**Headline:** The Coming Age of Border Changes?

**Teaser:** Trump’s remarks on annexing territory and recognizing Russian and Israeli territorial gains may align with his geopolitical ambitions, but the disruption to longstanding norms of fixed borders sets a risky precedent.

By John P. Ruehl

**Author Bio:** John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](https://independentmediainstitute.org/). He is a contributor to several foreign affairs publications, and his book, [*Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas’*](https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780761873389/), was published in December 2022.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Economy for All*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Politics, Trump, Europe/Denmark, Economy, North America/United States of America, North America/Canada, Middle East/Palestine, Middle East/Israel, Europe/Russia, Europe/Ukraine, Middle East/Syria, History, Europe/Germany, Europe/Moldova, Europe/Georgia, Africa/Eritrea, Africa/South Sudan, Middle East/Saudi Arabia, Middle East/Jordon, Middle East/Turkey, Middle East/Iran, Middle East/Iraq, Middle East/Cyprus, Africa/Ethiopia, Africa/Somalia, Africa/Morocco, Europe/France, Asia/China, Asia/India, Asia/Pakistan, Central America/Belize, Central America/Guatemala, South America/Guyana, South America/Venezuela, News, Time-Sensitive, Opinion

**[Article Body:]**

Amid ongoing discussions over Donald Trump’s plans for trying to resolve conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, the U.S. president has maintained steady pressure on NATO allies for months. After his 2024 election victory, Trump [again](https://www.msn.com/en-za/news/other/trump-says-he-wants-the-us-to-buy-greenland/ar-AA1wmloF) raised the prospect of annexing the Danish territory of Greenland, having first done so [in 2019](https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/trump-sparks-renewed-interest-greenland-greenland-belongs-people-greenland/). Once dismissed as outlandish, his renewed push against a key ally sent shockwaves through Europe and the international community.

Trump also [declared](https://apnews.com/article/canada-trump-tariffs-trudeau-trade-opposition-border-5d3dbbb4a701bb1676ee588bfbf2396a) his intent to make Canada the 51st state in November 2024 and has [continued](https://apnews.com/article/canada-trump-us-state-131dcff58a8f56116765f160d9f35460) reiterating his stance. [Violent conflict between the two nations occurred until the mid-19th century](https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2024/12/considering-history-lumberjack-wars-fenian-raids-and-trade-troubles-the-fraught-history-of-u-s-canada-relations/), but aggressive annexation today appears unthinkable due to the logistical challenges, deep ties, and friendly relations between the U.S. and Canada.

Yet Trump has [doubled down](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/12/trump-effect-how-us-tariffs-51st-state-threats-are-shaking-up-canada), with additional remarks about seizing the [Panama Canal](https://www.axios.com/2025/01/07/trump-press-conference-gulf-of-mexico-panama) and [Gaza](https://www.npr.org/2025/02/12/nx-s1-5276145/trumps-gaza-proposal-has-rattled-the-middle-east-more-surprises-are-likely) raising further concerns that the world’s most powerful country is seriously entertaining territorial expansion.

Trump’s motivations—whether a trade tactic against Canada, securing greater military rights in Greenland, or other reasons—remain unclear. Still, Washington’s expansionist policy pivot coincides with [fast-moving negotiations](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/europe-says-it-is-committed-ukraine-ahead-russia-us-talks-2025-02-18/) with Russia to try to end the war in Ukraine, likely by ceding land to Moscow.

Meanwhile, Israel is considering its own border consolidation, including [potentially permanent expulsions of Palestinians](https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israel-genocidal-plan-gaza-empty-north-south-deportation-camp) in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, and [formalizing its annexation](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2024-12-19/ty-article-magazine/.premium/haaretz-explains-what-is-happening-between-israel-and-syria-on-the-golan-heights/00000193-d9af-de86-a9f3-ffff47720000) of Syria’s Golan Heights. Once dismissed as political theater, Trump’s actions now seem part of broader efforts to reshape the discourse on borders, risking ushering in an unpredictable era of renewed territorial conflicts.

Following World War II, the international community [largely](https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/12/08/somaliland-the-nation-the-world-wont-recognize-but-cant-ignore/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) [resisted](https://www.politico.eu/article/a-balkan-border-change-the-west-eu-should-welcome-kosovo-serbia-land-swap/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) border changes, [even in the context of decolonization](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/uti_possidetis_juris), in fear of spreading instability, secession, and conquest. The [1975 Helsinki Accords](https://www.rferl.org/a/rip-helsinki-accords/27161370.html), in turn, cemented Europe’s postwar borders, discouraging violent changes while allowing for peaceful and mutually agreed adjustments.

Optimists hoped that this model would hold after the Cold War. Germany’s [reunification in 1990](https://securityconference.org/news/meldung/german-reunification-and-peace-in-europe/) was followed by Czechoslovakia’s [amicable split in 1992](https://www.gzeromedia.com/the-velvet-divorce-at-30-how-czechoslovakia-did-what-others-couldnt), and Western territorial disputes had by then been reduced to legal battles, as part of a multilateral, institutional approach to conflict resolution that was expected to spread into Eastern Europe and beyond.

However, [territorial disputes](https://www.sipri.org/publications/1996/europe-balkans-urals-disintegration-yugoslavia-and-soviet-union) erupted in the newly independent states emerging from former communist Europe, lacking clear paths for resolution. In the former Soviet Union, Russian-backed separatists in [Moldova](https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/europerussiacentral-asia-region/moldovatrans-dniester-1990-present/) and [Georgia](https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/europerussiacentral-asia-region/georgiasouth-ossetia-1990-present/) kept conflicts unresolved. The U.S. and NATO [involvement in the former Yugoslavia](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20049444) brought [uneasy peace](https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2024/the-western-balkans-controlled-instability/) until [Western backing](https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL31053.html) of Kosovo’s 2008 independence [deepened instability](https://www.bbc.com/news/62382069) and [divided allies](https://time.com/archive/6942603/why-kosovo-divides-europe/). Similarly, Western-supported independence efforts in [Eritrea](https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/article/conflict-between-tigray-and-eritrea-the-long-standing-faultline-in-ethiopian-politics) (1993) and [South Sudan](https://concernusa.org/news/timeline-south-sudan-history/) (2011) led to prolonged violence, [while other secessionist](https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/36778_Chapter2.pdf) and annexation movements continued to test the West’s commitment to managing territorial integrity globally.

Despite these challenges, the U.S.-led efforts to uphold the status quo mostly held until 2022, when Russia launched the largest war of territorial expansion in Europe since World War II. While Western powers have given [billions in military and economic aid](https://www.gmfus.org/news/ukraine-good-deal) to Ukraine and prevented Russia from taking Kyiv, they were unable to prevent Russia’s incursion as it unfolded on NATO’s doorstep. The exposed limits of Western deterrence have since shaken confidence in the permanence of established borders.

If a new era of territorial changes has arrived, Trump seems keen to normalize it and position the U.S. as its main beneficiary. Even increasing de facto control over Greenland or the strategically important Panama Canal without full annexation—while negotiating border changes elsewhere—exposes the weakness of certain borders worldwide and allows the U.S. to assert dominance in a changing world order.

In his first term, Trump [hinted at recognizing Crimea](https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-doesnt-rule-out-recognizing-russian-annexation-ukraine-crimean-peninsula/29328403.html), seized from Ukraine by Russia in 2014, and appears to accept that Ukraine will not return to its pre-2022 or even [pre-2014 borders](https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5151545-trump-ukraine-zelensky-war-russia/). On [February 18, 2025](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/17/russian-confirms-high-level-talks-on-ukraine-in-saudi-arabia), U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov convened in Saudi Arabia for Ukraine peace talks, excluding Kyiv and European allies from these discussions.

Keeping [U.S. commitments to Ukraine vague](https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/11/europe/ukraine-russia-trump-zelensky-intl/index.html) creates room for Trump to reduce support, but what does he want? Cutting costs, positioning the U.S. as a peacemaker, calming international markets, and potentially securing access to Ukrainian resources are among the possibilities. However, crafting a deal that looks like a win for U.S. foreign policy will be difficult, making the perception of Washington’s own territorial expansion key.

While increasing control over Canada seems unlikely, Moscow is “[closely watching](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/9/russia-says-closely-watching-trumps-greenland-claims)” Trump’s remarks about Greenland. After a [secret attempt by the U.S.](https://time.com/5653894/trump-greenland-history/) to buy Greenland in 1946, Trump’s open proposal carries some weight. Russian officials and media [have floated the idea of dividing Greenland](https://www.rawstory.com/greenland-russia/) equally, though more seriously, they believe Washington is [pressuring Denmark for greater military access](https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/uncertainty-tension-russia-reacts-trumps-greenland-proposal/). Proposals for agreements like a [Compact of Free Association](https://www.city-journal.org/article/trump-buy-greenland-national-security) with Greenland after its potential [independence from Denmark](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/13/the-majority-of-the-greenlandic-population-wants-independence) would likely provoke strong reactions from [Russia](https://news.usni.org/2024/10/29/russias-arctic-rise) and [China](https://gcaptain.com/u-s-department-of-defense-sounds-alarm-bells-about-chinas-growing-presence-in-arctic/), given their growing Arctic military presence. Moscow’s resistance may be softened by concessions in Ukraine, though this remains uncertain.

Washington’s openness to bilateral territorial adjustments, bypassing multilateral arbitration, will still require Ukraine’s consent and consideration of Greenlanders’ (or any other territory’s) wishes. Still, any territorial agreement between Russia and the U.S. could influence Israel’s territorial ambitions related to Gaza and [Syria](https://responsiblestatecraft.org/israel-syria/), after the collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s government in [December 2024](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-assad-regime-falls-what-happens-now/).

[In 2019](https://www.npr.org/2019/03/25/706588932/trump-formally-recognizes-israeli-sovereignty-over-golan-heights), Trump recognized Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a strategically important Syrian region under Israeli control since the 1967 Six-Day War. His decision, which the subsequent Biden administration [upheld](https://www.timesofisrael.com/amid-uproar-us-denies-change-in-policy-recognizing-golan-heights-as-israeli/), set a precedent for U.S. acknowledgment of Israeli territorial claims. After Assad’s government collapsed, [Israeli forces quickly entered](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/israeli-armys-activity-in-golan-heights-buffer-zone-in-syria-breaches-1974-agreement-un/3419572) the UN-designated buffer zone to strengthen control, while the Israeli government [announced plans](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-significance-golan-heights-2024-12-10/) to double its population there.

The Golan Heights provides Israel with a [strategic, elevated military position](https://www.tortoisemedia.com/2024/12/10/syria-what-is-israel-doing-in-the-golan-heights), [critical freshwater reserves](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/what-are-golan-heights-israel-syria), and other [natural resources](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/12/30/israels-oil-drilling-in-golan-criticised). With Syria’s government collapse and Damascus no longer a major threat, Israel faces little opposition to reinforcing its hold and potentially expelling the UN in the process. Strengthening its control could also allow Israel to frame its current military operations as a victory, coupled with the [weakening of “Iran’s proxy network.”](https://agsiw.org/the-decline-of-irans-proxy-network/)

Despite Assad’s fall, [Russia seeks to maintain some military presence in Syria](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/12/syrias-leader-russias-putin-make-first-contact-since-al-assads-fall), potentially restraining partners from countering Israeli moves in the Golan Heights while using its [influence over Hamas](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-is-russias-role-in-the-israel-gaza-crisis/) in Gaza to manage tensions. By deepening cooperation with Israel—closely tied to Trump—Moscow may hope to secure concessions in Ukraine. On February 24, 2025, Israel [was one of 18 countries](https://thehill.com/policy/international/5161197-us-votes-against-resolution-condemning-russia/), including the U.S., to vote against a UN resolution condemning Russia as an aggressor for its actions in Ukraine.

Trump’s unwavering support for Israel strengthens its position and pressures regional countries to align. Jordan, [which relies on water from the Golan Heights](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/05/19/israel-renews-water-sharing-agreement-with-jordan-despite-strained-bilateral-ties/), will likely be compelled to accept Israeli actions, a dynamic that also extends to Gaza. [On February 11, 2025](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/11/key-takeaways-from-the-meeting-with-donald-trump-and-jordans-king-abdullah), King Abdullah II of Jordan met with Trump to discuss the resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza after Trump proposed their relocation. The King, [wary of Jordan’s past instability with Palestinian refugees](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5776c5663e00bef2de055fae/t/594c2cf7d1758e3db055574f/1498164471888/PolicyFocus151-SykesPicot-3.pdf), firmly rejected Trump’s proposal for large-scale Palestinian resettlement. However, his offer to [immediately take in 2,000 injured children](https://www.newsweek.com/jordans-king-abdullah-tells-trump-he-will-take-2000-gaza-children-2029550) was a tacit acknowledgment of the feasibility of limited relocation, inadvertently lending a degree of credibility to Trump’s larger proposal.

The timeline for these deals remains unclear, but agreements with Russia and Israel could reshape global border norms and trigger uncontrollable consequences as the U.S. withdraws from enforcing territorial integrity. Both Russia and Israel would likely seek further gains.

Beyond Israeli actions, Syria is contending with [Turkish control in the north](https://medyanews.net/the-turkification-of-kurdistan-the-world-looks-on/) and [Kurdish independence](https://www.dw.com/en/fighting-in-syrias-kurdish-held-areas-what-you-need-to-know/a-71051390) movements. Kurdish independence aspirations extend into [Iraq](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/house-divided-can-kurdistan-preserve-its-autonomy), [Iran](https://merip.org/1986/07/the-kurds-between-iran-and-iraq/), and [Turkey](https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-11-27/kurds-turkey-waiting-a-turning-point), directly clashing with those countries, while Turkey’s ambitions of a “[greater Turkey](https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/local/turkey-advances-strategic-global-expansion-plans-citing-historic-mission/)” include expansive control over [Cyprus](https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/eastern-mediterranean-cyprus-and-geopolitics-turkish-irredentism) and the [Aegean Islands](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/8/turkey-opens-new-dispute-over-sovereignty-of-east-aegean-islands).

In Africa, Sudan faces territorial disagreements with both [South Sudan](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68134004) and [Ethiopia](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/04/securitizing-ethiopia-sudan-border-how-cross-border-conflict-shaping-trade-and-control-land), whereas Ethiopia has longstanding disputes with [Eritrea](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-october-17-2024-egypt-eritrea-somalia-summit-challenges-tigray-peace) and [Somalia](https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/ethiopia-and-somalia-on-the-edge-of-war/). Somalia’s deepening internal divisions meanwhile [threaten to further fragment the country](https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/event/political-fragmentation-horn-africa-jubbaland-and-transborder-ogaden-region).

Additionally, the decades-long conflict between Morocco and the Algeria-backed Western Sahara reignited [in 2020](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/western-sahara/paving-way-talks-western-sahara). During the final weeks of Trump’s first term, the U.S. became the first country to recognize Western Sahara [as part of Morocco](https://www.passblue.com/2025/01/08/could-tensions-between-algeria-and-morocco-heat-up-with-the-trump-presidency/) in exchange for Morocco’s recognition of Israel in December 2020. Yet here, Trump appears to have paved the way for a new direction, with [Israel](https://www.reuters.com/world/morocco-says-israel-recognises-its-sovereignty-over-western-sahara-2023-07-17/) recognizing Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2023 and [France](https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/08/western-saharas-conflict-over-negotiating-terms-comes-next) following in 2024. [Dozens of other countries have since offered increasing support](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/french-minister-western-sahara-back-moroccan-sovereignty-2025-02-17/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) for Morocco’s position while withholding full endorsement.

Regardless of whether the U.S. was simply ahead of the curve in Morocco, dangerous escalation looms elsewhere. China, observing Russia’s potential acquisitions in Ukraine, has [numerous territorial disputes](https://www.neglobal.eu/why-chinas-new-map-has-stirred-regional-tensions/) it could escalate, [a traditional part of its geopolitical strategy](https://www.neglobal.eu/why-chinas-new-map-has-stirred-regional-tensions/). Tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea, in particular, could lead to clashes with the U.S. and its allies. China and India [continue to contest](https://www.neglobal.eu/why-chinas-new-map-has-stirred-regional-tensions/) their Himalayan border, [despite recent de-escalation](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/have-india-china-achieved-border-breakthrough), while India and Pakistan remain locked in their [clash over Kashmir](https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/09/20/kashmir-to-remain-a-thorn-in-the-side-of-india-pakistan-relations/), with the nuclear threat heightening the stakes.

Closer to home, tensions along the [Belize-Guatemala](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/15/world/americas/belize-guatemala-border-dispute.html) border also carry the risk of escalation. And, [since 2023](https://www.visualcapitalist.com/the-venezuela-guyana-dispute-explained-in-3-maps/), Venezuela’s growing claims to Guyana’s Essequibo region, 70 percent of Guyana’s territory, have marked a significant shift in the Americas. An outbreak of violence could exacerbate the migrant crisis on the U.S. southern border, testing whether American borders are flexible and strong enough to handle added pressures.

Despite efforts to defend border integrity, colonial-era boundaries, long-established grievances, and sudden state collapses after the end of the Cold War have challenged territorial stability, with the West largely attempting to maintain order. Trump’s strategy suggests that global territorial management is not worth the effort, with his administration instead focusing on strengthening borders at home while exploiting vulnerabilities abroad. Changes in Ukraine and Israel may not occur overnight, but years of groundwork, coupled with ongoing deliberations, could accelerate the process and potentially include U.S. territorial expansion.

Whether other countries or future administrations will accept these moves is uncertain. However, if Washington sets a new standard, it will prompt other nations to pursue territorial changes more openly, inviting ethnic cleansing and even genocides. Washington’s ability to control this dynamic is unproven, as is its response to emerging foreign disputes and [potential internal secession attempts](https://theconversation.com/secession-is-here-states-cities-and-the-wealthy-are-already-withdrawing-from-america-200813). While deals with Russia and Israel over territory may grant the White House political breathing room, what follows is anyone’s guess.