

Three Hours in Greenland

by GWYNNE DYER

‘We need to wake up from a failed, 40-year consensus that said we could ignore the encroachment of powerful countries as they expand their ambitions,’ said US Vice-President JD Vance during his brief visit to the US military base at Pituffik in northern Greenland. (It was brief because the Greenland authorities wouldn’t let Vance go anywhere else.)

He then revealed that the real threat was the wily and evil Chinese: ‘We can’t just bury our head in the sand’ or in Greenland, bury our head in the snow’ and pretend that the Chinese are not interested in this very large land-mass.’

Back in the US, Donald Trump backed Vance up. ‘We need Greenland. Very important for international security; we have to have Greenland....There are Chinese and Russian ships all over the place.’ It’s total nonsense, but we’re not quite back to the 19th century yet and imperialists still need some plausible lies to justify their colonial acquisitions.

They’re not very plausible, though. The nearest Russian naval base to Greenland is Murmansk in northern Russia (2,500 km.), and no Chinese base is nearer than China itself (8,000 km)

There have been a few approaches by Chinese firms to acquire mining concessions or port facilities, but only one has been granted: a Chinese-Australian consortium producing uranium and rare earths in southern Greenland. There are no Russian investments.

If the United States feels for some reason that it needs more military bases in Greenland to establish control of Arctic waters, it is free to do so under an existing treaty with Denmark, which still controls Greenland’s foreign and defence affairs. (The island’s 56,000 people, 90% of whom are Inuit, already control their own domestic affairs)

The evidence that Washington doesn’t really need such bases is obvious and irrefutable. The US can build as many bases as it wants anywhere in Greenland, with no obligations beyond informing the Danish government about what it’s doing, and it has built precisely none.

During the Cold War there were 17 American bases in Greenland housing about 10,000 American troops. The one surviving US base, at Pituffik, has now dwindled to only 200 people. If you want to know the ‘strategic importance’ of Greenland to the United States, there’s your answer.

Besides, the US maintains 127 military bases in 47 other countries without requiring any of them to become American possessions, colonies or states. The American claim to Greenland is a straightforward land grab with no military or ‘security’ justification whatever. It’s not even clear why the United States would want to own it.

There are some interesting minerals in Greenland, just as there are under any other large tract of land, but harsh climate and long distances have so far discouraged most potential investors. It’s hard to see how actually making it American land would alter those calculations, and it would certainly be cheaper to buy the minerals from existing producers elsewhere.

This leaves only the motive that you suspected was at play in the White House in the first place: vainglory. Donald Trump would very much like to go down in history as a president who expanded the territory of the United States for the first time since William McKinley in 1898. He may live in the 21st century, but his values and ambitions belong in the 19th.

We should presume, therefore, that his territorial ambitions with regard to Greenland, Panama, Canada, and even Gaza (probably in that order) are as seriously meant as McKinley’s were for Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines and Hawaii. Greenland, Panama and Gaza will probably have to submit, in the end, but Canada may face a dreadful choice.

Trump currently talks about making Canada the 51st state and says that he will only use economic pressures to force Canadians to accept their fate. In reality he is building an authoritarian regime at home as fast as he can, and if crushing their economy does not bring Canadians to heel he may well resort to force in a couple of years.

In that event, Canadians would have to choose between resistance, knowing full well that they would probably lose in the end, or surrender without a fight to save lives. And by then it would be clear that their destination is not statehood and American citizenship, but some kind of subordinate colonial status. A big Puerto Rico, perhaps.

You think that's crazy talk? Consider what has happened to civil rights, the rule of law and respect for the constitution in the United States in just the past two months, and project those trends for another twenty or thirty months. They may not continue unchanged, but why not?