

January 14, 2025

A Canadian-European Security Consensus

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The Arctic community has been set aflame with the recent [news](#) on Trump's statements professing to wanting to buy Greenland and to make Canada the 51st state of the United States. While the vast majority of commentators scoffed at Trump's efforts to purchase Greenland in 2019, the [general consensus](#) of 2024 is that this time Trump's comments must be taken seriously. If one does take both propositions genuinely, it indicates that both Canada and Denmark need to prepare for a U.S. that may not act in a predictable – let alone ally-forward – fashion. A more [neo-imperial](#) U.S. has a significant impact on Canada's next steps in its Arctic foreign policy practice – which I suggest Canada could more seriously prepare for by engaging more seriously with European Arctic states on shared Arctic security priorities.

Reactions to Trump's Two Arctic Proposals

While Arctic states knew that a second Trump presidency would have implications for the Arctic, they may not have predicted that Trump would again call for the U.S. to purchase Greenland or suggest that Canada could be the 51st state even before his inauguration. His primary arguments for the first center around Greenland's centrality for the U.S.'s national security. While Greenland played an important role during the Cold War in terms of then-Thule (now Pituffik) Air Base's position in missile defense and Greenland's important geo-strategic position in the defense of North America, there is little reason why purchasing Greenland would garner the U.S. any additional security benefits to the ones it has now via the close relationship between Denmark, Greenland, and the U.S. The second proposal closely linked to Arctic allies is Trump's statement about making Canada the U.S.'s 51st state. Notably, he [would not rule out](#) the use of economic force to manipulate Canada into joining the U.S.

The general consensus is that both proposals are dangerous because they upset the norm of sovereignty and stability of borders in the international system. Some commentators, such as the University of Calgary political scientist Dr. Rob Huebert, [suggest](#) that Trump's behavior can be explained through the logic of manifest destiny – that the U.S. has a destiny to expand beyond its own borders across the continent. Others [suggest](#) that these two proposals might be negotiating tactics. In short, they argue that he does not wish the two extreme versions of these ideas but rather is seeking some relatively smaller gains in the U.S.'s relationship with Canada and

Denmark. This begs important questions about whether Trump respects the independence of other states and entities, or whether such behavior could be considered bullying – particularly towards close allies.

Trump's comments on purchasing Greenland are damaging on several levels. First, they completely remove Greenlandic agency on their future. Greenland's Prime Minister Mute Egede has [reiterated](#) that Greenland is seeking independence, and has [stated](#) Greenland does not want to trade one owner for another. While some Greenlandic politicians have [stated](#) that Greenland is open for business, any discussion of changes to Greenland's political future must begin and end in Nuuk. Second, these comments are [damaging](#) to the relationship between Denmark and Greenland, which will further stress the U.S.-Danish relationship. In neither of these levels are Trump's comments helpful for Greenlandic independence aspirations, the close relationship with Denmark, or the Kingdom's internal relationship amongst itself.

While the proposition to make Canada the 51st state might [seem](#) outlandish, the prospect of a 25% tariff on Canadian goods cannot be taken lightly. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has [claimed](#) that this proposal is largely to distract from the potential fallout from the tariff on Canadian goods. Not only is Canada a significant supplier of steel, aluminum, and uranium to the U.S., but many additional smaller companies do business across the border. Threatening the longstanding and mutually beneficial trade relationship is counterproductive for the U.S.-Canada relationship and bad for North American security as a whole.

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Whether we believe Trump that possessing Greenland or having Canada as the 51st state would benefit U.S. national security, the proposition raises hard questions for Canada and Denmark. With an ally that threatens economic coercion, how can such countries rely on an ally like the U.S. to address shared concerns in the Arctic including the threats posed by Russia, China, and climate change? Instead, Trump's comments counterintuitively make a case for a stronger Canada and European-led Arctic security consensus. Not only do Canada and European allies share beliefs that climate change represents the primary threat to the Arctic, they also emphasize a multilateral and cooperative approach to Arctic issues that seeks a more predictable and stable security situation in the region. Allies on both sides of the Atlantic are committed to countering Russian aggression in the Arctic through increasing exercising and interoperability through NATO and other intergovernmental arenas.

Canada will always be closely linked to the U.S. in regards to the continental defence of North America, regardless of whether one considers NORAD or the long and enduring partnership between the two countries. Some commentators have [suggested](#) that the U.S.-Canada relationship already faced decreasing mutual trust and weakening shared identity. Nevertheless, the close defence relationship between the two states will endure. The U.S. should not be removed from Arctic security considerations, but one need only recall the chaos of the first Trump presidency was in the Arctic to suggest that being prepared for a worse-case scenario is better than hoping for the best.

A Canadian-European-led approach to Arctic security should be considered more seriously. Such an approach could include three pillars. First, this approach would center multilateralism at its core. For matters of soft security such as environmental and human security, the Arctic Council would be the primary forum, while hard security matters could be dealt with via NATO – of which all European Arctic states and Canada are members. Both of these approaches to Arctic security are already the norm, and bolstering this norm has an important place in the zeitgeist given Trump’s threats to leave NATO and Russia’s [threat](#) to create a second Arctic governance forum that includes non-Arctic member states. By strengthening multilateralism as a core aspect of Arctic security, Canada and European allies can reinforce their position as important decisionmakers in the region.

Second, a Canadian-European led approach would place climate change as the most important threat to Arctic security. By default, this focus point would include Indigenous stakeholders as central actors who both experience the impacts of climate change firsthand as well as possess key knowledge and insights for its adaptation. A Canadian-European consensus could similarly share lessons learned on best adaptation measures for community, ecosystem, and infrastructure resilience. While the U.S.’s most recent Arctic strategy similarly recognizes climate change as the primary threat to the Arctic, there is no guarantee that such a prioritization will be shared by the incoming Trump administration.

Third, a Canadian-European conceptualization of Arctic security could emphasize military cooperation alongside an avoidance of escalation. This would include joint training exercises amongst NATO members and in other bilateral and multilateral arrangements (which are already ongoing), responding not only to traditional security threats but also to security risks such as natural disasters, humanitarian security risks, and environmental crises. Moreover, military cooperation could be stronger between the two sides of the Atlantic in response to hybrid threats, given that there has been a drastic increase in such threats towards both northern European states as well as Canada. Military cooperation of this ilk is already occurring but it will be increasingly important to ensure that military maneuvers can take place without the aid of the U.S.

These three areas of closer Canadian-European collaboration are, in many cases, already in their infancy or key parts of the relationship that Canada shares with its European Arctic allies. Trump’s comments reinforce the importance of developing these further. If Canada and European allies cannot rely on the U.S. to behave as it has in the past, then steps should be taken now to ensure that a Canadian and European-led conceptualization of Arctic security remains the norm in the region.