Discussion Article

The return of the Americas and the rise of Norden: The Arctic as a world-shaping space

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Abstract

The Arctic is emerging as a world-shaping space where US hemispheric ambitions and Nordic sovereignty converge. Washington's renewed focus on the Western Hemisphere turns attention northward — including but not exclusively toward Greenland — generating friction with a traditional ally, Denmark, while creating alignment with Finland. Meanwhile, the Nordic Council's institutional promotion of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Åland marks a geopolitical shift, stretching Norden across two continents. Although all Nordics now belong to NATO, the rootedness of their different strategic cultures portends a great test for Nordic Unity precisely where the Arctic meets the Americas. Emerging dynamics may also split the European geostrategic space into two, separating the Arctic and the immediate sub-Arctic from the rest of the continent.

Keywords

Arctic Security, Western Hemisphere, Nordic Cooperation, Geopolitics, Transatlantic Relations

Near home or far abroad

Does a superpower start or end at home? To unpack that question: Is it a sign of weakness to concentrate on matters closer to home, or is it a simple recognition of how strength and power are built up? Similarly, the definition of home and how it extends to backyards or shared neighbourhoods differs based on who you ask. That definition and the answers to the preceding questions are at the heart of the debate over the general direction of US foreign and defence policy and, in particular, in debates over the role that the Western Hemisphere plays in the broader picture. Here, even people who think that the Americas should be an important or even primary zone of US security posture can and do differ over specific policy choices. That said, at a time of a major paradigm shift it is very easy to think that those specifics are a concomitant part of the shift. However, it is at least just as — and I would argue even more — likely that we simply lack the tools to analyse and parse through the different policy preferences. What appears as a necessary connection to the uninitiated eye may, under closer inspection, be laden with a range of choices and alternative avenues.

The reasons for confusion are quite human. We can only specialise in so many things and most scholars, analysts and practitioners of international affairs — in the United States and abroad — have focused their sights on issues and regions other than the Western Hemisphere. As one example, one can query how well European NATO allies of Canada have understood the security landscape in the Great White North? For American scholars, who were raised by WWII veterans and other members of the Greatest Generation, a certain globalism had strong ethical appeal: the United States had saved and safeguarded Europe more than once throughout the twentieth century. Such a globalism increasingly came to have not only an ethical but also an aesthetic appeal. We still live in the shadow of such an aesthetic. During the first quarter century of the new millennium, it was common for books on US grand strategy to say very little or nothing at all about the Americas. Grand strategy was primarily for Eurasia or the Indo-Pacific, with some mentions of the African continent. To speak of the Americas would be the opposite of grand — it might even be seen as unbecoming for a superpower with global interests.

It was not always thus. During the nineteenth century, the United States not only expanded and developed interests in its hemisphere but also in the Pacific — from its involvement in the Second Opium War to its conquest of the Philippines. In the first half of the twentieth century the United States simultaneously pursued strong and varying hemispheric policy, while rising to global influence, and premiered collective security in the form of the Rio Treaty.**1** Similarly, at least from the Cuban Revolution in 1959 through the US intervention in Panama in 1989, the hemisphere was seen as part of a global game. It was only in the 1990s — with Cuba still Communist but without its great Muscovite protector — that an image of a global United States in opposition to a hemispheric one began to take form. Certainly, there was the War on Drugs, which in its different forms has been a policy mainstay since the Nixon Years, and it did include US military participation, most notably in Colombia. Yet it never resembled the all-out war that was fought against the poppy-farming Taliban in Afghanistan.

It was precisely to operations such as the long war in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq and more limited conflicts elsewhere, that US policy elites and their interlocutors in allied communities turned their attention. To make an obvious point, the War on Terror mirrors almost perfectly the timeline during which a socialist Venezuela descended into famine and repression, triggered millions of its citizens to become refugees, and, through its cooperation with Cuba, became a hub for powers hostile to the United States. It is this disconnect with US military priorities and its geography to which those who speak

1 See Tähtinen L. (2025) 'Brazil's Split Worlds: Navigating between the Global South and the United States,' *FIIA Briefing Paper* 414, Finnish Institute of International Affairs. Available at: https://fiia.fi/en/publication/brazils-split-worlds.

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to the importance of the Western Hemisphere often draw their attention. With the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, the resulting conditionality of governance in Caracas, and the growing pressure on Havana, we are beginning to see beyond the contours of, at least, one form of Washington's Western Hemisphere policy. Just as importantly, there is also a different Western Hemisphere beyond the one that lies to the south of the United States in Latin America and the Caribbean: The High North.

During the global Cold War, the Arctic — just like the rest of the Western Hemisphere — had been a site of major contestation as it provided the shortest route for missiles to reach North America from the Soviet Union. After all, the United States is an integral part of that geography due to the location of its 49th state: Alaska. However, as is now apparent, Washington considers all western-hemisphere lands to the north and east of the United States, including not only Canada but also Greenland and, via proxy, Denmark, a zone of grand interest. That proxy relationship, as well as the presence of other areas of Nordic sovereignty in the Arctic, helps explain how the Nordics are increasingly being pulled into a different strategic theatre from that of the rest of Europe. To make matters more challenging, depending on the geography under question, Nordics can and will align more readily. In Afghanistan and mainland Europe the Nordics have, in fact, aligned readily, while on the Iraq War and now the Arctic, alignment is more tendentious. As the Arctic connects Europe to broader US priorities in the Western Hemisphere, we should expect to see greater Nordic divergence in the years to come.

Shades of sovereignty in the Arctic

The Arctic — and the sub-Arctic — is characterised by shades of sovereignty. Complex claims of sovereignty exist based, for example, on the prolongation of continental shelves. The unsettled dispute regarding the status of the waterways flowing through Canada's North is a prime example, as was the Soviet and now Russian presence in Spitsbergen under the Svalbard Treaty. In the former case, there is no formal agreement over status, and even in the latter, when there is a formal agreement, different parties can interpret and instrumentalise it to different and even hostile ends. This means that Greenland, as a site of great power politics, is more the rule than the exception. Simultaneously, in many jurisdictions, domestic progressive politics drive for the incorporation and spread of land acknowledgement practices for the benefit of indigenous peoples. At least for outsiders eyeing territorial prizes, such practices emerge as another front for questioning the sovereignty of the central government.

Such shading or even lacunae are also increasingly celebrated by *Norden* itself. The Nordic Council has taken the lead on the topic, with its recent elevation of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland to its Presidium. The website of the Nordic Council reflects the new status (published 30 October 2025) with the following statement: "The decision means that the three countries will participate on an equal footing with Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland in the key decisions that shape Nordic co-operation." The designation of Åland as a "country" might surprise or even shock a number of Finns who do not watch the Presidium, the Nordic Council's senior body between the annual sessions. Now "the three countries" partake in the Presidium without an alteration of the Helsinki Treaty, a compromise between those who wanted wholesale change and partisans of the five-country model.

What may from the perspective of Nordic democratic traditions appear as a relatively minor measure is also a fundamentally geopolitical act. The Nordic Council now has a seat for a "country" that lies almost entirely on the North American plate and is by conventional geography considered part of the Americas. By self-admission *Norden* now covers both the northeastern flank of North America and the northwestern edge of Europe. This extension of *Norden* is happening at a time when the Arctic is rising onto world-shaping agendas, making it a primary space for related action. The US decision to

acquire both icebreakers and related technology from Finland speaks to this trend. It also suggests that the different histories, outlooks, and interests of different Nordic countries will come to the fore in a fashion that has not been present for at least a generation if not many.

Washington's current broad conception of the Western Hemisphere – a strongly securitised understanding of it – is one that overlaps with shades of Nordic sovereignty in the Arctic. Most prominently, this sequence has resulted in the resurfacing of an unfinished story of an Atlantic Denmark – one often ignored or even wished away by its Nordic neighbours – with its colonial legacies at times both aligning and clashing with US visions of itself and its security interests. While this is not the venue for doing so, we must recover a fuller understanding of US attitudes towards the Danish West Indies during World War I, the US occupations of Iceland and Greenland during World War II, and the diverging paths of all three spaces thereafter. Only by giving such US presence and partnerships in the Americas and the Atlantic sufficient consideration can we project lessons into Europe. At a time of a resurgent Monroe Doctrine, it is also vital to remember how anti-monarchical it is at its root. Thus far, the only fully independent outcome from the Danish realm is the case of Iceland. At its origin that republic is a creature of twentieth-century US promotion of precisely *republican* self-determination, and an arrangement that Washington in the following decades proceeded to underwrite with military force.

This exposition of *Norden's* Arctic and its interplay with the US and Canadian one is not building up towards any policy recommendations; instead, what has preceded and what follows simply states three things in an extended fashion. First, the expansion of the Nordic paradigm to include the Americas is a momentous decision. Second, such a decision may continue to contribute to the growing acrimony between Washington and its traditional close ally Copenhagen over the shades of sovereignty of Denmark's current and former territories. Third, it is increasingly clear that different Nordics trend in different directions; for example, the robust republican realism of Helsinki and the not-quite-post imperial predicaments of Copenhagen point towards different destinations and related dissension. To put things most bluntly, Washington's and Helsinki's common cause may not always align with the interests of Copenhagen. To understand how and why we need to delve even deeper into the historical record.

From West Africa to the World

In the 1650s, Denmark and Sweden clashed over the control of a West African trading port that later came to be known as the Cape Coast Castle, perhaps the most infamous of European slave fortresses. During the Northern War (1655-1660), this helped trigger warfare between the two Scandinavian kingdoms, resulting in the handover of Scania to Sweden but also the relinquishing of Sweden's Western African possession to Denmark. This reoriented the global projections of the two kingdoms: Sweden was to have *Dominium Maris Baltici*, while Denmark focused on overseas colonies and partook in the transatlantic slave trade. This had its own impact on other Nordic peoples: while Danes colonised the world, the Norwegians — especially once in union with Sweden — came to be known for their exploration of polar regions. Despite having some explorers and colonists of their own, the Swedes mostly focused on their eastern flank. By political and cultural extension, the control of the contested Baltic Sea also became for Finns the key determinant of strategic success.

Here, we must fast-forward for the sake of argument and focus on how this history, and the geography with which it interacts, has resulted in strikingly diverging global outlooks. Over the centuries and even recent decades Copenhagen and Stockholm, and, even more so, Helsinki, developed different strategic cultures. In the aftermath of World War II, Denmark pursued a Scandinavian Defence Union which Sweden ultimately rejected, as it feared it might push Moscow to more fully incorporate Finland into

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its sphere of influence. Over the years, Nordic misalignment surfaced, for example, as Danish interests in Nordic economic cooperation did not bend to the realities of Finland's relationship with its Soviet neighbour. In the event, when the Danes joined the European Community – in lieu of greater Nordic integration – it also helped carve out vacuums in the process of European integration. Decades later, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, itself a participant in the carving out of exceptions, got sucked into a vacuum. This was a major loss for Stockholm and Helsinki, used as they were to seeing a friend in London, someone with an eye to the realities of the Baltic Sea and the threat posed by Russia. In fact, in the early 2020s, a potential re-approximation with the UK was one of the many factors pushing Finland and Sweden toward Nato.

However, it is not only the Danish colonial but also expeditionary tradition that caused the greatest drift from the worldviews of Helsinki and Stockholm. For a certain generation of Danish leadership, the Iraq War and its associated projects of democracy promotion bore an unmistakable family resemblance to earlier episodes of US underwriting of global order. These included the defence of Denmark's Atlantic sovereignty, its transference to the United States in the Caribbean, and the midwifing of independence for its former possession: Iceland. Within that mindset, expeditionary participation was not a rupture but a reaffirmation of Denmark's place in the US-anchored liberal order. Yet to other Nordics, especially Finland, this alignment appeared less as solidarity than as complicity. The same war that reassured Copenhagen of its transatlantic credentials confirmed in Helsinki the wisdom of restraint. This, then, may have delayed Finland's, and possibly Sweden's, strategic realignment by nearly two decades. It also left behind a more divided continent: the Iraq War caused not only a Western but a European split. Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland found themselves on a different side than Denmark but also the UK, Poland, and Estonia.

Now, the grand-strategic tide has turned in Washington, and, in its corrective, the second Trump administration is willing to assign blame for US expeditionary warfare in Eurasia to both rivals at home and to many of those who used to be considered America's very closest allies abroad. Denmark and its fellow travellers now stand accused of backing earlier US policy – with such an accusation playing a part in a broader attempt to realign overall US global posture and the transatlantic alliance. Such alliance-remaking also means a more confrontational relationship with the European Union, and an interest and willingness to play sides not only between but also within European countries. Meanwhile for Sweden, and especially Finland, it is not only Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine but also the end of one era of US expeditionary warfare that provided the immediate backdrop for Finnish and Swedish Nato membership. As such, they can now shape Nato's meaning in ways that contribute to European self-reliance rather than US-led forever wars. Ironically, the fact that the Iraq War may have delayed Finnish Nato membership leaves Helsinki in a more agile position to shape the Arctic and the immediate sub-Arctic world, with the help of both Finnish technological and tactical know-how.

Conflicting commitments in Helsinki's position

None of the above is to say that Helsinki's position would be an easy one or one that would flow naturally from older commitments. Full military alignment has many benefits that need not be recounted here but it should be underlined how fuller alignment not only exposes one to the forces against which the alignment occurs but also to rifts between one's allies. A newly positioned country discovers both new and renewed friction. Finland's grand strategy in the post-1945 world was to remove itself from the Baltic nexus of Molotov-Ribbentrop, and for this Nordic cooperation was the most plausible gateway. Meanwhile, in that world, greater open cooperation with the United States would have threatened to unleash forces that would lock Finland in Baltic servitude. It is notable that the push to sell Finnish

icebreakers and related technology to the United States dates to the years of deepest Finlandization. That period of time was also the heyday of Nordic cooperation and US-Danish military cooperation in the Arctic. Different divisions allowed for different partnerships and alliances.

This is not to say that the US-Danish settlement of the past decades was ever a clear-cut relationship. Washington had expressed interest in purchasing Greenland several times in the years that followed World War II — to follow the model of the West Indies, if not that of independent Iceland. Now that Washington is reassessing US military presence around the world, while re-focusing on homeland defence and broader hemispheric affairs, the case of Greenland, whose defence has been a US responsibility for many decades, is a canary in the coal mine of transatlantic relations. A return to a Cold War era, US-led force posture faces new headwind, including the recovery of a longer trajectory of US strategic thought. The image of US boots on the ground helping a European monarchy hold onto the pre-postcolonial phase of its history in the Western Hemisphere is not one to ingratiate itself with today's Washington. This is the case even before one highlights the importance of Greenland in terms of mineral wealth or for US designs for hemispheric air defence.

This means that US pressure on Denmark, part and parcel of its hemispheric and Arctic shifts, and the Finnish economic and strategic interest in assisting the United States in this shift make for complex politics. It may very well be the case that in the future it is the Arctic that maintains primary US interest in deterring Russia, while non-Arctic Europe is expected to bear the brunt of its own defence. Once the Arctic emerges as a world-shaping space, as Europe once was *par excellence*, prior alignments will also shift. It also generally raises geopolitical stakes in the Arctic while diminishing them elsewhere in Europe. Europeans may recognise this from how they would often applaud US anti-communism in Europe, while deploring similar stances in the Caribbean basin or in East Asia. This is to say that the countries in the very north of Europe may soon find themselves exposed to a different geopolitical logic and valuation than most of the continent. This is because the logic of the Arctic, as an extension of the Western Hemisphere, looks to push aside its competition further south on the European continent.

New spaces, new arrangements

For Finland and Sweden, the logic of Washington's interest in Greenland highlights the defence of Åland — another of the Nordic Council's new "countries" and unlike the others, also demilitarised. One of the reasons that any superpower's turn to its own neighbourhood triggers concern in its neighbours is that their behavioural patterns can be mirrored by other great powers. Russia's neighbours feel the pressure of such a logic more heavily than most others. While neither party has a direct stake in the status of the remnants of Denmark's Atlantic empire, they have a strong indirect interest in it, not just in terms of broader principles of international law but in the shades of sovereignty that define the Arctic space and *Norden. They also simply share a major stake in Washington's general turn towards the Arctic, both as an extension of its concern for the Western Hemisphere and more independently.*

For years, many parties, both in the United States and in Latin America, lamented the lack of Washington's interest in the future and broader development of the lands to its south. After seeing the form that US interest in the region is taking, some are clearly elated – especially those who have had the misfortune of living under the despotic regime in Caracas or been driven abroad by it. Others have come to regret ever hoping for increased US interest in its affairs and would readily return to what many now see as benign neglect. Relatedly, the Nobel Committee granting its Peace Prize to the most powerful figure in the Venezuelan opposition provides a point of overlap between the two geographies. To explore that parallel further, it can be said that what is true for Latin America is just as true for the Arctic. The Nordic countries have long hoped for more US interest in the Arctic to counterbalance

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Russia's presence. Yet, Washington's push to integrate Greenland into the United States is so difficult for Nordic leaders and publics to stomach that it is nearly impossible for them to contemplate what it might mean for them. It would certainly make the US an Arctic power but this shift in Washington's strategic balance would also bring the United States closer to being a European power than ever before.

To return to our initial question: does a superpower start or end at home? Whichever direction the response flows, a qualified answer would have to recognise that for a superpower its neighbourhood can extend surprisingly far and wide. And in the case of the United States this conception may well encompass much of the Arctic that does not belong to Russia. Such a conception is bound to create friction where there was little before and provide foundations for coalitions which would have been difficult to imagine in the past. Superpower interest in a region is a force that does not leave previous arrangements or attitudes untouched. Also, the lessons learned and precedents set in one space shall soon shape the broader world. First the Arctic, then the world.