

HOW EUROPE CAN RESPOND TO TRUMP'S GREENLAND IMPERIALISM

The President's obsession with acquiring the Danish territory has put the transatlantic alliance at risk.

By Isaac Chotiner

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Demonstrators wave flags in Nuuk, Greenland, on Saturday during a protest against President Trump's plans to annex the Danish territory. Photograph by Alessandro Rampazzo / AFP / Getty

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“Considering your Country decided not to give me the Nobel Peace Prize for having stopped 8 Wars PLUS, I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace, although it will always be predominant, but can now think about what is good and proper for the United States of

America.” This was the text message Donald Trump sent over the weekend to Jonas Gahr Støre, the Prime Minister of Norway, as part of an explanation for why Trump has upended the transatlantic relationship in his quest to take control of Greenland. This idea, of either buying the territory, which is a semi-autonomous part of Norway’s neighbor, Denmark, or seizing it by force, has almost no support in public opinion polls in America or Europe, and was hardly a matter of public discussion before Trump became obsessed with it.

On Saturday, Trump threatened to place new tariffs on eight European countries “until such time as a Deal is reached for the Complete and Total purchase of Greenland.” Now European leaders, after tiptoeing around Trump for the past year, are openly discussing retaliatory tariffs. But Europe is still reliant on American military power, especially as it tries to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

To better understand the largest threat to the relationship between Europe and America since their alliance emerged after the Second World War, I recently spoke by phone with Ivan Krastev, an expert on European politics and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences, in Vienna. During our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, we discussed how the European far right is navigating threats from its ally in the White House, what this potential break between Europe and America could mean for China’s global influence, possible off-ramps that could calm the situation, and the dangers of a normally distractible Trump becoming hyper-focused on Greenland.

There’s been a lot of mockery of European leaders over the past weeks and months for caving to Donald Trump and for not taking the threat he poses to NATO seriously enough. But they are now in a real bind, given their reliance on America. What should they be doing that they are not?

This is a turning point in how Europe views the American Administration.

Of course, when Trump came to power for the second time, many European leaders knew that the new Administration would not be particularly friendly to Europe, to put it mildly. But they basically bet on two ways to maintain Europe's relationship with the U.S., both of which turned out to be wrong. One was Trump's transactional politics. They thought they could make deals with him in the way they did during the first Trump Administration. And the second was that they bet the competition between the United States and China would be so demanding that no American Administration could dismiss the importance, particularly in trade and financial terms, of the European Union.

And then, suddenly, in 2025, European leaders realized three things. First, there is an ideology behind the way Trump is treating Europe. Second, in the eyes of people in the Trump Administration—even if this is not the consensus in the United States or even among the American élite—the very existence of the European Union can be perceived as an obstacle to America. And third, which is also critically important, Europeans are not going to be able to deal with Trump by pretending not to notice what he is doing. In the beginning, their calculus was, “We have a choice between being fools and pretending to be fools.” Being a fool meant pretending that what was happening was just for a while, that Trump was going to come to his senses. And pretending to be a fool meant convincing themselves that, “Yes, we are doing what Trump is pushing us for, but we are doing it for our own reasons. We are increasing military budgets not because he's pushing for this but because this is the only way, for example, to have defense capabilities, which in the medium term is going to allow the European Union to be able to defend itself.”

O.K., but what is it you think the Europeans could be doing that they are not already doing? I still think they are in a box.

This is exactly what I'm saying. The European Union basically was fighting for time: first, to try to build [defense] capabilities. Secondly, it was fighting

for time with the hope that there was going to be a change either in the politics of the American government or in the constellation of power in the United States, while also hoping that there was going to be a crisis that would convince the American Administration that the way it was treating Europe would not work going forward.

European governments are quite weak, so many of the things that Trump or Trump's people criticize about Europe are not necessarily wrong. But where I do believe Trump slightly miscalculated was in threatening European sovereignty. It's one thing to attack Europe for its migration policies, when you will see support from certain parts of the European right that are also angry about migration.

Then came Greenland. It's now very difficult for even the Trumpian right in the European Union to say what he is doing is fine. We are really going to sell part of Europe because the American President wants it? To be honest, if Trump had been successful in stopping the war in Ukraine, he could have gone to European leaders and said, "Listen, I delivered, so you should trust me. Greenland is better off under our control." But now Europeans feel that they're being blackmailed.

Yes, I did notice in the last few days that the Trump allies Nigel Farage, the leader of Reform U.K., a right-wing populist party, and Giorgia Meloni, the right-wing Prime Minister of Italy, have released statements about Greenland that are relatively harsh on Trump.

He has chosen an issue that is not capable of pitting the conservative Trumpian right against the mainstream. Imagine you're a member of Germany's far-right AfD party, and Chancellor Friedrich Merz puts forward a declaration in support of Denmark's territorial integrity and the European Union's obligation to defend the territorial integrity of all its members. Do you imagine that the AfD would vote against such a resolution? The three countries most economically exposed to trade with the United States—

Germany, Denmark, and Sweden—have already taken a very tough line.

There is also a concern that he wants Greenland before the midterm elections in the U.S. And, from this point of view, I do believe that part of the European strategy now is to show to the American public, particularly the Republican Party élites, that Europe's reaction is not about its relations with the United States, it's not about its relations with the Republican Party, but that the President really went too far. And that this message, which the President sent to the Norwegian Prime Minister, saying, "You didn't give me a Nobel Prize, and this is why I'm going to take Greenland," does not make his actions look strategic. It makes them look petty.

Trump's arguments about the strategic necessity of acquiring Greenland are ridiculous. People around Trump, and Trump himself, have been saying for years that Russia is not really a threat and that we need to make deals with Putin. But now the White House is saying that they're going to invade Greenland because of the strategic threat of Russia and China.

This is a very important point because of how laughable this argument is, making it very difficult for any European to defend Trump's actions. The other thing is that, in the past year, Europeans learned that only the countries that stood up to Trump benefitted. And I'm not simply talking about China. I'm also talking about Brazil. And this is why Europeans may be forced to do things that they don't want to do. I don't believe that, even now, we will see the Anti-Coercion Instrument, but Europe cannot simply do nothing.

What is the Anti-Coercion Instrument?

Basically it is an instrument that was created by the European Commission to retaliate against China in the event of a trade war, and it means that, for security reasons, you can enact unified protectionist policies, across the E.U., to target a single country. And normally, as you can imagine, you don't want to do this to the United States. President Trump is right to believe that, in

many respects, Europe is weak. But, from time to time, that weakness is also the source of determination. You don't have an option. If you are not going to show, at this moment, that you can respond, all these governments are going to look totally illegitimate in the eyes of their own publics.

So you think that Europe really won't just totally cave?

Yeah. I don't believe that it's going to be the most radical response, and it should not be because, in a way, what Europe is now doing is much more about trying to renegotiate its relationship with the United States. Europe is not interested in breaking with the United States. And this is not simply because of Ukraine. Europe is now in a world that is very hostile to its political model. Secondly, Europeans are reading opinion polls, and the opinion polls show that Trump's very hostile attitude to Europe is not widely shared by the American public. It's a very MAGA story. Other Americans are not thinking about Europe every day, but they view us as old allies, which is preferable to the alternatives. So, from this point of view, I can imagine that Europe will, on one level, try to be as strategic as possible in showing strength and resistance. And, on another level, they will be trying to communicate to the people of the United States that it's not about Europe's relationship with America. We are in an abusive relationship with Trump, but we want to negotiate.

You said the countries with the closest economic relationship to America had taken a particularly firm stance against Trump. Why would that be?

It's a message very much meant to be heard by the markets. The markets are not totally indifferent to what Europeans are going to do. Don't forget, a significant percentage of European pension funds are still in the American market.

I think Trump thought the Europeans would fold, and he may have had good reasons to believe this, but he should be careful not to make the same mistake that the Russians made with the Ukrainians. At the time of the

invasion, Ukraine was fragmented, Zelensky was not very popular, and nobody expected them to do anything. Trump tries to motivate nationalist sentiments at home, but he sometimes seems unaware of the nationalist sentiments of other countries. For example, it has been interesting to see Greenland's reaction, because if Trump had pursued a different policy, he probably could have gotten support in Greenland, but now Greenland is looking much more pro-Danish than it has been over the last twenty years.

You said in your first answer that the Trump policy toward Europe was more “ideological” than expected. Did you mean that Trump and the people around him seem to have a particular distaste for what they see as the liberalism of Europe compared to the United States?

Many ordinary Europeans view the transatlantic relationship in almost religious terms. We stay together. We are going to do this. We have been close for such a long time.

And, by the way, I do believe this was part of the European problem. Europe developed too many dependencies on gas with Russia, on security with the United States, and on trade with China. Then, when Vice-President Vance came to the Munich Security Conference last year and basically said our natural allies are the AfD in Germany, despite knowing what that meant in the context of German history, Europeans did not know what to believe.

And then there was the national-security strategy that the Trump Administration released last year that describes civilizational decay, and civilizational failure, in Europe. So I believe it's not about liberalism anymore. Suddenly, you have the feeling that America has basically lost hope in Europe. The Trump attitude is: We are trying to remake Europe. We are going to put our own people there. We are going to basically run the place. It's a kind of Venezuelan moment, in which Trump and the people around him believe that Europe cannot run itself, so we are going to come and do it. Europe is not unaware of its own weaknesses, but this really became too

much.

That is interesting, but it's not exactly ideological. It's that he sees European weakness and wants to exert power.

That is true. When Trump first came to power, there was some very interesting analysis from historians trying to gain an understanding of Trump's world view. Something that they figured out was that, throughout his career, President Trump has held a strong belief that there was something totally wrong that, after the end of World War Two, countries like Germany and Japan were able to do so well. In his understanding, it did not make sense that the United States, the United Kingdom, and even the Soviet Union won the war, but the Germans and the Japanese were doing so well. And then it transformed into "America won, so why are Europeans living better than us? Why do they have better cars?" Etc.

And I do believe that world view stayed with him. Moreover, he does not understand what the European Union is. Europeans believe in win-win scenarios. They do believe that you really can find a way to compromise. If there is a religion of European politics, it is about compromise and consensus. And then you have somebody like Trump, who's not interested in this.

I was talking to an American analyst, a colleague of mine, and he made an observation, which I found profound, but will probably seem trivial to you. He said President Trump had a successful business career in many respects, but he was not spectacularly successful in one business that he tried, and this was the casino business. The problem is that in the casino business, in order to win, you should try to create the illusion that others are winning.

I think that's pretty good. I don't find that trivial, actually.

This was looking like a Crimean moment. So trust in the United States was very much based on the fact that, regardless of our differences, Europe can

rely on the Americans when it comes to Russia, and now nobody believes it anymore.

When you say a Crimean moment, I assume you're referring to Russia taking Crimea twelve years ago, and that that was only the beginning of their designs on Ukraine, and that Trump's desire to seize Greenland could similarly be a first step. Is that what you meant?

No. It is that in 2012 and 2013, prior to the invasion of Crimea, President Putin's popularity had declined a bit, and there had been some protests in Russia. And then suddenly you have basically this super-majority of support that emerges after he annexes Crimea. And, in my view, President Trump also thinks that if suddenly, overnight on July 4, 2026, Greenland becomes part of the United States, then America is going to understand how great they have become. And I do believe this is really scaring many in Europe because they imagine that this is going to be a politics that others want to imitate.

I think Trump is totally wrong about how Americans would react to that, but it also just might not matter. And that in itself is scary enough. Are there off-ramps you see?

I believe there is going to be a group of countries, including those in Eastern Europe, saying, "Listen, let's talk seriously. We are going to recognize the strategic dimension of Greenland, but what we cannot talk about is America owning it." And here President Trump basically has an option. Either he's going to say, "I achieved what I wanted to do. I never meant owning it. It was just about a deal, and now we are going to, for example, increase our military presence there, or it is going to be our companies that are going to develop some of the rare-earth resources of Greenland." Something like this can happen. But my feeling is that at this moment President Trump is not interested in this. It has become too symbolic for him.

The other option for compromise is that Europeans are going to keep

Greenland, and we are going to make Trump the chair of the Nobel Prize Committee so he can give the next Nobel Prize to himself. But, as of now, I do believe that Europeans probably are going to target some American goods. And we will see about the Anti-Coercion Instrument going forward.

You mentioned earlier that Europeans thought Trump really did care about building a coalition against China. But now it seems possible that one of the long-term effects of America potentially breaking with Europe in a major way would be to provide an opening for China.

Totally. This is *the* story. And I also believe Europeans are still hanging on to the hope that some part of the American élite—the financial élite but also the military élite—is going to go to President Trump and say, “Listen, you dislike Europe. And, of course, Europeans are idiots as you told us, but they’re idiots that we need.” If you look at global public opinion, people believe China is rising, but what is more interesting is that they have stopped fearing this. And I do believe this is something that President Trump slightly underestimated.

And then there is the question of NATO. Many Europeans have started to ask themselves the question of whether their belief in NATO has started to resemble the French belief in the famous Maginot Line. Before World War Two, the French created this “fortification” on the German-French border, which created the feeling that they were defended, and then it turned out that it was not the case. So, suddenly, this destabilization of Europe can really have far-reaching consequences. This is why some Europeans still believe that at a certain point there is going to be a strategic realization on the side of the Trump Administration that this is not a war worth fighting.

I hope you’re right, but you said Trump may have “underestimated” what effect all this would have with regard to China’s potential influence going forward. I don’t think this was underestimated or overestimated. I don’t think it goes into the equation of what he’s thinking about. The concept of

a misguided national interest is one thing. Lots of Presidents have had those. The concept of a person who has no conception of the national interest is maybe closer to the mark.

No, you're right. And do you know what the real risk for Europe is? The real risk for Europe is that Greenland will become Trump's obsession. Because one of the important things about President Trump is that he has strong views, but he cannot keep his attention for a very long time on the same issue. And, if this basically becomes an obsession, then the nature of the change to the transatlantic relationship is going to be really, really dramatic. ♦