Control over Greenland: A long-standing goal of American imperialism

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The visit by a high-level US delegation to Greenland underscores the seriousness with which American imperialism is pursuing the seizure of the Arctic island and the sharpening tensions this is fuelling between Washington and its former European allies.

National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, Second Lady Usha Vance, and Energy Secretary Chris Wright were due to arrive Thursday for their uninvited visit. After the embarrassing leaked Signal discussion on a military assault on Yemen, Waltz's attendance was withdrawn.

Officials from Greenland, a self-governing territory, and the Danish government have refused to meet with the Americans. In unusually strong language, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen told broadcaster TV2 on Tuesday, "I have to say that it is unacceptable pressure being placed on Greenland and Denmark in this situation. And it is pressure that we will resist." She added, "It is clear that when you make a visit in this way, and the Greenlandic politicians clearly say that they do not want the visit, you cannot interpret it as respectful."

The White House responded by announcing later Tuesday that Vice President J.D. Vance would join the party visiting Greenland, which would focus on a stop at the US Pituffik military base on the island's northwest coast. The US correspondent for Denmark's public broadcaster DR described the move as a "diplomatic declaration of war."

In January, US President Donald Trump threatened to use economic force against a nominal ally to secure control over Greenland from Denmark. Coinciding with his stated intention to seize the Panama Canal and make Canada the 51st state, Trump's expansionist plans point to a new stage in the breakdown of inter-state relations under conditions of a rapidly intensifying redivision of the world among the imperialist powers. Many of the conflicts that plunged the globe into two world wars in the 20th century are resurfacing with a vengeance. Greenland is a case in point.

Washington's interest in seizing Greenland is not new. It has enjoyed a military presence on the island for over eight decades. US military and geostrategic planners view Greenland, which lies approximately halfway between Washington and Moscow, as critical for waging war against Washington's geostrategic rivals, including Russia and China. The American oligarchy and its political mouthpieces consider the island a stepping stone to US imperialism's dominance of the western hemisphere, a substantial source of natural resources and a gateway to new Arctic trade routes opening due to climate change. The European powers are no less determined to maintain their dominance over the island to secure their access to the Arctic.

A US senate hearing in February on securing control over Greenland saw Republican and Democratic senators discuss with senior foreign policy experts how best to impose US dominance over the island and the Arctic more broadly. As Senator Ted Cruz put it in his introductory remarks, "Greenland sits directly on the shortest flight path for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) traveling from Russia and the Middle East to the US., making its positioning crucial to our security. We have maintained a military presence in Greenland since World War II, particularly at Pituffik Space Base, which serves as the northernmost US military installation and provides critical missile warning and space surveillance."

Danish colonisation and US imperialist occupation during World War II

Greenland was settled by Norse Vikings possibly as early as the 9th century and certainly by the late 10th century. Its modern position as a colony within the Danish Kingdom began in 1721, when Norwegian missionaries arrived on the island to convert the Inuit population, most of whom had been living there since about the 12th century after migrating from modern-day Canada.

Greenlandic exports, entirely under the control of the Danish Crown, were initially chiefly blubber, which was in high demand for lighting prior to the development of gas lamps and later modern electricity. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, improvements in fishing technique produced a significant growth in exports and the industry continues to dominate Greenland's exports to this day.

In the mid-19th century, Denmark began to exploit Greenland's vast mineral resources, opening a mine at Ivittuut on the west coast of the island in 1854 to extract a large cryolite deposit. The mineral was traditionally used to wash and dye clothing, but in the late 19th century it was discovered to have properties vital for the smelting of aluminium. A recent documentary by Danish public broadcaster DR, "Greenland's White Gold," estimated that the mine, which was fully controlled by Oresund Chemical industries and operated by Danish workers shipped into the site, produced some 400 billion kroner (€53 billion) of revenue for the Danish state until it was closed in 1987. This revenue included a steady trade with the US until World War II of about 10,000 tons of cryolite per year.

The documentary provoked an outraged response from Denmark's right-wing parties, who denounced the filmmakers for making one-sided claims and distorting information. Underscoring the ongoing determination within Danish ruling circles to maintain a strong influence in Greenland, DR was forced to remove the documentary from its website and fire its chief editor for documentaries.

With Nazi Germany's occupation of Denmark on 9 April 1940, Washington and London moved decisively to prevent the Hitler regime from gaining a foothold in the North Atlantic. British troops occupied the Faroe Islands and Allied forces took over Iceland for the duration of the war, while the Roosevelt administration reached an agreement with Denmark's foreign representative in Washington, Henrik Kauffmann, to serve as Greenland's protector during the conflict.

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On 9 April, 1941, the agreement was signed and troops were dispatched to Greenland to stop an "attack by a non-American power." President Roosevelt declared in a subsequent announcement that Greenland was to be part of US continental defence, placing it within the area of Washington's Monroe Doctrine that excluded the European powers from the Americas.

Prior to the official deployment of troops, American military resources had already been dispatched to secure the Ivittuut cryolite mine in early 1940. Imports of the mineral to the US, which played a key role in the production of fighter aircraft, rose to 40,000 tons in 1940 and peaked at 90,000 tons in 1942.

At a time when Greenland's population barely surpassed 20,000 people, the US deployed some 6,000 troops to the island. In addition to defending it against a potential German occupation, which would have established a base for the Nazis to attack North America, the Greenland operation was essential in easing the passage of bomber aircraft and other supplies to Europe, since they could stop for refuelling at runways built by the US. Due to weather patterns, control over Greenland allowed the US to provide advanced forecasts for military operations in Europe.

The Danish government under Nazi occupation denounced Kauffmann as a traitor for agreeing to US military bases in Greenland, but the government that took office in Copenhagen after the liberation of Denmark in May 1945 voted to formalise the arrangement. One year later, Washington offered Denmark $100 million (a sum equivalent to $1.5 billion in today's money) to buy Greenland outright, which Copenhagen rejected. Subsequent years saw negotiations on Greenland's future constitutional status, with the result that it became a county of Denmark in 1953. Concurrent processes saw Iceland declare independence in 1944 and the Faroe Islands secure home rule in 1948.

The Cold War and "Danification"

The official end of colonialisation by no means meant an end to Denmark's exploitation of Greenland and mistreatment of its inhabitants. It was largely a cosmetic change dictated by the broader decolonialisation process following World War II.

As the Cold War began, the Danish government concluded a new agreement with US imperialism in 1951 that extended wide-ranging rights for American military operations on the island. The creation of the Thule Air Base, which would play a central role in ballistic missile defence capabilities throughout the Cold War, was established under the deal. The base's construction followed the forcible eviction of the local Inuit population.

Denmark served as a close ally of American imperialism throughout the Cold War. A founding member of NATO, Denmark permitted the storage of nuclear weapons at the Thule base for years, a fact that only became public in the mid-1990s. When the US ambassador to Denmark asked then Prime Minister H.C. Hansen in 1957 whether he wished to be informed of American deployments of nuclear weapons to Greenland, Hansen responded in a note released in 1995 that his government "did not see any problem in this matter" of storing "supplies of munitions of a special kind." Denmark's Social Democrat government had just publicly adopted an anti-nuclear weapons policy forbidding the deployment of nuclear weaponry in Denmark or on any of its territories.

Just over a decade later, a major diplomatic crisis ensued when a B52 bomber carrying four hydrogen bombs crashed near the Thule Air Base in 1968, contaminating sea ice with radioactive material. At the insistence of the Danish government, a clean-up operation was launched.

During the postwar period, Danish governments invested in significant urbanisation projects in Greenland. However, social conditions for the population were poor, especially among residents of numerous Inuit communities who were forced to move into larger towns and abandon their traditional lifestyles. Although life expectancy increased dramatically as health and social services became available, and chronic diseases like tuberculosis were overcome, this was combined with policies of open discrimination, and efforts to assimilate or eliminate Greenlandic culture that were referred to subsequently as "danification." Greenlandic workers were paid different wage rates from the Danish workers they worked alongside, and children were systematically removed from families and sent to Denmark for education, where they often lived with foster families.

One especially gruesome episode was revealed in a recent DR investigation on the practice of fitting intra-uterine devices to girls as young as 13 to lower birth rates on the island. Between 1966 and 1970, some 4,500 of these devices were fitted, mostly without the knowledge of those impacted. The figure amounted to about 35 percent of the Greenlandic women of child-bearing age at the time. Although the practice officially ended in 1975, reports indicate that it may have continued after this date. A lawsuit has been filed by 143 women, some of whom were as young as 12 when they were subjected to the process, for compensation from the Danish government. The lawsuit came after an initial effort by 67 women to demand compensation from the state was rebuffed.

Another major crime was the infamous "Little Danes" social experiment, in which 22 children were separated from their families and sent to foster families in Denmark for over a year. Upon their return to Greenland, they were placed in an orphanage and given virtually no contact with their families. They were prohibited from speaking Greenlandic, forced to speak Danish, and only allowed to socialise with the children of prominent Danish families living in Nuuk, Greenland's capital. It took the Danish state until 2020 to apologise for its part in the project, which was conceived of as creating a Greenlandic elite and eradicating Inuit culture.

Greenlandic "independence" and mounting inter-imperialist tensions

Opposition to Danish rule grew in Greenland throughout the 1970s, driven by the social upheavals of the post-war decades, and brutal treatment of the population by the Danish state. A significant accelerant came in 1973, when Greenland joined the European Economic Community along with Denmark, even though a big majority of voters on the island had rejected EEC membership in the previous year's referendum. As Greenland was treated like every other county in Denmark, the vote was not counted separately from the national tally, which produced a majority in favour of membership.

Copenhagen and Greenlandic politicians reached an agreement to establish home rule over domestic affairs in Nuuk from 1979. A further referendum on EU membership resulted in Greenland withdrawing from the bloc in 1985 and assuming the status of an associated overseas country or territory (OCT).

Home rule was expanded further in 2009 with a self-government agreement. It not only granted Greenland's government control over the island's mineral resources, and the right to be consulted on foreign affairs and Arctic defence, but also included the terms by which the island could eventually secure independence from Denmark. Although support for eventual independence is overwhelming in the population, about 90 percent of which is of Inuit origin, a date for a referendum has never been set over the past 16 years.

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Denmark's longstanding colonial relationship with Greenland, which continued well after the formal end of colonialism in 1953, has left the island heavily dependent on a block grant of approximately 5 billion kroner (€700 million) from Denmark to fund its public services. Trump and his advisers have sought to capitalise on this, presenting American involvement as creating the perfect opportunity for Greenlanders to sell their natural resources to American corporations and investors to generate an alternative source of income to support the island's 57,000 residents.

Trump and other senior officials in his administration have made no secret about the fact that they are trying to exploit resentment among Greenlanders towards Denmark due to its colonial past, repeatedly stating that Greenland is "not happy" with the Danish government. But no doubt fuelled by their opposition to another colonial-style relationship with an imperialist power, polls indicate that only 6 percent of the population support Greenland joining the United States.

After Trump initially expressed his interest in buying Greenland in 2019, Washington opened a consulate in Nuuk in June 2020, 67 years after its first consulate was closed in 1953. The step was supported by an investment of $12 million in Greenland, a substantial sum given its small population. According to the website of USAID, which operated out of the consulate office, its focus over the past four-and-a-half years was on "energizing Greenland's entrepreneurial ecosystems; advancing Greenland's market diversification efforts; unlocking Greenland's green growth potential."

Trump's renewed interest in Greenland is one among a growing number of disputes deepening divisions between Washington and its erstwhile European allies. When Trump declared at a January press conference that he could not rule out the use of military force to seize Greenland or the Panama Canal, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz denounced the use of violence to redraw national borders as a violation of international law. French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot subsequently raised the prospect of sending French troops to Greenland to defend EU territory.

In March 2024, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Nuuk to open an EU office in Greenland. Having recently adopted its first Arctic strategy, the EU hopes through its representation on the island to gain access to much needed natural resources and strengthen its position in the redivision of the world as it rearms to the teeth to compete with Washington. The European imperialists underlined their predatory intentions earlier this month with a new rearmament programme to enable them to take military action around the world independently of the United States.

Under these conditions, there is no prospect for Greenland's population to determine its future and redress the abuses of the colonial period within the framework of world capitalism. A deal with the rapacious representatives of American imperialism to facilitate "independence" from the former colonial power Denmark will turn the island over to Washington's mad plans for world war, which will include the ruthless exploitation of natural resources and aggressive targeting of rivals in the Arctic. The EU and Denmark have made just as clear their determination to participate fully in the redivision of the world, including the Arctic region, that is well underway.

Ending Greenland's subordination to the interests of the major and lesser imperialist powers is a task entirely bound up with the development of an international anti-war movement led by the working class. Rejecting the deployment of gigantic sums of money to rearm and wage war, workers across Europe and the United States must wage a joint struggle for the socialist transformation of society. Only on this basis can the Arctic region and its peoples overcome the consequences of imperialist domination and prevent the looming catastrophe produced by capitalist-induced climate change that is destroying the region's environment.

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