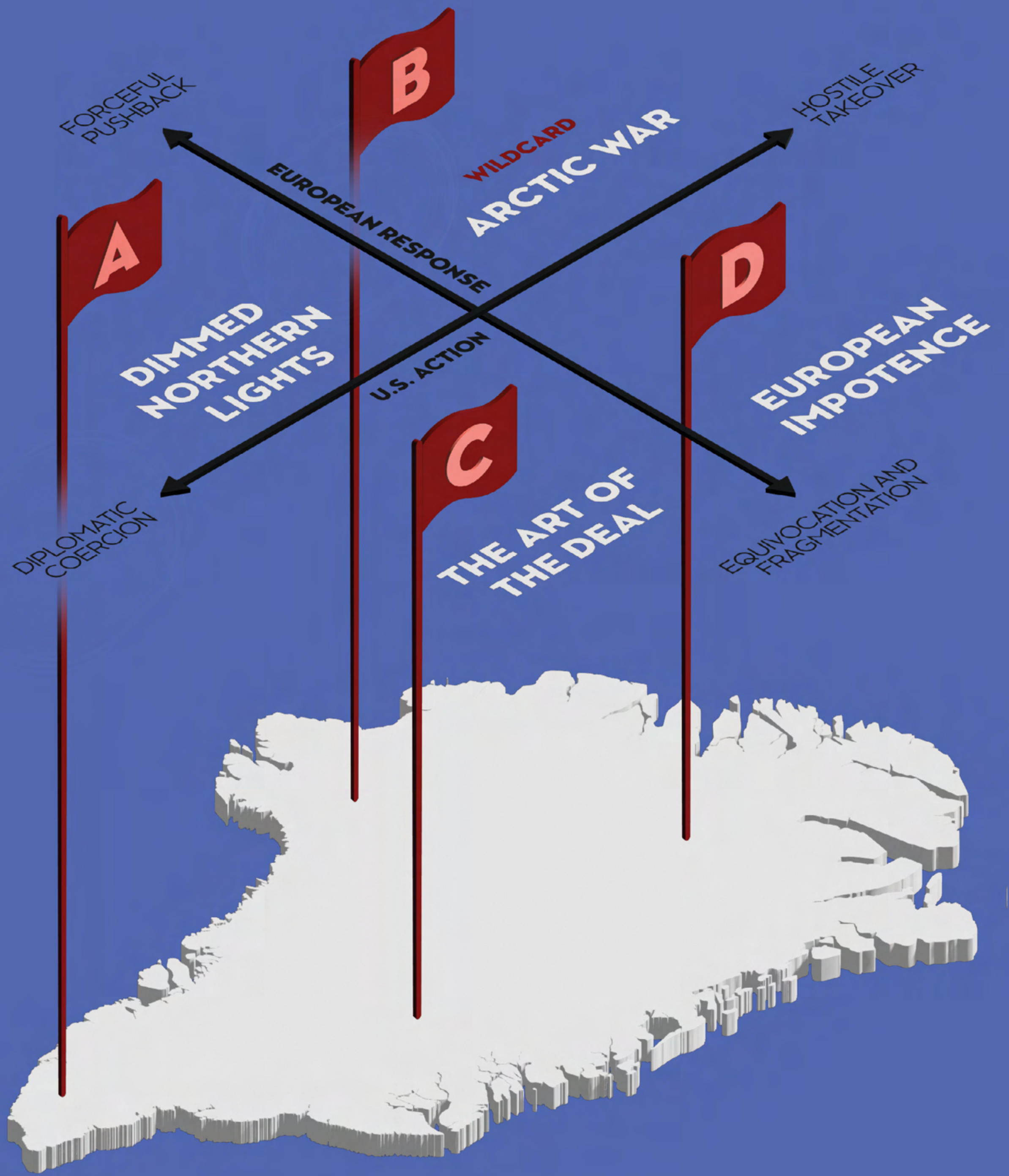
COPENHAGEN INSTITUTE FOR FUTURES STUDIES

SCENARIOS FOR GREENLAND:

Deterrence, Dependence, or Capitulation?



FORCEFUL PUSHBACK
HOSTILE TAKEOVER
B
WILDCARD
ARCTIC WAR
EUROPEAN RESPONSE
A
D
DIMMED NORTHERN LIGHTS
U.S. ACTION
EUROPEAN IMPOTENCE
C
THE ART OF THE DEAL
DIPLOMATIC COERCION
EQUIVOCATION AND FRAGMENTATION

The Arctic has long been viewed as a future arena of geopolitical competition and conflict. Renewed remarks by U.S. President Donald J. Trump about taking control of Greenland – a semi-autonomous, Indigenous-governed territory within the Danish Realm – have brought that future abruptly into the present. They underscore the Arctic's growing strategic importance as a defensive bastion, shipping corridor, and potential source of vast natural resources, while also straining relations between the United States and its closest allies. More fundamentally, they raise unsettling questions about whether a return to unconstrained Great Power politics is eroding long-standing international norms, institutions, and the rule of law.

Recent diplomatic efforts by Danish and Greenlandic leaders, supported by European allies, to reaffirm the territorial integrity of the Danish Realm and address U.S. concerns over Arctic security have so far failed to produce a clear resolution. Given the unpredictability of the Trump Administration and its increasingly hostile tone towards Europe, a swift or stable settlement appears unlikely.

To say that the stakes are high is an understatement. What is at risk is not only the lives and livelihoods of the Greenlandic people, but also the cohesion of the transatlantic alliance and the credibility of a rules-based international order – long underwritten by the United States itself. In this context of profound uncertainty, it is necessary to consider how the dispute over Greenland's future might unfold.

The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies has therefore developed four scenarios outlining how the conflict over Greenland could end, and the geopolitical implications of each outcome. While scenarios typically have a medium- to long-term focus – looking at least five to ten years into the future to reduce the need to constantly revise analyses and narratives due to rapidly changing developments – the gravity of the situation at hand demand that these scenarios focus on the near term. Accordingly, they are written from the perspective of November 2026, shortly before the U.S. mid-term elections.

They are structured around two critical uncertainties: first, whether an attempted American takeover would take the form of military action or diplomatic coercion; and second, whether Greenland, Denmark and their European partners would respond through firm resistance – including the use of force – or by pursuing pragmatic negotiation. The scenarios do not assign probabilities, nor do they advocate a preferred outcome. Rather, they offer snapshots of plausible near futures intended to illuminate the potential consequences of decisions that could be taken within days or weeks, and to support preparation for the wider political, economic and societal fallout they entail.

SCENARIO

Dimmed Northern Lights

DIPLOMATIC COERCION / FORCEFUL PUSHBACK

In 2026, the U.S. backed down on annexation ultimatums, but continued to pursue de facto control over Greenland's critical infrastructure and strategic decisions through procedural "coordination," security narratives, and deniable, but effective, economic pressure on Denmark. Europe and key NATO allies stood their ground, producing a tense equilibrium: Greenland stayed Danish territory but inside a tightened U.S.-defined security perimeter, while allied trust eroded, NATO weakened and European defence/tech autonomy accelerated.

"If we have to choose between the United States and Denmark here and now, we choose Denmark." JENS-FREDERIK NIELSEN, GREENLAND'S PRIME MINISTER, 13/01/26.

"From today, there will be an expanded military presence in and around Greenland… comprising aircraft, vessels and soldiers, including from NATO allies." THE DANISH MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, 14/01/26.

Looking back from the U.S. midterms in November, 2026 was remembered less as the year Greenland was "taken" and more as the year the Atlantic Order was replaced by an Arctic standoff. The United States never crossed the line into an overt armed seizure. Instead, it tightened its grip in the way that great powers often do when they want something but don't necessarily want or can rally domestic support for a conflict: through diplomacy that sounded like security coordination, through narratives dressed up as moral concern, and through calibrated economic pain that made the debate feel domestic in Copenhagen rather than geopolitical in Nuuk. Europe, somewhat unexpectedly, decided it could not afford to blink. The stage was set for a tug of war.

A key moment often pointed to in retrospect was the "Washington meeting" on January 14th. It did not resolve anything, but it did something more useful for escalation management – it institutionalised disagreement. A working group was framed as "coordination," but functioned as a pressure valve that kept the conflict alive but procedural, below rupture, but above normality. Each subsequent round followed the same ritual. U.S. "security concerns" were placed on the table. Danish and Greenlandic sovereignty red lines were restated. Meanwhile the cost of saying "no" quietly rose.

Washington's most effective move was to make the coercion feel personal to Denmark without making it look like an attack on Greenland. Greenland remained the stage while Denmark became the target audience. In practice, the administration leaned on two levers in parallel.

The first was the obvious one: security. Control over Greenland was described as an Arctic necessity with ports, airfields, connectivity, and "trusted" infrastructure rolled into a single strategic argument. The second lever was more potent because it worked the nervous system rather than the battlefield, targeting both large Danish and European businesses as well as public sentiment.

As the months passed, Danish companies with significant U.S. exposure experienced a steady rise in friction that rarely needed to be formally declared. Approvals slowed, tariffs went up, procurement rules hardened, "investigations" multiplied, and unfavourable reputational narratives suddenly found footing. It was coercion that could be denied in public, but which were felt in boardrooms and on bottom-lines. And when that didn't work, collective punishment was used to press Denmark and their allies through sanction-like tariff schemes. Threats were occasionally voiced about cutting off Denmark from U.S. tech services and infrastructure, but the costs the American tech providers would incur in such an event kept the intentions from ever being carried out, despite being both legally and technically possible.

The corporate pressure also had a political purpose as it created space for increasingly louder voices at home to argue that Greenland simply wasn't "worth it" for the Realm, nudging Danish public opinion into an uncomfortable divide.

The U.S. did not need Denmark to surrender outright – it merely needed Denmark to wobble.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the pond, a different pressure mounted domestically, both in the political and civil spheres, and the situation in Venezuela became both demanding and unstable. This led to the U.S. administration's Greenland objective gradually shifting from formal and complete annexation to a new status quo in which Greenland's critical infrastructure, procurement choices, and strategic projects sat inside a U.S.-defined security perimeter and were conditioned by U.S. approval.

European and NATO allies' responses were a pleasant surprise. Instead of treating the standoff as an awkward bilateral family quarrel, key capitals responded to it as a precedent-setting test, and if coercion could be normalised inside the alliance against a small partner, then sovereignty and deterrence would become conditional elsewhere. The Danish "from today" military announcement was therefore not just a Greenland policy but a broader message about European pain tolerance and the reclaiming of international respect for established rules, agreements and the proper legal avenues for challenging them. We saw reinforcements, readiness, and critical infrastructure protection being lifted from technical detail to strategic priority, because vulnerability in the North Atlantic was no longer abstract, someone was actively challenging it.

What emerged over the year was a tense equilibrium characterised by coercion without conquest, and deterrence without direct confrontation. Daily life continued in Greenland, but the governance logic shifted. Investment decisions stopped being merely economic and became geopolitical. Ports, runways, satellite links, and cables turned into choke points in the political debate. Ultimately, Greenland remained part of the Danish sovereign territory, while the U.S. extracted concessions on assets of value (current and future), and achieved something close to de facto veto logic over who could build, buy, or collaborate, which effectively pulled Greenland's strategic projects into a U.S.-defined security perimeter without formal takeover.

China and Russia, meanwhile, played the standoff the way third parties often do when allies fight: opportunistically and asymmetrically. Beijing did not need to outmatch Washington in the Arctic to gain an advantage from the confrontation. It needed only to widen transatlantic mistrust and position itself as the actor that "respects sovereignty" while keeping its economic optionality alive. China's foreign ministry publicly rejected the U.S. framing that invoked China as the justification for its ambitions in Greenland, warning that the U.S. should not use other countries as a "pretext" to pursue its interests in Greenland and insisting China's Arctic activities complied with international law. This posture served multiple purposes at once as it denied the legitimacy of the U.S. narrative, signalled to European capitals that Washington was instrumentalising the "China threat," and kept

China's longer-term commercial interest in Greenland – especially regarding critical minerals and infrastructure – politically palatable in non-U.S. fora. Russia's posture was less about Greenland per se and more about bandwidth. Moscow didn't need to make the Arctic "about Russia" to benefit. It only needed the High North to consume attention and budgets, turning every allied movement into a resource trade-off elsewhere. Russia's response operated in the familiar space between signalling and ambiguity through heightened presence, a more probing posture, and a steady drumbeat of narratives portraying Western discord as proof that security guarantees were conditional and international law was subject to western hypocrisy.

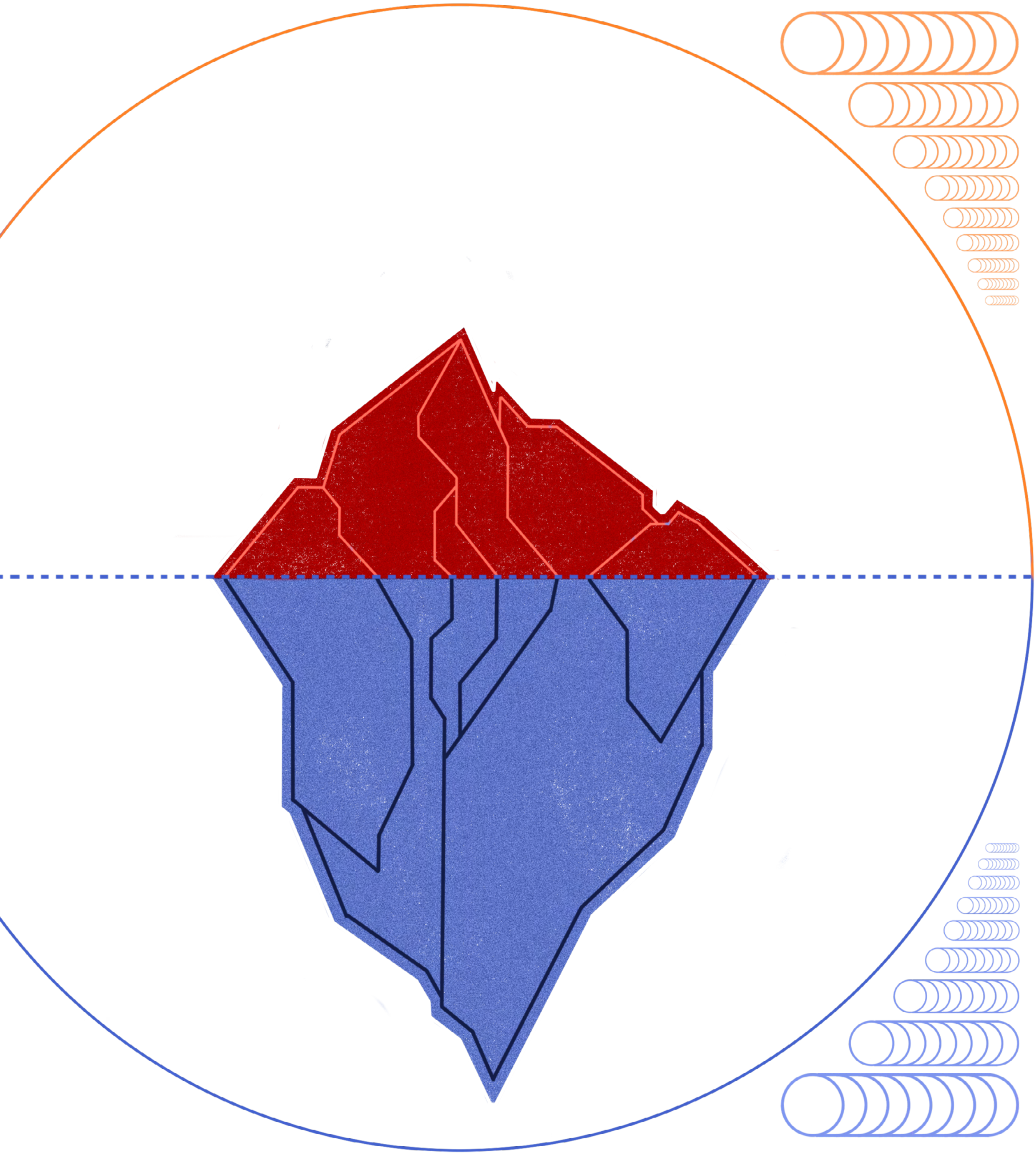
By the U.S. midterms, the end state looked less like a dramatic turning point and more like an accumulation of constraints. Denmark avoided having to give up territory, as well as the humiliation of abandonment by its partners, but paid for it in higher defence burdens and in the politicised vulnerability of globally exposed corporations. Additionally, the internal divide among the Danes about the "value of Greenland", had gathered momentum and could be reignited again in the near future, if provoked. Greenland avoided occupation, but found its autonomy increasingly exercised inside a tightened security perimeter. The U.S. secured substantial practical gains without firing a shot. Publicly, "We secured Greenland" became "we secured Arctic security". Trump's concession was reframed as statesmanship: "We made a deal; we avoided war; we strengthened security." Europe preserved the principle that sovereignty could not be rewritten under pressure, but it did so by accepting higher economic and political costs than most leaders had previously considered plausible. On the positive side, Europe's defence integration and upgrades, tech independence and economic-security toolkits were accelerated by necessity. NATO remained intact on paper, but alliance trust was permanently damaged and informal ideas of restructuring for future robustness continued to be vetted.

Variation scenario: **Unexpected Standdown**

In a variation scenario, internal differences in the U.S., along with domestic unrest and open-ended military and political involvement in other places in the world – such as Iran, Venezuela and potentially other countries in Latin America – leaves the U.S. administration's bandwidth and goodwill exhausted. Coupled with the increased material deterrence efforts of NATO allies on Greenland, the U.S. sees no choice but to stand down, at least for the time being. This means that we approach the U.S. midterms with a deescalated, yet still alert atmosphere in the Arctic. Whether this is merely a temporary pause in the president's efforts of territorial pursuit, as the one we experienced from 2019 to 2024, remains to be seen.

Variation scenario: **Institutional Brakes**

U.S. attempts to seize Greenland are unpopular among both Democratic and Republican voters. In a variation scenario, a cross-party coalition of congressional members put the brakes on the Trump administration's efforts. One possible outcome could see Congress voting to pass the bipartisan NATO Unity Protection Act, blocking President Trump from using force to seize Greenland, effectively neutering the President's threats. This outcome ultimately hinges on whether Congress can still, in practice, functionally constrain executive power rather than merely offering symbolic opposition.



WILDCARD
SCENARIO

Arctic War

HOSTILE TAKEOVER / FORCEFUL PUSHBACK

The crisis detonated when U.S. troops invaded Greenland, rapidly overwhelming Danish and NATO forces. It was an act that symbolically ended the post–Cold War Atlantic order and fractured NATO. Europe pivoted from military dependence to economic retaliation and strategic decoupling (tariffs, divestment, tech de-risking), triggering transatlantic market turmoil, while Russia exploited allied disunity to force Ukraine into a punitive settlement. The shock accelerated Europe's push for strategic autonomy: an EU turn toward energy security, tighter control over U.S. platforms, and a fast-tracked push toward deeper defence integration, including a unified European Army.

The crisis began abruptly following the seizure of the Venezuelan prime minister Nicolás Maduro by U.S. troops, followed by the threat that action in Greenland would be next on the list. In a show of unity, NATO members came to Denmark's aid by deploying troops and opening consulates in Nuuk. This modest show of force, however, did not deter the U.S. President, who ordered the U.S. military prepare for a rapid invasion of the island. Danish and NATO troops were quickly overwhelmed and forced to surrender, and media footage of combat in Nuuk circulated globally within hours. The images proved historic. They marked the symbolic end of the post-Cold War Atlantic consensus and the UN system and ushered in a new era in international relations defined not by rules of law, but by raw power.

The consequences for NATO were immediate and irreversible. The alliance, already strained, effectively disintegrated as a result of U.S. aggression. Steps were immediately taken for form a new alliance, consisting of former NATO members, but its deterrent credibility was fundamentally altered.

The EU, defeated on the battlefield but increasingly defiant in other arenas, pivoted to economic and political retaliation. The U.S.-EU trade deal signed in August 2025 was abandoned, and the EU began imposing tariffs on U.S. goods. Markets reacted violently. Export controls, retaliatory measures, and mass divestment – including the withdrawal of European pension funds from U.S. markets – triggered severe financial instability. The EU formally – and with too much delay, many would argue – began treating the United States as a security risk rather than a strategic partner.

Europe faced an uncomfortable reality: its deep dependence on U.S. tech platforms and infrastructure had long represented a strategic vulnerability. Now, that vulnerability had become unacceptable. Yet while Brussels ramped up its efforts to unwind this dependence, it had to proceed cautiously, as the United States retained effective "kill-switch" leverage over critical European digital infrastructure.

Unable to move decisively at the state level, the EU acted indirectly. Under the public justification of child protection, access to U.S.-based social media platforms was restricted for minors. Officially framed as a public health and societal measure, the policy also served a strategic objective by gradually reducing platform penetration and normalising European alternatives from the consumer level upward.

Within the United States, the administration intensified anti-European rhetoric. The Greenland seizure deepened internal divisions, but public attention quickly faded. Even before the invasion, Congressman Randy Fine had introduced the Greenland Annexation and Statehood Act, designed to fast-track statehood procedures. The political objective was explicit: to allow President Donald Trump to announce a preliminary 51st state in time for the United States' 250th anniversary on July 4. The move was largely performative, but it signalled permanence. Annexation, not association, was now U.S. policy.

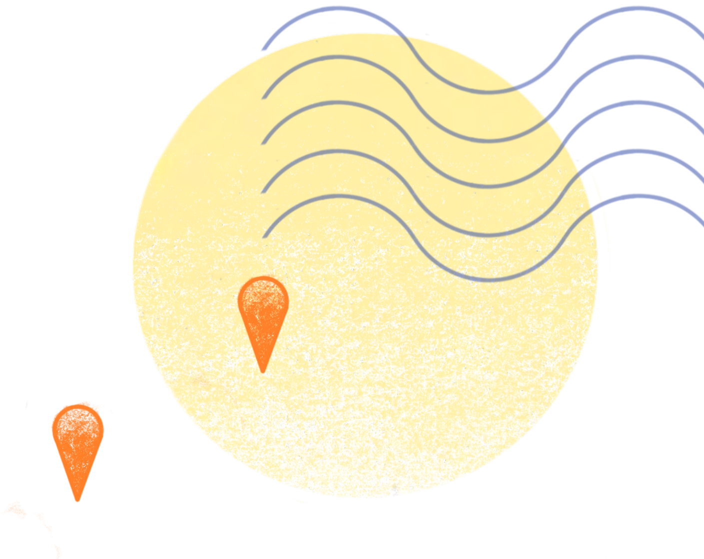
Anti-American sentiment surged globally. Yet attempts at economic retaliation quickly exposed Europe's own vulnerabilities. Rising unemployment and the entrenched dominance of U.S. technology platforms revealed a widening gap between policy ambitions and everyday life: for many citizens, political alignment mattered less than continued access to the digital networks that structured their social lives.

As the EU-U.S. relationship deteriorated, Russia exploited the disunity and escalated their war efforts in Ukraine. With Europe lacking decisive action, Ukraine folded under the renewed pressure and was forced into a crippling peace agreement largely on Russian terms.

The long-term consequences the Arctic War were the most profound. Trade between the United States and Europe contracted sharply, reversing decades of economic integration. A deep financial crisis engulfed both sides of the Atlantic as markets recognized that the trust that once formed the foundation of the global economic system had largely evaporated. Capital flight, disrupted supply chains, and collapsing confidence amplified volatility and accelerated recessionary pressures.

In response, Europe rapidly scaled investment in nuclear power and renewable energy, seeking to eliminate strategic dependence not only on Russia and the Middle East, but increasingly on the United States as well. Energy policy underwent a fundamental reframing: sustainability remained relevant, but the dominant priority shifted decisively toward supply security and strategic autonomy. This transition, however, deepened Europe's reliance on Chinese green technologies, creating a new axis of dependency even as old ones were dismantled.

On the security front, the shock proved catalytic. Long-standing resistance to deeper military integration in the EU eroded, and the Union moved toward the formation of a unified European Army. What had once been a theoretical ambition became a practical necessity, driven by the recognition that Europe could no longer outsource its security to an unreliable external guarantor.



Variation scenario: **Taiwan triggered**

In a variation scenario, Beijing moves decisively, launching coordinated operations to bring Taiwan under its control while simultaneously consolidating its hold over the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands. The moves are framed domestically as the restoration of sovereignty and regionally as a fait accompli in a world where norms no longer constrain great powers. International responses are limited to protests and sanctions, reinforcing the perception that military dominance, not legal order, now defines outcomes in Asia.

Wildcard scenario: **World War III**

The worst possible outcome: World War III does not begin with a single declaration, but through cascading escalation. The U.S., already engaged in confrontation with the EU, faces parallel crises as China moves on Taiwan and Russia consolidates control over Ukraine and invades other Eastern European countries. As red lines blur, a major military incident – perhaps a naval clash in the Indo-Pacific or a strike on Arctic assets – triggers direct combat between nuclear-armed powers. With trust absent and communication channels degraded, escalation becomes self-sustaining. World War III begins not by intent, but by the failure of restraint in a world that has normalised force as policy.

SCENARIO

The Art of the Deal

DIPLOMATIC COERCION / EQUIVOCATION AND FRAGMENTATION

Greenland exited the Danish Realm via an independence vote and signed a U.S. COFA that traded generous grants and mobility rights for American control over defence and exclusive resource access. Washington achieved this through parallel coercion of Denmark and narrative capture inside Greenland (self-determination and prosperity framing), while EU unity fractured and resistance collapsed. The aftermath was an alliance-wide trust shock: NATO survived but confidence in the U.S. as a benign guarantor eroded, Europe accelerated tech/data sovereignty and defence autonomy debates, and China and Russia exploited the return of overt power politics.

"I would like to make a deal...you know, the easy way. But if we don't do it the easy way, we're gonna do it the hard way." PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP, 09/01/26.

Greenland was not seized by force. By mid-2026, it voted for independence and shortly thereafter entered a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the United States. Yet the substance of that choice was shaped by overwhelming asymmetry. Washington offered an annual block grant that far exceeded Denmark's historic transfers, full access for Greenlanders to live, work, and study in the United States, and a one-time lump-sum payment to citizens. In return, the United States would maintain control over Greenland's defence and security, alongside exclusive rights for American corporations to extract and process mineral, oil, and gas resources. The agreement effectively placed Greenland's strategic and economic future firmly within the American orbit.

The speed of this outcome reflected a deliberate two-pronged U.S. strategy. Denmark was subjected to intense pressure, including the temporary withdrawal of American regulatory approvals for major pharmaceutical exports and restrictions on Danish financial institutions' access to U.S. markets. The economic impact was immediate, triggering political crisis in Copenhagen and sharply narrowing Denmark's room for manoeuvre.

In parallel, Washington reframed Greenland's status as a moral issue of unfulfilled self-determination. By pressing for a rapid referendum and portraying the COFA as a historic opportunity for prosperity and dignity, the United States shaped political narratives inside Greenland. The European Union initially rallied behind Denmark, but this solidarity proved fragile. Member States failed to agree on a unified approach, and several quietly concluded that confronting Washington was not worth the cost. By the time Greenlanders voted, resistance had largely collapsed.

The repercussions for transatlantic relations were immediate and enduring. NATO did not disintegrate, largely because the United States avoided military force and has remained formally committed to the alliance. Nonetheless, trust was badly eroded. Among European allies, the United States came to be viewed less as a reliable guarantor of collective security and more as an unpredictable power willing to coerce even close partners. By late 2026, discussions about a more autonomous, European-focused defence arrangement had moved decisively into the political mainstream, even if agreement remained elusive.

Within the EU, the Greenland affair triggered a profound reckoning. Advocates of deeper integration argued the episode underscored the need for far stronger political and strategic cohesion. At the same time, Eurosceptic parties portrayed the crisis as proof that the EU was never meant to act geopolitically and should retreat to its core competency of managing a common market. By late 2026, Europe found itself pulled between these competing visions, with no clear resolution in sight.

In the United States, the administration framed the Greenland deal as a historic, bloodless victory. Domestically, however, the reaction was muted. Social unrest, polarisation, and economic anxiety continued to dominate public attention. Interest from mining and energy firms remained limited, as companies confronted the immense costs and challenges of operating in Greenland. Militarisation also proceeded more cautiously than early rhetoric suggested, revealing that symbolic and strategic value outweighed immediate operational priorities. As 2026 progressed, Washington's focus shifted elsewhere, leaving Greenland strategically significant but politically peripheral.

Denmark emerged deeply shaken. The loss of Greenland produced a sense of national humiliation and a belief that the EU abandoned Denmark in crisis. Domestic politics fractured across unfamiliar lines, and snap elections were called following the collapse of the centrist coalition. Meanwhile, Denmark's security establishment moved rapidly to reinforce the Faroe Islands, widely viewed as a potential next pressure point in the North Atlantic.

In Greenland itself, cautious optimism following independence gave way to unease. While government revenues were set to increase, the long-term sustainability of welfare programmes and universal healthcare came into question under an American-dominated framework favouring costly private services. As gaps emerged, resentment towards the United States grew, and a "back to the Danish Realm" movement soon gained momentum.

Globally, the implications were stark. China condemned the U.S. approach while presenting itself as a defender of a rules-based order, adopting a measured tone towards Europe. At the same time, Beijing interpreted American behaviour as confirmation that power politics have returned, intensifying pressure on Taiwan and assertiveness in the South China Sea. While direct conflict remained unlikely, it became much more plausible.

Russia exploited Western disarray with characteristic opportunism. Incursions near the Baltic states increased, activity around Gotland, Bornholm, and Svalbard intensified, and Moscow leveraged U.S. distraction to force a conclusion to the war in Ukraine on favourable terms for Russia.

Economically, the initial disruption from U.S. pressures quickly subsided. European markets stabilised, though Denmark entered a recession. U.S. markets initially rallied before cooling as investors recognised that benefits would be distant and uncertain. International institutions continued to function, but their authority was weakened as smaller states hedged against an increasingly transactional order.

By the end of 2026, the United States has consolidated control over Greenland's physical and digital infrastructure under the banner of national security. Europe's response – a renewed push for technological and data sovereignty – has already triggered fresh tensions, potentially foreshadowing more trade confrontations in the future.

Overall, the U.S. employing an *Art of the Deal* approach in Greenland came to be seen as a turning point when formal legality ceased to meaningfully constrain power politics even among allies. Whether this accelerates fragmentation or provokes a renewed, if fragile, commitment to restraint in the long run remains uncertain. What is clear is that many long-standing assumptions no longer apply, and no stable replacement has yet emerged.

Variation scenario 1: **Greenlandic institutional pushback**

Within the bounds of this scenario, outcomes could diverge if Greenland's domestic institutions prove more resilient than anticipated. Organised civil society resistance could slow or partially block the implementation of key COFA provisions, particularly in welfare reform and resource extraction. While this would not alter Greenland's strategic alignment, it could preserve greater de facto autonomy over social policy and delay the full economic integration envisioned by Washington, increasing friction but reducing immediate social backlash.

Variation scenario 2: **European strategic convergence**

An alternative pathway could emerge if the Greenland episode catalyses faster-than-expected European defence convergence. A narrower coalition of willing EU and non-EU states could move ahead with concrete capability pooling and operational planning, bypassing institutional deadlock. While such an arrangement would remain limited in scope, it could begin restoring European strategic confidence and marginally rebalance transatlantic relations, reducing U.S. leverage in future crises.

Wildcard scenario: **U.S. domestic reversal**

A low-probability, yet disruptive wildcard may be a sudden domestic political reversal in the United States, driven by constitutional challenges, fiscal constraints, or legislative backlash against overseas commitments. In this scenario, Washington could seek to renegotiate or quietly hollow out the Greenland COFA, reducing financial transfers and strategic investment. While unlikely given elite consensus and sunk costs, such a reversal would leave Greenland economically exposed, deepen European mistrust, and further destabilise assumptions about the durability of American commitments worldwide.

SCENARIO

European Impotence

HOSTILE TAKEOVER / EQUIVOCATION AND FRAGMENTATION

By spring 2026, the U.S. had begun re-militarising Greenland while tightening economic coercion and leveraging Europe's digital dependence, forcing EU division and Denmark's collapse into conceding sovereignty in exchange for economic security and "digital continuity" guarantees. The occupation was widely read as the death of legal internationalism, and it left Europe strategically paralysed by tech/platform entanglement while internal blame and anti-American sentiment surged. China and Russia exploited the transatlantic rupture amid volatile markets and a global reversion to raw power politics.

"Greenland is not for sale."

The refrain was repeated so often by Greenlandic and Danish politicians that it eventually became an article of faith.

Of course, buyout was never the only plausible outcome. As diplomatic talks dragged on, positions increasingly hardened and the question of ownership of Greenland proved irreconcilable to all sides. Starting in the spring of 2026, the increasingly impatient Trump administration's intent to acquire the arctic territory took on a new intensity.

"Greenland is the shield," became the American refrain to counter the European one, casting the arctic island as the indispensable high-latitude keystone necessary to protect the U.S. mainland from future missile threats under the "Golden Dome" project. Why should the Americans risk New York for Europe if Europe was determined to block the defences that keep New York safe?

Rapid U.S. re-militarisation and renovations of dilapidated military bases in Greenland occurred amid heightened pressure and economic coercion that left the Europeans floundering. New rounds of tariffs on European imports were announced, and a Microsoft cloud outage – most likely a deliberate show of force by the Americans – temporarily paralysed workplaces and government offices across Europe and spooked capitals.

European leaders sought negotiation with the Americans, who proved unwilling to budge. As the seriousness of the situation came into focus, furious debates erupted in the European Parliament when Denmark sought to invoke the EU's mutual-defence clause (Article 42.7). It soon became clear that member states read its obligations differently, and that the pain threshold for conflict with the U.S. over Greenland was much higher in Copenhagen than in most other capitals. In any case, U.S. control of Greenland was at this point a settled matter.

Greenland became the bargaining chip in a standoff that Europe could not afford to prolong. Recognition of Greenland as American territory and the withdrawal of European troops from the island was the forced concession – the fact that such a transfer of sovereignty was fully outside the realm of legality was treated as an afterthought. What the Europeans begrudgingly got in return was a promise of tariff roll-back, a non-aggression pledge, and a "digital continuity agreement" which also included tech, intelligence, and "kill switch" returns.

Despite international condemnation, the Trump administration hailed the U.S. takeover as a victory for the United States – and for Greenland, now free from Danish domination and safely tucked under the U.S. security umbrella. The Americans quickly began exploring development of infrastructure while establishing a transitional governmental administration for the territory. The consequences of the takeover, and Europe's response to it, proliferated into a number second and third order effects – some expected, others unforeseen.

As the superpower switched its posture, the world felt its tremor. The *2026 U.S. Occupation of Greenland* eventually came to be understood as the final nail in the coffin of legal internationalism. Europe underwent a deep crisis of confidence that stood in stark contrast to the resolute response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Calls to sever ties with the U.S. heightened, yet European decision-makers remained hesitant, recognizing how asymmetrically interlocked and crucially dependent on the services and tech infrastructure of a now-hostile state they still were. U.S. firms remained embedded in European infrastructure in an uneasy limbo that highlighted how old notions of state sovereignty no longer applied in the age of platform capitalism.

Anti-Americanism became an aftershock of strategic failure, although it didn't prevail everywhere. NATO members Turkey and Hungary looked to their own fortunes as the strategic ambiguity that had long characterised their commitments to the alliance began to deepen.

As for NATO itself, the alliance became a shell. As its credibility imploded, European member states in the Nordics and Baltics sought out new assurances from Europe's bigger nations, outside the channels of U.S.-dominated security framework. The Trump administration expressed its will to "dump NATO", blaming its failures on the "ungrateful Europeans", which would complicate the superpower's ability to project force globally but aligned with the renewed emphasis on regional dominance as opposed to global hegemony. It marked the early stages in a geopolitical reorientation that was at once defensive and aggressive in nature. For the time being, however, U.S. troops remained stationed on European soil as leverage (another uneasy entanglement).

Greenlanders, shocked and angered, weighed their options and attempted to capitalise on the situation to secure greater autonomy, yet major uncertainty remained with regards to how this would function under U.S. stewardship. The realisation quickly set in that the prospect of independence for the arctic people now seemed off the table entirely. The country's relationship to Denmark soured as the former metropole was seen as selling Greenland out in exchange for its own stability and security. In Denmark – humbled and humiliated – anger rose at the government and at European leader's handling of the Greenland situation. Diplomatic relations with the U.S. persisted formally but were non-existent in practice.

Such is the state of things as of November 2026. Eventually, these events will likely be considered by historians as another chapter in the centuries-long history of Danish geopolitical failures and territorial concessions – although it may never become a fully settled matter whether to refer to it as an invasion, annexation, or something else. In world history, it may come to mark a hinge point after which new rules apply – or, rather, once forgotten rules have become familiar once more: unpreparedness will be punished, small powers will inevitably yield to great-power interests.

For China and Russia, the strategic shift in U.S. foreign policy and the resulting antagonism between former allies has been a strategic gift. China has become emboldened to assert a more aggressive strategy of dominance in the South China

Sea region and may prepare an eventual move on Taiwan. Beijing has also sought out industrial and tech policy partnerships with those governments in Europe that now consider China the lesser of two evils. Russia has sought to capitalise on a humiliated Europe by testing its ability to mount a coherent response, increasing its land and air activities along NATO's eastern borders while ramping up both covert sabotage and overt messaging – to the Eastern Europeans: "you are expendable"; to the Southern Europeans: "this is not your fight."

Markets fluctuate and tensions rise as old friendships break and new enmities are formed. Eventually, a calm will settle, and with it may come the realisation that the world had changed for good. Perhaps it has become a more cynical place – or perhaps those who were once shielded from its harshest realities have now woken up to how things have always been.

Variation scenario 1: **Russian rapprochement**

In a variation scenario that includes a peace settlement in Ukraine, Russia may seek a different strategy than aggression. Moscow, battered by years of bloody fighting in Ukraine, may put off further territorial ambitions and instead seek to test changes to European energy-diplomacy. Whether the European will be more receptive is a separate question.

Variation scenario 2: **A violent turn**

Accidents happen. And in high-tension situations, such accidents may be misinterpreted. A downed U.S. aircraft or a misfire on ground could cause the otherwise bloodless takeover to turn violent, causing deaths and further worsening relations following a U.S. occupation of Greenland. In such a scenario, Europe's rhetoric radicalizes, and the U.S. doubles down on anti-European hostilities, more aggressively leveraging its dominant position in European infrastructure. The scenario still ends with U.S. control of Greenland and a largely powerless and fragmented Europe, but the pathway is uglier and more destabilizing.

Questions for reflection

Policy makers

- What is your red line in Greenland – and what would we actually do if it's crossed?
- Which assumptions about allies are you still treating as stable, but shouldn't?
- What is the escalation ladder for grey-zone coercion (cyber, comms, investment pressure) before it becomes kinetic?
- Who is in command in a fast-moving crisis – politically, militarily, and in public communication?
- Which critical infrastructures (ports, airports, cables, satcom, fuel, data) are single points of failure if the conflict escalates through the scenarios?
- What is your economic-security toolkit (screening, sanctions, procurement, capital controls) – and what triggers using it?
- What is your plan for domestic cohesion when the costs hit (jobs, prices, corporate pressure, defence spending)?
- How do we coordinate EU/NATO/Realm roles without ambiguity, duplication, or paralysis as the crisis drags on?
- What does "success" look like in 12 months – what would we accept as a good enough end state?

Businesses

- Where are we dependent on geopolitical stability we've never stress-tested (market access, approvals, sanctions risk, supply chains, digital infrastructure, economic stability, legal predictability)?

- Which revenues, assets or personnel are exposed to political leverage or risk?
- If we become a bargaining chip, what is our response playbook (legal, communication, operations, stakeholder management)?
- What is our board's position on resilience obligations if government asks us to take a hit for sovereignty/security? Are we having the right dialogues with the right people (policy makers) for mitigation, response coordination and potential compensation mechanisms, in case the ask comes?
- What would we stop doing tomorrow if we assumed this geopolitical environment and its wider implications last or accelerate over the next five years?

Private citizens

- What are you willing to pay (taxes, prices, inconvenience) for security and sovereignty – and what are you not?
- If "strategic autonomy" means spending on technology and defence buildup and thereby higher costs, what trade-off feels acceptable: welfare, climate action, or consumption?
- Which information sources would you trust in a crisis – and how would you spot manipulation?
- If digital infrastructure becomes leverage, what personal/community resilience steps matter most?
- If coercion targets jobs and companies, should government prioritise economic stability or territorial integrity?
- What are the non-negotiables you'd defend, also at a cost to your daily convenience and/or financial comfort: human rights, rule of law, alliances, self-determination?
- How much uncertainty are you willing to tolerate before accepting "a deal" that reduces Greenland's autonomy?
- In five years, what would we regret more: escalating too late or compromising too early?

COPENHAGEN INSTITUTE FOR FUTURES STUDIES

unesco
Chair