The Weekend Essay Geopolitics

Greenland, America and the end of Atlanticism

Behind the crisis caused by Donald Trump's threats is a much bigger change: the waning of US hegemony and the coming of a multi-polar age

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The Greenland ice sheet is breaking up, losing 280bn tonnes to the ocean every year. All across the Arctic, new sea routes are opening as temperatures rise. Some projections indicate that in 20 years it will be possible to sail across the North Pole through the central Arctic Ocean — though you would have to watch for giant icebergs, large enough to sink the biggest vessels and the best-laid plans.

Given the extraordinary effects of global warming, which were almost unforeseeable a short while ago, it is not surprising that Greenland has been thrown into the geopolitical spotlight. What is more surprising is the way this has happened, with a US president demanding the right to take over the country in order to prevent other Great Powers from doing so.

Pushing for "the Complete and Total purchase of Greenland", Donald Trump has found a cause that is fully alienating his administration from most European countries and has the potential to effectively end Nato as a mutual defence agreement. By midweek, he was ruling out using military force and talking up the prospect of a deal. But like the Arctic ice, the transatlantic relationship seems to be fracturing rapidly.

Donald Trump with Nato secretary-general Mark Rutte in Davos, where the US president said on Wednesday that the two had discussed 'the framework of a future deal' over the island © AP/Evan Vucci

The break-up of Atlanticism has, of course, been predicted many times before and still has not happened, mainly because of Europe's dependence on US military guarantees. From the Suez crisis in the 1950s to the invasion of Iraq in the 2000s, Nato has weathered many storms and survived with its common defence purpose intact.

It was Henry Kissinger who observed back in the 1960s that political identities are often established by opposition to a dominant power. "The European sense of identity," he argued, "is unlikely to be an exception to this general rule — its motive could well be to insist on a specifically European view of the world." Kissinger's book *The Troubled Partnership* did not become a bestseller, except, he liked to joke, in bookshops where it had been put under "marriage manuals".

This crisis could very well be different precisely because of differing senses of identity. These have, of course, been developing over time: Europeans preferring principles of sovereignty, international law and UN co-operation, Americans (and not just Trump Republicans) believing in predominance, global control and economic supremacy. Since the 2010s the split has become ever more visible, especially with Trump in charge.

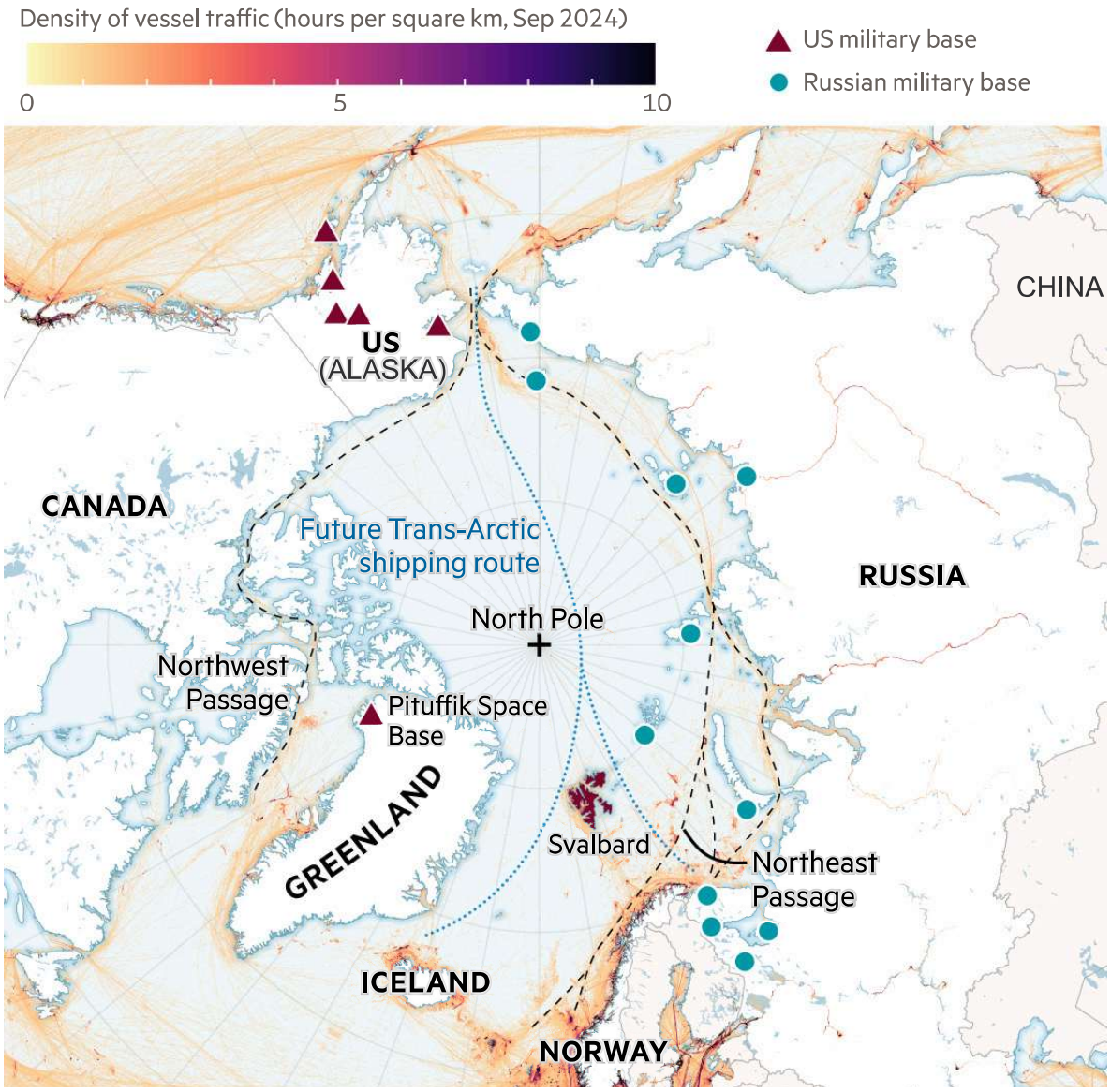
A world dominated by one or two superpowers was not peaceful, but it was to some extent predictable. That predictability is gone

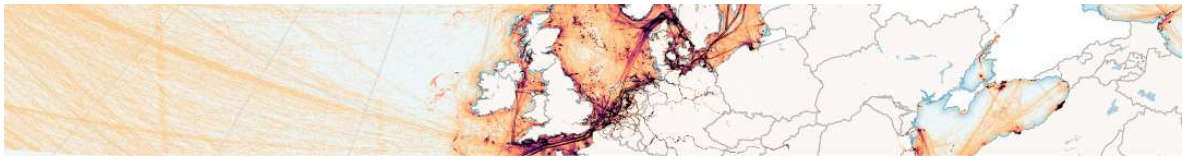
In Trump's second administration, the US is governed by the hard right, while in Europe, for the most part, traditional political parties are still in charge. But even if European extreme-right parties were to succeed further electorally, or the US were to elect a Democratic president, it is highly likely that transatlantic tensions would continue.

The reason for this is that political identities, as declared by governments on both sides of the Atlantic or elsewhere, are usually connected to power relations. And it is these fundamental power relations that have changed, from a unipolar system with the US at the centre after the cold war to an embryonic form of multi-polarity today. The transatlantic crisis is the effect of a much bigger change that has been building for almost a generation: the end of American hegemony and the coming of a multi-polar age. The global system no longer has one centre. It has many, each of which will seek to project power in whatever way it sees as serving its interests.

This is a kind of world that few of us have experienced. Nearly everyone alive today has grown up in a world dominated by one or two superpowers. That world was not peaceful, but it was to some extent predictable. Now that predictability is gone, replaced by the uncertainties that a much more complex and multi-polar world will bring. Gone also is the belief that the 21st century would somehow be a return to the cold war, with China replacing the Soviet Union as the global antagonist of the US.

Key trade and military routes run through the Arctic





FINANCIAL TIMES

Sources: Global Maritime Traffic, FT research

That is not the world that Donald Trump sees when he demands Greenland or attacks Venezuela. He sees — as, for their part, do Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping — a world of rapidly evolving multi-polar rivalries in which they need to dominate their neighbourhoods and strengthen themselves in case of large-scale Great Power confrontations. This is the vision of the world that Trump acts on now and will act on in the future.

So the new era of fragmentation is no new cold war, but it carries some striking similarities to another past world, that of the late 19th and early 20th century. Back then, we also had a world of many Great Powers that clashed with each other and sought to dominate their neighbourhoods. Nationalism and populism were on the rise, and many people felt that the globalisation of the day had not worked for them. Protectionism and tariffs increased, and growing numbers blamed the citizens of other countries for their problems. Immigration and terrorism were among the big issues. Leaders everywhere were fearful of military action, but still prepared for conflict in ways that almost guaranteed that, if hostilities were to break out, the Great Powers would get involved.

Trump's message that might makes right is not only unsettling Europeans. It is also heard loud and clear in Moscow and Beijing

We know how that world ended. Today, as before 1914, the stakes are very high, and the conflicts are real. A large number of people who live within the Great Powers believe that those who live in other Great Powers, or at least their leaders, are out to get them. Two in five Americans have said that it is likely that America will go to war with China in the next five years. In China, where reliable public opinion data is scarce, students frequently ask me when I believe a full-scale Sino-American war will erupt. Two-thirds of Russians believe the war in Ukraine is a life-or-death "civilisational struggle" with the west, and about the same percentage of Indians have an unfavourable or very unfavourable view of China. In Europe, a staggering three-quarters of Germans and French now view China unfavourably. Meanwhile, 73 per cent of French people and 71 per cent of Germans believe that the US is no longer an ally.

Much as in the pre-1914 world, nationalisms of various kinds play an increasing role in today's politics. From Trump's attempts to dominate the western hemisphere, to Xi Jinping's quest to regain China's glory, to Vladimir Putin's stab at a new Russian empire, to the rise of populist anti-foreign attitudes in Britain, Germany and France, negative views of others underpin many of the conflicts in today's world.

A boat makes its way through a frozen inlet off Nuuk, capital of Greenland, last year © AP/Evgeniy Maloletka

It is easy to see how such sentiments make major war more possible, because they make it harder for even the more sensible political leaders to warn against the effects of international conflict. Under such circumstances, few of those in charge want to risk their own political careers through defusing tensions with other countries. The bipartisan US consensus over confronting China is one example. Another is how Russian, Chinese and American political elites have aligned themselves with expansionist agendas that many privately recognise could lead to disaster, such as in the case of Ukraine, Taiwan or Greenland.

The worst part of Trump's Greenland posture, at least so far, is the rhetoric that it uses. Not only does it openly threaten an ally, but it argues, in a very naked fashion, that might makes right. This message is not only unsettling Europeans. It is also heard loud and clear in Moscow and Beijing. Why should Xi hold back in blackmailing Taiwan when Trump threatens the use of military force against Denmark, a treaty ally and one of the most unwarlike countries on Earth? Why should Putin not go for broke in Ukraine when Trump sends special forces to capture the president of another country and his wife, and puts them on trial in an American court?

How this crisis unfolds in the coming weeks and months will determine not only the future of the transatlantic relationship, but also of relations among the world's Great Powers. They are all watching keenly. For Russia, Trump is the gift that keeps on giving. Moscow newspapers have not only found the total justification for Putin's war in Ukraine, they also, gleefully, describe Europe's impotence in international affairs: "spinning as if in a frying pan", wrote the pro-Kremlin tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda. China is, as usual, more careful, but the People's Daily writes about "Europe's strategic 'spinelessness' in the face of hegemonic coercion". Even India and Indonesia are taking Trump's rhetoric as justification for acting unilaterally when their strategic interests are at stake.

A team from the Chinese icebreaker Xuelong 2 carry out scientific research during an Arctic expedition last August © Alamy

Russia's '50 Years of Victory' nuclear-powered icebreaker at the North Pole in 2021 © AFP via Getty Images

In a broader sense, Trump's policies serve as a reminder of how often dominant powers self-destruct rather than being diminished by the actions of their rivals. Before 1914, Britain wasted its status and resources on unnecessary wars and conflicts. America's Boer war was Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, made worse by the 2021 retreat from Afghanistan and the constant quarrels among allies.

The global image of the US, the soft power that kept its prominence among nations, has suffered more since Trump first became president than at any other time in US history. For much of the rest of the world, Trump's late-night tweets and bullying demeanour, his infantile preoccupation with winning the Nobel Peace Prize or building resorts in Gaza, and now his campaign to buy Greenland — including, presumably, its 56,000 people — are constant reminders of American decline and unreasonableness, a country not fit to manage international affairs, or even, it seems, its own affairs.

Another aspect of the decline of dominant powers is their inability, or unwillingness, to concentrate on the key issues facing their own countries. It is easy to empathise with Americans who voted for Trump because they believed that the US has done enough for the world, and now needs to concentrate on its own affairs. America First is not an unreasonable slogan for the many Americans, including those who have fought in needless, unnecessary wars, who are now suffering from decaying industries, infrastructure and healthcare.

The push to buy Greenland takes an approach to international affairs unique to the US and makes it into a modern parody

Trump was elected to be the first post-cold war US president, a president who really put the US, and not the international system it had created, first on the agenda. What the voters got was, in the end, the opposite: continued decline at home, exacerbated by self-inflicted economic chaos, and a quixotic foreign policy that delivers nothing to ordinary Americans.

The push to buy Greenland is part of that unworkable approach to the world. For people outside the US, it is the principle that countries and peoples can be bought and sold that rankles most. But the campaign is more than another frustration in the uninformed, febrile mind of an ageing president. It takes an approach to international affairs unique to the US and makes it into a modern parody. Didn't Thomas Jefferson buy Louisiana? Didn't Andrew Johnson buy Alaska? Woodrow Wilson, not among Trump's favourite presidents, bought the Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917 for $25mn. Why not buy Greenland now and make it American? But the world has moved on and parodying the past leads nowhere.

At the US consulate in Nuuk on January 13, an employee closes the door after hanging out the American flag © Reuters/Marko Djurica

Meanwhile, the strategic situation in the Arctic in terms of Great Power rivalries will be going from bad to worse. Moscow and Beijing are increasingly co-operating on Arctic development, though their partnership contains inherent tensions. China declared itself a “near-Arctic state” in 2018 and announced its “Polar Silk Road” as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, framing the region as a domain for strategic access rather than sovereignty — a conceptual challenge to the territorial claims of Arctic nations. The two powers conduct combined coast guard patrols in the Bering Sea and joint bomber flights near Alaska, while Chinese investment and technology help develop Russian Arctic infrastructure that Moscow previously resisted sharing. Already in June 2025, the Trump administration transferred responsibility for Greenland from US European Command to Northern Command, integrating it into homeland defence rather than treating it as part of European theatre operations.

For Europe, the crisis over Greenland has the potential to become much more than just another stage in the slow unravelling of its relations with the US. Europe has been left in the lurch by its main ally and needs to act to assert its interests and not just its identity. The European parliament has moved to freeze approval of the recently negotiated EU-US trade deal until Trump’s threats cease. But trade is not enough. A permanent European military presence in Greenland is needed, alongside European institutions that treat Greenland as vital to Europe’s own security, rather than as a Danish dependency to be defended just on principle. Such policies make coercion both more difficult and less attractive to Washington.

At the core of Europe’s longer-term dilemma is, of course, the unwillingness of European countries to take responsibility for their and the continent’s own defence. Even the recent rise in defence budgets has predominantly flowed to American suppliers. European countries spent roughly €381bn on defence in 2025, yet less than one-fifth of procurement is conducted jointly.

Low cloud over houses in Nuuk this month © Mads Claus Rasmussen/Avalon

The lack of military integration is Europe's greatest weakness, made worse by Brexit and by the cost of the war in Ukraine. An integrated European defence mechanism within Nato is urgently needed. It will be extraordinarily hard to achieve, just like the single market and the euro. But without its own integrated defence capability, Europe will remain a region in which Great Powers demand what they believe they need for their own security.

At the moment, the only foreseeable outcome of the current crisis is further damage to the transatlantic relationship and the emboldening of America's Great Power rivals. Trump's demands have been impulsive and reckless, but they are still reflective of new realities that we all have to live with. The way that Great Powers think about capabilities and dominance has fundamentally changed. And their rivalries have moved north, with the receding ice, into waters that are truly uncharted.

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