

# GREENLAND'S GEOPOLITICAL ASCENDANCE

Barry Scott Zellen on Trump's continued interest in the small island

**A**cross Arctic North America, from Alaska to Greenland, there has been an ongoing dialogue between the resource development and environmental factions of each community. The resulting dialectic oscillates like a pendulum across the generations – sometimes stopping big projects (such as Alaska's Project Chariot, to blast a deep water port with atomic weapons; and Project Rampart, to dam the Yukon River, as proposed in the Fifties), sometimes greenlighting them in exchange for concessions (such as the Alaska Pipeline in the Seventies and the North-West Territory's diamond mines in the Nineties) and sometimes both (as with the NWT's Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, rejected in the Seventies, but later approved in the Noughties, only to linger undeveloped since; and the vast rare earth and uranium-rich Kvanefjeld mineral deposit in Greenland, approved by the pro-development Siumut party when in power, but later rejected by the more eco-friendly Inuit Ataqatigiit party in 2021).

The Inuit Ataqatigiit party (IA) rose to power largely due to its vocal opposition to the Kvanefjeld mine, tapping into popular sentiment, leading to Siumut's downfall. While Kvanefjeld is home to one of the richest rare earth mineral deposits (said to be the world's second largest), it is also full of uranium (the world's sixth largest) and it has a long history associated with nuclear power. IA's decision to pull the plug on Kvanefjeld and to ban uranium mining in November 2021 (first been banned in 1988, then lifted 25 years later), just a few months banning future offshore oil exploration, suggests an independent Greenland may prove less 'open-for-business' than its leadership first asserted after Trump's 2019 overture (under Siumut's rule) and reiterated more recently (under IA rule). Greenland's opposition to Kvanefjeld development may reflect the ubiquity of anti-nuclear sentiment felt so strongly around the circumpolar world, from Point Hope ever since Project Chariot to Deline, North-West Territory, where mining uranium for the Manhattan Project at the Eldorado Mine left a deadly legacy; to Narsaq, Greenland, where Niels Bohr imagined a nuclear future for Denmark.

Resource extraction remains an underlying catalyst for the current geopolitical storm over Greenland, adding lustre to Trump's renewed interest in gaining sovereign possession of the island to better position America to benefit from the many strategic energy and mineral opportunities that result from climate change. At the same time, we also see Trump's gleeful willingness to annoy allies while finding common cause with their domestic rivals.

In Trump's muscular courtship of Greenland, we can a potential tilt away from NATO and its focus on containing Russia in Europe, to an expanded vision for NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense treaty that unites America and Canada in their joint defence of the continent.



**Kvanefjeld is home to one of the richest rare earth mineral deposits**

While Trump hopes for a constitutional union with Greenland, the island aspires to independence and it is conceivable that a compromise can be struck that benefits Greenland more than its current colonial relationship with Denmark – perhaps more akin to a Pacific island state with a compact of free association with America than a fully sovereign Westphalian state. Just like we saw in Afghanistan with the resulting fall of the government in Kabul, there is no place in this new order for America's NATO ally and partner, Denmark, or its continued rule over Greenland from Copenhagen.

One problem American sovereignty over Greenland can solve is that of collective land ownership, which greatly inhibits free enterprise from taking root. That was one of the most consequential innovations and lasting strengths of the pioneering Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 that became a central feature in Canada's subsequent Arctic land claims treaties built upon ANCSA: creating native corporations at the local and regional level to spearhead economic development, with fee-simple title over nearly one tenth of the land base. This allowed the above-noted dialogue between pro-development and pro-environment factions to play out democratically, with the environment protected by new co-management boards and defended by hunters and trappers committees, while development is pursued by the new native corporations.

The results of this approach have proven both successful and enduring even if the pace of development has been slow and uneven, with projects like the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline never quite taking off. The strength and momentum of historic, grass roots opposition to mega projects that threaten local ecosystems, as we see with Kvanefjeld, has proven stubborn to reverse. For that to happen, more time is needed, as is greater understanding of and respect for local traditions and values. This is a conversation that is only just getting started. Where it takes us will be interesting to observe, with ripple effects felt around the world ●

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