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Though President Trump backed off on his demand for ownership of Greenland, he clearly did damage to a post-World War II system that Washington itself had designed.

The costs of his Greenland push

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which gives the United States almost unlimited rights to base troops, missiles, aircraft and the U.S. Navy on Greenland — he described it as “a much more generous deal.”

Of course, there is the possibility that Mr. Trump’s retreat from a demand for ownership is just temporary, until he finds another reason to revive what has been a yearslong ambition, to pull off an American land acquisition slightly larger than the Louisiana Purchase. (Historians note that Napoleon Bonaparte sold the French territory to Thomas Jefferson for \$15 million to raise funds; Denmark has consistently said it has no interest in a deal for Greenland.)

For now, though, Mr. Trump has retreated from his recent declaration to The New York Times that ownership is key because “that’s what I feel is psychologically needed for success.” It is unclear what that means about other places where he has threatened action, from Mexico to Cuba to Iran.

But there was a longer-term price, harder to measure.

Even as Mr. Trump backed off, he clearly did damage to a post-World War II system that Washington itself had designed. It is a system that for all its many flaws, helped prevent direct superpower conflict for three-quarters of a century. Along the way it brought huge advantages to the United States.

After Greenland, nothing will be quite the same in the Atlantic alliance. The perception of how America envisions using its military and economic power has shifted, perhaps permanently.

And in an era of so many urgent threats, from China’s menacing of Taiwan to Russia’s appetite for European territory beyond Ukraine — how did

Greenland emerge as Washington’s most urgent security concern?

“Estranging allies is the cost,” said Richard Fontaine, the chief executive of the Center for a New American Security and a former aide to the late Senator John McCain, while the benefit of owning Greenland “seems minimal.”

The estrangement is real. Allies began to talk about their survival strategies in a world where Washington could no longer be trusted. “We’ve now de-escalated,” Alexander Stubb, the president of Finland and a friend and golfing partner of Mr. Trump, told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour. “But obviously, it’s not over yet.”

European leaders have good reason to wonder where Mr. Trump’s demands will next fall.

Some spoke obliquely about preserving the “rules-based system,” not wanting to directly challenge Mr. Trump. But one leader was astoundingly direct: Mark Carney, the prime minister of Canada, a former central banker who took on Mr. Trump with a bluntness that shocked many in the audience at the World Economic Forum in Davos and generated sustained applause.

“Every day we’re reminded that we live in an era of great-power rivalry,” Mr. Carney told the crowd last week, before Mr. Trump reversed course. “That the rules-based order is fading. That the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must.”

That last line draws from Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian whose “History of the Peloponnesian War” has, for hundreds of years, served as the funda-

mental text on managing raw power.

“This aphorism of Thucydides is presented as inevitable, the natural logic of international relations reasserting itself,” Mr. Carney said. “And faced with this logic, there is a strong tendency for countries to go along to get along. To accommodate. To avoid trouble. To hope that compliance will buy safety.”

“Well, it won’t,” he concluded.

But that leaves America’s allies with uncomfortable choices. It is one thing to declare that the United States can no longer be trusted. Some will hedge; Mr. Carney visited Beijing, where he agreed to open Canada to Chinese electric vehicles, which the U.S. has banned.

But it is a stretch to say that any of America’s biggest allies — including Britain, France and Germany — can truly afford to go their own way. They have no replacement for a system where the United States stands at the center of their defensive strategy, bolstered by the American nuclear arsenal. They cannot pretend to have the kind of exquisite military reach that Mr. Trump has showcased, from the strike on Iran’s nuclear sites to the rendition of Nicolás Maduro, the former Venezuelan leader.

It would take decades, and hundreds of billions of dollars, to replicate what the Pentagon has built up over generations. Few countries in Europe have the stomach for that. Nor do they possess the budget or the technology.

Mr. Trump rarely misses a moment to remind them of this reality. NATO, he has said repeatedly, is “nothing” without American power at its core.

And in Davos, he was repeatedly dismissive of Europe’s willingness to fight. He questioned, in an interview with Fox Business, whether Europe would “be there” if the United States “ever needed

them.” He acknowledged that NATO had sent troops to Afghanistan, but insisted “they stayed a little back, a little off the front lines.”

That was too much for Mark Rutte, the secretary general of NATO, who usually flatters Mr. Trump in public and thanks him for forcing European nations to spend far more on defense. But this time he pushed back hard.

“For every two Americans who paid the ultimate price” in Afghanistan, he reminded Mr. Trump as the two men sat onstage at the forum, “there was one soldier from another NATO country who did not come back to his family.”

Mr. Rutte bolstered his reputation as a Trump whisperer by quietly negotiating the “framework” that alleviated the immediate crisis over Greenland. Speaking to Sky News from Davos, he said that in his private meeting with the president, U.S. ownership of Greenland had never come up and that the president was “really focusing NATO again on how can we collectively save the Arctic from the Russians and the Chinese.”

Perhaps Mr. Rutte’s diplomacy will hold. But after Greenland, European leaders have good reason to wonder where Mr. Trump’s demands will next fall. Last spring, he was claiming that Canada had to become America’s 51st state and that if it did, it would get the protection of the Golden Dome for free.

He has not revived that demand. But he did take on Mr. Carney, whose critique clearly stung. And he did so with a not-very-veiled threat on Wednesday, one that sounded a lot like the way he was talking about Denmark until then.

“Canada lives because of the United States,” Mr. Trump said. “Remember that, Mark, the next time you make your statements.”