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How Trump's Greenland obsession could land him in a military stockade

If Trump's threat to annex Greenland ever became an actual order — it would be illegal. And he would be subject to a U.S. military tribunal

By **Brett Wagner, J. Holmes Armstead**, Contributors

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A member of the Danish military walks in front of the Joint Arctic Command center in Nuuk, Greenland, on

Friday. European countries are now prepositioning military forces to Greenland under their own flags as a deterrence to a possible U.S. invasion.
Evgeniy Maloletka/Associated Press



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How Trump's Greenland obsession could land him in a military stockade

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Four hundred years ago, a representative of the Dutch West India Company purchased Manhattan from its natives for the equivalent of \$24 in beads and trinkets, according to legend.

Fast forward to 2026, and a failed former Manhattan real estate investor now seems to think the same formula should work for him in the 21st century, that he should be able to purchase Greenland — or annex our neighbor to the north by military force if they're unwilling to sell.

European allies are now prepositioning military forces to Greenland under their own flags as a deterrence to a possible U.S. invasion and to calm local fears.

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While President Donald Trump's lamebrain scheme to make Canada our 51st state may have dropped out of the conversation, at least for now, Greenland, part of Denmark, has moved front and center. In addition to Trump's rhetoric, at least one Republican member of Congress has already introduced supporting legislation to make Greenland the newest star on the flag. (Sorry, Puerto Rico — better luck next time.)

Let's be clear: Canada, Denmark and the United States (along with Britain, France, Germany and 26 other sovereign nations) are NATO allies, legally bound under international law by a treaty, Senate-ratified, which bears the full weight of law in the United States.



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Full stop.

The U.S. military obeying an order to "annex" a NATO ally, by force, intimidation or otherwise, would be patently illegal, a criminal act punishable by law.

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NATO is more than just a mutual defense pact; it is a living, breathing alliance where militaries train and operate jointly. Our allies are the same nations that joined us, in solidarity, on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq following the attacks of 9/11, when then-President George W. Bush invoked the common defense clause in Article 5 of the NATO agreement, where an attack on one is considered an attack on all.

It bears noting that Denmark was one of our first allies to rally to our defense and to put boots on the ground; the Danes and Greenlanders suffered the highest casualties per capita of any nation in the coalition. It is inconceivable that any member of our military would ever lift a finger against our NATO brethren. Especially Denmark. Especially Greenland.

Enter Trump.

Our commander in chief seems to believe the Atlantic alliance is nothing more than another norm for him to blast through. He is, of course, sadly mistaken. Because Denmark is already signaling that, should push come to shove, shots will be fired. Danes will not go down without a fight.

Where the concern in Trump's first term centered around whether the president might try to withdraw the U.S. from NATO, those fears have given way in the second term to a new reality where he's apparently contemplating whether to invade one of its members. All while cheekily claiming that if he doesn't, Russia or China will.

A full year into his second term, however, few seem willing to call out the president on a fundamental reality.

So, we will.

If Trump's unhinged threat to annex Greenland ever did become an actual order — it would be illegal.

It doesn't matter that the order came from a "superior officer." We hanged 12 Nazi war criminals after the Nuremberg trials

for this same conduct. "Just following orders," like at Nuremberg, will not be an excuse. Even if that order comes from the president.

Just because the commander in chief of our nation's armed forces is also our duly elected president, with all the powers invested in that high office, that does not imply, in any way, that the president has unchecked power over the military. A president must follow the law, too, or face the consequences.

Normally, in a situation where subordinates believe themselves to have received what appears to be an unlawful order from their superior officer, that subordinate should object and then ask for clarification. Normally, this action would serve to alert the superior officer that there's a problem.

In a hypothetical case such as this, however, where the order in question is coming directly from the president, this process would be turned on its ear — a commander in chief, in this case, who went to great pains to eliminate disagreement, in advance, by appointing malleable underlings who have agreed, also in advance, to blindly obey. Trump also systematically removed military lawyers who would normally act to screen inappropriate behavior and unlawful conduct. This signaled his desire from the beginning to subvert the law or to break it altogether.

Hopefully, our four-star military leaders are already discussing this privately amongst themselves. And they will be prepared, en masse, to inform their commander in chief that none of them will be implementing an illegal order.

One might reasonably expect Trump, at that point, to attempt to do what he always does: blast through the norm, invent a rationale on the fly and find himself a lackey who will carry out his bidding.

Fortunately, for American democracy and for the future of our military, that's not how things work.

Should the president cross this immutable line in the sand — ordering military action against our NATO ally — the law has been broken.

Period.

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At that point, the commander of the Military District of Washington — the officer who has criminal jurisdiction, through the Uniform Code of Military Justice, over all military personnel in the federal district, including the commander in chief — would bring Trump not in front of a sitting judge or a jury of his peers, as is the case in civilian court, but to a military tribunal. This tribunal would be empowered to try war crimes in a legal venue where the Supreme Court has no authority to grant immunity, as it did in its controversial 2024 ruling in *Trump v. United States*. Instead, the district commander would have the authority, the mechanism and *the sacred duty* to effectuate an arrest of Trump and to initiate criminal proceedings.

Uncharted territory, to say the least, but then again, so were the Nuremberg trials. And everyone remembers how those turned out.

Brett Wagner served as professor of national security decision-making for the U.S. Naval War College and adjunct fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. J. Holmes Armstead served as professor of strategy and international law at the U.S. Naval War College and as a judge advocate general, inspector general and civil affairs officer in the Army, Army

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