

BRIEF

THE ARCTIC

EUROPEANISING NATO NO. 7

| HENRIK LARSEN |

The Arctic has become an additional test of transatlantic cohesion after the Trump administration's claim to Greenland. The Europeanisation of NATO serves two purposes in this regard: strengthening European confidence in solidarity with Denmark; and providing for a more dedicated European (and Canadian) effort in the High North and thus indirectly for protecting the US homeland against Russian and Chinese threats.

President Donald Trump's claim to Greenland has exposed the Arctic as a region of transatlantic dispute. It stems not only from Trump's personal ambition to expand US territory but also from the region's growing importance for the US in its strategic competition with Russia and China. In principle, Europeans and Canadians share interests with Americans in checking the growing presence of strategic rivals in the region. Trump's unprecedented claim to the territory of a NATO Ally is both an obstacle and an opportunity for an Alliance undergoing a historic shift of the defence burden to the Europeans.

Denmark has been transformed by US threats to seize 98% of its sovereign territory

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF AMERICA FIRST

The 'America First' foreign policy is a chief reason why the Europeans are reversing decades of underinvestment in defence, not least in the Arctic. Paradoxically, this push is also translating into an increased European

ambition to decide over its own security matters. Western European states, which are driving most of the new defence investment in absolute terms, see their growing military strength as a reason to stand up to US extortion of Europe. Security-dependent eastern European states face a tougher dilemma in expressing principled support for Denmark's territorial integrity but in private are concerned about the sustainability of a US-led European security order under such circumstances.

Denmark itself has been transformed by US threats to seize 98% of its sovereign territory. Reports of Danish soldiers bringing blood bags and explosives to blow up airport strips in Greenland suggest that Copenhagen was prepared to resist an armed US seizure. Long described as a 'super-Atlanticist', Denmark is now attempting to balance Atlanticism and European hawkishness.¹ Trump's bullying attempts to take over Greenland and the fact that several European countries sent soldiers to the island in January 2026 in solidarity with Denmark show the difficulty of this balancing act. The war against Iran and Trump's low domestic approval ratings seem to be contributing factors to the administration's abandonment of acquisition in favour of an agreement that excludes the economic and military presence of US strategic rivals on the island.

NATO'S ARCTIC SHOWCASE

Arctic security had not figured as prominently at a post-Cold War NATO summit as it did in Ankara in July 2026. The intention was to showcase the Alliance's growing commitment

to the region and thereby soothe the division over Greenland. NATO could boast of several initiatives, first and foremost the Arctic Sentry mission to strengthen Allied defence and deterrence across the region within one framework under the Joint Forces Command Norfolk. It could flag others as well: increased military presence and awareness activities in the region; more frequent and larger land, sea, and air exercises in cold-weather conditions; the Forward Land Forces battlegroup in Finland; and a Combined Air Operations Centre in Norway.

NATO's strengthened commitment to the Arctic, and Allied capability announcements in preparation for burden shifting seem to have been successful in taming Trump's statement, upon arrival in Ankara, that Greenland should be controlled by the US rather than Denmark.² NATO could thus showcase the summit as a success. But the real purpose of the Europeans' new commitments was not so much deterring Russia and China in the Arctic (at least not in the short term) as raising the political costs for the US of seizing the island, whether by military or economic means.³ Europe's demonstration of its added security value in the Arctic serves to impede US coercion of Allies with the hope of making the administration refocus on its real strategic rivals. This should constitute a guideline for the deployment of NATO's growing military capabilities going forward.

NATO AND THE US HOMELAND

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO makes it more straightforward for the European Allies to link the European Arctic with the Baltic states and central Europe to form a coherent deterrence and defence concept against Russia. This process is underway, relying on European capabilities embedded in minilateral and regional European coalitions within NATO, including forward-deployed forces.⁴ The progress is commendable, but it seems equally essential that a Europeanised NATO should not be strictly interested in the European Arctic alone, but also indirectly show itself of value to US homeland via the High North, which stretches across the Atlantic to North America.

The Trump administration's criticism of NATO is not only about underspending but also the lack of reciprocity in defence readiness.

This requires the Europeans to be attuned not just to the threat Russia poses but also to China's growing interest and activities in the region. The US is wary of China's ambition to become a near-Arctic state, including through its Polar Silk Road investment efforts, and Russia's role as a facilitator of Chinese influence.⁵ The 2026 US National Defence Strategy notes adversaries' growing influence in (among other places) Greenland, calling for continued military and commercial access to such chokepoints. The Defence Strategy is also clear that European resources are best focused on Europe, but a hard geographical separation of threats in the High North between North America and Europe does not seem viable (and Greenland's strongest sense of belonging is with Europe).⁶

Europe's demonstration of its added security value in the Arctic serves to impede US coercion of Allies

Two elements stand out in US strategic thinking about the importance of the Arctic, which the Europeans must pay attention to even if they are not directly affected. First are the US efforts to build the Golden Dome to intercept enemy ballistic, cruise or hypersonic missiles in the boost phase shortly after launch and during mid-course flight. Greenland assumes a strategic geographical position for radars beneath likely missile routes from Russia and China, and the island's high latitude is ideal for communication with military satellites orbiting the Earth north-south.⁷ Although Golden Dome does not seem intended to cover US Allies, NATO needs to demonstrate consideration for its centrality in any US homeland protection strategy if it wants to demonstrate reciprocity.

The second element is China's increasing presence in the region. The Greenland-Iceland-UK and Greenland-Iceland-Norway gaps remain of interest for the surveillance of nuclear-armed Russian submarines passing into the North Atlantic, where they can threaten NATO supply

lines and the US homeland.⁸ But the Arctic is also now increasingly interesting due to China's naval activities, especially research activities with dual-use purposes such as mapping the undersea bed, currents, and salinity. Commercial shipping, increasingly possible due to global warming, can likewise have dual use. China's joint patrols and naval exercises with Russia so far have concentrated on the Pacific, but the US sees Sino-Russian coordination as one strategic problem.⁹ The European Allies' increased focus on the Arctic is partly a result of US political pressure and military encouragement. From a US defence planning perspective, European investments in maritime patrol and undersea surveillance capabilities serve to monitor rivals' activities and focus own resources closer to home.¹⁰ In addition, the US is interested in Finnish and Canadian expertise in the construction of icebreakers, where it lags Russia.¹¹

Meanwhile, Canada is shifting its position from treating Arctic security as separate from NATO to placing itself as the defender of the Alliance's western and northern flanks.¹² Ottawa, which (also as a result of US pressure) seeks stronger ties with Europe as part of its declared middle-power diplomacy, reinforces the feasibility of a NATO in which non-US Allies assume a greater responsibility for the protection of the US homeland. The partnership with Canada has high potential for a Europeanised NATO that is more relevant for US national security.

EUROPEANISATION AND ARCTIC-ISATION

The Greenland deal agreed in New York on 22 September safeguards both elements of US strategic thinking. First, the deal grants the US far-reaching military rights on the island: apart from unhindered access by land, air and sea, it is entitled to establish manned bases with Danish and Greenlandic consent required only when it comes to implementation details. Second, the deal effectively keeps China out of Greenland through a consultation mechanism that in reality gives the US the final say over investments from adversaries seeking to expand influence and control over the island. Furthermore, the deal contains a clause that

obliges Greenland to take over the responsibilities under the deal and remain in NATO, should the island one day declare itself independent.¹³ Greenland can pursue its independence aspirations but not with the help of Chinese investments that could influence the island's geopolitical orientation and thus receptiveness to an increased US military presence in the decades ahead.

The conclusion of months of tense diplomacy about Greenland highlights the need for European investments, likely requiring state guarantees or subsidies, that give alternatives to the capital that is now foreclosed from China. Larger investment projects, such as the production of graphite, require broader contributions possibly targeting the most critical areas for Allied mineral security, rather than what is the most profitable.

When it comes to defence investments in Greenland, European contributions are essential, even if Denmark lives up to its new historic commitment of approximately \$6 billion for Arctic vessels and surveillance capabilities. One option is to make Arctic Sentry a permanent mission to demonstrate that the seven NATO Arctic states can now synchronise surveillance and defence in the region rather than act individually. Another option is to link US and European Arctic military exercises such as Nordic Response (formerly Cold Response) for greater joint defence readiness.¹⁴ Exercises are no longer seen as escalatory in the region but as contributing to stability by signalling credibility in raising the cost of aggression.¹⁵

Europeanisation of NATO's Arctic posture allows Europeans to demonstrate solidarity with Denmark without directly confronting Washington

Beyond Greenland, a third option is a higher degree of NATO involvement against Russia's growing grey-zone warfare in and around Svalbard. For this, the European Allies must demonstrate convincingly to the Trump administration (as Finnish President Alexander Stubb has done) that the archipelago is a strategic location against nuclear-armed Russian submarines based on the Kola

Peninsula. Moreover, China's longstanding research station makes Svalbard one of the few places where Russian and Chinese activities in the Arctic converge, adding to the case for increased NATO involvement. A fourth option is for NATO to formulate an Arctic strategy, which it currently does not have—but only if such an exercise would be conducive to greater political consensus about the Alliance's role in balancing Russia and China in the region, including the added value of an enhanced European military presence.

The Europeanisation of NATO's Arctic posture does not in itself provide a resolution of the

transatlantic divergence over Greenland but allows Europeans to demonstrate solidarity with Denmark without directly confronting Washington. It would also give the Trump administration burden-shifting reciprocity that makes coercion and criticism of free-riding Allies domestically more difficult. Whether a Europeanised NATO is sufficient to maintain transatlantic equilibrium in the Arctic depends on whether the Trump administration, in its remaining two years, will prioritise balancing Russia and China, where its threat perception aligns with that of the Europeans and Canadians.

ENDNOTES

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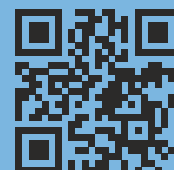
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