



THE END FOR NATO?

Barry Scott Zellen, PhD, explores the future of NATO in the event that America takes Greenland

With Stalin's large standing army smothering half of Europe and his fledgling nuclear arsenal extending Moscow's ambitions overseas, America had to scramble. And scramble it did. First, in 1949, it formed NATO with the 4 April, 1949 signing of the Washington Treaty with a dozen founding members. That same year, Newfoundland and Labrador – until then British – joined Canada bringing their defence and security under the control of America's next door neighbour in Ottawa. From then on, Greenland, under colonial rule from Denmark, was an outlier in the North American Arctic.

Two years after NATO was formed, the Danes and Americans agreed to extend their wartime defence of Greenland through the long twilight of the Cold War with their 1951 bilateral defence treaty providing the US unfettered access to the vast and lightly populated island (the world's largest). At the same time, America bore nearly all of the cost of the island's defence, to Denmark's relief. President Truman offered to buy Greenland outright, but the Danes said no to his \$100-million offer of gold bullion.

Between 1954 and 1957, the US completed construction of the world's most massive and audacious construction project, the DEW Line (Distant Early Warning Line), a string of radar bases that stretched

across the top of North America from Alaska across both Canada and Greenland, and incorporated the (then) new air base at Thule. At one point, the US built and manned up to 17 military installations, with a total manpower of 6,000 troops – well more than today's 150-200 troops at Pituffik, the sole remaining US base on the island.

Back then, America feared an armada of Soviet bombers laden with A-bombs barrelling over the horizon, dodging its anti-aircraft batteries and dropping their deadly payloads on undefended American cities. But by the late-Fifties, ICBMs emerged – and these deadly intercontinental ballistic missiles presented North America with a more insidious (and for a long time, indefensible) threat. In little more than 20 minutes, nuclear hell fell upon the long-insulated Americans from above. Slow, lumbering bombers were no longer needed, nor were American efforts to counter them, as these deadly, far-reaching nuclear-tipped rockets entered the military arsenals of both the US and the Soviet Union.

Greenland became less essential to America's survival, which came to depend more and more upon space-based surveillance and, in time, ballistic missile defence systems (of the sort now in Alaska). The US presence on the world's largest island soon declined, though its bilateral defence treaty with the Danes remained in effect and was updated in 2004 to catch up to more modern, less colonial times, with the autonomous Home-Rule government in Nuuk joining the treaty – and in so doing, gaining a voice in the future defence of their island.

In 2009 more robust self-rule would strengthen Greenland's autonomy, with an eye to eventual independence. But somewhere along the amicable journey toward a more independent Greenland actively involved in its own defence and security, a warming world with its increasingly accessible Arctic resources and declining sea ice caught the attention of nearly all world powers.

At the same time, Russia resurged as military power and China rose as an economic super power with an increasingly potent and global military reach. In no time at all, the Arctic was in play. As Russia turned its tanks upon Ukraine in a bid to restore its imperial past, NATO expanded across the once neutral Nordic region, nearly to the gates of Saint Petersburg (as it must have seemed to Russians), not all that long after the alliance had incorporated the tiny Baltic states once under Moscow's direct rule. And soon, the future of Greenland itself came into play once more. But not from Russia or China, as the White House now contends in its effort to sell its vision for Greenland's future under the star-spangled banner. But rather from America itself, with the President enamoured with the idea of a Mt. McKinley-sized geopolitical move via a Sewardian territorial expansion, right into the history books.

In 2019 when Trump's big idea to purchase Greenland first arose, people laughed it off as preposterous. But with its successful overnight snatch-and-grab of Venezuela's ruling family without a single lost American life (or aircraft), the White House now felt emboldened. If it could grab Venezuela's oil (the world's largest known reserves) at so low a cost, why not Greenland too, with its bountiful untapped

mineral wealth? And so, now Greenland has transformed from beneficiary to target of American military power.

Will, as many fear, the NATO alliance start to buckle under this strain? While the alliance is distracted by this internal strife, some fear that the Russians might make a grab for Svalbard or the Baltic micro-states where Moscow's ties are long and deep (and where their sovereign ambitions are perhaps even more convincing than America's for Greenland.) Russia might also be tempted to grab Hokkaido and continue the war that Stalin began in 1945 when he invaded the then-Japanese Kuril Islands. Come to think of it, now might be a pretty opportune time for Beijing to seize Taiwan – so all at once, a new world order can emerge where regional hegemony once again reigns supreme.

THE LOGIC OF THE DISPUTE OVER GREENLAND IS ULTIMATELY ROOTED IN THE MONROE DOCTRINE

But we need not worry about NATO's survival or a fatal collapse in alliance cohesion. In 1951, when America entered into its bilateral defence treaty with Denmark to secure Greenland, NATO was at its zenith of unity and cohesion, but it was at the time still quite small, with only a dozen member-states, many not yet recovered from the devastation of World War II and many were, at one-time or another, adversaries in war or former colonies of one another. (Iceland and the UK would in time become future adversaries in their long-running, low-intensity Cod Wars from 1958 to 1976.)

A year after Greenland's 1951 bilateral defence treaty, in 1952, NATO expanded to include Greece and Turkey, who would in 1974 also go to war against one another – on Cyprus. And in 1966, NATO survived the exit of a key founding member, France – and had since the 1954-62 Algerian War excluded this contested French colonial territory from its collective defence commitments – in turn reducing its defensive footprint to exclude former French colonial territories in North Africa. In so doing, not avoid withdrawing NATO's commitment to collectively defending NATO member states' remote, former (and, in the case of Cyprus, coincidentally insular) colonial territories was thus established as a norm for the alliance, not an exception – one that is newly relevant once again.

With the subsequent waves of expansion of NATO in the years since the Cold War ended, the alliance has become ever more fractious and diverse. This has made alliance politics more contentious, but in the end the alliance has not only endured, but even strengthened. Denmark says if President Trump annexes Greenland by force, it will mean the end of NATO. Many European allies agree. But this is not a foregone conclusion.

NATO has overcome such internal dissension before. When Iceland and Britain fought over disputed cod fisheries, their fight was over an expanding (and contested) maritime frontier as the

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Law of the Sea expanded territorial waters, to the frustration of global fishing fleets long accustomed to fishing in what were now somebody else's waters. When Greece and Turkey came to blows, it was over a dispute on Cyprus, an island just beyond NATO's borders. And when France exited NATO, NATO quickly modified its commitments to defend formerly French colonial territories in Africa, stepping back from a pledge of collective defence once its collectivity restructured under the pressures of decolonisation.

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Now, as America turns its hunger for territorial expansion (and likely, a treasure chest of natural resources) to Greenland, it is explicitly challenging Denmark's right to colonise this vast North American island that America has been defending since World War II, and which even Seward himself sought to acquire over a century and a half ago. As Trump's Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller told Jake Tapper recently on CNN: "There's no need to even think or talk about this in the context that you're asking of a military operation. Nobody's gonna fight the United States militarily over the future of Greenland." He may well be right on this.

The dispute over Greenland is ultimately a North American dispute and its logic is rooted firmly in the Monroe Doctrine, which has been guiding American policy off and on going back as far as 1823. It's more like the dispute between Iceland and Britain over the High North Atlantic cod fishery or between Greece and Turkey over the future of

Cyprus, another island nation contested by larger powers, which NATO easily weathered by turning its other cheek.

Whether America annexes Greenland by force or not remains a question on everybody's minds right now. And so it should be. It's a fascinating and important question. But we need not worry about NATO or its ability to weather this new storm. The alliance has been through such storms before, and has always come out the other side intact, or even stronger. Yes, it is surreal that the alliance leader is challenging the sovereignty of a small member state. But America's challenge is not to Denmark's traditional homeland in northern Europe. It's to its colonial claims in North America, a claim America has every right – with a very long tradition – to question.

When American polar explorer Robert Peary made North Greenland his stomping grounds at the end of the 19th century, it became known as Pearyland. He fully expected Pearyland to soon become an American colony – as did Denmark. Only when the Washington passed on this opportunity, tired of the colonial game (as a former colony that itself had famously thrown off its master), did Copenhagen pursue its own claim.

In the years since, America has second-guessed its initial disinterest in this largest of islands, time and again. Under the presidency of Donald Trump, extending American sovereignty over Greenland has become national policy. Now, Washington may be ready to make its move. Denmark and Greenland understand this, and while they deeply oppose it, it need not end their alliance with America, nor put the Atlantic alliance at risk. Compensation will be offered, compromises will be made, fences will be mended and long-standing partnerships will inevitably endure. And NATO, I am confident, will live happily ever after – as it has before. There's really no reason to fear otherwise ●

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