Westphalian Order Under Siege

3 JUNE 2025
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EPIS Report Groups – Security Policy and Defence: Report Article Proposal:

Westphalian Order Under Siege: Trump's Challenge to Allied Sovereignty and Europe's Strategic Dilemma

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact, that the old is dying and the new cannot be born." (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276)

I. Introduction:

For nearly four centuries, the Westphalian state system has served as the foundational grammar of modern international relations. Most students entering the field of political science are still introduced to its core principles – sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference – as the normative bedrock of the modern international order, shaping how international institutions and alliances are constructed and understood.

Especially within the transatlantic relationship that evolved after the Second World War, these principles became the cornerstone of trust and institutional cohesion. Within NATO and later the European Union, Westphalian norms were not merely abstract ideals, but operating assumptions: essential to mutual recognition, legal equality, and the strategic predictability that underpinned the alliance – particularly the guarantee of territorial integrity among member states (NATO, 2022).

Although often criticised as hypocritical – given the West's history of intervening in other sovereign states' affairs – these principles remained largely uncontested within the Western alliance itself. As Henry Kissinger (2014, p. 11) observes in World Order, "the contemporary, now global Westphalian system – what colloquially is called the world community – has striven to curtail the anarchical nature of the world" through legal and institutional mechanisms. While not universally upheld, this framework has provided the normative foundation for modern diplomacy and alliance-building. Within the transatlantic context, it has served not only as a theoretical model, but as a pragmatic logic of unity – one grounded in the mutual respect for sovereignty and the protection of territorial integrity among allies.

Today, however, one of the core Westphalian principles – the respect for territorial integrity – is increasingly under strain. Violations of this principle have always occurred globally, and this paper does not attempt to argue for the universal consistency or legal applicability of Westphalia. Rather, it focuses on the rhetorical rupture within the Western alliance itself and the caesura this second Trump administration presents – and how Europe, in response, is confronted with the erosion of a normative foundation it long considered stable. What follows is an exploration of how Westphalian principles, while often mythologized in theory, became structurally embedded in the postwar European security order – and how that very order is now being unsettled from within.

II. The Westphalian Myth and the Institutionalisation of Sovereignty in NATO and the EU

Signed in 1648 in the cities of Osnabrück and Münster, the Peace of Westphalia marked the end of one of Europe's most bloody periods, the Thirty Years' War – a conflict that had devastated the continent and caused nearly 20% of its population to perish. Since then, the treaty has taken on a near-mythical status in international relations theory and has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, often interpreted as the symbolic origin of the modern state system. As Henry Kissinger (2014) noted, the European powers that emerged from this conflict would go on to export elements of the Westphalian model across the globe – yet this "export" often occurred through conquest and colonisation, revealing a central contradiction between the principles of sovereignty and the means of their dissemination. This contradiction was especially visible in the 19th century, when European powers increasingly operated according to a realist understanding of international politics. As Clausewitz famously argued, war was considered a legitimate extension of political strategy. In this context, state sovereignty was frequently subordinated to imperial ambition and great-power competition. Yet despite such contradictions, Westphalian norms continued to serve as a legitimising framework – a rhetorical anchor that would later be institutionalised in the postwar Euro-Atlantic security order.

Yet, scholars such as Stephen Krasner (1999) and John Gerard Ruggie (1993) have critically reassessed this mythologised view of Westphalia. Opposing the scholarly view of Westphalia as a sort of "natural order", Ruggie (1993, p. 148) describes the modern state system as socially constructed, rooted in a specific transformation of political authority. Westphalian sovereignty, according to Ruggie (1993), emerged under particular conditions characterised by exclusive territoriality and mutual recognition. Extending this critique, Krasner (1999, p. 3) famously labelled sovereignty as "organised hypocrisy", arguing that while states routinely violate principles of non-intervention and territorial integrity, they continue to invoke them rhetorically as sacred to legitimise their actions and aspirations. Applied to the

modern international system, Westphalia should therefore be understood not as a consistent empirical reality, but as a selectively upheld normative framework – more symbolic than structural in many global contexts.

Nevertheless, Westphalia, as both a normative framework and empirical reality, served as the foundation for the European post-WWII order. Drawing lessons from the failures of the past, European and North American states wove its core principles into the newly created institutions designed to ensure that war on the European continent should remain a relic of the past. Nowhere was this more evident than in the foundational treaties of NATO and the European Union, which codified Westphalian norms as a shared consensus among member states, providing the foundation for an institutional framework in which allies no longer needed to fear encroachment, coercion, or territorial contestation from within the alliance itself. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty operationalises the protection of territorial integrity by affirming that an armed attack against one member shall be considered an attack against all, thereby offering a mutual defence guarantee rooted in the inviolability of each member's borders (NATO, 1949, Article 5). Similarly, the Treaty on European Union obliges the Union to respect "the equality of Member States before the Treaties" and their "essential state functions," including the safeguarding of national territory and political identity (European Union, 2012, Article 4(2)).

This section sought to demystify the often-mythologised role of Westphalia in international relations – not as a universal or natural order, but as a historically situated framework, shaped as much by power as by principle. By tracing its evolution from symbolic origin myth to functional foundation of postwar alliance structures, it becomes clear that Westphalian norms were selectively embedded in NATO and the EU not out of pure legal consistency, but to serve the strategic need for predictability and mutual recognition among allies. It is precisely this selective but stabilising role that makes their present-day erosion – rhetorical or otherwise – so consequential.

Visualisation 1: Three Pillars of the Traditional Westphalian Order

III. Rhetorical Imperialism: America First, Territorial Integrity Last

Essentially, it's a large real estate deal.

Donald J. Trump (Haberman & Rogers, 2019)

From as early as August 2019 (Haberman & Rogers, 2019), this quote set the tone for what was to come. Reiterating an idea the United States had last proposed – albeit secretly – in 1946 under President Harry S. Truman, Trump's offer to buy Greenland from Denmark was met across the transatlantic alliance with scepticism and quiet resentment. At the time, the proposal was largely dismissed as a humorous mishap – another instance of Trump's unorthodox style rather than a serious shift in strategic posture.

Yet the world kept turning. By the end of Trump's first term in 2021, the geopolitical landscape had grown increasingly unstable: China was asserting itself more aggressively in the Pacific, while Russia was advancing its vision of the 'Russkiy Mir'- a civilizational sphere justified through cultural and linguistic ties (Snyder, 2018). Instead of a humorous eccentricity, his transactional aspiration was in hindsight a harrowing harbinger: a desire to expand American influence, and early expression of what would become a sustained campaign of rhetorical imperialism. This campaign would soon undermine and threaten these very political frameworks of the rule-based international order that had defined the postwar West.

Greenland:

Greenland has been of American interest since the mid-19th century. Long regarded as a strategic necessity, President Truman's secret 1946 proposal to purchase the island ultimately led to a bilateral defence agreement (Associated Press, 2019; Yale Law School, n.d.), which granted the U.S. military the right to establish bases in Greenland at its discretion (even though the US had troops stationed there already) – without transferring the island's sovereignty or control over its vast natural resources. Situated in the North Atlantic, Greenland provides the United States with a critical forward operating position: it enables power projection into the Arctic, forms part of early missile defence systems, and offers strategic surveillance capabilities over both Europe and Russia. As climate change continues to melt Arctic sea ice and open new shipping lanes, Greenland's military and economic significance has only increased, placing it at the centre of American defence planning. The island has been part of the Kingdom of Denmark since 1814, and is thereby part of NATO but not of the European Union, while enjoying broad political autonomy under its own government in Nuuk.

Since Trump was inaugurated as the 47th President of the United States, his previously stated aspirations to acquire Greenland have evolved into open challenges to the island's – and by extension, Denmark's – sovereignty. In statements issued by the administration or by Trump himself, Greenland has once again been described as "essentially a real estate deal" (Haberman & Rogers, 2019). More alarmingly, when asked whether Denmark's rejection of U.S. annexation would be accepted, Trump refused to rule out the use of force, stating only that the United States "would do what it takes to secure its national interests" (Heath, 2025). Diplomatic ties between Denmark and the United States have since remained frosty (Shuster, 2025) and uncertainty looms over how far the administration is willing to go. Nevertheless, Trump's statements are more than just rhetorical power games. As laid out above, they openly challenge the territorial integrity of a NATO ally – threatening the use of military force to acquire allied territory and subordinating collective norms to unilateral American interest. In doing so, Trump's language places U.S. strategic behaviour in unsettling proximity to the justificatory logic used by rivals like Russia and

China, whose own challenges to sovereignty often begin not with tanks, but with the reframing of territorial claims as transactions.

Canada:

Trump's bid to purchase Greenland marked a symbolic return to imperial logic, invoking 19th-century colonial reasoning in the language of transactional sovereignty. While that episode exposed cracks in the U.S.-Danish relationship, it is the case of Canada – Washington's closest ally and neighbor – where rhetorical imperialism struck more deeply, rupturing a bilateral relationship nurtured over the course of two centuries. Canada and the United States are deeply interwoven both economically and politically, through shared membership in NATO and regional trade frameworks such as the USMCA. In 2024, total U.S. goods trade with Canada reached approximately $762.1 billion, making Canada one of America's most significant and integrated trading partners (Office of the United States Trade Representative [USTR], 2024). Canada is also home to vast deposits of rare earth elements, critical minerals, and some of the world's largest oil reserves – resources that are increasingly vital in the context of geopolitical competition. Its proximity to the Arctic, a region of growing strategic significance amid rising tensions with China and Russia, further enhances its importance to U.S. defence planning – planning that would typically take place within the frameworks of mutual consultation and collective security under NATO.

Instead of seeking cooperation, President Trump stated in numerous posts on his platform "Truth Social" as well as in press conferences, that Canada should rather become the 51st U.S. state (Samuels, 2025), questioning the legitimacy of the 49th parallel as a border between the two countries. Following abstruse posts of land maps that showed Canada as a territorial part of the United States, his administration imposed unprecedented economic pressure, beginning with a 25% tariff on Canada's car industry and later expanding the measures to include a broader range of goods (Michael, 2025). Trump thus exerted pressure on its economy, inflicting damages that raised concerns about political overreach – unsettling the assumptions of mutual respect and sovereign equality that have long underpinned the bilateral relationship. According to then–Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, these actions were part of a deliberate strategy: "What he wants is to see a total collapse of the Canadian economy, because that'll make it easier to annex us, is the second half of his thought" (Taylor-Vaisey, 2025). Trump's narratives were swiftly met with significant backlash from the Canadian public and political establishment. Trudeau dismissed the idea outright, stating that there was "not a snowball's chance in hell" of it happening (Reuters, 2025).

Both the Greenland and Canada cases highlight the extent to which Trump has steered U.S. foreign policy toward imperialist aspirations – with his provocative proposals concerning Panama or Gaza not even accounted for here. In the context of postwar history, this rhetorical turn constitutes an

unprecedented threat to the foundations of the Western alliance network. Statements following Trump's reasoning erode the very pillars upon which the transatlantic order has long rested: sovereignty, mutual respect, and territorial integrity. Across the Western world, each ambiguous or incendiary comment emanating from the Oval Office leaves allied capitals increasingly unsettled. This raises urgent questions about whether NATO can still be considered a credible framework of collective security – and whether Trump might ultimately act on his threats against allied territory, given that the current administration now appears to prioritise national interest over the territorial integrity of even its longest-standing allies.

IV. Westphalia in Retreat: Europe in a World of Disorder

As rhetorical imperialism creeps into the heart of the Western alliance, Europe stands at a disorienting juncture. Westphalia – so long the cornerstone of the post-WWII security landscape – is slowly eroding from within, destabilised by the very actor that once championed its principles among allies. Krasner's (1999) critique of Westphalia as "organised hypocrisy" is not merely a commentary on inconsistency anymore. Under Trump, this hypocrisy has become a governing logic: norms like territorial integrity and sovereignty are no longer sacred, but transactional and conditional, reframed in terms of national interest rather than collective security.

Europe, right now, seems to be holding its breath – waiting out Trump's presidency in the quiet hope that everything will somehow return to normal. While sparks of ambition have surfaced – from calls for closer inter-European integration to proposals aimed at reducing overreliance on U.S. security guarantees, such as expanding the nuclear umbrella under French or British leadership – these have yet to coalesce into a coherent strategic shift. Though developments in the European defence industry signal that change is underway, political momentum remains cautious and uneven. Trump still seems to be treated as an anomaly, rather than as a symptom of a deeper strategic and ideological reorientation in the United States, with no guarantee that future administrations will reverse course.

Meanwhile, Washington increasingly echoes the very narratives long deployed by authoritarian expansionist powers such as Russia, depriving Europe of the moral leverage of condemning those, and emphasising the urgency for decisive action, bandwagoning, and moves towards strategic autonomy. Westphalia is in retreat – disenchanted, eroded, and now abandoned not by its historical adversaries, but its very architects – and it is time for Europe and Canada to move swiftly to retain decisive weight on the global stage. In the aftermath of rhetorical imperialism, the burden of adapting to a changing global order, to stand for our values and principles, no longer lies in D.C. – but in Brussels and Ottawa. As history reminds us, words have a way of becoming policy – and silence, too often, becomes complicity.

Visualisation 2: Map of an "American Empire" if Trump's rhetorical imperialism would become reality (Greenland, Canada, Panama Canal Zone, Gaza Strip)

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DOI 10.69790/epis-rep-spd/20378