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Greenland: a geostrategic challenge for the European Union in the age of Trump 2.0

Donald Trump's return to the White House confirms, after a first term marked by an attempt to buy Greenland, that the Arctic Island is a critical geopolitical issue for the United States - and that it should also be the same for the European Union. The new situation, in which the military threat has become a factor, is forcing the European Union to rethink its relationship with Greenland and, more broadly, with the North in a clearly strategic way.

What does Donald Trump really want? Is he serious about annexing Greenland? Is he prepared to do whatever it takes, including military action, to make it happen? [Why should the United States want to appropriate this territory?](#) More generally, are we witnessing a change of direction by Washington in its Nordic and transatlantic relations? What does this mean for Europe? Do we have the means to resist at a time when the United States is talking about its possible withdrawal from NATO and threatening the world, and therefore the European Union, with a significant increase in customs duties?

The question of the future of this Arctic territory that sits at the crossroads of Europe and America is far from anecdotal. The shock provoked by Donald Trump is all the greater given that the subject has long been neglected by European chancelleries. Even [Denmark, on which the island has depended for more than two centuries](#), has to admit that it had not sufficiently considered the geostrategic importance of Greenland.

Why didn't Europeans see this coming? Obsessed with the future of European integration, have they only observed the rapid evolution of the rest of the world the wrong way round, becoming aware of upheavals and crises only as they occur? The European Union has always had a distant relationship with its Overseas Countries and

Territories (OCTs). In 2014 however, it did clarify its [relations with Greenland and Denmark](#). And with good reason: the Member States jealously guard their sovereignty over these territories located outside the European continent. As a result, European public policies have only a fairly indirect impact on these regions, and one that is appreciated to varying degrees by their populations.

The case of Greenland within the European OCTs is even more singular. [This territory formally left the European communities](#) in 1985, but its inhabitants, who hold Danish passports, remain European citizens. As Denmark does not belong to the euro zone, the Danish krone is still the island's currency. With enhanced autonomy status since 2009, Greenland now aspires to independence and, more than any other OCT, is the object of covetous interest from certain powers.

Over the last ten years, a handful of politicians have tried to draw attention to the complexity and fragility of Greenland, the many geopolitical issues that are concentrated there and the need for the European Union to tackle the issue head on. But this has been too little or to no avail! Those who have gone to meet the island and its inhabitants have always done so on lightning visits and with so many preconceived ideas that nothing of consequence has ever really

happened. In Brussels, it is still fashionable to reassure people that links are being maintained, thanks to a few agreements on fishing, education and development aid, especially via a [direct financial contribution from Denmark](#) varying between 50 and 60% of this autonomous province's budget.

It was a serious mistake to think that a situation that persists year after year would therefore be unchangeable by nature. And the fact is that the geopolitical reality of Greenland is evolving much faster than the Europe's response.

A COMPLEX AND FRAGILE REGION

Greenland remains too little known to the major European nations, which have no serious representation on the ground, unlike the United States, which reopened its consulate in Nuuk in 2020. Under these conditions, it is hard to get a clear picture of the situation. [It was only in 2024](#) that the European Union finally decided to open an office in Nuuk.

Situated on the borders of America and Europe, Greenland is home to some 56,000 inhabitants on an area that makes it the largest island in the world, yet it occupies a special place in European history. It was the first territory to emerge from the European integration process, without ever having chosen to join. Greenland had no autonomy from Denmark at the time of the Danish referendum on accession to the EEC in 1972. Greenland voted against, but the whole of Denmark at the time voted in favour. After obtaining autonomous status in 1979, which was strengthened thirty years later, Greenland now aspires to independence. Its people, 90% of whom are Inuit, want to do away with the organic link that still binds them to Denmark.

But the road to self-determination remains full of pitfalls. Firstly, because [the island's economy is fragile](#). Most goods are imported from Europe. The local workforce is still poorly qualified, and young people who leave to study abroad (often thanks to the Erasmus programme) are reluctant to return to the island because of the limited job opportunities and harsh living conditions. Greenland also suffers from a

serious lack of infrastructure, particularly in the field of transport. There are no roads linking the main towns: travel is by boat, plane or helicopter.

Of course Greenland is rich in [raw materials](#), but their exploitation is hampered by the high cost of extraction, the harsh climate, the lack of dedicated infrastructure and the scarcity of local labour. In addition, Copenhagen is ensuring that certain strategic resources such as uranium and rare metals do not fall into the hands of Chinese companies. Under these conditions, the development of fishing and tourism is not enough to guarantee the income that would allow Greenland to detach itself financially and politically from Danish control. And signing mining agreements with large foreign consortia could prove extremely damaging to the island's future sovereignty.

Greenland's demography is also a source of fragility. Its extremely low population density (0.03 inhabitants per km²) is concentrated on a few points on the western side of the island. Nuuk, the only real town, already accounts for more than a third of the total population and could in the near future account for more than half, so much so that it is draining and drying up the other human settlements in the territory. For some years now, the demographic balance has been in the red, which does not augur well for the future.

From the point of view of the [climate and the environment](#), Greenland is obviously fragile too. The ice is melting much faster here than anywhere else, and the resulting changes are already visible. Greenland absorbs more greenhouse gases than it emits, but it is heavily affected by carbon emissions and pollution from the major nations of the northern hemisphere. There is a distortion of approach between the European Union, which insists on the risk of climate catastrophe for the island and its ice pack, and the Greenlanders, who see in the consequences of global warming new opportunities for the development of their economy.

For all these reasons, the European Union, like Denmark, is walking on thin ice when it comes to acting for and with Greenland. This complex situation has often favoured the status quo or taking very small steps forward.

AN AMERICAN DOCTRINE IN THE PROCESS OF BEING REDEFINED

Against this backdrop, Donald Trump's recent statements were like a shot fired into a room that had previously seemed peaceful. His intention to buy back or even annex Greenland was all the more astonishing given that nobody had seen it coming. Yet this was not the first time that the American president had made such a proposal: in 2019, Donald Trump had already put forward the idea. [Mike Pompeo](#), his then Secretary of State, looked into the matter... before closing it again rather quickly. The matter seemed to be buried because Trump never mentioned it again, either during his 2020 or 2024 campaigns. In hindsight, it is conceivable that he waited until after his election to surprise people and hammer home the point after the failure of his first attempt.

Faced with the US President's sometimes-thunderous comments, Europeans have generally taken to adopting a low profile while waiting for the storm to pass. But 'Trump 2' is no longer the novice he sometimes was during his first term. When it comes to foreign policy, he now has most of the Republican administration behind him that he once lacked, and his electoral and parliamentary base has clearly been consolidated. He now knows better than ever the depths of the American people, who are not hostile to the idea of extending the country by purchase or negotiation. It should be remembered that this is how the United States acquired Louisiana, Florida, Texas and [Alaska](#) in the 19th century.

Donald Trump wants to move quickly, because he knows his time is running out. Speaking in the run-up to his inauguration, the 47th President sought to surprise by forcefully unveiling the broad outlines of the new geostrategic doctrine he intends to implement. Abrupt in both content and form, he hopes to create a favourable balance of power at a time when China is experiencing economic difficulties and Europe, politically weakened, is divided. In this respect, he has learned a great deal from Putin's method, which, with its extreme red lines, has been able to stun Europe and the Biden administration since the start of the war in

Ukraine. Like some of his rivals in the 'Global South', Trump no longer hesitates to assert that the world order must be profoundly reshaped. In a way that would obviously satisfy the aims of the new America he intends to embody.

'America First' is now much more than a campaign slogan. It has become the backbone of a new geostrategic doctrine designed to reassert American leadership at a critical time when certain powers are openly challenging the United States' imperium. China is more than ever the main rival. In the already long-running confrontation with Beijing, the Indo-Pacific region remains central, and the economic war is as relevant as ever. But in Donald Trump's mind, the competition is now also moving into other areas and/or regional spaces.

For Washington, military and geostrategic issues are taking precedence over strictly economic ones. In geopolitical terms, concerns about Africa, the Middle East and Latin America are real, but are considered less important than the risks surrounding the country's immediate zone of influence, which is the North American continent and its maritime areas. In this sense, 'America First' also means that the United States and its immediate interests must come first. Without returning to isolationism, Donald Trump refuses to see the United States continue to pose as the world's policeman and unconditional protector of Europe.

In his own way, he is reformulating the famous Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which aimed to guarantee the predominance of the United States over the entire continent in the face of the European colonial powers of the time. With one difference: the United States is no longer an emerging power, but a superpower that feels challenged by players such as China and Russia within and on the edges of what it considers to be its turf.

So it is no coincidence that, at the same time as his new declarations on Greenland, the 47th President has announced his intent to reclaim the Panama Canal, that he has taken a tough stance against Mexico, that he is suggesting that Canada should become the 51st state,

4

and that he is threatening Europeans with his country's withdrawal from NATO and a substantial increase in customs duties.

We can, of course, question the realism of these stated objectives. The use of pure force, particularly with regard to Greenland, would run the risk of being opposed by Congress. The fact remains, however, that Donald Trump has genuine scope for coercive use of customs barriers and regulations to obtain major concessions. The economic weapon is therefore loaded, and it is likely that it will not remain unused.

EUROPE URGENTLY NEEDS A GENUINE NORDIC STRATEGY

What can Europeans do about the new American ambitions in Greenland and the Western Arctic? To take Donald Trump's words lightly would certainly be to misjudge his determination.

The European Union can no longer afford to avoid a genuine geostrategic review of its transatlantic relations, its commitment in the Arctic and its involvement with its OCTs in general and Greenland in particular.

What is striking about rereading the European Union's roadmaps is that, particularly with regard to the [European Arctic](#), is that they are rather insipid and largely disconnected from political and geopolitical issues. As far as Greenland is concerned, no in-depth reflection has yet been undertaken.

Clearly, we need to analyse more closely the foundations of the new Trump doctrine on the Western Arctic, trying to distinguish between what is strictly in his country's interests and what concerns Europe and the EU. It is clear that the 47th President intends to strengthen his defensive and offensive capabilities in the far North. The Arctic is undoubtedly the shortest trajectory between the United States on the one hand, and Russia and [China](#) on the other. In the event of a high-intensity conflict, it is therefore urgent for Washington to rebuild northern defence lines, like those established during the Cold War from Alaska to

Greenland, crossing Canada, before being dismantled after the collapse of the USSR.

In addition to the air, tactical and nuclear issues, there is also that of maritime navigation in the Arctic, facilitated by the accelerated melting of the region's ice. This gives us a better understanding of the pressure exerted on Canada which, to the great displeasure of the United States, persists in considering the Northwest Passage as internal waters under its sole sovereignty. In the minds of American strategists, the area to be protected and controlled is not limited to the northern seaboard of the continent; it also extends to the entire northern zone of the Atlantic Ocean, from Greenland to Norway, via Iceland and the British Isles.

This is where European interests are directly at stake. It is a place of intense maritime and air traffic, both civil and military. The problem for Europe is that the countries most directly affected do not belong to the European Union. For the time being, the White House has not made any official statement on the subject, but it is clear that Iceland will sooner or later be the subject of strong interest on its part. The European Union would be wrong not to prepare for this, and Iceland's decision to hold a referendum between now and 2027 on whether to reopen negotiations on Reykjavik's membership of the European Union represents a real opportunity. Provided that the Commission agrees to abandon some of the rigour it has already shown towards Norway on the issue of fisheries management.

The issue of Greenland is more delicate because the United States still has, under a convention signed in 1951, a [major airbase in Pituffik](#) (formerly Thulé) in the far North-West. It cannot be ruled out that they might want to develop other military installations on the island and obtain privileged access to the international airports of Kangerlussuaq, Nuuk and Narsarsuaq. The announcement on 27 January by Troels Lund Poulsen, [the Danish Defence Minister](#), regarding the creation of a €2 billion envelope [to strengthen security in the Arctic and the North Atlantic](#) is clearly a movement in the right direction. Denmark, which is playing a close game here, needs more outspoken support from its European allies, provided that this does not exacerbate

already strained relations with Washington. On 28 January, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen undertook a [tour of Europe](#) visiting Berlin, Paris and Brussels.

The European Union has a card to play by significantly increasing its investment in the island, in a way that meets the needs and development aspirations of the Greenlandic population. It has the means to do so, provided that the unique nature of this territory and its people's aspiration for self-determination are taken into account.

Europe has relatively little time to act, but probably more than the haste of recent events might suggest. Greenlanders may not be happy with their relationship with Denmark, but they do not want to be under the thumb of the United States either. Some 85% of Greenlanders said 'no' to the question of leaving the Danish kingdom - which also includes the Faroe Islands - to become part of the United States, according to a poll carried out by the Verian agency and published on 28 January by the daily [Berlingske](#).

Donald Trump is, by nature, reluctant to intervene militarily, and the path - undoubtedly the preferred one - of acquiring Greenland or placing it under

trusteeship presupposes a number of prerequisites that imply proceeding in successive stages. As things stand, any decision by Denmark to withdraw from its Arctic province would at the very least require ratification by its Parliament, or even a referendum. This decision would also require a referendum procedure in Greenland, which would only be a first step before a real referendum on the island's independence. The latter could only legitimately take place after negotiations and agreement on the resources likely to replace the very substantial subsidies currently granted by Copenhagen. It is only then that discussions, themselves subject to popular ratification, could take place on a possible attachment or association agreement with the United States. It is hard to predict the outcome, especially as American pressure, which promises to be strong, could ultimately have counter-productive effects.

One thing is certain, however: if Europe gives up playing its card now, it will quickly be relegated to third-rate status in the increasingly crucial Arctic region.

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