

The Americas



The Donroe Doctrine

Who's next?

WASHINGTON, DC

The White House weighs how to acquire Greenland

DONALD TRUMP'S appetite in the western hemisphere appears insatiable. Just a day after snatching Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's strongman leader, Mr Trump set his sights on his next target: Greenland. "We need Greenland from the standpoint of national security," the president told reporters aboard Air Force One on January 4th. His allies were quick to amplify the message. Stephen Miller, an influential adviser, argued that American control of Greenland was necessary in order to secure the Arctic and defend NATO's interests. Forget international law, he growled: "We live in a world...that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power."

Greenland and Denmark, and much of Europe, are in shock. A year ago, Mr Trump's threats against the self-governing Arctic territory of 57,000 people, which is part of Denmark, elicited mostly derision and distaste among European leaders.

This time it is different. "Enough is enough," responded Jens-Frederik Nielsen, Greenland's prime minister. "No more pressure. No more innuendo. No more fantasies about annexation." Mette Frederiksen, Denmark's prime minister, implored Mr Trump to drop the threats, adding that they "should be taken seriously". Once a leading candidate to be NATO's secretary-general, Ms Frederiksen sombrely posited that any American move to seize Greenland would spell the end of the alliance.

In an extraordinary joint statement on January 6th, six European leaders reaffirmed their support for Greenlandic and Danish sovereignty and for the principles of the UN Charter. But behind this display of unity lurked panic. The White House,

for its part, paid little heed. Within hours it put out its own statement, saying the president and his advisers were now considering a "range of options" to acquire Greenland, including through military force. Reeling from the spectacle of Mr Trump's triumph in Venezuela, Danish officials are increasingly fearful that he may simply, on a whim, declare Greenland part of the United States. Europe, lacking much military muscle or will, would struggle to resist.

As ever with Mr Trump, it is hard to determine just how serious his intentions are. For over a year he has offered a hotchpotch of reasons as to why he covets the Arctic territory: access to its resources; achieving prosperity for Greenlanders; enhancing America's national security. Recent pronouncements have the distinct tenor of America's 19th-century Monroe Doctrine, which sought to exclude foreign powers from the western hemisphere. "It's so strategic...Greenland is covered with Russian and Chinese ships all over the place," he said. More recently Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, has told American lawmakers that Mr Trump hopes to buy Greenland, portraying the president's bellicose rhetoric as a negotiating tactic.

An outright annexation is still unlikely. But Mr Trump's interest is serious: he seems intent on bolstering America's sway over the Arctic island and changing its sta- ▶▶

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▶ tus before his presidential term is up. For now, his administration's strategy appears to be two-pronged. First, it aims to cultivate elements within Greenland's independence movement and to deepen the movement's divisions with Denmark. Second, it seems to be trying to strike a deal of sorts with the Arctic islanders, perhaps even bypassing Denmark entirely.

Start with independence. Though most Greenlanders favour it, and the abuses by Denmark's past colonial administrations are still a neuralgic issue, they do not want to become Americans either. That has not stopped American officials from fomenting divisions between Greenland and Denmark. During a visit in March 2025 J.D. Vance, the vice-president, criticised Denmark for supposedly failing Greenlanders. He then appeared to back independence, saying that the United States would "have conversations with the people of Greenland from there". In December Mr Trump appointed Jeff Landry, the Republican governor of Louisiana and a foreign-policy novice, as special envoy to Greenland. The move implied, at least to some, that the United States intended to treat Greenland as a separate entity from Denmark.

The CIA and the National Security Agency have reportedly stepped up surveillance of Greenland's independence movement, and have been tasked with identifying locals sympathetic to the United States. The Danish government summoned American diplomats twice last year over reports of spying and running a covert influence campaign in Greenland. Denmark's military-intelligence service raised concerns about the United States in its annual threat assessment last December.

At the same time, there is increasing chatter that the Trump administration is working on a deal to present to Greenland. Mr Trump has repeatedly compared the situation to a large real-estate deal, one he says would bring great riches to Greenlanders. American officials have discussed offering a so-called Compact of Free Association (COFA) to the island, an agreement it has historically extended to small nations in the Pacific. COFAs allow American armed forces to operate freely in signatory countries, with the added sweetener of duty-free trade. American officials have reportedly sought to engage in direct talks with the Greenland government, but have so far been rebuffed.

Deal—or no deal?

Danish officials retort that Greenland already hosts an American military base, which gives Uncle Sam wide latitude over how it operates there. There are no explicit limits on the number of troops the United States can deploy to Greenland under the terms of its treaty with Denmark, though any significant change would probably re-



quire the consent of Denmark, which it might anyway be likely to get. Besides, Mr Trump's claims that Denmark has left Greenland exposed to Russian and Chinese predations ignore America's own underinvestment over recent decades. Its armed forces once stationed around 10,000

soldiers across 17 bases in Greenland during the cold war. Now it has fewer than 200 troops in the country, and a single missile-defence base still there.

In any case, America's repeated threats to take over Greenland are yet more evidence of Trumpland's heartfelt loathing of Europe. In European capitals, the spat has raised questions that verge on the surreal. On January 5th Germany's foreign minister affirmed that, come what may, Greenland would come under NATO's Article 5 security guarantee—only this time it would be against American predations. Last year France was considering sending troops to Greenland. Though no match against the United States, they could act as a tripwire to raise the political costs of intervention. As otherworldly as those thoughts may sound, European officials are giving them due consideration.

Ever since Mr Trump first mused about grabbing Greenland, Danish officials have been baffled by his logic. All of America's security and economic needs on the island, they insist, could be achieved through existing treaty arrangements and collaboration. But those arguments have made little impression on Mr Trump. Danish officials admit that this leads them to a final, more frightening conclusion: only total American control will be enough to quench the president's appetite. ■

Defending Canada

Look south and beef up

OTTAWA

The armed forces of Canada are planning against threats from the United States

CANADA HAS never had an equivalent of Uncle Sam, sternly exhorting its citizens to sign up to fight for their country. That is changing. Jennie Carignan, Canada's top soldier, is looking for Canadians—whether they are 16 or 65—who will come to their country's aid in the event of a military attack or calamitous natural disaster. "We're going to need heavy-equipment operators," says General Carignan. "We're going to need drone operators. We're going to potentially need cyber operators as well." Call her Aunt Jennie.

There is no direct line between her plan for a 400,000-strong civilian-defence force and Donald Trump plucking Venezuela's dictator, Nicolás Maduro, from his safe house in Caracas, Venezuela's capital, on January 3rd. But nor is the timing entirely coincidental. In the past year Mr Trump has repeatedly asserted that it would be in Canada's interest to become America's 51st state. No one in a position of responsibility

really believes the United States would ever invade. Even Mr Trump himself, when asked whether he would use military force to annex Canada, has said "no", or that it is "very unlikely".

But all agree that the relationship with the United States has changed irrevocably. Mr Trump's rhetorical and economic assaults saw to that. Canada had no choice but to try to become a country that can handle threats autonomously, with or without its tempestuous neighbour. Mostly it worries about incursions by Russia and China, cyber-attacks and assaults on infrastructure. But America's raid on Caracas, and subsequent talk of acquiring Greenland, if necessary by force, means military action is no longer unthinkable between two countries that have been peaceful since 1815, before Canadian independence.

The Department of National Defence (DND) began discussing the creation of a civil-defence capability around the time ▶▶

▶ Mr Trump suggested he would use “economic force” to persuade Canadians to join the United States. “In this context, it is responsible for the government to assess the full range of scenarios and options, including a voluntary civilian-defence force that could support the Canadian Armed Forces,” says Marco Mendicino, former chief of staff to Mark Carney, Canada’s prime minister, and previously the minister in charge of public safety.

The DND has gamed out some of those scenarios. Plans are now regularly updated to deal with a surge of migrants who might want to enter Canada from the United States. Mr Trump’s predilection for sending troops into states run by Democrats while using his justice department to prosecute his political opponents has compelled Canada to prepare for the event of civil strife next door.

Combat planners have also sketched scenarios in which an adversary such as Russia or China might attack Canada’s infrastructure or shut down sources of energy or water in order to pin down North American military responders, while one of such foes attacks the Baltic states or Taiwan. Canada is constantly fending off cyber-attacks, says General Carignan. “We always prepare for the worst-case scenarios,” she says reassuringly.

But officials are not eager to discuss all of them. Quite reasonably, they do not want to provide their potential adversaries any hints about Canada’s preparations or vulnerabilities. But they are also preoccupied with trying not to provoke Mr Trump. Few are willing to be interviewed on the record, but it is a fact that those worst-case scenarios, however unlikely, now include incursions by America.

General Carignan says the plan to muster a civil-defence force should please the United States. It meets Mr Trump’s demand that America’s allies should look after more of their own defence and rely less on the United States in the event of an attack or natural disaster. In November she dispatched a team to Finland to study that country’s extensive civil defence developed during decades of being menaced by Russia next door.

Tuck yourself up

Under their Comprehensive Security Concept, Finns are expected to store enough food, water and medical supplies for 72 hours. Lists are kept of civilians trained in medical first-aid, rescue and firefighting, who would lead others to designated bomb shelters dotted across the country. Big enough to hold 85% of Finns, these are not drab, post-apocalyptic bunkers. They include underground playgrounds and, of course, saunas.

The Canadians were impressed. “They have bunkers everywhere and they make



them normal places to be. Some of them have swimming pools in them,” says one official. But it was also noted that Canada is 30 times larger than Finland, with vast tracts of sparsely populated territory where it would be nearly impossible to defend sovereignty without America’s help.

Mr Carney wants to change that. He is promising to spend C\$82bn (\$59bn) over the next five years so that Canada is on a path to devoting 5% of its GDP to defence by 2035. Much of that money will be spent in Canada’s north. Russian submarines and Chinese “research” ships are making increasing forays into Canada’s Arctic waters. “There is a threat coming from the north and we can’t just be a liability,” says General Carignan.

The Canadian Armed Forces have 67,000 full-time personnel and 27,000 reserves. All of them joined voluntarily. In addition to defending the second-largest country on earth, they are stretched to the limit with far-flung operations. In Latvia they bolster the defence of the Baltic

states, while in Asia a naval mission works to keep the Taiwan Strait open to international shipping.

The armed forces are also spread thin over Canada’s almost 10m square kilometres. Climate change may have dropped down the list of the country’s priorities, but the damage caused by increasingly dangerous weather has not gone away. Troops are regularly called on to help people affected by floods and forest fires. When covid-19 swept through miserably understaffed old-people’s homes in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec in 2020, the army was dispatched to care for them. The new civilian-defence force could help with these kinds of emergencies, freeing up the army to concentrate on defending the homeland from military threats.

It may also rouse Canadians from the reverie they have enjoyed since defence spending first drifted below 2% of GDP more than three decades ago. That this meant Canada depended on the United States for much of its territorial defence did not seem to bother anyone. Philippe Lagassé, who studies defence at Carleton University in Ottawa, notes that Canada has never faced threats like those it does today. He says it is “hard for the Canadian mind to wrap itself around” the new reality.

Uncle Sam’s job

Canadians seem to be waking up. That is almost certainly due to Mr Trump’s hemispheric ambitions, now demonstrated with force. General Carignan says she is regularly besieged after public appearances by Canadians ready to serve. Before Christmas a senior citizen implored her to deploy him, despite his age. “He said, ‘Listen, I can’t carry a rifle and go to war, but I’m out there scanning the internet. I can help. Let me know how I can help you.’” ■



Looking in every direction