

**The Big Read** Geopolitics

## **The art of dealing with Donald Trump**



The president-elect's aggressive claims about potential territorial expansion are a crash course for allies in his negotiating tactics

**Alex Rogers, Felicia Schwartz, Lucy Fisher and Henry Foy** YESTERDAY

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Just over a week before his second inauguration, Donald Trump plans to redraw the map of America. Or so he wants people to believe.

Having spent the election campaign warning against new foreign entanglements, the president-elect has in recent days made a series of aggressive claims about American territorial expansion.

On Tuesday, he ramped up threats to take control of both Greenland and the Panama Canal. Asked at a rambling press conference if he would rule out using military force in either case, he said: “No, I can’t assure you . . . It might be that you’ll have to do something.”

Trump has mused about Canada becoming the 51st state of the US and also announced that the Gulf of Mexico should be renamed the “Gulf of America”.

The New York Post dubbed his bombastic assertions the “Donroe Doctrine” — after the 19th-century project to assert US control over the western hemisphere named after President James Monroe.

For America’s allies, partners and neighbours, the claims have been a dramatic foretaste of what the next four years may bring, with an American president apparently discarding the norms underpinning the international order and turning on long-standing friends. After all, Greenland is controlled by Denmark, a member of Nato.





Donald Trump Jr, the president-elect's son, on a visit to Greenland this month. His father's remarks about gaining US control of the Danish territory have shocked EU officials © Emil Stach/Ritzau Scanpix/AFP/Getty Images

“We expected some things. We planned for some things. But nothing this crazy,” says one senior EU official of the Greenland remarks.

Trump's provocations have also come at the same time as Elon Musk, the billionaire who is now a key adviser, has been actively trying to undermine several other allied governments. Musk has called for new elections in the UK and the imprisonment of Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, while on Thursday he gave a platform on his X social media network to the head of the far-right Alternative for Germany party, which he has endorsed as the country's only salvation ahead of February's elections.

In effect, the last week has given allies a brutal crash course in how to respond to the new administration — whether to treat the president's statements as policy goals, negotiating tactics or just bluster that will amount to nothing. Is Trump to be taken seriously and literally, or is he just trying to create headlines by shocking people?

“We're all the cats — and Trump is holding the laser pointer,” says Trevor Traina, Trump's former US ambassador to Austria. “So, do we behave like cats? Or do we stand back and kind of assess?”

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Lord Peter Ricketts, former UK national security adviser, says Trump is “still in the campaigning phase” of “disruption, provocation, destabilisation” and that his “unscripted remarks” at the press conference should not be a cause for panic.

“He was in a sort of stream of consciousness, rather than formulating specific ideas. So I think he's setting a tone, he's wanting to destabilise people, warn them that he's serious,” says Ricketts.

Leaders of allied governments know that if they say nothing, they risk letting Trump set the terms of debate about disputed issues, while making themselves look weak.

But they also admit they cannot express outrage at each statement they find uncomfortable.

Some Trump allies warn not to get sidetracked by the president-elect's most outlandish comments. But they insist that the lesson of the last week is that leaders need to find a way to engage directly with Trump if they do not want to find themselves under enormous pressure from the new administration.

"I've had conversations with various foreign leaders, and my advice in almost every case was the same: get your ass on an airplane," says Gordon Sondland, Trump's former ambassador to the EU. "Go to Mar-a-Lago. Don't bring an entourage. Sit with President Trump and start talking about things you can do today, tomorrow — not 20 years from now."

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**For Trump's supporters**, there is a method to the madness.

They insist that he is not actually preparing plans to invade Greenland or Panama, but that he is raising legitimate national security and economic issues — which he is pursuing in his own, very distinctive way. The president-elect has a long history of using outrageous statements as the opening in a negotiation.



A protester holds up an anti-Trump banner in Panama City this week. The president-elect's allies say that he has talked about the Panama Canal's status to find ways to lower shipping costs © Arnulfo Franco/AFP/Getty Images

Trump has long had a fixation with acquiring some form of control over Greenland, dating back to 2019 when billionaire Ronald Lauder planted the idea in his head.

Current and former Trump aides say that the world's largest island is becoming strategically important because of the intensifying geopolitical rivalry over the Arctic. They say that Greenland's location makes it a prime location for missile warning systems, which the US already has at its military base on Greenland's north-west coast. The territory is also rich in oil and rare earth mineral deposits that are critical for new technologies and for the military.

Former ambassador to the EU Sondland believes the "end game" could be for the US to increase its military presence there "to defend western democracy" and also be "the exclusive benefactor of Greenland". He adds: "You mine a mineral, it's worth X, they get a cut."

**Experience demonstrates that Trump's desire to pursue foreign policy through a lens of 'peace through strength' is one of his signatures**

Carla Sands, Trump's former ambassador to Denmark, says that the government in Copenhagen had left Greenland "unprotected" despite its status as the territory of a Nato ally and that Trump could "secure" both the US and the territory. "I feel like it's unfinished business," she says.

The point of raising the status of the Panama Canal, Trump allies say, is to find ways to lower shipping costs. He is worried about growing Chinese influence and wants to

ensure access for US naval vessels in the event of a conflict.

Karoline Leavitt, a spokesperson for the Trump transition, said: "President Trump has called attention to legitimate national security and economic concerns regarding Canada, Greenland, and Panama."

David Lammy, the UK foreign secretary, says that while Trump's rhetoric can be "destabilising", it is often very different from his actions. He contrasts the vocal criticism of European Nato members with his decision to deploy more American troops to Europe during his first presidency.

Lammy says there are advantages to Trump's approach, particularly when dealing with autocrats. "Experience demonstrates that Donald Trump's intensity of rhetoric, and his desire to pursue foreign policy through a lens of 'peace through strength' and



through a degree of unpredictability, is one of his signatures,” Lammy says.

But such reassurances have done little to calm some American allies in the face of this week’s statements. “We talked through sanctions, Ukraine, tariffs, things like that,” says the senior EU official who has been involved in drawing up Brussels’ response to Trump’s victory. “But the idea of invading Greenland? I’m flabbergasted. It’s unbelievable.”

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**Facing such provocations,** some governments have chosen to respond with firmness.

After Trump talked about renaming seas, Mexico’s president, Claudia Sheinbaum, stood in front of a map from 1607 and cracked that North America should be called “Mexican America”.



Mexico’s new president, Claudia Sheinbaum, jokes during her daily conference that North America should be called ‘Mexican America’ after Trump said the Gulf of Mexico should be renamed © Alfredo Estrella/AFP/Getty Images

But the risk of such an approach is an open war of words. After Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared that “there isn’t a snowball’s chance in hell” that Canada would become part of the US, he was mocked by Trump allies — especially as he did so after announcing his own resignation. “Girl, you’re not the governor of Canada anymore, so doesn’t matter what you say,” Musk posted on his platform X.

John Bolton, who was one of Trump's national security advisers but later fell out with him, says that Trump enjoys tormenting the centre-left Trudeau. "What's he doing now with Canada? Driving them crazy, because he likes it," Bolton says.

**The [incoming] team is more calm and quite reasonable. What Trump is telling his people he plans to do is not what you are hearing at the press conferences**

Ahead of the inauguration, there is some optimism that Trump is putting in place an effective national security team, which will help manage some of the inevitable noise.

European officials and diplomats stress that his team is largely sticking to more mainstream positions regarding relations with the EU and its member states.

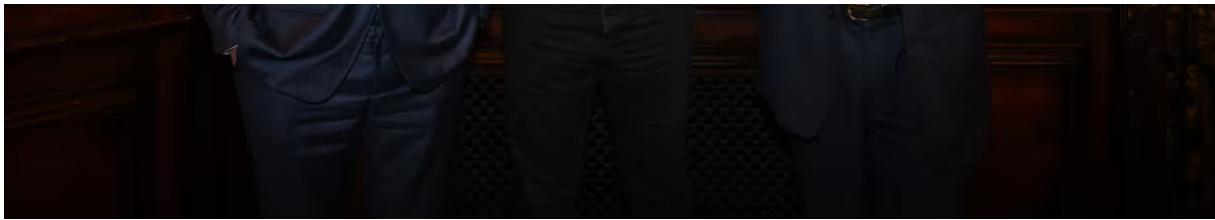
In Brussels and the EU's biggest capitals, officials are pinning their hopes on familiar figures such as Marco Rubio, secretary of state nominee, Keith Kellogg, Trump's Ukraine envoy, and Mike Waltz, his nominee for national security adviser, to moderate the president's stance on key foreign policy and trade issues that would affect the continent.

"The team is more calm . . . and quite reasonable," says one official who has held discussions with members of the incoming team. "What Trump is telling his people he plans to do is not what you are hearing at the press conferences."

However, the added complication is how to deal with Musk and his personal interventions in European politics. "Musk is the really scary one," says another EU official.







Elon Musk, centre, poses with Reform UK treasurer Nick Candy, left, and party leader Nigel Farage in Mar-a-Lago last month. Musk has called for Britain's prime minister to be jailed © Stuart Mitchell/Reform UK/PA Wire

Trump claimed ignorance about Musk's manoeuvrings this week, but noted it was "not so unusual" for the billionaire megadonor to weigh in on elections.

Olaf Scholz, the German chancellor, has urged his political allies to not engage with Musk. "The rule is: don't feed the troll," he told the German magazine Stern.

Former UK national security adviser Ricketts says he is "very sceptical that the Musk-Trump love-in will continue all that long. They're two massive ego, narcissist personalities." He adds that Musk is trying to bring to politics "the same provocative, destabilising techniques" that have served him well in business, but that "I think he has to learn the [UK] government is prepared to stand up to that".

Some European politicians believe the EU needs to respond to the new administration with positive ideas for the transatlantic relationship.

Friedrich Merz, the conservative frontrunner in the race to succeed Scholz in Germany, has urged the EU to "grow up and act" in the face of the "disruptive political decisions" to come.

Instead of retaliatory tariffs, Merz, a staunch Atlanticist, has suggested that the bloc try to negotiate a free trade agreement with the US president. "We need a positive agenda with the US, which would benefit both American and European consumers," he said last week.







Shinzo Abe and Trump sign a trade deal in New York in 2019. By 'constantly talking to Trump on the phone', the late Japanese prime minister was said to have built a genuine friendship © Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

Former US national security adviser Bolton believes foreign leaders should learn from the example of Shinzo Abe, the former Japanese prime minister. Abe, who was assassinated in 2022, is remembered for building what appeared to be a genuine friendship with Trump during his first term.

Bolton says Abe was able to get answers to his concerns about North Korea, China and Trump's "protectionist instinct" because "he was constantly talking to Trump on the phone". They also frequently met and Abe used the occasions to talk about new Japanese investments in the US.

There were "shiny charts, with corporate symbols on them and maps of the US, with arrows to where the plants are located," says Bolton. "I would say to any foreign leader, in Europe in particular . . . watch what Abe did and try to emulate this."

One place to start, he adds, would be to "play golf, or figure out how to learn".

*Additional reporting by Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and Leo Lewis*

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