

Opinion Geopolitics**What to do when no relationship is special**

European countries can do more in the Arctic than just periodically standing up to US bullying

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Danish soldiers man a checkpoint in Nuuk. The lesson of Greenland for Europe's western flank is that everything can be weaponised at any time © Ben Birchall/PA Wire

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“That’s the news from Lake Wobegon: where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average,” was the frequent tagline of an ironically nostalgic American [radio show](#) set in the eponymous (fictional) small town in Minnesota. A similarly wistful take on Nato might have run: “Where all the allies are blameless, Article 5 is an article of faith, and every relationship is special.”

Cynics will point out, fairly, that it was never thus. Yet the point may be moot. President Donald Trump's climbdown in Davos from his threat of invading Greenland, and Europeans sending a tripwire force to the island to give him pause, may have left the alliance formally intact. But it has been shaken to its very foundations.

Within the past week alone, I have heard politicians and policymakers from northern Europe muse about the problem of the US as the latest hostile member within Nato; it might be time, one thought, to reopen the Western European Union (the EU's proto-defence club, founded in 1954 and finally retired in 2011). Another asked: "Do we need to move from defending Europe without the US to defending it *against* the US?" A third felt that Europe needed its own new nuclear weapons capability for regional deterrence — one that is shared and not reliant on the US for maintenance. That same week, the Toronto-based Globe and Mail reported that the armed forces of Canada, a founding member of Nato, had modelled a hypothetical US invasion of their country for the first time in more than a century.

But it's worse than it sounds. Nato member states on Europe's Atlantic and Arctic flanks, protected by geography from the constant tension juddering through eastern and central Europe ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, always took deep reassurance from their proximity and deep security ties to America. Dignitaries visiting Washington from these countries would invariably intone at dinners that, Trumpian turbulences notwithstanding, our special relationship immunises us against any kind of trouble.

Indeed, shared civilisational beliefs, universal values and mutual interests were subject to interpretation within Nato even before Trump. Yet there was at least one rock-hard basis for even the most peripheral or least powerful states' bilateral relationship with America: the possession of strategic real estate essential to US homeland defence, allied defence and US power projection abroad (from Canada and Denmark to the Azores and Norway). The lesson of Greenland for Europe's western flank is that the “[iron laws of the world](#)” (as Trump's adviser Stephen Miller put it) apply here too: everything can be weaponised at any time.

Some locations now feel especially vulnerable. The Norwegian Arctic Archipelago Svalbard has had a demilitarised status since 1920; but it guards the exit route of the Russian nuclear submarine fleet on the nearby Kola Peninsula and houses a large polar-orbit [satellite ground station](#) whose data supports commercial and military systems worldwide. Iceland (no military) or Ireland ([tiny navy](#)) are also now very conscious of their exposure.

Europe's Atlantic and Arctic states have been quietly reviewing their national defences; Iceland gave itself a new [national security strategy](#) in 2025. Leaders in Oslo, Reykjavík, Dublin, Copenhagen and elsewhere are upping defence budgets and improving capabilities. For now, there are no signs that Ireland will follow Sweden and Finland and join Nato; Iceland is mulling a [referendum](#) on opening EU accession talks. Even so, in an enormous maritime zone that is now the object of predatory interest from three great powers, there is more potential for collective action beyond just periodically standing up to US bullying.

European countries could establish a sustained presence on Greenland that focuses on the wellbeing and security of Greenlanders. That would help Greenland and Denmark protect a [fragile ice ecosystem](#) whose integrity is a global public good, and engage in responsible harvesting of natural resources. They could also collaborate to provide the entire region with space-based and maritime systems for early warning about risks and threats ranging from climate change to hostile activity around seabed cables and other infrastructure.

Such a dense and comprehensive safety net doesn't require club membership in either Nato or the EU. But it would stabilise the region — and thus serve the interests of both and, arguably, America's too.

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