

Despite Trump claim, Greenland not in peril

WASHINGTON

U.S. and E.U. officials say they're unaware of Russia or China threats

BY EDWARD WONG

Fourteen years ago, a Chinese icebreaker called the Snow Dragon made a long and surprising voyage.

Over three months in the summer, the scientific research vessel crossed from the Pacific to the Atlantic, traversing nearly 5,400 nautical miles (10,000 kilometers) of the Arctic Ocean, a first for China. The crew discovered that melting ice meant the ship could travel through the remote region without great difficulty, the expedition leader told reporters after docking in Iceland.

"To our astonishment," said the leader, Huigen Yang, "most part of the Northern Sea Route is open."

American and European officials took notice at the time and began keeping a close watch on China's moves in the Arctic.

But while China has talked about expanding trade and access to shipping lanes and natural resources in the Arctic, it has developed only a small footprint there over the years. And even as China and Russia compete with the United States in many parts of the world, they do not present a threat to American interests in or near Greenland, say experts on those two superpowers and current and former U.S. officials, including intelligence analysts.

Those findings contrast sharply with assertions by President Trump, who has repeatedly cited security as the reason he wants to acquire Greenland. In a speech last week at an annual forum in Davos, Switzerland, he said Greenland was an "enormous, unsecured island" that was a "core national security interest of the United States of America."

"It's been our policy for hundreds of years to prevent outside threats from entering our hemisphere, and we've done it very successfully," he added.

At a meeting on Jan. 14 in Washington, Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio asked the Danish foreign minister, Lars Lokke Rasmussen, and the foreign minister of Greenland, Vivian Motzfeldt, whether Denmark had the resources to protect Greenland against any potential future threat from China, Mr. Rasmussen said in an interview.

However, Mr. Trump and his aides have not presented any intelligence that points to Chinese threats to Greenland.

China has increased its collaboration with Russia on maritime patrols and long-range bomber patrols in the vast Arctic region, said Gen. Alexus G. Grynke, the top NATO commander in Europe. But allied officials say there is no looming threat, and in any case, Greenland falls under the NATO security umbrella.

If any problems were to emerge, the United States could expand its military presence in Greenland under a 1951 U.S.-Denmark pact. Denmark, which has sovereignty over the autonomous island, has said it would welcome more



Nuuk, Greenland's capital. President Trump has said acquisition is needed for security, but some see that as a pretext. "He wants the greatest land deal in history," one analyst said.

American troops. The United States had about 10,000 troops in Greenland during the Cold War, 50 times as many as the 200 there now.

Although China does have a long-term goal of projecting naval power globally, it is focused on building up its military for deployment mainly in the Asia-Pacific region, where it is vying with the United States for dominance.

"Regarding China, there's no military activity near Greenland," said John Culver, a former intelligence analyst on China who briefed Mr. Trump in his first term. "If this administration had any intel about actual threats, it would be leaked."

"I've never read anything that shows China has military designs on Greenland," he added.

Senator Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat who receives regular briefings from U.S. intelligence officials, expressed a similar view.

"Let me be clear: As vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, I'm closely tracking the facts, and there is no current military threat from Russia or China to Greenland," he said last week in a statement to The New York Times. "The only immediate threat right now is from the United States, with talk of taking territory from one of our closest allies."

"Denmark has been clear: If we want expanded military access or greater co-

operation on critical minerals, they're open to it, but it must be done in partnership, not through intimidation and saber rattling," Mr. Warner added. "When we create chaos with our allies, we weaken America's ability to meet real global threats and make ourselves less safe."

China and Russia collect some intelligence near Greenland and in the Arctic that is focused mostly on activities at the U.S. military's Pituffik Space Base in Greenland, an American official said. But neither country has threatened Greenland's sovereignty or security, said that official and another U.S. official.

China is focused on the Asia-Pacific region and Russia, though an Arctic power, is not seen as an immediate threat.

Mr. Culver said China does not need Greenland or to get close to the American mainland to launch nuclear warheads at the continental United States. The same goes for Russia.

Some former U.S. officials said they were concerned about the strains that Mr. Trump's push to control Greenland was putting on relations between the United States and its European allies and how the tensions weakened the ability of those nations to challenge or deter

Chinese or Russian ambitions across the globe.

"We already have de facto control in Greenland," said Rush Doshi, a former China director on the Biden White House's National Security Council. "The marginal increase in control we might get from taking the territory threatens to blow up our relations with important allies and partners."

Those relations are needed for the United States and its allies to work together to re-industrialize at scale in order to compete with China, he added.

Mr. Doshi said China does seek to make commercial inroads in the Arctic, but the United States can address those in talks with allies and partners. And any Arctic challenge from China, he said, is "less significant than the Soviet threat during the Cold War, and even during the Cold War, we didn't militarily seize Greenland. If we didn't seize it then, what's the reason to seize it now?"

Mr. Trump has mentioned that Greenland has critical minerals, which are important for civilian and military uses. Last year, Chinese leaders threatened to impose bans on exports of its processed rare earths and critical minerals to the United States, which compelled Mr. Trump to back down from his trade war with China.

Mr. Trump has said that having access to the raw minerals is not the main issue for the United States, but rather

having the ability to process and refine them. China has a global monopoly on that production, and U.S. territorial control of Greenland would not change that.

As for Russia, it has been an Arctic power since the Cold War, but it does not pose an immediate threat to Greenland, said Fiona Hill, a senior director for Russian and European affairs in the first Trump administration. "Trump has become obsessed with owning it," she said. "He wants the greatest land deal in history — that's the context."

Mr. Trump's statements in interviews about his personal desire to acquire Greenland underscore the idea that the concern over security appears to be a pretext. It is similar to how he cited drug smuggling from Venezuela last fall as the rationale for his renewed aggression against that country when the actual core reason turned out to be his drive for its oil.

Speaking about Greenland, Mr. Trump said in a Times interview this month that taking it was "psychologically important for me." And in 2021, he told the authors of the book "The Divider" that he needed to acquire the island because it was "massive."

Mr. Doshi said, "Is this really about China and Russia, or is the discussion of what is behind the drive for Greenland, which is an imperial project based on vanity?"

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