Was WEF26 Truly Equipped to Address Peace?

27 FEBRUARY 2026

Burak Baran



Every year, world leaders, business leaders, and financiers meet in the Swiss Alps for the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum. Davos, the centre of the World Economic Forum, has been a shorthand for global dialogue – a place where leaders talk about international cooperation, green energy, and most importantly peace – in an increasingly polarized and authoritarian world order.

The annual forum in 2026 was different than the rest. Perhaps for the first time, the language of peace was tested against reality. As the summit unfolded in Davos, tensions surrounding the dispute between the U.S.

and Denmark's territory, Greenland, escalated into a confrontation over sovereignty, territorial integrity, Arctic security, and NATO's cohesion. This year's edition became a stress test for global governance.

The strategic importance of the Arctic

In modern contemporary politics, three important developments have elevated Greenland's strategic importance.

Melting ice caused by the increasing temperatures is opening new sea routes and transit times between Asia, Europe, and North America. The Arctic is no longer considered a barrier but rather a maritime corridor.

Greenland hold deposits of rare earth elements and minerals such as neodymium, dysprosium, and terbium which are vital for green infrastructure, advanced electronics, and defence systems. According to the USGS, Greenland also has approximately 7.8 billion barrels of undiscovered oil – a natural resource that has attracted US interests in the last couple of decades. However, in 2021 the Greenlandic government restricted new oil exploration, citing environmental concerns. In an era of fragile supply chains and growing technological competition between major powers like the U.S. and China, access to minerals can carry strategic weight

The militarization of the Arctic has accelerated since the Cold War. The U.S., Russia and others view the region strategically important. The location of Greenland amplifies its importance within NATO's northern flank.

The second presidency of Donald Trump intensified U.S. interest in the region. President Trump has expressed publicly multiple times that the U.S. wants "total access to Greenland," refusing to rule out military intervention until Davos. While the U.S.' ambitions were framed as a matter of security and partnership, the rhetoric used by the Trump administration undermined relations and mutual trust. Denmark has expressed that the sovereignty of Greenland is non-negotiable, supported by the European leaders.

Davos as a governance mechanism

Davos is not a treaty-based or formal organisation. It doesn't hold formal enforcement authority. Rather, it is a stage for discussion. Its influence; however, stems from its ability to convene leaders and decision-makers across the globe in a single place. This function provides several advantages:

At WEF26, European Commission President von der Leyen has explicitly reaffirmed the importance of principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. U.S. Representatives changed their earlier rhetoric, emphasizing the importance of continuity of the alliance. These interactions collectively have helped reduce uncertainty regarding Greenland's future and its implications.

Davos, in some sense, functioned as a mechanism of stabilisation – facilitating de-escalation, discussion, and reassurance of stability and non-

aggression. However, the stabilisation should not be mistaken with the structural resolution of the dispute.

Greenland as the 'stress test'

The Greenland issue has revealed four structural controversies in global governance.

There is an assumption that dialogue reduces fragmentation. However, when strategic alignments become more intense, dialogue becomes reactive rather than preventative. The case of Greenland has illustrated that peace often falls behind strategic manoeuvring. Elite forums can manage the rhetoric – but they cannot neutralize power asymmetries.

The contemporary international order rests on sovereignty and territorial integrity. Strategic interests, such as those surrounding Greenland, can persuade global powers like the U.S. to test normative boundaries everyone takes for granted. Even rhetorical questions about sovereignty can destabilize alliances such as NATO, as recent debates have shown. Greenland has shown how fragile sovereignty is when embedded in competition.

Panels at the WEF emphasize the importance and relevance of resilience, sustainability, and cooperation. But long-lasting peace requires institutional enforcement mechanisms; dialogue alone is not enough. It requires deterrence, military commitments, and predictable, rational behaviour of alliances.

Was WEF26 equipped to address Greenland?

In terms of facilitation, yes – WEF provided an effective arena for dialogue. It promoted transparency, clarified national intentions, and prevented escalation with the U.S. President Trump eventually announcing that the U.S wouldn't use military or economic measures to "take over" Greenland. Markets remained stable, unlike predicted by economists; NATO's internal strength was reaffirmed, and assurances were made, even if symbolic – which is valuable in times of uncertainty.

However, Davos lacked the structural capacity to enforce outcomes. There were no structural mechanisms in Davos that could stop strategic brinkmanship. Enforcement depends purely on voluntary restraint and shared commitment of states, which may not be credible in the current global environment. Davos' authority is not coercive. Greenland has shown the world that Davos functions only when involved parties value the stability of the international system. It struggles when stability itself is negotiable.

Peace in a global era of strategic competition

WEF26 revealed both the relevance and structural limitation of dialogue. It offered space for reassurance and reaffirmation of sovereignty while helping prevent escalation. However, it has also shown a deeper tension within

global governance. Peace can't rest solely on narrative framing or symbolic unity. It requires coherence, predictability, and deterrence mechanisms.

Greenland was a diagnostic moment for the functioning of WEF. It revealed the fragile interface between global dialogue and geopolitical calculation. The Arctic will continue to emerge as a strategic arena in the future, and similar stress tests are very likely. The challenge for global governance should be to construct frameworks where peace can be sustained under high pressures.

If WEF is to remain relevant in a fast-paced global order, it must integrate geopolitical realism into normative perspectives. Dialogue is and will be essential, but without structural frameworks or enforcement, it risks being a performance rather than a safeguard.

Greenland leaves us with a lesson: peace will be negotiated not only in formal institutions or military alliances but also in forums where narratives and intentions are shaped. The real question is no longer whether Davos can discuss peace – but whether the existing international system can institutionalize it before the next stress test arrives.

EPIS