025, further integrating the island into American homeland defence planning (Olsvig and Charron, 2026, pp. 141, 146). Furthermore, KoD officials reassured the US that, despite the latter's escalating rhetoric and threats of annexation, Denmark remained a dedicated ally that would allow the Americans to enhance their military footprint under longstanding defence agreements extending back to 1951. Nonetheless, the American annexation rhetoric continued unabated. The Trump White House's persistence indicates that the stated threat was never really about a capability deficit awaiting remedy; it was a justification serving other American interests in the territory, among them rare-earth deposits, undersea infrastructure, control of emerging Arctic shipping routes, and the promised Golden Dome system.

Audiences and the Failure of Securitization

If Trump's campaign was a securitizing move, it was one that failed to secure the audience acceptance necessary to legitimize the extraordinary measure of annexation. The first and most consequential audience was in Greenland itself. Greenlandic governments had sought to downplay the security dimensions of economic development and independence, preserving room for manoeuvre in their relations with Denmark. By 2024, however, Naalakkersuisut had explicitly affirmed Greenland's place in the Western alliance and sought a greater voice within NATO, while continuing to resist an expanded military presence (Gad et al., 2024, pp. 228-233, 236; Naalakkersuisut, 2024, pp. 43-45). Greenland's leaders were prepared to accept US securitizations of their territory as a site of American defence installations, but they explicitly and repeatedly denied the securitization of Greenlandic self-determination. That denial was already visible in 2025. After

the March 2025 Greenlandic election, the outgoing and incoming heads of government led the largest public demonstration in years to the US consulate in Nuuk, Naalakkersuisut and Inatsisartut changed legislation to prevent foreign economic support to political parties and substantial foreign investment in real estate, and all five party leaders rejected becoming part of the US, even in a free association arrangement (Olsvig and Charron, 2026, pp. 148-149). In January 2026, Greenland's parliament took the unprecedented step of suspending its regular work so that ministers could concentrate on the crisis, while Premier Jens-Frederik Nielsen declared US claims that only Washington could prevent a Russian or Chinese takeover to be "completely unacceptable" (Gad et al., 2024). In securitization terms, this was an authoritative audience explicitly denying the securitizing move while accepting, and indeed inviting, militarization by Danish and allied forces to protect against help.

The second audience comprised the Danish government and its European allies, who rejected annexation as a remedy while accepting a version of the underlying concern. Here the rhetorical tightrope that small states must walk becomes visible. The same Danish foreign minister who flatly denied the presence of Chinese warships also acknowledged that "there's always a bit of truth in what he is saying," that Denmark and Greenland "definitely share the concern that [the] Arctic is not any longer a low-tension region," and that they shared Washington's concerns "to some extent, but not the methods" (Colombo, 2026). Defending against help in the face of narrative warfare requires refuting specific, objectively false versions of the threat (ships "all over the place") while accepting other, more defensible versions of the same threat (a deteriorating Arctic security environment) to preserve the alliance relationship and keep the dispute within the realm of normal politics. Refuse every version of the threat and the smaller state appears complacent, confirming the larger state's charge of unpreparedness. Accept every version and it concedes the premise on which the extraordinary measure rests.

The third audience was American. Unlike Greenlanders or Danes, US legislators and voters held the formal capacity to constrain or enable presidential action. Congress as an institution did not act decisively to block the president, but individual members of both parties publicly opposed military action, and in January 2026 Senators Jeanne Shaheen and Lisa Murkowski introduced the bipartisan NATO Unity Protection Act to bar the use of federal funds to "blockade, occupy, annex or otherwise assert control" over the territory of a NATO ally (*Al Jazeera*, 2026a). Public opinion was unequivocal: in a Pew Research Center survey conducted in late January 2026, 58 percent of Americans opposed a US takeover of Greenland and only 21 percent favoured it, with even Republicans divided (Shepard, 2026). Rather than generating the domestic consensus associated with successful securitization, the Greenland campaign exposed the political limits of the president's security claim.

The failure of the securitizing move with each of these audiences explains Trump's retreat at Davos and the return of the dispute to negotiated politics. It does not, however, explain why the narrative continued. To understand that we must turn to what the September agreement did, and did not, resolve.

The September 2026 Agreement: Normal Politics and Its Limits

The agreement signed in New York on 22 September 2026 amends and supplements the 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement. It authorizes expanded US modernization activities at Pituffik Space Base and an additional defence area at Narsarsuaq and Mestersvig, establishes procedures

for identifying further defence areas, provides for accelerated review of requests for unmanned installations, and grants US forces free movement, overflight, and undersea access. It commits Denmark to strengthen its multi-domain Arctic posture and interoperability with NATO allies, bars states outside NATO from establishing military installations or a persistent military presence in Greenland without the agreement of all three parties, and restricts control of particularly sensitive sectors by investors from states that are not NATO members, NATO partners, or European Union member states. The agreement has no end date, and should Greenland become independent, it must remain in NATO and assume the rights and obligations stipulated in the agreement. Its preamble affirms Danish sovereignty and recognizes that Greenlanders "constitute a people pursuant to international law with the right to self-determination," while contemplating US military access "including through establishment of a Golden Dome defense system" (White House, 2026b). Trump hailed it as "tremendous for Europe and for the United States and for everybody," Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen described it as "a deal that can last forever," and Greenlandic Premier Nielsen called it "a win-win-win" (*Al Jazeera*, 2026b).

From a defence against help perspective, the agreement is a qualified success. It channelled American "help" back into a negotiated, treaty-based framework that preserves Danish sovereignty and Greenlandic self-determination, and it did so through mechanisms that largely already existed. As analysts at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) observed, "expanded access, basing, and overflight rights were already available under the existing framework," and Washington had reduced its military presence in Greenland after the Cold War by choice (Hernandez-Roy et al., 2026). The agreement therefore provides powerful *ex post* evidence that the military-security problem Trump invoked never required the extraordinary remedy around which his securitization had been constructed. Normal politics, negotiation, and institutional adaptation proved capable of accommodating American security requirements without American ownership.

The agreement also reflects the multilateral turn that Danish and European "help to defend against help" had anticipated. Danish political scientist Lin Alexandra Mortensgaard argues that the agreement's grounding in the North Atlantic Treaty, its distinction between NATO and non-NATO states, and its provisions supporting "a stronger NATO engagement in the Arctic" amount to a "natofication" of the U.S.–Greenland security relationship. This binds the US more tightly to the alliance while giving Denmark and Greenland written assurance that they do not face American military "help" alone (Mortensgaard, 2026). In Ørvik's terms, the smaller states did not persuade the larger state that they could defend themselves alone. Instead, they persuaded it to accept that Greenland would be defended collectively within an alliance framework.

This success came at a sovereignty price that a classical reading of defence against help would not predict. Denmark and Greenland formalized a US veto over third-party military presence and investment in sensitive sectors, and the Greenlandic government committed a future independent Greenland to NATO membership. Mortensgaard reads these provisions as sovereignty curbed for the sake of the alliance, while Christopher Hernandez-Roy, Alex Dalziel, Henry Ziemer, and Otto Svendsen conclude that the document is "a NATO-first rather than an 'America First' document" (Mortensgaard, 2026; Hernandez-Roy et al., 2026). The concessions were not demanded by any change in the objective threat environment, which allied intelligence had consistently assessed as falling well short of the emergency invoked to justify American ownership of Greenland. They

were the price of de-escalation, paid to an ally whose threat narrative had been rejected by every relevant audience but had nonetheless generated leverage. Nor did the settlement restore the trust that the crisis had eroded in Copenhagen and Nuuk (Mortensgaard, 2026).

The settlement did not end the president's narrative that Greenland is, or is destined to become, American territory. Weeks before the agreement was signed, Trump posted to Truth Social, without accompanying text, a map depicting North America, Greenland, and Iceland covered by the US flag and labelled "United States of America" (Thorsson, 2026b). A month after it was signed, the president told a midterm election rally in Georgia that "Denmark was so great. They gave us Greenland," adding: "It's gonna go down as the greatest real estate deal in history, probably after Venezuela" (Roll Call Factbase, 2026). The agreement explicitly reaffirms Danish sovereignty and Greenlandic self-determination, but the president's account of it describes a territorial transfer. For a domestic American audience, the narrative of acquisition is thus being sustained as a *de facto* continuation of the campaign, notwithstanding an agreement that explicitly recognizes Danish sovereignty rather than superseding it. This illustrates how narrative warfare operates: a claim persists despite contrary evidence because it serves the political purposes of the actor advancing it.

From Objective Threat to Narrative Warfare

Defence against help operates within what might be characterized as a problem-solving logic: a bargaining strategy that presumes both parties are arguing, albeit asymmetrically, about the same set of facts related to the strategic threat environment. The Greenland case pushes securitization theory's insight about the constructed nature of threats even further. It is not merely that Washington sought to securitize Chinese and Russian activity near Greenland through rhetoric; the claim underpinning that effort was tested against available intelligence and found erroneous by the ally's own government and other regional experts, while the policy it was invoked to justify proceeded unchanged.

When a larger power's claims about a third-party threat are unfalsifiable in practice (revised in emphasis from ships to destroyers and submarines to a generic risk of future occupation with no timelines) and left unmodified by contrary intelligence from within the alliance itself, a smaller state cannot outperform the threat because the threat is not anchored to any stable, observable referent object it could address. Under these conditions, no amount of defence spending, allied troop rotation, or evidence-based threat assessment can satisfy the credibility test because the test is not actually being adjudicated on capability grounds. Denmark was, in effect, asked to defend against a threat that its own protector would not allow it to disprove. The KoD and Greenland ultimately escaped this trap not by passing the credibility test but by changing the forum in which it was administered from a bilateral relationship in which Washington alone set the threshold to a multilateral one in which allies could share in defining it. Even then, the narrative survived the settlement, suggesting that the most a smaller state can achieve against narrative warfare is containment rather than resolution.

The Canadian Parallel: Shared Dilemma, Different Treatment

Trump has not threatened to take over Canada militarily, and in 2025 he described the prospect of taking Canada by force as "highly unlikely" (Doyle et al., 2026). Canada nonetheless faces a structurally similar critique, interwoven with recurrent "51st state" rhetoric tied to trade and continental defence. In May 2025, Trump declared that joining the Golden Dome would cost

Canada US$61 billion "if they remain a separate, but unequal, Nation," but nothing "if they become our cherished 51st State" (Maimann, 2025). He repeated the offer to senior military officials in September 2025: "Become 51, become the 51st state and you get it for free" (Tasker, 2025). In January 2026, as the Greenland crisis peaked, US officials reported that Trump had complained that Canada could not defend its northern border against Russia or China, with one official insisting that Canadians "certainly need to up their game when it comes to Arctic capabilities," a similar framing to that applied to Greenland and the KoD (Doyle et al., 2026).

The critique has since been institutionalized. On 18 May 2026, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby announced that the US was pausing its participation in the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD), the bilateral body established in 1940 to study the sea, land, and air problems of defending the northern half of the Western Hemisphere, on the grounds that "Canada has failed to make credible progress on its defense commitments" (*Canadian Press*, 2026; Appleton, 2026). Days later, a US defense official stated that Canada "has yet to make the hard decisions and trade-offs needed to put it on track to become a credible partner in the mutual defense of our continent and hemisphere" (Boynton & Cecchini, 2026). The pause carried little operational cost as the PJBD had not met since November 2024, and Toronto-based international trade lawyer Barry Appleton plausibly reads it as leverage timed to coincide with the joint review of the Canada–United States–Mexico Agreement rather than primarily as a defence policy event (Appleton, 2026). In August 2026, the White House declared that President Trump was "finally ending Canada's free ride" on trade issues (White House, 2026a), and the September map that placed Greenland and Iceland under the US flag did the same to Canada (Thorsson, 2026b). The vocabulary of "credibility," the metric of defence against help, has thus been appropriated by the larger state as an instrument of pressure.

As with Greenland, the threat assessment underlying the critique does not withstand scrutiny. Canada's own assessment holds that the risk of conventional military attack in the North American Arctic remains low, and comparative analysis of threats in, to, and through the region concludes that the notion of a full-spectrum military invasion of the North American Arctic is "preposterous." The principal military challenge is instead the proliferating aerospace threat through the region to the continent, which requires a common Canada–U.S. response, coupled with hybrid threats below the threshold of armed conflict (Dean & Lackenbauer, 2026a; Dean & Lackenbauer, 2026b; Lackenbauer, 2025b). Chinese military threats to the Canadian Arctic are largely indirect and speculative. An "undefended Canadian Arctic," vulnerable to Russian and Chinese military encroachment, is therefore no more an objective description than ships "all over" Greenland. The narrative has also found intellectual entrepreneurs who address Northern Canadian audiences directly. Historian Sam Hossack and Lackenbauer document how one American commentator, writing in Northern Canadian outlets, spent years laying the groundwork to justify a US takeover of Greenland while using language that subtly challenged Canadian sovereignty by linking Greenland and Nunavut's shared vulnerabilities (Hossack & Lackenbauer, 2026).

Canada's response has been an explicit, anticipatory exercise in defence against help. In June 2022, Ottawa committed $38.6 billion over twenty years to NORAD modernization, including an Arctic Over-the-Horizon Radar system, new sensors, and infrastructure upgrades (DND, 2022a; DND, 2022b). In June 2025, Prime Minister Mark Carney announced that Canada would reach NATO's

2 percent target ahead of schedule, declaring that the country had been "too reliant on the United States" and pledging new radar, drones, and sensors "to monitor the seafloor and the Arctic" (Gillies, 2025). In March 2026, Carney unveiled a northern plan backed by more than $40 billion, including over $35 billion in federal investment. Its defence measures include $32 billion for forward operating locations in Yellowknife, Inuvik, and Iqaluit and at 5 Wing Goose Bay and $2.67 billion for new Northern Operational Support Hubs and Nodes, alongside the $6.5 billion Arctic Over-the-Horizon Radar being developed with Australia. His framing echoed Ørvik almost exactly: "Canada cannot rely on another country for our security and prosperity," and "Canada is taking full responsibility for defending our Arctic sovereignty" (Prime Minister of Canada, 2026a). Canadian scholars have urged Ottawa to go further. Lagassé and Massie explicitly call for a revival of defence against help, arguing that a more plausible risk than invasion is a US "help" operation that might extend into the Arctic and never end, and that Canada must develop sovereign capabilities so that it "could credibly say to the United States: 'We don't need your help'" (Lagassé & Massie, 2025).

Canadian audiences have also shifted in ways that resemble the Greenlandic and Danish response. A May 2025 poll found that 37 percent of Northern Canadians identified the US as the most serious threat in the Arctic, compared to 35 percent for Russia and 17 percent for China, and Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy's optimism about the Canada–U.S. partnership already seemed outdated within months of its release (Lackenbauer, 2025c). Carney's January 2026 warning at Davos that the world was "in the midst of a rupture, not a transition" placed Canadian strategy squarely within that reassessment (Prime Minister of Canada, 2026b). Yet Canadian experts have also cautioned against going it alone, noting that there is no scenario in which Canada could defend its portion of the North American aerospace domain by itself with current capabilities, and that the real concern is less that the US will fail to defend the Canadian Arctic than that it might do so without meaningful Canadian input (Boynton, 2026). That concern is Ørvik's, restated for an era of all-domain continental defence.

The comparison between Canada and Greenland should not be overdrawn, and the differences are as instructive as the parallels. First, there is no history of American purchase offers for Canadian territory analogous to the Truman administration's 1946 offer to buy Greenland for $100 million in gold, itself one episode in a long history of American securitizations of the island (Ewing, 2019; Jacobsen & Olsvig, 2024). Second, NORAD structures the binational defence relationship in a fundamentally different way than the 1951 agreement between the US and the KoD. Where the 1951 agreement left the US to "assist" Denmark with Greenland's defence from designated defence areas, NORAD embeds Canadians in a joint command, so that American "help" in the air and space domains is already partly Canadian (United Nations Treaty Series, 1951). Third, Washington's leverage over Canada has been primarily economic rather than military, and Canadian officials have generally treated annexationist rhetoric as rhetorical excess. Fourth, Canada is not a microstate seeking a path to independence but a middle power with the fiscal and industrial capacity to generate credible Arctic capabilities, which makes the material dimension of defence against help more feasible for Ottawa than it ever has been for Nuuk. Fifth, Canada is itself a beneficiary of American "help" in Greenland: the U.S. base in Pituffik, for example, is an important staging point for the resupply of Canadian Forces Station Alert and other High Arctic sites (Olsvig & Charron, 2026, p. 141). Sixth, the Greenland agreement may itself benefit Canada by reinforcing NATO's role in Arctic defence and extending the alliance's northern and western flanks into the North

American Arctic, even as its references to defence of the "American" continent and the persistence of "Fortress America" thinking in Washington signal that the onus remains on Canada to build operational capacity (Hernandez-Roy et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, the underlying grievance Washington has voiced against both Canada and KoD/Greenland rests on the same assertion of Arctic vulnerability to Russia and China, offered with little specificity, used to justify an American imperative to bolster its defences and to question its allies' standings. If that grievance follows the Greenland pattern and hardens into an unfalsifiable narrative rather than a measurable capability gap, Canada's defence against help investments in its Arctic as part of broader North American defence may encounter the same a credibility test that Denmark faced and which cannot be passed because it is not really about capability at all. As Lackenbauer argued before Parliament in October 2025, "Canada needs its own narrative," and "we cannot simply rely on the United States to define that narrative" (Lackenbauer, 2025a).

Conclusion and Implications

Despite its critics, we contend that defence against help remains a coherent strategy when a threat can be assessed and negotiated between a smaller state and its larger neighbour. The Greenland case suggests that this condition can no longer be assumed in the North American Arctic. Where a protecting power substitutes narrative for assessment (invoking a hypothetical, subjectively imagined danger rather than an objective, measurable one), traditional markers of credibility such as defence spending, exercises, and allied presence may fail to produce the reassurance or restraint that defence against help theory predicts. Securitization theory helps to explain why. Trump's securitizing move failed with every audience capable of legitimizing annexation, yet the narrative persisted because its function was to sustain pressure rather than to persuade. The September 2026 agreement demonstrated that the security problem could be resolved through normal politics, but it did not resolve the narrative, which the US president continues to deploy.

This has substantive implications for policymakers in Copenhagen, Nuuk, and Ottawa. First, material investment in defence against help should be paired with a deliberate contest over the narrative itself. This includes public refutation of specific claims, as Nordic diplomats and Danish officials undertook with respect to Trump's unsubstantiated declarations about Chinese and Russian presence around Greenland, as well as independent or multilateral verification (through NATO or the European Union) rather than bilateral arguments with Washington alone which afford no external check on subjective assertions. Such a contest requires walking a rhetorical tightrope of refuting objectively false versions of the threat while acknowledging the genuine deterioration of the Arctic security environment, so that the smaller state is not cast as complacent. Second, it is advisable to frame sovereignty questions in explicitly multilateral rather than bilateral terms. The European deployments to Greenland and the "natofication" of the September agreement show that "help to defend against help" from allies can do more to constrain Washington than further demonstrations of unilateral capability to defend against an amorphous Arctic threat. For Canada, this points toward deepening Arctic defence cooperation with Nordic and European allies and treating NATO's northern flank and NORAD as complementary rather than separate commitments. Third, smaller states should recognize that settlements reached under narrative pressure carry costs, including sovereignty concessions unrelated to any change in the objective threat environment, and that a settlement may contain a narrative without ending it. As

Olsvig and Charron caution, it is up to the smaller state to preplan its options "lest the great powers dictate its 'choice'" (Olsvig and Charron, 2026, p. 150).

More broadly, the securitization and small-state literatures have generally theorized threat construction as something adversaries do to one another. The Greenland and Canadian cases point to an undertheorized dynamic of threat construction by a "protecting" power against the very ally it claims to be protecting. Whether defending against help can address this emerging dynamic in the North American Arctic has implications for regional and broader alliance cohesion, as well as small-state strategy more generally in a world grappling with a "rupture" in the rules-based international order (Carney, 2026).

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