

Greenland as an American Territory: A Bad Idea, a Bold Idea ... or a Beyond-the-Horizon Idea worth Studying?

Barry Scott Zellen, PhD

Earlier this week, the *Wall Street Journal* reported President Trump's interest in purchasing Greenland from Denmark, generating much critical reaction in Greenland, where a movement for increased autonomy (and a gradual, incremental evolution toward sovereign independence) has had majority support for many years, as illustrated by the 75.54% yes vote in a 2008 referendum on this issue. While Greenland has long been a colony of Denmark, its formal status has evolved in recent years from outright colonization toward more collaborative Home-Rule governance in 1979 to, in the wake of the 2008 referendum on autonomy and independence that garnered overwhelming (75.54%) support of Greenland's electorate, to more robust and meaningful Self-Rule in 2009.

1. Roots of Greenlandic Autonomy: The Circumpolar Inuit Rights Movement

A key driver of this movement for increasing autonomy (potentially culminating, in time, with Greenland's sovereign independence – with Denmark's support), has been the steady empowerment of the island's majority Inuit population – part of a circumpolar movement for Inuit rights spearheaded by the Inuit Circumpolar Council. This movement includes, and for many has been defined by, securing the protection of Inuit land rights through various mechanisms, such as the land claims process in Alaska and Arctic Canada which has transferred fee-simple land title to around one-tenth the Arctic land base to the Inuit along with a variety of co-management tools to protect those lands, surrounding waters, and its wildlife, or – as seen in Russia – the emergence of co-management, joint-venture developments, and the creation of national parks in the absence of the formal restoration of land title. In addition to land rights, the Inuit rights movements has sought, and successfully strengthened, the preservation and revitalization of Inuit culture and language, along with the increasing empowerment of Inuit through greater self-governing powers. The movement for autonomy in Greenland, and the collaborative path toward its eventual independence with the support of Denmark, is part of this circumpolar movement, and takes inspiration from the pioneering gains of the Arctic's first experience with native land claims, the historic Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971. ANCSA was the first land claim to transform the political geography of the North, and while it had many structural flaws and imperfections, it laid a foundation from which Arctic land claims continued to evolve, with each new iteration providing the Inuit with greater powers... (See the author's 2008 monograph, *Breaking the Ice: From Land Claims to Tribal Sovereignty in the Arctic* as well as his 2009 monograph, *On Thin Ice: The Inuit, the State and the Challenge of Arctic Sovereignty* (Lexington Books) for more details.)

2. Climate Consequences: Adding Urgency (and Energy) to an Otherwise Gradual Movement

Adding urgency to the circumpolar Inuit rights movement, with roots firmly planted in the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, has been the dramatic and volatile effects of the polar thaw, whether viewed regionally or part of the global flux in climate that fueled a rethinking of national security policy (and Arctic policy) during the previous administration (but which currently is viewed through more of a regional lens.) Whether considered from a more localized perspective or a global one, the effects of the polar thaw have been dramatic, bringing global attention to a region that has, since the Cold War, been largely neglected. What was once something of a niche field understudied by

international relations and strategic studies scholars has, since the polar thaw became a topic of global attention from the lay-public to the highest levels of governance, become front and center to not only study, but policy formulation and strategy development around the world – so much so that numerous non-Arctic states have their own Arctic policies, and non-Arctic observer states now outnumber the Arctic member states on the Arctic Council, the post-Cold War international regime that collaboratively oversees the Arctic region on a number of non-defense and non-security issues areas. Growing global interest in the Arctic brings along new diplomatic challenges, most recently the rise of China and its assertions of a special “near-Arctic” status aligned with its “Polar Silk Road” initiative which was noted in the 2019 United States Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook, along with other U.S. policy papers and strategy documents, as particularly concerning.

The results of these competing interests in the near as well as more distant future are exceedingly difficult to predict, so considering a wide range of scenarios and developing contingency plans for them is essential. For instance, a determined China could develop regional alliances and dependencies through strategic capital infusions with the small sovereign micro-states of the High North Atlantic, which owing to their exceedingly small populations remain vulnerable to rapid demographic upheavals resulting from a small number of development projects staffed by Chinese contractors – resulting in a “South China Sea-modeled” stealth invasion of the region. Iceland, with a population around 300,000 and a long sovereign experience, is perhaps more resilient to such an external demographic threat, though were Iceland to break from NATO and pursue a non-aligned future, the vulnerability could increase. Greenland, while part of the Kingdom of Denmark, likewise remains embedded in a solid alliance architecture, but with only 56,000 people could, if it becomes independent, become highly vulnerable to external pressures, whether economic, demographic, or even military.

Similarly, with Russia resurgent and its recently illustrated appetite for foreign intervention (following its annexation of Crimea), and the specter of a clash with NATO over the small Baltic states, or potentially, the non-aligned northern European states, scenarios of extreme instability in the High North Atlantic can also be envisioned. In short, global interest in the Arctic introduces new risks which could in time threaten the national security of the United States. This follows a long period that with few exceptions was marked by a steadiness and predictability; the pre-thaw Arctic region was more a strategic buffer in world politics that – even during the height of the Cold War – was defined foremost by its stability. The movement for Inuit rights emerged during this period of calm, and the incrementally increasing empowerment of the Inuit proceeded with the same stability during a half-century of policy innovation that began with ANCSA, culminated with the formation of the Nunavut Territory in 1999, and came to a conclusion with the passage of the Labrador Inuit (Nunatsiavut) Land Claim in 2005. Were the strategic and geographic landscape to remain stable and largely free of flux, the potential emergence of a sovereign and independent Greenland would merely continue the process and its incrementalism further, but not upend regional geopolitics. But because of the dynamic flux of the polar thaw, and the return of Westphalian state competition to the Arctic region in recent years, the potential independence of Greenland becomes instead a strategic wildcard needing to be closely monitored, and pro-actively engaged, to ensure a future sovereign Greenland maintains a close, collaborative and friendly relationship with the United States and the West, optimally as part of NATO. (For an overview of Arctic geopolitics in the post-Cold War era, including the era of the polar thaw, see the author’s 2010 monograph, *Arctic Doom, Arctic Boom: The Geopolitics of Climate Change in the Arctic* (Praeger Books); for more on the evolution of the land claims model and its contribution to Arctic stability and security,

see the author's Chapter 16 of *The Fast-Changing Arctic: Rethinking Arctic Security for a Warmer World*, "Stability and Security in a Post-Arctic World: Toward a Convergence of Indigenous, State, and Global Interests at the Top of the World." For a specific discussion of the complex diplomatic environment of today's Arctic, see the author's brief analysis in *Stars and Stripes* on 9 August 2019, "China Lost Chance to Be 'Near-Arctic' 150 Years Ago." For a discussion of Inuit involved in Arctic diplomacy, please see the author's Spring 2010 article in the *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, "Cold Front: Hillary, Ottawa, and the Inuit: A Year after the Inuit Re-Assert their Sovereignty, Washington Takes Their Side.")

3. Preparing for the Unexpected: What if Greenland Joins Nunavut in a Wider Secession/Independence Movement ... or Decides to Join Either Canada or the United States?

The challenge of an independent Greenland, and the consequences to American security, has been the topic of much discussion and study, including last year's Advanced Research Project at the United States Coast Guard Academy exploring this within the context of Greenland's emergent role in world politics. But independence is not the only path that Greenland may pursue. It is possible that it will remain part of the Kingdom of Denmark by mutual consent, and continue to refine its relationship and expand its autonomy over time with the same incrementalism as in the past. As well, the movement for independence of Greenland could inspire a similar movement in Canada – particularly Nunavut which has enduring historical and cultural ties and geographical proximity to Greenland, and where Inuit already govern at the territorial level – resulting in a wider movement for secession from both Canada and Denmark. This would prove even more complex to manage, with even greater risk to the United States and its security, comparable to the risk presented by the Quebec Independence movement further south. This potential scenario is worthy of future study, since the scale of territory that would be contested, the higher risk of civil and regional war (since Ottawa may be less inclined to let the Baffin region go, even if Copenhagen is ready to bid farewell to Greenland), and the strategic importance of the region to the world, are significant. In addition to a scenario of dual-secession of Greenland and Nunavut, there is also the possibility that Greenland elects to join Canada, finding in the Nunavut model of territorial self-governance aligned with a land claim treaty many benefits well-suited to their homeland. Imagining how such a scenario were to unfold will require much study, but at very least, Denmark will have to agree to Greenland's departure and to Canada's expansion – a scenario that may seem unlikely today but which, in a situation of war in northern Europe, could become more feasible.

But for the moment, we will concern ourselves with a similar idea that has, on occasion, been considered at the highest levels of the United States Government before, especially immediately after World War II: the potential of Greenland joining the United States as a new state or territory. The reason for considering this now is that the topic has, quite suddenly, emerged as a point of discussion around the world, owing to news reports that the President has been considering such a scenario himself, and, according to news reports, embraces the idea. Such a tectonic shift in the North's political geography is exceedingly rare, and it has been a century and a half since a change of similar magnitude affected the United States (when, in 1867, Alaska was purchased from Russia – a move that was widely criticized at the time but which, in the years since, has contributed much to American security, particularly since World War II.)

Critics of President Trump's flirtation with the idea of "buying" Greenland from Denmark suggest such thinking is better suited for an earlier time in history, when boundaries were exchanged by sovereigns through transactions of this sort – including our own 1867 Treaty of Purchase with Russia to acquire the

lands under colonial administration by the Russian-American Company (RAC), and the later purchase by the newly confederated Canada of the lands under colonial administration by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC)). They also cite political leaders in both Greenland in Copenhagen suggesting the idea is without merit and inconsistent with their own step-by-step process of decolonization under way. This may be true today.

But supporters of the President's plan note the increasing strategic importance of Greenland in a thawing Arctic, part of a wider process of Arctic integration with the world economy and its geostrategic architecture under way for many years, dating back centuries to the colonial era when Arctic furs (primarily beaver) and whale oil fueled the economies of both the New World and Old. During the Gold Rush era, the mineral potential of the Far North would be equally recognized for its strategic-economic value (leading to a brief demographic imbalance in the Yukon Territory, with more Americans in the Klondike than Canadians and Ottawa greatly concerned there could be instability and potentially a secession risk); and in World War II (and again in the Cold War), the strategic-military value of the region was recognized for its own sake.

In World War II, thousands of U.S. soldiers were stationed across the North, building the strategic Alaska-Canada (Alcan) highway, the lesser-known Canol road, a slew of air bases, and protecting the vital Northwest Staging Route ferrying Lend-Lease aircraft to the Eastern Front, where the Nazi military onslaught was, at great sacrifice by our Russian war-time partner, brought to a halt. At the same time, the U.S. Coast Guard's Greenland Patrol defended Greenland, which came under America's direct military protection after Denmark fell to the Germans, from becoming a North American beach head for further Nazi advances – indeed, the specter of Greenland falling, and the Gulf of Saint Lawrence becoming vulnerable to Nazi conquest, would concern war planners until the machinery of the Nazi state was decisively demolished. It wasn't long after World War II came to an end that President Truman floated the idea of purchasing Greenland from Denmark for \$100 million, an idea that *Time Magazine* endorsed for its strategic wisdom the very next year, with widespread encouragement from war planners who recognized Greenland's strategic prominence for the post-war world.

During the Cold War, the Distant Early Warning (DEW) line was built across the Inuit homeland, protecting the North American continent from strategic bomber assault, and the Thule air base augmented American air power in the region. The waters off both Greenland and Iceland, the famed Greenland-Iceland-UK (G-I-UK) gap, would also play a central role during the U.S.-Soviet confrontation and in America's forward maritime strategy near the Cold War's end. Soon after the Cold War ended, columnist and foreign affairs expert Walter Russell Mead – whose bona fides include serving as James Clarke Chace Professor of Foreign Affairs and Humanities at Bard College; Global View Columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*; and co-founder of the New America Foundation – proposed in all seriousness, in his July 1992 column in the *LA Times*, to purchase Siberia from Boris Yeltsin's Russia for \$1-2 trillion.

While the outright purchase of such a large portion of the globe is now-a-days uncommon, and due to this relative infrequency is widely perceived to be better-suited to the world of yesteryear than that of today, it wasn't all that long ago that large-scale shifts in borders were more the norm and less the exception. And in today's world, so much is in flux, and let's not forget that it was only five years ago that Crimea quickly fell to Russia's expansionist ambitions, experiencing a rapid, in many ways brilliantly executed, annexation by a resurgent Russia – changing hands largely without bloodshed. All this suggests that tectonic shifts in political geography do remain possible, and in some cases, might

contribute to global security. It is conceivable that in a future world, Greenland's union with the United States could be such a case. Because the globalized world is vastly different from the colonial world, however, it would require additional parameters be met than required for the Alaska purchase. Like with the Alaska purchase, which Russia welcomed for the financial relief it provided, and as well as its reduction in strategic pressure, with the century-old United States providing a much-needed buffer between the British Empire in North America, and the territory of mother Russia (on the Eurasian side of the Bering Strait). But in addition, the people of Greenland, who are majority Inuit, would have to also welcome the change in sovereigns, and find American policies and investment, in addition to its military protection, attractive enough to forego independence. Because securing and sustaining independence with a population of 56,000 is quite a difficult challenge, a formal sovereign association with the United States might, in some circumstances, appeal to the people of Greenland. Just as the earlier-mentioned (but less discussed) scenario of Greenland joining Canada would require Greenlanders finding merit in the Nunavut model of regional self-governance, for this scenario (of Greenland becoming part of America), Greenlanders would have to find merit in the "Alaska model," with its combination of multi-level governance, settled land claims, still-evolving structure for co-management between the various levels of governance (federal, state, tribal, and municipal), and natural resource development experience. Indeed, were Greenlanders to one day consider whether to join the United States or Canada (in lieu of pursuing independence), the choice may be between resource-development vs. cultural and environmental protections, the very same fault line that divides contemporary Alaska. Issues of future settlement by non-Inuit would also surely be an issue: Alaska today is less than 15% native, while Nunavut remains nearly 85% native, as if a mirror image of one another. Greenland is, at present, closer to 90% native, so is more aligned with Nunavut in terms of indigeneity of its populace. On the other hand, Canada, by virtue of its proximity to the United States, is largely buffered from the risks and dangers of world politics, and unlikely to face an external threat to its sovereignty. Greenland, however, is quite exposed, on the outer edge of the North American continent, and in waters that are not only increasingly strategy, but also potentially contested. It faces existential risks as a polity much the way Iceland does, perhaps more so because of its small demography and vast geography. If alliance membership alone did not guarantee its independence, perhaps a closer constitutional relationship, such as territorial status or even statehood, might one day prove to be an appealing option to the people of Greenland.

4. Thinking About the Unthinkable ... Again

It is no secret that Russian President Vladimir Putin has been fortifying his vast Arctic territories, with mothballed military bases unused since the Cold War period undergoing a recent and ongoing strategic refurbishment on a scale comparable to Beijing's fortifications of contested islands in the South China Sea. Thinking ahead to a more fluid geopolitical world, and toward the protection of the more isolated outposts in the Far North that remain vulnerable in such a world, is exactly the kind of out-of-the-box thinking and global deal making that fueled President Trump's unlikely rise to the White House, where his reputation as a master deal-maker and willingness to muse out loud about a complete rapprochement with Russia defined his political brand. President Trump certainly did not come to occupy the Oval Office for status quo policies, but instead to shake things up – and while he faces much domestic criticism on a variety of fronts, his aversion to war and his genuine desire to keep America safe stands out for its consistency. Even his willingness to negotiate with the Taliban, our war-time opponent, for nearly a year of talks while fighting still rages on the ground, illustrates a strategic thinker

willing to do upset the status quo. His friendship with the long-isolated leader of North Korea, including a series of dramatic summits and even a quick but no less historic visit across the DMZ, is another example of unconventional thinking in the Oval Office.

To imagine a hypothetical world in which Greenland becomes an American territory, on a path toward statehood not unlike that which Alaska followed, is to imagine a world in which North America is far more secure and united than it is today. Greenlandic Inuit, who suffer from a long legacy of neglect and whose colonial experience, despite recent gains in autonomy, has not been entirely positive, may indeed stand to benefit in many ways. First and foremost, the defense of Greenland in time of war would be strengthened by its constitutional integration into the U.S. polity, much the way Alaska's has been since its purchase, and this alone could deter war from ever taking place. That the legacy of Russian colonialism, which under the RAC was brutal and exploitative, could be gradually reversed in Alaska over time – where particularly since the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 and the subsequent Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, gains by Alaska natives have been notable, even if still a work in progress (with continued resistance from Alaska's settler population and the state government) – is illustrative of the changes we can expect in such a hypothetical future. While Greenland's gradual process of increasing autonomy and decolonization under Danish rule would be up-ended, causing much heartburn for elites in both Greenland and Denmark who benefit from the current system and its gradualism, a mutually positive outcome of a U.S. purchase could be a win-win for both Greenlanders and for America. They would have to consent to such an exchange of sovereigns, to be sure. And that would require a referendum to be held. But, once the people of Greenland make their choice, if they choose to join our union, it would be an historically transformative event on a scale of the Alaska purchase, and with the same long term potential strategic and economic benefits. It's that kind of bold, unconventional thinking that put President Trump in the White House, and one might argue, it's that kind of bold thinking, however unconventional, that we need in order to not only adapt to the more dynamic and literally more fluid world of the thawing Arctic, but to thrive. It may not be likely, and at the moment not under consideration by either the Danes or the Greenlanders. Indeed, it could well be a brief flirtation and not a long-term strategic commitment of the President's, and thus different from, say, Secretary of State William H. Seward's embrace of Alaska as a critical component of America's expansion. But it is nonetheless a scenario worthy of study, and, much like the great Cold War theorists, reason to "think about the unthinkable" once again.

The author serves as the Class of 1965 Arctic Scholar at the Center for Arctic Study and Policy (CASP) at the United States Coast Guard Academy (USCGA). The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect official views or policies of the United States Coast Guard Academy, United States Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security, or any other branch or service of the United States Government.