

1. Currents of Arctic Exceptionalism Reborn

It's no coincidence that last summer's peace summit between President Trump and Russian strongman Vladimir Putin is took place north of sixty in America's 49th state. Much media coverage called attention to Alaska's long and proud heritage as part of the Russian Empire courtesy of the centuries-long run of the Russian-American Company, which afforded a perfect historical and geographical bridge between past and present that also spans east and west as relevant today as it was in the long-ago days when the RAC and HBC ruled the North.

America and Russia jointly share their more recent collective memory of the stabilizing buffer that the North provided during the Cold War, when flashpoints of conflict elsewhere risked rapid escalation to World War III and nuclear winter. Meanwhile, along the chilly Ice Curtain between Alaska and the Soviet Union, life went on much as it always had (as it continues to do). Following that was our optimistic post-Cold War euphoria when so many of us believed Russia would finally come in from the cold, and become a new frontier for democracy and economic partnership with Alaska, which percolated without really ever achieving its full potential, but likewise never faded entirely from our hearts - at least right up until the Ukraine invasion in 2022 brought such calming overtures to a crashing end.

These were all compelling reasons for bringing President Trump's summitry to Alaska this past August, where the White House hoped majestic and picturesque landscapes would foster a reset in the recently strained bromance between The Donald and The Vladimir. But in the end, the three-hour meeting seemed to fizzle, much the way the breathtaking summitry with North Korean strongman Kim Jung-Un did during Trump 1.0, ending with a whimper and not a deal. But in the months that have followed, despite some frostiness at the lack of momentum, America and Russia have edged closer and closer to a peace deal on Ukraine.

In the wake of America's lightning snatch-and-grab of Venezuela's strongman (and close ally of Russia) Nicolas Maduro over the New Year's holiday, and current speculation that the White House might next turn its attention - and naval power - against Greenland to force its constitutional merger with the United States, there is - oddly enough - much reason for

hope. That's because in these months since Trump and Putin summited together in Alaska, America has edged closer and closer to Moscow in many ways, from its resurgent use of force in its foreign policy to its embrace of hemispheric spheres of influence in world politics. Rather than expect, or pressure, Russia to come in from the cold and enthusiastically embrace democratic values, why not instead mirror Moscow's more muscular ways?

Alaska's unique Russian-American history thus still offers us much reason for optimism, as this is the unique territory that was once under the flag of Tsarist Russia, but which peacefully transitioned to that of America, not by force or coercion but by secret and fruitful negotiation, after which Russia gladly withdrew from North America in exchange for what it viewed to be just and fair compensation, letting Alaska become an American-governed buffer (and thereby preventing further British encroachment upon Russia's empire). In short, the Alaska Purchase was an agreement between sovereigns over where one sphere of influence stopped, and another started. That's as good a blueprint for ending the bloodshed in Ukraine as one could hope for, and the foundation of dueling draft peace accords which recognize either Russian territorial control of the Donbas in eastern Ukraine, or its demilitarization and emergence as a new buffer territory in the heart of Europe. Nowhere does democracy seem to be an issue, just as its absence was notable in the rationalization for invading Venezuela.

The real story here and a key reason for bringing this next chapter in Trump peacemaking to Alaska was the realization in both Washington and Moscow that stability comes from carving up the world into distinct, and mutually recognized, spheres of influence. This is, ultimately, what Arctic Exceptionalism is all about. Arctic states all came together in 1996 and agreed to respect their respective Arctic boundaries, and pledged to work together at the Arctic Council with their mutual respect binding them together. That mutuality ensured the Arctic remained peaceful, regardless of the many obvious asymmetries that could have divided the Arctic, where its states range in population from 350,000 (Iceland) to 350,000,000 (USA), and in territory from 39,769 square miles (Iceland) to 6,601,665 square miles (Russia).

While there is much fuss in recent days over the specter of an American invasion and annexation of Greenland, this is really just a matter of a reset in the spheres of interest that

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stabilize the world, with America making the case (with worrisome insistency, as the Danes see it) for an end to Danish sovereignty in the western hemisphere, and the expansion of American power across the island of Greenland. It's not the first time America has aspired to gain sovereign possession over Greenland, and for Greenlanders, it need not mean the end of their aspirations for independence. Many a small island state has achieved independence with America as its military partner. But for Denmark, it would mark an end to its status as an Arctic nation, and would be a humbling affirmation of its status as a small state.

Nor must an American expansion to Greenland doom the NATO alliance. The alliance has experienced military conflicts between its members before, notably between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus' dueling Greek and Turkish communities, and between Iceland and Britain over cod fisheries. When President Trump's Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller suggested force remains unlikely, he may have been spot on. As he told Jake Tapper on CNN soon after the American military intervention in Venezuela, "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."

While not the same circumpolar love fest experienced from 1996 when the Arctic Council was formed through to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there's no reason for Arctic doom or gloom. That's because the realist foundations of Arctic Exceptionalism are still alive and well - as is its certitude that the North Star still inspirationally points combative mankind toward peace, whether we think we're ready for it or not.

Arctic Exceptionalism is rooted in Arctic geography, climate and history. It is where the continents and hemispheres meet, where early humanity itself flowed from Eurasia into the Americas bringing civilizations and cultural richness to every corner of our world. It is where our isolation builds not just strength and independence for which the Arctic is deservedly famous, but a warmth of character and a hospitable and welcoming mindset known all across the circumpolar north. Arctic Exceptionalism continues to shine brightly toward a future defined more by peace than war, accommodation and collaboration more than conflict and competition. We only have to listen to our own hearts as they beat in unison and harmony and not the pundits from down south who tell us Arctic Exceptionalism is part of the past and should be buried once and for all.

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President Trump, the perennial outsider, knows better than to listen to the biased partisans of the discredited deep state, and has instead sought to expand America's Arctic presence in many ways, and in so doing expand its greatness. In Alaska this past summer, he had the opportunity to do so again, hoping to restore the Arctic to its position long envisioned, famously so by the last Soviet Premier and beloved peacemaker Mikhail Gorbachev at the Cold War's end, as a zone of peace for all the world to emulate.

As President Trump turns toward Greenland with an impulse to expand America's constitutional footprint, he imagines securing America and all that it values, and believes this will be in the interest of Greenlanders, whose neglect by the Danes and appalling mistreatment, are infamous. Indeed, given the deep moral injustices of past Danish colonial policies in Greenland and the continued suffering that resulted (for which the Danish government has recently - albeit belatedly, and in my view half-heartedly - apologized), and the island's geostrategic value in a world where hemispheric spheres of influence are again in vogue, it is not a stretch to imagine a Trump authorizing a military operation to annex Greenland under the convergent pretext of humanitarian intervention, commercial interests, and national security, comparable to the administration's rationalization of military action in Venezuela.

The Danes will howl in protest at the dismemberment of their antiquated kingdom and their undesired downsizing to small nation status, and their loss of international prestige with the end of their run as an Arctic nation. But for Greenlanders, it could mark a new beginning, one where anything is possible. The end result will be a better world, one where hope is triumphant and Arctic Exceptionalism is affirmed - and where the hopes and dreams of Arctic peoples can be rekindled, and the nightmares of the colonial past be mercifully forgotten.

2. Countercurrents of Arctic Imperialism Reborn

Greenland and America have been through a lot together, and the bonds forged - from the commercial whaling and polar exploration days of the 19th century through America's defense of the world's largest island during World War II and the Cold War - run deep. One can think of a new American intervention there - should recent tensions not soon abate as presidential attention turns elsewhere - as something of a rescue mission, bringing a

decisive end to a long and messy forced marriage between the Danes and Greenlanders. Indeed, if America were to take Greenland, it would be less a hostile takeover and more a messy divorce, leaving bruised feelings and broken hearts, all mendable with time - and the western hemisphere all the stronger.

It would not be the first time that the American military has come to Greenland's rescue. First there were the Nazis, who infiltrated weather teams on Greenland during World War II to radio updates to the Wehrmacht to help its long fight against the western allies. We sent the Coast Guard to serve as the Greenland Patrol, and they held the line. The Germans, caught between the tightening vise grip of advancing western allies in the west and the Red Army in the east, were unable to break out of mainland Europe to threaten Greenland and beyond that Labrador, Newfoundland and the Gulf of St. Lawrence as many then feared they would.

Soon after the second world war ended, a new nemesis arose, when our old war-time partner, Stalin, turned his victorious forces of Eastern Europe's liberation from Hitler into an army of occupation that quickly subjugated half the continent, snuffing out the embers of democracy for nearly half a century to come. America quickly pivoted from postwar euphoria and demobilization to planning for a long, cold war. It was bad enough that from 1945 to 1948, Eastern Europe fell under Stalin's thumb. But then in 1949, the Soviets split the atom and the USSR thereby emerged as the world's second nuclear power. 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 we did. First, in 1949, we formed NATO with the April 4, 1949 signing of the Washington Treaty with a dozen founding members, several of which were former foes and/or colonizers, including the British we once overthrew at the birth of our republic. (And in 1955, even West Germany, which we had only defeated a decade earlier, joined the alliance - bringing together a motley crew of allies with complicated relationship history.) Also in 1949, Newfoundland and Labrador, until then British, joined Canada - bringing their defense and security under control of America's next door neighbor in Ottawa. From then on, Greenland, under colonial rule from tiny Denmark, was an outlier in the North American Arctic.

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Two years after NATO was formed, and amidst the onslaught of communist aggression unfolding on the Korean Peninsula half a world away, the Danes and Americans agreed to extend their wartime defense of Greenland through the long twilight of the Cold War, with their 1951 bilateral defense treaty providing the Yanks 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 defense, to Denmark's great sigh of relief. President Truman offered to buy Greenland outright, but the Danes said no to his \$100 million offer of gold bullion. But the idea of America defending Danish sovereignty over such a large chunk of North America, with the American taxpayer footing the bill, never felt entirely right.

And yet, America kept at it. Between 1954 and 1957, it completed construction of the world's most massive and audacious construction project, the DEW Line (short for 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, now called the Pituffik Space Base. At one point, we built and manned up to 17 military installations, with a total manpower of 6,000 troops, well more than today's 150-200 lonely troops at Pituffik, the sole remaining US base on the island.

Back then, America feared an armada of Soviet bombers laden with A-bombs barreling over the horizon, dodging our few anti-aircraft batteries, and dropping their deadly payloads on undefended American cities. But by the late 1950s, 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 would fall upon the long-insulated Americans from the heavens above. Slow, lumbering bombers were no longer needed, nor were our efforts to counter them, as these deadly, far-reaching nuclear-tipped rockets entered the military arsenals of both America 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 defense systems (of the sort we now have in Alaska). The US presence on the world's largest island soon declined, though its bilateral defense 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 defense of their island.

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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 defense and security, a warming world with its increasingly accessible Arctic resources and declining sea ice caught the attention of nearly all world powers, great and small.

At the same time, Russia resurged as military power, and China rose as an economic superpower 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 statelets 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 enamored with the idea of a Mt. McKinley-sized geopolitical move via a Sewardian territorial expansion, right into the history books.

At first, 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 appeared 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, Greenland quickly transformed from beneficiary to target of American military power.

Will, as many fear, the NATO alliance start to buckle under this strain? That was the sentiment at Davos this year, particularly amongst the Europeans (and most notably among the Danes) as President Trump presented America's acquisition of Greenland with the utmost urgency. For now, under the Trump-whispering of NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, the crisis seems to have subsided. But tomorrow is another day.

While the alliance is so distracted by this internal strife, some fear that the Russians could 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 may 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.

But we need not worry about NATO's survival, or a fatal collapse in alliance cohesion. In 1951, when America entered into its bilateral defense 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 defense treaty, in 1952, NATO expanded to include Greece and Turkey, who would in 1974 also go to war against one another - on the island of 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 defense commitments. Not defending NATO member states' remote colonial territories was thus established as a norm for the alliance, not an exception - one that is newly relevant once again.

With the subsequent expansions 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. While many European allies agree, this is not a foregone conclusion.

NATO has overcome such internal dissension before. When Iceland and Britain clashed over disputed cod fisheries, their fight was over an expanding (and contested) maritime frontier as the 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. (It is intriguing that Cyprus has again emerged as a model for a newly proposed framework agreement to de-escalate recent tensions between America and NATO, with

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British sovereignty over its Cyprus military bases said to point the way toward a compromise between outright annexation and the continuation of the status quo.)

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 colonize 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 since 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 recurring disinterest in this largest of

islands, time and again. Under the presidency of Donald J. 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. Fences will be mended, compensation will be offered (and any more retaliatory tariffs again rolled back - perhaps time and again), compromises will be made, 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.