



By Sasan Karimi

# Greenland and the West's selective morality: An Iranian perspective

February 2, 2026 - 21:42

Politics

TEHRAN - European leaders have long portrayed themselves as guardians of the international legal order - principled actors committed to sovereignty, multilateralism, and restraint. In contrast to what they often describe as American impulsiveness, Europe's self-image is rooted in moral seriousness and a respect for rules. However, as tensions escalate between Washington and European capitals over Greenland, that narrative is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

The Greenland debate has exposed something deeper than a transatlantic disagreement over an Arctic territory. It has revealed a widening gap between Europe's rhetoric and its recent conduct elsewhere in the world - a gap that undermines its credibility far beyond the Arctic.

At issue is not whether Greenland's territorial status should be respected. Under international law, the principle of territorial integrity remains fundamental, and few would seriously argue otherwise. The real question is why European governments have suddenly adopted an uncompromising legal tone in this case, while abandoning the same standards in conflicts and crises that matter just as much - if not more - to global stability.

In the Middle East, European behavior has been strikingly inconsistent. During the most recent escalation - a short but consequential conflict - European governments refrained from condemning acts widely regarded outside the West as aggression. Some went further, providing defensive assistance to Israel while simultaneously amplifying political pressure on Iran. The revival of the "snapback" mechanism under the nuclear deal, coupled with Europe's failure to actively defend the agreement it once championed, sent a clear message: alignment with Washington took precedence over legal commitments and diplomatic balance.

Even symbolic actions reflected this shift. The quiet withdrawal of invitations to Iranian officials from major international forums, including the World Economic Forum in Davos, illustrated how quickly Europe abandoned the posture of neutral engagement it once claimed to uphold. For many observers, these moves confirmed what had already become apparent: Europe was no longer acting as an independent pole, but as a secondary actor operating within American strategic boundaries. It is against this backdrop that Europe's reaction to Greenland appears so jarring.

When American political figures, including President Donald Trump, openly discussed expanding U.S. influence over Greenland, European leaders rushed to frame the issue as a blatant violation of sovereignty and international norms. The language was absolute, legalistic, and moralizing. Yet for audiences outside the transatlantic alliance, the sudden firmness rang hollow.

The problem is not that Europe is wrong to defend legal principles. The problem is that it defends them selectively.

International law, if it is to retain legitimacy, cannot function as a menu from which powerful actors choose what suits them. When principles are enforced in some regions but ignored in others, they lose their normative force and become tools of convenience. That is precisely the perception now taking hold in much of the Global South - and increasingly in parts of the Middle East and Asia.

The Greenland controversy also highlights an uncomfortable geopolitical reality that European leaders rarely acknowledge publicly. Greenland's strategic, military, and economic integration with the United States is deep and longstanding. American security guarantees, infrastructure investments, and defense presence have shaped the island's modern strategic identity for decades. This does not justify territorial revisionism, but it does complicate simplistic legal narratives that ignore power realities altogether.

Western governments routinely invoke such realities when they serve their interests. Security needs, historical ties, and regional stability are frequently cited to rationalize interventions, sanctions, and political pressure elsewhere. To deny that similar factors are at play in the Arctic - while insisting on a rigid legal interpretation - only reinforces perceptions of double standards.

Ironically, this moment has exposed a contrast between style and substance in Western politics. Figures like Donald Trump, often criticized for their disregard for diplomatic norms, have at times articulated geopolitical realities more bluntly than European leaders who continue to cloak strategic calculations in legal language. While Trump's rhetoric is frequently crude and destabilizing, it is also refreshingly candid in its acknowledgment that power, not principle alone, shapes global outcomes.

Europe's discomfort with that candor reflects a deeper strategic anxiety. Greenland has become a symbol of Europe's dependence on American security and its limited ability to shape outcomes independently. By framing the issue as a legal dispute rather than a strategic one, European leaders avoid confronting that imbalance - but they do so at the cost of credibility.

For countries outside the Western alliance system, this moment presents an opportunity - not to endorse American claims or undermine sovereignty, but to challenge the moral hierarchy that Europe has long assumed. By highlighting inconsistencies in how international law is invoked, these states can force a more honest conversation about how the global order actually functions.

This does not require abandoning legal principles. On the contrary, it requires defending them consistently. When Europe condemns territorial pressure in the Arctic while remaining silent on violations elsewhere, it weakens the very norms it claims to protect. When it punishes some states while shielding others, it transforms law into leverage.

The consequences extend beyond Europe's reputation. A rules-based order cannot survive on selective enforcement. As more states lose faith in the impartiality of international norms, they will increasingly rely on power, alliances, and deterrence rather than law. That trajectory benefits no one - including Europe itself.

If European leaders wish to restore their standing as normative actors, they must move beyond moral posturing and confront their own contradictions. Upholding international law means applying it even when it is politically inconvenient - whether in Greenland, the Middle East, or elsewhere.

Until that happens, the Greenland debate will remain more than a territorial dispute. It will stand as a mirror reflecting the West's deeper credibility crisis - one rooted not in the erosion of sovereignty, but in the erosion of consistency.

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