

# The Greenland crisis

## Implications for transatlantic and global security

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**Transatlantic relations have been shaken by the crisis that was triggered by President Donald Trump's territorial claims on Greenland. Trump suggested that the US was prepared to use military force to achieve its goals. Beyond Denmark and self-governing Greenland, the crisis quickly involved all of Europe and exposed fundamental problems in the transatlantic relationship. Although the crisis has been temporarily averted, it could flare up again. This memo analyses the actions of key players during the crisis and discusses the potential consequences for transatlantic, European, and global security.**

**T**HE GREENLAND CRISIS is far more than a bilateral Danish-American issue. It has prompted extensive discussion about the end of NATO, the transatlantic relationship that has existed since 1945, and the rules-based world order of which NATO is a component.

NATO has often been subjected to severe strain throughout its existence since 1949. The alliance's demise has been predicted many times. It still endures, but the crisis may also prove to be the beginning of the end of NATO in its current form.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen emphasised early on that US military action against Greenland would spell the end of NATO and the European security order. At the height of the crisis, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney maintained that the international rules-based world order has been replaced by one in which major powers ruthlessly exploit their power.

This study analyses a number of key actors—the US, Denmark and Greenland, Germany, the UK, France, Denmark's Nordic neighbours, the Baltic states, Poland, NATO, the EU, Russia, and China—and draws tentative conclusions about their actions and how the crisis may affect their security policies going forward, primarily over the next five years.

The Greenland issue is hardly resolved and can be expected to remain an element in America's relations with Europe, Russia, and China. From the US, we can generally expect continued tough action against allies and reduced engagement in Europe. NATO allies must

decide whether this behaviour is primarily linked to Trump or whether we are seeing a more fundamental US reorientation, and how to balance adaptation and resistance in relation to the US. Europe acted with relative unity during the crisis, but it is uncertain whether this unity will last and whether Europe can mobilise the resources required when the US role in transatlantic security is changing dramatically. The crisis brought gains for Russia and China. Examples include a shift in attention away from Russia's war in Ukraine and a possible opening for China to strengthen its economic ties with Europe at the expense of the US.

This introduction is followed by a brief historical background and an overview of the course of the crisis. The selected actors are then analysed. The memo concludes with a discussion of security policy implications, including from a slightly longer-term perspective.

### **COURSE OF EVENTS**

When Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany in 1940, Greenland, which had been a Danish colony since 1721, was thrown into the realm of great power politics. The island, which was important for the protection of American convoys to Europe, among other things, was under US military protection from 1941 to 1945. During the Cold War, Greenland played an important role in the defence of North American airspace and the North Atlantic. In 1946, Denmark declined a (non-public) American offer to

purchase Greenland, but in 1951 a Danish-American defense agreement was established that allowed for a significant American presence in Greenland.

After the Cold War, US interest in Greenland waned, but it increased again from 2014 against the backdrop of heightened great power competition worldwide, including in the Arctic. In 2019, Trump publicly proposed that the US should buy Greenland. This was rejected by Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen as “absurd,” prompting Trump to cancel a planned visit to Denmark, among other things.

When Trump was re-elected president in 2024, tensions over the Greenland issue intensified and, in December 2025, morphed into a crisis when Trump reiterated, citing threats from Russia and China, that US national security required control of Greenland. The governments of Denmark and Greenland stated that an American annexation was unacceptable. At the same time, they expressed interest in cooperating with the US.

In early January, the heads of government of France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Denmark issued a joint statement expressing their interest in Arctic security and cooperation with the US, while also supporting the territorial integrity of Denmark and Greenland.

On January 14, at Denmark’s request, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President J.D. Vance met with the foreign ministers of Denmark and Greenland in Washington. After the meeting, the Danish foreign minister said that “fundamental differences” remained but that discussions would continue. A Danish–American working group was also formed.

At the same time, Denmark invited the US to participate in the Arctic Endurance military exercise in Greenland. The US declined, but France, Germany, the UK, Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, Iceland, and Belgium accepted. Trump then threatened to impose toll increases on several of these countries, including Sweden, by 10 percentage points. This triggered intense activity within the EU. On January 20, the European Parliament decided to suspend ratification of the 2025 trade agreement with the US. The EU also discussed introducing its own tolls against the US and using the EU’s most powerful economic instrument: the EU Anti-coercion Instrument. This instrument enables the EU to take powerful countermeasures to protect itself against pressure from third parties, something that has come to be known as the “trade bazooka.”

On January 21, Trump changed his stance in significant respects. During his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, he maintained that the US

should own Greenland, but said he did not intend to use force to take over the island. He also cancelled the toll increases against countries participating in Arctic Endurance. After talking to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Trump said that there was a framework for a future agreement on Greenland. The Greenland crisis thus entered a new and calmer phase.

NATO is discussing an increased presence in the Arctic, and Denmark/Greenland have declared themselves willing to discuss this with the US, including the extension of the Golden Dome missile defence system to Greenland. However, the more specific meaning of the “Davos solution” remains unclear. For example, it is unknown what, if anything, has been agreed, and whether the US accepts Danish sovereignty.

### **THE US—NEW POLICY, NEW STYLE**

America’s actions regarding Greenland are best understood as an expression of both the Trump administration’s broader national security policy shift and President Trump’s unconventional leadership style. Trump has consistently criticised his predecessors for leading the country in the wrong direction, culturally, socially, economically, and in terms of national security policy. This criticism is directed, among other things, at America’s role as guarantor of the rules-based global order, which is seen as a liability. According to the Trump administration, the US is paying the costs of an order under which it is systematically disadvantaged, for example through unfavourable trade agreements and unnecessary subsidies for the security of its allies. Multilateral institutions are viewed with deep suspicion. The administration also claims that US foreign and security policy has often been overly based on misguided ideology and abstract values, rather than tangible US interests.

Against this backdrop, the administration says it wants to radically reshape the international order and narrow the definition of the national interest. This means reducing commitments and dependencies and putting what it perceives as US interests first. Transactionalism, demands for reciprocity, and a focus on concrete gains here and now are central. Together with Trump’s way of making decisions and acting in public, this can give the impression of short-sighted and impulsive policies, but this does not rule out long-term strategic thinking within the administration.

Great power competition, especially with China, is a key driving force. The US prioritises securing the Western Hemisphere and limiting the influence of other major powers there, while its ambition in other regions is to establish balances of power that favour the US,

rather than to maintain a cohesive international order. One consequence is that allies, especially in Europe, are expected to take greater responsibility for their own security rather than, as the administration perceives it, freeloading on America's military strength.

The Trump administration's criticism of Europe is not limited to hard security. It describes parts of Europe as economically overregulated and threatened by civilisational collapse due to mass immigration, questions the democratic legitimacy of several European governments, and praises "patriotic" parties. The EU is seen as a symbol of both Europe's misguided policies in several areas and one of the institutions that has ruthlessly exploited US generosity and benevolence. European criticism of the US and the change of course that Trump represents is perceived as ungrateful and short-sighted. From the perspective of the Trump administration, if no course correction takes place, several European states risk gradually becoming liabilities rather than assets, for the US, NATO, the regional balance of power, and Western civilisation, something that the administration is not prepared to accept.

Several of these lines are reflected in the Trump administration's Greenland policy—great power competition with China and Russia, America's role in the Western Hemisphere, the argument that Denmark and NATO cannot defend Greenland—and strategic considerations may indeed have played a role as driving forces. US plans for the Golden Dome missile defence system and Greenland's projected role in defending against Russian and Chinese nuclear missiles, are also part of the picture, which may become more important after the expiration of the START treaty.

At the same time, Trump's unique leadership style, characterized by radical initiatives, confrontation, threats and flattery, high-stakes bidding, the personalisation of politics, and dominance over the news cycle, has shaped US actions. His background in the real estate sector and his desire for a historical legacy in line with previous presidents associated with territorial expansion may also have been important drivers of his actions before and during the crisis. The knowledge that the 2026 mid-term elections could limit Trump's room for manoeuvre may also have contributed to his willingness to act quickly and decisively.

The Trump administration is prepared to use tough measures to achieve its goals. The president prefers bilateral interaction, where America's economic, political, and military weight can be fully leveraged to extract concessions from smaller players, something that is more difficult within multilateral frameworks. This approach can

be described as aggressive unilateralism: the US takes short-term risks to strengthen its strategic position in the long term, with limited consultation with allies and partners—or, in the case of Denmark/Greenland, in direct confrontation with them. One could also say that Trump is making short-term gains at the expense of America's long-term position.

Trump's threat of tolls against European countries that participated in Arctic Endurance deviates from previous practice in transatlantic relations but is in line with his earlier actions as president. It is unclear whether Trump intended to carry out his threats to use force against a NATO ally, but, regardless, these statements represent something new both in relation to his first term and historically.

There may have been several reasons why Trump backed down from his demands, including significant bipartisan opposition in Congress and among the American public, the EU's threat of economic countermeasures, NATO allies' support for Denmark, and Mark Rutte's intervention. In-depth analysis of what caused Trump to back down, and assessments of which factor was the most important driving force behind his actions, will have significant implications for European actors' policy towards the US and the management of future transatlantic crises.

The Greenland crisis may flare up again, and the de-escalation should not be interpreted as a change in the overall course of US national security policy, which includes elements such as fundamental criticism of the rules-based world order and its institutions, a narrowly defined national interest, unilateralism, a tougher policy towards allies, and perhaps even expansion at their expense and the use of force against them. The combination of America's strategic change of course and Trump's leadership style contributes to considerable uncertainty about both America's goals and how far the country is prepared to go to achieve them.

## **DENMARK AND GREENLAND—THE REALM UNDER PRESSURE**

President Trump's claim over Greenland has initiated a fundamental reassessment of Danish security policy. The Danish-American security relationship has its roots in World War II, and since the end of the Cold War, Denmark has emerged as an active NATO member and one of America's most loyal allies. At the same time, Danish politicians were not prepared to increase defence spending to the level desired by the US. However, Trump's demands on allies to significantly increase defence spending and

his desire to buy Greenland, which became apparent during his first term in office, led to a rude awakening among Danish and Greenlandic politicians.

Danish and Greenlandic politicians were therefore prepared when Trump's demand for control over Greenland resurfaced at the end of 2025. During the crisis, they maintained close dialogue, conveyed a unified message, and acted proactively. They signalled that Denmark's and Greenland's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected, requested a meeting with US representatives, consulted with allies, and announced expanded military exercises in and around Greenland, to which several allies contributed. Prime Minister Frederiksen made it clear that US military action against Greenland would spell the end of NATO and the current European security order. Danish politicians concluded that they had to counter America's demands and signal that Denmark took its sovereignty and Arctic security seriously, which meant that it would not hesitate to defend the island if necessary.

Despite the political unity shown during the acute phase of the crisis, Denmark's relationship with self-governing Greenland is complicated. There is a Greenlandic bitterness towards historical Danish colonial policy that still permeates the relationship today. Since the introduction of extended self-government in 2009, Denmark has had primary responsibility for security and defence policy, economic policy, and the judiciary within the Realm (*Rigsfællesskabet*), which comprises Denmark, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. However, efforts towards Greenlandic independence remain, even if the issue currently seems to have fallen further down the agenda. As long as Greenland is part of the Realm, it is possible for Denmark to manage and limit Russian, Chinese, and American influence, but with full independence, that possibility would disappear.

The combination of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and strident American demands has prompted a series of initiatives to strengthen Danish defence. Missing capabilities are being acquired at a rapid pace and, in 2025, two modernisation packages focusing on the Arctic were presented. The aim is to counter Russian power projection in the Arctic and North Atlantic, and the packages include investments in capabilities to detect Russian aircraft, ships, and submarines in the waters between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom (the GIUK Gap).

Danish defence cooperation and investments have been rebalanced from a mainly transatlantic focus towards the Nordic region and the European great powers. The extent of this shift will largely depend

on whether, and if so how, the Greenland crisis will be resolved. A more extensive shift in Danish priorities from the US to Europe would be indicated by the collapse of negotiations with the US; the Greenlandic self-government choosing, more or less voluntarily, to join the US in exchange for financial compensation; European allies, rather than NATO as an organisation, taking responsibility for security in the North Atlantic and the European Arctic; Danish or Greenlandic public opinion demanding the terminating of the 1951 defence agreement; and Denmark radically prioritising European over American defence equipment.

### **E3—RALLYING BEHIND DENMARK**

Europe's three major powers (the E3), France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, have had different relationships and collaborations not only with the US, but also with the EU, during the post-war period. The United Kingdom has a historic alliance with the US and, in addition, a strategic dependence on American components for its national nuclear force. Germany has built its security policy identity around a strong transatlantic link, an extensive US military presence in the country, and its NATO membership. France's relationship with the US has been characterised by a more critical approach, with a strong desire for independence. Unlike that of the UK, France's nuclear arsenal is autonomous and produced domestically in France. Both Germany and France are central to cooperation within the EU, unlike the EU-sceptical UK, which only joined the EEC in 1973 and left the EU in 2020. In 2025, the UK, to some extent Germany, and to a lesser extent France, sought to accommodate Trump. Despite these differences, all three countries reacted strongly to Trump's claim over Greenland and rallied behind Denmark.

### **Increased engagement in the Arctic**

In recent years, the E3 countries have increased their engagement in the Arctic. The UK has long seen itself as a close neighbour to the region and has been involved in NATO military exercises, most recently through the Atlantic Bastion strategic concept. The concept's purpose is to develop the ability to hunt Russian submarines, including in the GIUK Gap. The UK has also initiated and leads the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a rapid response force primarily intended for operations in the Baltic Sea region, the North Atlantic, and the Arctic.

In the case of Germany and France, their involvement has been accentuated in recent times. Over the past year, the German navy has both led and participated in operations aimed at increasing NATO's deterrence in

the Arctic and North Atlantic. Germany has signalled its intention to expand its involvement along NATO's northern flank and to participate in future operations. In July 2025, a new French defence strategy for the Arctic was launched, aimed at expanding France's presence and influence in the Arctic, deepening cooperation with Arctic allies, and adapting more of its military capabilities to the region's requirements.

Trump's move put the E3 countries' engagement in the Arctic to the test. Each of the countries signalled its support for Denmark and Greenland early on, both politically and militarily. They were all part of the group of eight allied states that sent military personnel to the island and expressed support for Denmark and Greenland in joint statements.

### **Mixed reactions to the toll threat**

France and Germany's reactions to Trump's threat of tolls have been stronger than those of the UK. French President Emmanuel Macron described the threat as blackmail and sought to mobilise support among other European leaders for activating the EU's Anti-coercion Instrument, if warranted by the situation. The German government also made it clear that all economic countermeasures were on the table.

The French president has warned that acceptance of "the right of the strong" would lead to "neo-colonialism" and "vassalage." In Paris, there is recognition of Denmark's situation. France has thirteen overseas territories around the world, and there are fears that Trump's claim to Greenland could set a precedent that threatens French sovereignty over these areas.

While Macron's frankness can be understood in the light of French foreign policy tradition, Keir Starmer's statement that "Britain will not yield" was more remarkable. Firstly, the UK positioned itself alongside the European countries. Secondly, Starmer has previously pursued a strategy aimed at avoiding confrontation with President Trump. At the same time, the British government has been careful to emphasise the UK's dependence on the US in terms of security, as well as the importance of maintaining the special relationship between the two countries.

### **A continuation of existing trends**

The initial aftermath of the Greenland crisis points to a strengthening of existing trends in the E3 countries.

France is experiencing a tailwind for the idea of European strategic autonomy. Macron has described the Greenland crisis as a strategic wake-up call for the whole of Europe. However, he is likely to be referring

more to other European states than France. From the French perspective, the events are seen as proof of the need to reduce dependence on "everything that is not European" by developing the defence capabilities of European states, European production, and prioritising European defence equipment.

The UK is caught between the US and Europe. The crisis has not changed the fundamentals of its relationship with the US and NATO. Its deep dependence on the US for defence and nuclear deterrence means that the UK is likely to continue to safeguard a close relationship. At the same time, there is talk of a restart with the EU under the Labour government.

Germany is trying to balance the transatlantic relationship through a kind of diversification and reducing its dependence on the US by increasing its own strength. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz emphasises the need for joint, concerted, and resolute European action. The Chancellor believes that this has been an effective strategy for dealing with the Trump administration during the Greenland crisis, as well as in the process of securing US security guarantees for Ukraine. The priorities appear to be fundamentally unchanged, as the German government has neither rejected the transatlantic relationship nor warned that the crisis will necessarily result in NATO's demise. On the contrary, the Chancellor highlights NATO's continued value for all members, including the US. The German government's line is to preserve US contributions to NATO's deterrence and defence, especially nuclear deterrence, while prioritising increased European capability development and cooperation.

### **Possible paths for the development of European security**

Given the different national security policy traditions of the European powers, there are several possible paths for future European defence cooperation.

Firstly, bilateral cooperation between the E3 could be deepened. In 2025, the UK and Germany concluded a comprehensive bilateral cooperation agreement focused on security and defence. The 2010 Lancaster House Agreement between France and the UK was updated in July 2025 and now covers cooperation in more areas than before. In addition to strengthened bilateral cooperation, the parties express their support for NATO and a strengthened transatlantic link, in parallel with a focus on European capability development. Deepened cooperation on nuclear capabilities includes not only research, but also strengthened capacity for coordinated decision-making and consolidation of non-proliferation agreements. Discussions on the development of a

European deterrence capability are ongoing between several European states. Macron has announced an “update” of the French nuclear doctrine in the spring, in particular its European dimension.

Secondly, proposals for a new European security architecture may be brought to the fore. The Greenland crisis has revived the idea of more formalised security cooperation between European states, for example in the form of a European Security Council. Such a structure would probably include the E3, but could also include other like-minded states.

Thirdly, the ongoing defence industry cooperation within Europe could be deepened. There are strong political and economic reasons to increase this cooperation within Europe and to accelerate the pace of production. Restructuring the European defence industry takes time, while European defence companies inevitably compete with each other. Another question is whether European countries are prepared to procure more European defence equipment.

Fourthly, populist parties may gain increased influence over government power in the E3, which could change the dynamics of cooperation between countries. These parties’ views on NATO, European integration, and Russia differ, but their accession to power could slow down ambitions for increased European defence cooperation.

### **THE NORDIC COUNTRIES, THE BALTIC STATES, AND POLAND—A DIFFICULT BALANCING ACT FOR DENMARK’S NEIGHBOURS**

During the Greenland crisis, Denmark’s Nordic neighbours, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, faced problems similar to those of Denmark, albeit in a less acute form. The same applies to the Baltic states and Poland. All of these countries are threatened by Russia and, due to their limited military capabilities, are dependent on the US as a protective power against it. They value NATO and the rules-based world order, including the principle of territorial integrity. Since Trump’s return as president in January 2025, they have been walking a tightrope between trying to placate the US on the one hand and maintaining integrity and European cohesion on the other. The actions of the countries concerned during the Greenland crisis can be seen as a continuation of this policy. As before, the countries handled the balancing

act slightly differently, demonstrating both similarities and differences between their respective approaches during the crisis.

### **Unified Nordic action with nuances**

The Nordic countries’ actions evolved during the course of the crisis. Initially, they issued cautious statements of solidarity with Denmark, but avoided openly criticising America’s actions. As the crisis escalated in January, they took a tougher stance towards the US. On January 14–15, Sweden, Norway, and Finland announced their decision to send military personnel to the Arctic Endurance exercise in Greenland. The countries stressed that this was done within the framework of a previously planned NATO activity and portrayed their participation as a way of demonstrating European responsibility for Greenland, not as a move directed against the US. However, Danish media reports indicate that Denmark also intended to deter the US and, if necessary, defend Greenland against an American attack.<sup>1</sup> It is not known whether the other Nordic countries were aware of and agreed with this, but the question is of interest when analysing their actions during the crisis. Finland’s communication was slightly more low-key than Norway and Sweden’s, but when Trump announced that countries that had contributed personnel to the exercises in Greenland would be subject to tolls, all three countries sharpened their rhetoric.

The differences in communication style can probably be attributed to the countries’ foreign and security policy traditions, as well as differences in their vulnerability to Russia and their security dependence on the US. These nuances do not change the picture of a united Nordic response, which may well be repeated in the future.

### **A more cautious approach from the Baltic states and Poland**

In general, it can be said that the Baltic states and Poland have taken a more cautious stance than their Nordic neighbours. It would take much more for any of these states to openly confront the US. They perceive the Russian threat as even more acute than the Nordic countries. In addition, the Baltic states and Poland attach even greater importance to the US as a protective power than their Nordic neighbours.

<sup>1</sup> Fastrup, Niels et al., ‘Danmark var klar til kamp: Her er ordren til de danske soldater i Grønland,’ *Danmarks Radio*, 23 January 2026, retrieved from <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/danmark-var-klar-til-kamp-her-er-ordren-til-de-danske-soldater-i-groenland> (11.02.26); and Granlund, John, ‘Spelet bakom insatsen på Grønland: Satte militären i beredskap,’ *SVT Nyheter*, 23 January 2026, retrieved from <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/spelet-bakom-insatsen-pa-gronland-satte-militaren-i-beredskap> (11.02.26).

None of the countries sent military personnel to Greenland during the crisis. Estonia and Latvia have made military personnel available to Denmark for future training exercises in Greenland, but underscore that this should be seen in light of the threat that the US perceives in the Arctic. In recent statements, these countries, like Lithuania, have made clear that NATO should jointly increase security in the Arctic to meet US demands. Polish statements indicate that a Polish military contribution to Greenland is not currently on the agenda.

The twists and turns over military contributions exemplify the balancing act that the Greenland crisis has posed for the Baltic states. It is not known whether Denmark has requested military personnel from the countries, or whether the countries have chosen to wait for approval from the US. The path chosen by the countries can be seen as a middle ground between, on the one hand, support for Denmark and Greenland and, on the other, a way to avoid confrontation with the US.

Most political statements highlight the importance of de-escalation and dialogue, but Poland's signing of the joint statement on January 6, which also clearly marks support for the territorial integrity of Denmark and Greenland, deviates from the pattern in an interesting way.

### Relations with the US—vital but threatened

The transatlantic relationship has been shaken to its core and is seen as increasingly fragile. At the same time, the Nordic countries, the Baltic states, and Poland continue to see value in maintaining as much US involvement in European security as possible and are avoiding taking steps in a different direction themselves. These countries see no alternative to NATO and its Article 5, at least not in the short or medium term. In the worst case, they see value in NATO as a security organisation even without US participation, but this is not something that is discussed publicly.

The countries are doing what they can to maintain US involvement in European security. They continue to strive for functioning relations with the Trump administration and maintain contacts with other parts of the US establishment. This is evident in how Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre and Finnish President Alexander Stubb appealed for de-escalation in a message to Trump after the toll threats. Similarly, Stubb's reaching out to Republican Senator Lindsey Graham immediately after Trump's speech in Davos can be interpreted

as an attempt to indirectly influence the Trump administration to preserve NATO.

All countries have previously advocated greater European responsibility to relieve the US, rather than an independent European defence force. Their actions during the Greenland crisis indicate that this position remains unchanged. At the same time, warning voices are being raised about the implications of more unpredictable US behaviour. The issue of alternative security arrangements has been addressed in different ways in different countries. In the Nordic region, Nordic cooperation as a supplement to NATO is relatively uncontroversial, while considerations of a plan B are meeting with resistance in the Baltic states and Poland.

### The future of regional security

The Nordic countries are striving to strengthen their regional cooperation, in parallel with and within the framework of NATO, not instead of NATO. At the same time, uncertainty about the role of the US has increased. This makes further strengthening of the Nordic community probable. Increased Nordic security cooperation is likely to be launched as increased Nordic responsibility for NATO's regional planning, but in practice it also means preparations for a less functional NATO. The four Nordic countries will probably form the core of the cooperation, but in some circumstances broader constellations, mainly involving the Baltic states and Poland, may also be relevant, e.g., within the Baltic Sea cooperation format NB8+.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, each country will continue to strive for the closest possible bilateral relations with the US, which may come at the expense of joint efforts.

The countries have had somewhat different views on the EU's role as a security organisation. However, the gap has narrowed in recent years, and it is likely that they will continue to move closer together. None of the countries sees the EU as a defence alliance or as a potential one, but in recent years they have opened up to more areas where the EU can supplement NATO. For Finland, the Baltic states, and Poland, the EU has also had a broader security policy value as a Western community. This role, and in particular the economic power potential that may have had some influence over the US during the crisis, may be seen as even more important in the future. The question of Norwegian EU membership has become topical again in connection with the crisis, and with reference to the security

<sup>2</sup> Iceland does not have its own defence forces and is therefore not included in Nordic or Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation. However, Iceland participates in foreign policy cooperation.

situation, among other things, Sweden's finance minister has also raised the question of Swedish membership in the EMU currency union.

While the Nordic countries will probably continue to use a polite tone towards the US and do their best to preserve NATO in its current form, Nordic cooperation is likely to be strengthened in the future. However, if the transatlantic link is significantly weakened, Nordic defence cooperation could become a way of ensuring regional security without NATO, as far as possible. Possible indicators of movement in the latter direction could be a strong prioritisation of Nordic (and other European) suppliers in future defence equipment purchases, joint capability development without a direct link to NATO's capability goals, deeper defence policy cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, staff talks, command structures, and joint exercises.

In summary, all of these countries are among the most Atlanticist in Europe, which has shaped their management of the crisis. The contrasts within this framework between the Nordic countries on the one hand and the Baltic states and Poland on the other can be explained by intra-Nordic solidarity and differences in views on Russia and the US. From a broader perspective, the main concern of all of these countries is that the issue of Greenland, and the divisions it creates between alliance members, weakens the transatlantic link and overshadows the issue of Russia's war against Ukraine and the broader threat Russia poses to Europe.

### **NATO'S TRANSATLANTIC BALANCING ACT**

The continued involvement of the United States is crucial to NATO's deterrence and defence capabilities. The alliance's role during the Greenland crisis was mainly to serve as a political forum for negotiations and compromise and as a military tool to meet US demands through an increased focus on Greenland.

When we refer to NATO, or the alliance in the political track, we are referring to Secretary General Mark Rutte and his international staff. They have no decision-making power of their own and are formally only supposed to support and implement the decisions of the allies, but the role of the Secretary General also provides opportunities for independent action, something that Rutte utilised during the crisis.

NATO's priority was and is to maintain US commitment to the alliance and limit the consequences of the Trump administration's policies on cohesion. Added to this is a constant need to maintain, or at least outwardly project, the greatest possible unity. NATO therefore sought a pragmatic solution to the Greenland crisis,

i.e., something that all parties could live with and that would make the issue less urgent.

Rutte used tools such as flattery and the drafting of a loose framework for a future Greenland agreement to create a diplomatic way out of the crisis, a so-called *off-ramp*. In doing so, he stretched his formal mandate. Rutte's desire to be perceived by Trump as an acceptable actor in the crisis probably explains why he did not clearly express his support for the sovereignty of a member state. Before Davos, Rutte kept a low profile in public on the Greenland issue, which critics interpreted as excessive appeasement of Trump.

For the time being, this entails tension between the NATO Secretariat and individual member states. Such tendencies were evident in Prime Minister Frederiksen's statement that Rutte does not have a mandate to negotiate on Denmark's behalf. Rutte has acknowledged this, but other member states are also likely to have views on his actions vis-à-vis the Trump administration.

NATO also plays a role in the military track and is now responding to the US demand for increased responsibility for NATO's northern flank, including through the multi-domain operation Arctic Sentry, which began on February 11. The need to ensure the alliance's relevance to its most important member has always been there, but is now more pressing. In practice, this means, at least in the short term, a diversion from other tasks such as deterrence and defence along the eastern flank, although this ultimately depends on the scope and duration of the operations in the area.

More generally, the Greenland crisis and the increased divisions within NATO that it is a symptom of may limit the alliance's effectiveness and deterrence capability. Available resources may be spread across an increasing number of tasks, and the credibility of Article 5 may decline both within and outside the alliance. Measures to ensure that military resources are sufficient for all tasks will be important, as will measures to repair cohesion and confidence in member states' commitments to each other and to the alliance.

It is challenging to assess the longer-term repercussions of the Greenland crisis for NATO since plan A, with continued close transatlantic cooperation within NATO, increased European responsibility for conventional defence, and increased regionalisation, is confusingly similar to plan B, with more independent European defence capabilities and more regional cooperation formats. In addition, a majority of the allies will portray measures for the latter as central to the former.

Examples of indicators that can be interpreted in both directions include the extent of NATO activities

linked to Greenland, reduced European resistance to more substantial defence cooperation within the EU framework, increased intra-European cooperation on nuclear deterrence, and future capability development and equipment procurement, as well as joint exercises, staff cooperation, and chains of command.

### **THE EU—INCREASED AGENCY AS A TRADE POLICY ACTOR**

The Greenland crisis shows that the EU was able to act more cohesively than expected. The fact that the European Commission holds exclusive competence over trade policy was crucial to the Union's ability to respond in a prepared, united, and forceful manner to Trump's threat of tolls. While the Union chose to accept a toll agreement in the summer of 2025, which some critics described as humiliating, the situation during the Greenland crisis developed in a different direction. When a member state's national sovereignty was directly threatened, the Union signalled its acceptance of the economic costs of defending this fundamental principle.

There was strong political consensus, at least outwardly, on countermeasures in response to US threats of further toll increases of 10 percentage points against countries participating in Arctic Endurance. The European Commission had already prepared a toll package in the spring of 2025, intended to come into force in the event of a failure to reach a trade agreement between the EU and the US. The package was worth approximately EUR 93 billion and was aimed primarily at goods originating in Republican-controlled US states.<sup>3</sup> These preparations and close cooperation between the directly threatened member states, including France and Germany, helped the EU to quickly coordinate its positions and communicate them. The fact that Paris and Berlin also signalled their readiness to take further countermeasures in the form of the EU's Anti-coercion Instrument against the US can also be seen as an important signal to avert the toll threat. The joint preparations and consistent signalling of countermeasures were a prerequisite for the EU to be able to respond quickly and forcefully, which may well have helped to mitigate the most acute phase of the crisis.

The Greenland crisis has highlighted the EU's strength as a trade policy actor, while at the same time revealing the risks of one-sided dependencies. These two factors may reinforce current trends in the EU's common trade policy. The Union may seek to accelerate its

strategy of de-risking, primarily by diversifying trade relations. One example is that in January 2026, the EU agreed to conclude trade agreements with both India and the South American economic association Mercosur. In the future, it does not seem impossible that individual member states will reduce national reservations in order to bring about similar agreements.

In addition to the possible trade policy effects, the Greenland crisis and the deterioration of transatlantic relations may reinforce ongoing processes to expand the EU's role in security and defence policy. As early as spring 2025, the European Commission presented a comprehensive package to strengthen Europe's defence capabilities, which included new loan mechanisms for European rearmament (known as SAFE loans). This was a clear consequence of the widening transatlantic rift that emerged in early 2025 with J.D. Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference, in which he accused Europe of weakness and democratic shortcomings, and with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky's meeting in the Oval Office, which was dramatically interrupted.

The uncertainties created by the Greenland crisis are therefore likely to contribute to momentum for further initiatives to strengthen the EU's role in security and defence. It is likely that this will occur in areas where the EU can work to accelerate European capability development, not least in the defence industry. It will be crucial to monitor how the Union designs its defence industry initiatives, for example, in terms of the degree of openness to American companies and American companies' access to Europe's critical technology market. The EU's broad focus on trade and energy policy is a further indicator of the EU's role and priorities going forward in relation to external parties, notably the US.

### **RUSSIAN CONTINUITY AND OPPORTUNISM**

Russian reactions should primarily be viewed against the backdrop of three enduring factors that dominate Russian national security policy.

The first factor is the Russian Federation's established strategy towards the US, Europe, and NATO. Alongside NATO as a whole, the US is the adversary with which the Russian political leadership compares and measures itself. The Russian goal of seeking to divide the West and exploit existing friction in transatlantic relations can thus be said to have gained new ground as a direct result of the US administration's policy. This is also evident from studying Russian statements made in

<sup>3</sup> "US tariffs: Economic, financial and monetary repercussions," *European Parliament, Economic Governance and EMU Scrutiny Unit*, July 2025, retrieved from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2025/764382/ECTI\\_IDA\(2025\)764382\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2025/764382/ECTI_IDA(2025)764382_EN.pdf)(05.02.26), pp. 2, 7.

connection with the crisis, such as Russia's criticism of Denmark as a colonial power in Greenland. Thus, the Russian Federation's national security policy towards the US and Europe remains unchanged in the longer term.

The second factor is Russia's national security policy interests in the Arctic as codified in official documents, such as the Arctic development strategy until 2035, or the national security strategy. Current policy focuses on the domestic development of the Russian Arctic regions, particularly with regard to infrastructure expansion. For geographical reasons, Greenland has not previously been the focus of Russian Arctic policy.

The third factor is the Russian Federation's ongoing war in Ukraine. The war is the primary factor affecting the Russian political leadership's scope for action, priorities, decision-making, and analytical capabilities. Thus, when an opportunity arises for the Russian political leadership to take advantage of the situation, as a result of the actions of the US political leadership, it will seize it. This behaviour is not new in itself, but the political context is currently particularly favourable to Russian interests. The focus that the Greenland issue has taken up in European politics benefits Russia, as it inevitably shifts the focus away from Ukraine.

What is referred to in Europe as the Greenland crisis is compared in the Russian information space to the annexation of Crimea. This comparison is interesting in several respects. US policy towards Greenland and Denmark both confirms and reinforces the Russian view of the great power's right to spheres of interest, as well as the right to uphold these by force. At present, there appears to be a certain consensus between the US and Russia on this issue, but the countries' time perspectives and strategic priorities remain radically different. The constant in this context is Russia's strategic objectives. These remain unchanged both towards Europe and an increasingly unpredictable US.

### **CHINA BIDES ITS TIME**

China's actions have been relatively restrained. Trump's claims that China poses a security threat to Greenland have been dismissed as exaggerated and a pretext for promoting US goals. Instead, China has presented itself as a responsible global actor working for peaceful, stable, and sustainable development in the Arctic.

Beijing's relatively low-key approach can be interpreted as China wanting to avoid increased attention on its own activities in the region. These have gradually increased, not least scientifically, diplomatically, and economically. Since 2018, China has had an official Arctic

strategy, called itself a "near-Arctic state," and developed particularly close cooperation with Russia.

For China, the Greenland crisis is yet another sign of a deepening rift in transatlantic relations, and it is also seen as an existential crisis for the US-led liberal world order. The fact that Trump has caused significant damage to the US alliance system, not least NATO, may benefit China in the long term, as this system has been one of America's main strategic advantages over China. China is already trying to exploit the situation to strengthen its ties with European countries and present itself as an attractive and reliable alternative to the US, especially in terms of the economy and trade.

The Greenland crisis is unlikely to result in any major change in China's strategy towards the US, either with regard to the Arctic or in general. The Arctic is not a central foreign policy priority for China. However, Beijing may be forced into temporary tactical restraint, especially if the US and NATO strengthen their presence in the Arctic.

More generally, the crisis is seen as further evidence that the Trump administration is acting increasingly unilaterally and aggressively when it believes that vital interests are at stake. It is difficult to predict how this may affect US behaviour towards China and its neighbouring regions. However, China's own approach towards the US remains unchanged. Even though the US now officially prioritises the Western Hemisphere, Beijing believes that the US still considers China to be its main national security policy challenge for the foreseeable future.

### **SECURITY POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The Greenland crisis is much more than a bilateral Danish–American issue. It is a symptom of the state of transatlantic relations and not only affects the European security order but also has global consequences. Our knowledge of what actually happened during the crisis is incomplete, and new information may lead to revised conclusions. Similarly, new perspectives on the crisis and its significance may emerge over time. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions about the crisis and its implications can be drawn.

#### **America's role and global security**

The US initiated the crisis but at the same time plays a unique role as a superpower and guarantor of European and global security. The extent to which America's actions were driven by Trump's personal ambitions as opposed to national security policy considerations is debatable, but Greenland continues to play a role in

US national security, which must be seen in a global context. The island has long been considered important for the defence of North American airspace and transatlantic sea lines of communication. How relevant the latter aspect will be in the future depends on how directly involved the US will be in the defence of NATO's European members, but the former remains relevant even with the increased focus on the Western Hemisphere that the Trump administration has signalled. Trump's rhetoric about Russian and Chinese presence around Greenland may have been exaggerated, but Greenland could potentially play a role in defending against Russian and Chinese nuclear missiles. This, along with Trump's comments about the Golden Dome missile defence system in Greenland, thus reflects national security policy intentions.

Greenland also plays a role in great power competition. For example, China has shown interest in Greenland's rare earth metals. Despite various obstacles to their extraction, access to these metals is an issue with both security and economic implications for the US. The Greenland issue can hardly be considered resolved, but can be expected to remain an element in US relations with China, Russia, and Europe.

### **NATO and transatlantic security**

US actions during the crisis probably foreshadow what its allies can expect in the coming years. NATO survived once again, but there is great uncertainty about America's position towards the transatlantic security order. A reduced US role in the defence of Europe seems likely. In concrete terms, it could range from diminished but still crucial support, to a radical drawdown, or even outright hostility, as in the Greenland crisis.

Denmark/Greenland faced a level of US pressure that a NATO ally had rarely encountered before, if ever. In a situation that many could not even have imagined, Denmark/Greenland held fast to its sovereignty and even appears to have prepared to defend it with military force. This "red line" was complemented by a clear willingness to discuss Greenlandic security with the US and to accommodate American wishes, as long as they did not infringe on national sovereignty.

The European actors examined were less directly exposed than Denmark but faced the same fundamental problems, and like Denmark, they tried to strike a balance between, on the one hand, trying to secure America's continued engagement in Europe and NATO by proving useful to the US and keeping Trump happy, and, on the other hand, upholding boundaries when

the Trump administration's actions appeared to threaten vital interests.

Some actors emphasised adapting to the US. These included NATO, represented by its Secretary General; the Baltic states and Poland. Other actors, the Nordic countries, the E3, and the EU, supplemented adaptation with resistance in various ways: clearer statements in support of Denmark, participation in Arctic Endurance, and economic measures against the toll threat.

Both adaptation and resistance entail risks for Europe. The example of Denmark shows that even substantial investments in being a model US ally do not necessarily pay off, while consistent resistance in the form of, for example, criticism of the US and its policies, powerful economic measures, and security policy solutions directed against the US can be dangerous for a Europe that is still militarily, economically, and technologically dependent on the US.

One question with implications for future crisis management is what kind of European action caused Trump to back down. Was it adaptation, resistance, or a combination of both? The question deserves in-depth analysis, with the awareness that the answer may be complex and may not constitute a simple blueprint that always works. In this context, it is also important to assess the relative significance of Europe's actions compared to domestic opposition to Trump's actions. To what extent can Europe influence the actions of the Trump administration, and to what extent are these actions governed by internal factors in the US that are beyond Europe's control?

The motives behind the Trump administration's actions also affect the prospects for a long-term solution to the crisis. In this regard, it will be interesting to follow how the process towards an increased role for NATO in the Arctic develops. Regarding NATO's future, it will also be interesting to see how the alliance handles the strains caused by the balance between the Arctic and the eastern flank, as well as how it handles the potential tensions between European member states regarding the prioritisation of the Arctic in relation to the eastern flank. If Trump's idiosyncrasies, ideologically based expansionism, and/or an unshakeable belief that US national security requires control of Greenland are the driving forces, then this will obviously make negotiated solutions more difficult, whereas they will be facilitated if the US can accept solutions that are compatible with Danish sovereignty.

The issue also has implications for transatlantic relations beyond the Greenland question. Whether Europe

and the rest of the world interpret the Greenland crisis primarily as an expression of a broader US change of course, or instead as an expression of Trump's leadership style and personality, will be central to how Europe acts in the long term. If this is principally interpreted as an expression of a change in US policy, then the likelihood of real hedging or even European autonomy will increase. If, on the other hand, Trump himself is attributed more explanatory power, then attempts at balancing may continue for the time being, with prospects for improved transatlantic relations when Trump leaves the scene.

### European unity in the short and long term

One impression from the crisis is that Europe reacted with relative unity. Despite significant differences between the two crises, a comparison with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 may be illustrative. During the Greenland crisis, different European actors calibrated adaptation and resistance differently, but unlike in 2003, they did not split into two camps that supported or opposed US policy. It is worth noting the relative unity of the E3 countries in 2025–26, which contrasts with the division in 2003 between France–Germany and the UK.

One factor that was probably behind the relative cohesion in 2025–26 was that the policy of adaptation pursued by several European actors throughout most of 2025 was clearly insufficient to prevent what were, to say the least, undesirable US actions. When adaptation failed, the element of resistance grew stronger. The focus of Europe's collective action shifted towards greater resistance. Certain parallels can be seen with a similar shift in emphasis in Europe's relationship with Russia in connection with the escalation in Ukraine in 2022, when the stance of the more Russia-critical countries gained noticeably greater influence.

Although the Greenland crisis may reinforce tendencies toward European unity in security policy, it remains to be seen whether this will be the case. Factors such as continuing tensions between Atlanticism and continentalism, including between the E3 states, and an increased influence of Eurosceptic parties, may work in the opposite direction.

In the short term, convergence should be facilitated by the realisation that Europe can rely less on the US, and by the fact that strengthening European defence capabilities within, or as a supplement to, NATO is in practice very similar to strengthening capabilities with the aim of replacing NATO. For example, increased defence spending, strengthening of the defence industry,

and deeper regional cooperation can serve both purposes. However, other measures, such as consistently prioritising European defence equipment over American equipment, and military planning and development of military capabilities outside the NATO framework, would be clearer indicators of a move towards a separate European security order. To the extent that the EU develops towards greater security policy agency, for example through the establishment of a European Security Council, this could also point in the same direction.

A fundamental problem with any attempt to establish a purely European security order is the continued dependence on the US and the fact that even Europe's militarily strongest states, the UK and France, have finite financial resources. Germany is economically stronger, but its political will to rearm cannot be taken for granted. In the case of Poland, there is no lack of willingness to rearm, but despite significant military investments, the country cannot sustain a European security order without the US, something to which it is also currently strongly opposed.

### Russia, China, and the global order

Russia and China were not direct actors in the crisis, although it allowed both of them to reap certain gains, and it does not change their fundamental policy towards the US. Both countries view America's questioning of the rules-based world order and the division within the transatlantic camp positively. While the crisis shifts attention away from Russia's war against Ukraine, Russia is simultaneously using America's claims over Greenland to justify its annexation of Crimea.

In the longer term, the crisis could not only mean further gains for Russia and China, but also losses. On the one hand, China sees an opportunity to strengthen its economic ties with Europe at the expense of the US, and if NATO collapses, one of Russia's key security policy goals for several decades will be achieved. Such a scenario would greatly strengthen Russia's position in Eurasia and radically undermine Europe's security. On the other hand, the net effect of the current turmoil could instead be a stronger Europe, which would run counter to Russia's interests. A potentially strengthened US and/or European presence in the Arctic could also limit China and Russia's influence there.

### LOOKING AHEAD

The Greenland crisis has subsided, but it could flare up again. The crisis is an expression of deeper, underlying tensions in the transatlantic link, and other transatlantic crises can therefore also be expected in the coming

years. NATO survived this crisis as well, but the transatlantic security order will certainly change, although the scale of that change remains uncertain, given America's radically altered and often fluctuating attitude to both the order and its global role.

As long as the Trump administration does not completely abandon Europe, the continent will face a choice

between adaptation and resistance in relation to the US. Europe will also eventually need to choose between strengthening the European pillar of NATO or replacing the alliance with a more purely European security order. The survival of NATO still seems more likely, but US actions and trends in Europe could make the latter development conceivable in the longer term. ■

### Endnote

This report was originally published in Swedish. The tool DeepL Translator was used to assist with the translation into English. The text was subsequently reviewed by an English-language specialist.

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