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The GuardianWeekly

ON THIN ICE

Why Trump wants Greenland – and what it means for the western alliance 10

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Trump's new cold front

People walk on a beach in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland

EVGENIY MALOLETKA/AP

In Greenland's capital, residents talk of fear without preparation as the threat of a US invasion grows

By *Miranda Bryant* NUUK

The seemingly unshakeable safety of Greenland was a source of reassurance for Najannguaq Hegelund when she was living in Denmark. Whenever there was any instability in the world, she would joke with her family: "Well we will just go to Greenland, nothing ever happens in Greenland."

But in recent weeks – during which Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened military action on the largely autonomous Arctic territory which he claims he "needs" for national security purposes, despite it being part of the Danish kingdom – Hegelund, 37, has realised this is suddenly no longer true.

"Look where we are today," she said. "It's just so crazy."

Like many of Greenland's 57,000-strong population, Hegelund has found herself worrying about evacuation plans in case of a US invasion, whether or not to flee to Denmark beforehand and fielding questions from her children about becoming American.

Others said they have been watchful of the skies and seas around Greenland, tracking US planes on flight trackers and even discussing plans on how best to respond if they were captured. Many said they were suffering from anxiety and struggling to sleep.

Last Saturday, thousands of Greenlanders marched across snow and ice in the capital, Nuuk, to take a stand against Trump. They held signs of protest, waved their national flag and chanted "Greenland is not for sale".

As they finished their march outside the US consulate, the news broke that Trump had announced he would charge a 10% tariff on eight European countries from February over their opposition to his plans.

"I thought this day couldn't get any worse, but it just did," Malik Dollerup-Scheibel said after being told about Trump's announcement. "It just shows he has no remorse for any kind of human being now."

Last week, before the march, Hegelund said Greenland had never experienced anything like it. "How do you deal with it when you haven't experienced anything like that, at all, at any point in history?" she asked.

Almost exactly a year ago, Trump talked about the US needing to acquire Greenland – by military force if necessary. Back then, the mood in Nuuk was more lighthearted, verbally combative and sceptical. Today, many are openly alarmed, trying to prepare themselves and their families for what could happen and wanting practical advice from the authorities. The big difference now, said Hegelund, who works monitoring Inuit legal rights for the NGO Sila360, is that there is the precedent of Venezuela.

When JD Vance, the US vice-president, visited Pituffik, the US military base in north-west Greenland, in March, he said US control of the autonomous territory was critical to fend off China and Russia and accused Denmark of having "not done a good job".

If US troops were to arrive in Nuuk and lay claim to Greenland, many Greenlanders feel they would be powerless. "What could we do?" said Hegelund. "We are like 20,000 in Nuuk. How are we going to go against American troops?"

Over the past couple of years, Joint Arctic Command (JAC), the

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Danish military forces tasked with protecting the sovereignty of the kingdom of Denmark in the Arctic, has run a preparedness course for young Greenlanders in response to the region's heightened security situation. But many say they lack basic information on what to do in case of invasion.

Hedvig Frederiksen, 65, and her daughter, Aviaja Fontain, 40, are so worried that they have taken Greenland's surveillance upon themselves. "It's scary," said Fontain, who is struggling to focus on her university exams because of the geopolitical tension. "She [Frederiksen] keeps looking at the planes because she has a view and I keep on looking at the harbour because I have a view to the harbour." Frederiksen, who uses flight trackers, recently got a scare when she said she spotted a Hercules plane leaving Pituffik and thought it was coming to Nuuk to invade.

"If they [the US] take over Greenland, what am I supposed to do then?" Fontain said. "Are we going to have to pay for our studies? Are there going to be soldiers here shooting Greenlandic people?"

Frederiksen is one of 143 women who recently won a legal battle against Denmark's government after being forcibly fitted with IUDs when young by Danish doctors. Speaking through her daughter, who translated, she said: "If the soldiers are coming here, then what will they do? We are all just thinking that they are going to do bad stuff to us because we don't want to be US citizens or a [US] state."

'It's scary. Are there going to be soldiers here shooting Greenlandic people?'

Greenland, said Fontain, already has the generational trauma of Danish colonisation. "Are we going to have another one?" she said. "I hope to God that we won't be Americans. Trump can just make bases here instead of making threats. It is people's lives he is talking about and we are not violent here. I'm so afraid if they take over are they going to bring their violence here?"

In October, Copenhagen announced an additional 27.4bn Danish kroner ($4.27bn) for Arctic and North Atlantic security, including for two new Arctic vessels, greater maritime patrol aircraft capacity and a new JAC headquarters. But on the ground there are few visual signs of increased security. The current JAC headquarters looks cosy, rather than imposing or threatening. Even the US consulate, an unfenced traditional red-painted building, channels hygge rather than attack.

A Danish defence spokesperson said: "It is important to note that almost all military capabilities deployed in the Arctic are mobile in nature." As a result, they are not necessarily publicly visible in a specific geographic area, he added.

Having finished high school and voted for the first time last year, Aviâja Korneliussen, 19, is part of a generation that has come of age during this unprecedented time of Greenlandic history, in which one of the world's most peaceful populations has come under threat from a superpower.

▲ Najannguaq Hegelund
INESA MATULIAUSKAITE

▼ Hedvig Frederiksen, Aviaja Fontain and Aviâja Korneliussen

Korneliussen, who is an artist and works at a museum and a bar, says Trump's threats are dividing society. "Before all of his claims it was just an easy life. You had no worries, you were friends with everybody," she said, eating breakfast in her apartment. "But now someone has a different idea of how Greenland will be and another has a whole different idea and if they clash you cannot be friends."

She finds the way people talk about Greenland online, as an object to be traded, dehumanising. Amid the global attention, Indigenous Greenlanders are, Korneliussen says, becoming more open to expressing their Inuk identity, including through Inuit tattoos and art, and separating themselves from Denmark.

If the US was to invade, Korneliussen thinks there would be a lot of protest, but she is not sure how people – herself included – would react. "I think I would just lock myself inside and find a way out of here," she said. But at the same time, she does not want to have to leave her life in Greenland. "It is weird to think about because you don't want to think about that stuff – like the what ifs and what not. Especially if you have people you care about and it is the land you were born and raised in. The culture that you live every day."

As well as fear and anxiety, there is also a strong sense of wanting to get something positive for Greenland out of the situation.

Pele Broberg, leader of Naleraq, the most US-friendly of Greenland's parties, which came second in last year's election, said Greenlandic politicians have been asking Denmark for a free association deal with them for decades, but that for the Danish government "there was never a good time".

But last week Greenland's prime minister, Jens-Frederik Nielsen, changed tone. On the eve of the White House meeting, standing alongside the Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, he said: "If we have to choose between the US and Denmark here and now, we choose Denmark, Nato and the EU."

The Associated Press contributed to this report

MIRANDA BRYANT IS THE GUARDIAN'S NORDIC CORRESPONDENT

ANALYSIS
EUROPE

Nato's last dance?
With western alliance in the balance, leaders tread a fine line

By *Patrick Wintour*

Greenland, with a population of fewer than 57,000, might not seem to be the territory on which the future of the relationship between Europe and the US, the viability of Nato as the world's most successful defence alliance, or the fractured relations between the UK and Europe would be determined.

But battlefields are sometimes the product of chance, rather than choice. It now feels as if Donald Trump's threat to impose 10% tariffs on eight fellow Nato states for sending troops last week to support Greenland's sovereignty may be one of those clarifying moments in which Europe had no option. Successive European leaders condemned Trump's blackmail and intimidation last Sunday.

The chair of the Danish parliament's defence committee, Rasmus Jarlov, captured a mood in saying: "Every insult, threat, tariff and lie that we receive strengthens our resolve. The answer from Denmark and Greenland is final: We will never hand over Greenland."

He added: "We pray that our true allies will stand with us because we are going to need it."

So far there is every sign that all eight countries targeted by Trump will spring to Denmark's defence. Even leaders of European countries close to Trump, such as the Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, called his decision a mistake.

In their joint statement the eight made no threat of reprisals such as imposing counter-tariffs on the US, but they warned his move risked a dangerous downward spiral and a trade war would be a matter of time.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, is exploring the activation of the EU's anti-coercion instrument in his discussions with fellow European leaders, the Élysée briefed. France will also raise the question of the validity of the EU-US tariff agreement concluded in 2025.

Keir Starmer said on Monday that the UK would not retaliate, but the benefits of Brexit are rapidly evaporating. His trade agreement with the US, announced with fanfare last year, has not yet been signed. The indefinite postponement risks weakening his position in the Labour party. He has rebuffed those who argue for the UK to join the EU customs union, by saying it would be impossible as it would undermine the deal. With no deal, and an extra 10% blanket tariff on UK imports, that argument looks threadbare.

Moreover in the wider choice for the UK between the values of the open sea, represented by the US, and those of Europe, the case for the open sea has been dealt yet another blow. When Bronwen Maddox, the director of the Chatham House thinktank, declared last week that the western alliance was over, one can be sure similar views were being expressed privately in the UK Foreign Office.

> ***Trump, it seems, is not interested in sovereign US bases on Greenland. He wants ownership***

Denmark's political leadership went to the White House last week with an offer, but got nowhere. Trump, it seems, is not interested in sovereign US bases on Greenland. He wants ownership.

Since nothing any longer is preposterous, the risk of a military confrontation between Europe and the US is not minuscule. "If the United States decides to militarily attack another Nato country, then everything would stop," argued Mette Frederiksen, Denmark's prime minister, on 5 January. "That includes Nato and therefore post-second world war security."

Closing US access to its Nato bases in Europe becomes the endpoint. Yet since the US pursuit of Greenland is based on the need to monitor and counter Russian and Chinese threats in the Arctic, the loss of cooperation from Scandinavia, Iceland and the UK would ultimately not serve the US national interest.

That is not to say there are no quixotic voices. The former UK permanent secretary Simon McDonald said the 1917 purchase of the Danish West Indies, now the US Virgin Islands, might be a precedent. But his is a lonely voice.

In Trump's mind, everything, including Greenland and a seat on his version of the UN security council, the "board of peace", should be for sale. Not only is might right, but wealth, regardless of how it is acquired, equals legitimacy.

For Europe, forged by a different set of values, that would be the equivalent to signing its own death warrant.

PATRICK WINTOUR IS DIPLOMATIC EDITOR FOR THE GUARDIAN

▼ Protesters gather at the US consulate in Nuuk
EVGENIY MALOLETKA/AP

▼ Pituffik base in northern Greenland hosts US and Nato defence systems
THOMAS TRAASDAHL/GETTY

EXPLAINER

Routes and resources
Melting ice brings geopolitical jostling for Arctic assets

By *Ashley Kirk*

Lying between the US and Russia, Greenland has become a critical frontline as global heating opens up the Arctic. Its importance has been underscored by Donald Trump considering attempts to take the island from America's Nato partner Denmark, either by buying it or by force.

The climate crisis is shrinking Greenland's ice sheet, along with the Arctic sea ice, opening new sea routes and exposing resources.

Trump's threats, once dismissed as bluster but now taken seriously, are also seen as a signal of how melting ice is turning Greenland into a geopolitical flashpoint.

The average extent of sea ice in the Arctic over the past five years was 4.6m sq km, roughly the size of the EU. But this is a 27% reduction compared with the average of 6.5m sq km between 1981 and 2010, according to data from the National Snow and Ice Data Center. The sea ice lost is equivalent to the size of Libya.

The shrinking ice means that, in the summer, the sea ice no longer reaches the Russian and Canadian coasts. And because there is no land beneath the north pole, it is exposing once inaccessible seas. This is opening up new shipping routes. Routes once limited to icebreakers have become commercial corridors.

The most developed is the northern sea route, which overlaps the north-east passage and runs along Russia's Arctic coast from Europe to Asia. It is central to Moscow's ambitions.

Farther west, the north-west passage cuts through Canada's Arctic archipelago, while a central Arctic route across the north pole is also emerging in nations' long-term planning. This is redrawing the global trade map, adding alternative routes to the Suez canal and cutting the journey from western Europe to east Asia by almost half.

Last year, the container ship Istanbul Bridge became the first liner vessel to travel from China to Europe via the northern sea route, also known as the polar silk road shortcut.

Data from the Marine Exchange of Alaska showed that in 2024 there were 665 transits of the Bering Strait, which separates Russia from the US, up from 242 in 2010.

▼ A partly frozen sea inlet outside Nuuk, Greenland
EVGENIY MALOLETKA/AP

Serafima Andreeva, a researcher at the Norway-based Fridtjof Nansen Institute, said Moscow was aiming for year-round use of the north-east passage from Europe to Asia and was investing heavily in nuclear icebreakers. But ships were still getting stuck in the ice, she said: "Even now there are occasional issues with use of the route, even in the 'summer'."

Several nations have claims in the Arctic: Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the US. The UN's commission on the limits of the continental shelf (CLCS) makes recommendations on these claims.

The US already has a military presence in the Arctic and in Greenland specifically. The remote Pituffik base in north-west Greenland hosts missile warning, missile defence and space operations for the US and Nato.

Russia has maintained its presence in the Arctic, opening several military bases and restoring old Soviet infrastructure.

In 2018, China declared itself a "near-Arctic state" to gain more regional influence. It deployed three icebreaking vessels there in 2024.

Nato countries have been reinforcing their Arctic naval presence and there have been announcements on increased icebreaker building. With Nato's Nordic expansion, Denmark's air force has become more integrated with Finland, Norway and Sweden.

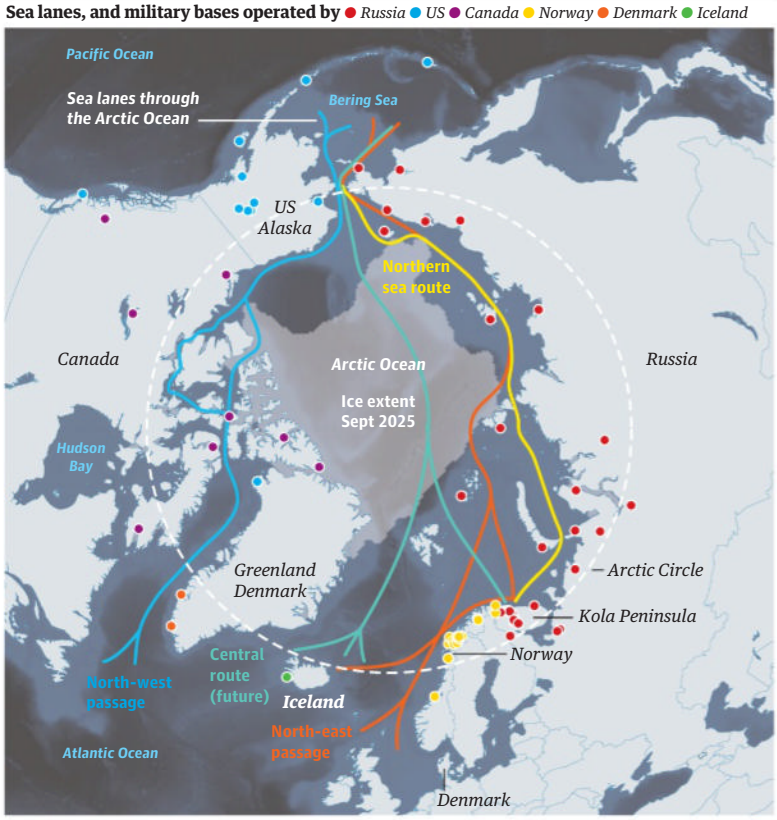
Greenland is valuable in the global race for critical minerals. The island ranks eighth in the world for rare earth reserves, estimated at 1.5m tonnes by the US Geological Survey. It hosts two of the largest known deposits, including at Kvanefjeld. China's Shenghe Resources is the largest shareholder in the Kvanefjeld project, holding a 12.5% stake.

No rare earth mining has taken place because of inaccessibility. Only about 20% of Greenland is ice-free, and much is inaccessible for most of the year. But as with the Arctic shipping lanes becoming more viable, global heating is also altering this, and retreating ice is exposing new mineral resources. International interest is likely to persist.

ASHLEY KIRK IS VISUALS EDITOR AT THE GUARDIAN

Sea ice is retreating in the Arctic Ocean

Sea lanes, and military bases operated by ● *Russia* ● *US* ● *Canada* ● *Norway* ● *Denmark* ● *Iceland*



Source: Arctic Portal, National Snow and Ice Data Center, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022 Military Balance.
Note: main bases and forward operating bases

Continental shelf claims in the central Arctic Ocean

Agreed borders
Median line
Each country's claim

Cropped to the Arctic Circle

Denmark
Awaiting CLCS review

Norway
Recommended by CLCS

Russia
Revised submission

Canada
Awaiting CLCS review

US
Unilaterally mapped

Source: IBRU, the Centre for Borders Research at Durham University. Note: CLCS review involves the UN's commission on the limits of the continental shelf. Only EEZ boundaries of highlighted countries plotted

ANALYSIS
EUROPEAN UNION

Failed flattery
EU's strategy of appeasement shattered by Trump's threats

By *Jennifer Rankin* BRUSSELS

As the sun set over the port of Limassol in Cyprus, the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, last Thursday used a tried and tested formula, calling the US one of "our allies, our partners". Only 24 hours earlier, Denmark, an EU and Nato member state, had warned that Donald Trump was intent on "conquering" Greenland, but the reflex at the top of the EU to describe the US as a friend runs deep.

Trump's announcement that eight countries that have supported Greenland would face tariffs unless there was a deal to sell the territory to the US mocked the notion that the US is Europe's ally. The countries include six EU member states, as well as Norway and the UK, the latter unprotected by the much vaunted "special relationship". It suggests that Europe's strategy of flattering and appeasing the US president has failed.

For critics, exhibit A is von der Leyen's decision to sign a trade deal with Trump that was deeply skewed in favour of the US. While the EU agreed to eliminate tariffs on many US goods, it accepted 15% duties on many products and 50% on steel. After years of the EU extolling its heft as a trade player, the terms of the EU-US trade deal signed last July were seen as a humiliation.

Von der Leyen defended that deal by saying it provided "crucial stability in our relations with the US" at a time of acute instability in an "unforgiving" world.

Now that argument is left in ruins, while the 0% tariffs for the US may never be implemented. The Trump administration has succeeded in uniting the European parliament from radical left to far right – via mainstream groups – against the agreement. The leader of France's far-right National Rally party, Jordan Bardella, described Trump's threats as "commercial blackmail" and said the EU should suspend last summer's agreement. Meanwhile, the centre-right European People's party leader, Manfred Weber, joined other mainstream parties in calling for the deal's ratification to be paused.

The unspoken reason for accepting the unequal trade bargain was the hope it would keep the US backing Ukraine in its war with Russia, providing capabilities, such as intelligence, which Europe is unable to match after decades of low defence spending. The former prime minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš has described this as Europe's diplomatic disadvantage. "Europe still needs the US," he told the Guardian last week, before the latest Trump announcement. "So that's what makes the entire process [on Greenland] very, very difficult. And national leaders are generally speaking quite hesitant to criticise President Trump. But they're also hesitant in explaining to their societies why that's the case, this security dependence."

But Trump may have pushed the EU too far. Although Greenland left the EU's predecessor organisation, the European Community, in 1985, acquiescing in the forced sale of the territory of an EU member state would send a disastrous signal about the EU as a geopolitical actor and its commitment to Ukraine.

As European leaders declared their determination to uphold Danish and Greenlandic sovereignty, there are growing calls to use the EU's powerful but untested anti-coercion instrument against the US.

> ***Europe still needs the US and that makes the process [on Greenland] very, very difficult***

The regulation, invariably described as the EU's "big bazooka", was conceived as a response to Chinese economic pressure. It would allow the EU to impose sweeping restrictions on US goods and services, suspend investment or intellectual property protections.

France, which has long championed a muscular response to US pressure, called on the EU to trigger the instrument if Trump goes ahead with tariffs on countries supporting Greenland. But using the anti-coercion instrument takes time. While the commission promises "a certain expeditiousness", agreeing on sanctions could take about one year. Punitive measures require agreement of at least 55% of EU member states representing 65% of the population.

When Trump introduced his so-called liberation day tariffs in 2025, European leaders denounced them as "wrong", harmful, mutually destructive and pledged a "robust response". In the end divisions among the 27 member states and determination to shelter national industries put the EU on the path of appeasement rather than confrontation. As the 80-year-old transatlantic relationship goes through epoch-defining changes, the next few weeks will reveal whether this time is different.

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▼ Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission
LUIS ROBAYO/GETTY