

# Greenland - For Protection or for Sale?

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*At a time when environmentalists are rightly very concerned about the protection of the highly sensitive ecology of Greenland, the headlines are instead filled with talk regarding **the 'sale' of Greenland initiated by President-elect Trump's provocative and disturbing statement of buying Greenland.***

Before coming to the details of this, it should be stated at the outset that there is something wrong about the state of the world in which the most prominent leader of the most powerful country talks brazenly about the buying or selling of a country. This becomes all the more disturbing when such talk continues even after the people and leaders of the country object to this.

Greenland is no small country. It is spread over 836,330 square miles. The earliest biggest annexation for USA was of Louisiana in 1803 from France involving land area a little less than that of Greenland.

At present Greenland is an autonomous territory with significant democratic progress (including progress towards potential independence) under the overall control of Denmark and a significant military presence of USA. Despite its huge area Greenland has only about 56,000 indigenous residents, mostly the Inuit people. Trade and economic relations with China have been growing rapidly in recent times.

Denmark's control over Greenland is also a go-back to colonial times but Denmark has at least been somewhat sensitive to the desire of local people first for autonomy and then for independence. In 1775 Denmark-Norway declared Greenland a colony, in 1814 Norway handed over Greenland to Denmark, in 1880 Denmark started more organized colonizing in Greenland, around 1941 Germany's invasion of Denmark prompted the USA to send some of its soldiers quietly to Greenland, in 1951 its military presence there was regularized by a treaty. In 2019 President Trump made his first offer of possibly buying Greenland, an idea that was opposed by Denmark strongly and did not advance much at that time.

However Trump and his advisers had obviously not forgotten about this and even before occupying the White House, on December 22 President-elect Trump stated while naming his ambassador to Denmark,

“For purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the world, the USA feels that ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity. “

Greenland's **PM Mute Egede** responded to this by stating that Greenland is “not for sale and will never be for sale...We must not lose our years long fight for freedom.”

Greenland's strategic and sea route importance has increased in the wake of the Ukraine war and the ongoing higher rate of ice melting which is likely to increase further in times of climate change. Greenland has offshore reserves of oil and gas, and it has big reserves of rare earth minerals, perhaps next only to those of China. In fact during the 1970s US **Vice President Nelson Rockefeller** had specifically suggested buying Greenland mainly for its mineral wealth.



Hence mining and militarization may become increasingly important in Greenland, while aspirations of local people for independence as well as environmental protection concerns may be pushed behind. This is worrying at a time when ecological protection is needed on urgent basis. In 2022 the melting of as much as 18 billion tons of ice sheets was reported in just three days of mid-July in Greenland. Very frightening estimates have been presented of the extent of rise in sea level if melting on such a scale continues.

This was not the first instance of such massive ice melting within a short time, nor is it likely to be the last. This has also highlighted the need for a more protective future for Greenland. But it appears that some powerful persons have an entirely different view on the matter.

Even President Truman made an offer in 1946 to purchase Greenland for 100 million dollars. This offer was refused, but Denmark later succumbed to USA pressure to set up military bases in Greenland, including a nuclear powered station Camp Century.

With its strategic location close to Russia as well as the USA, Greenland remains of great

military interest to the USA. This is a factor which has acquired more importance recently with the accentuation of big power rivalries.

This Arctic region is highly sensitive from the ecological point of view, a sensitivity which has increased further in times of climate change. As the ice sheets which cover vast areas melt under the influence of global warming, buried carbon deposits will be released and sea levels will rise. The region's unique biodiversity including polar bears and seals will be badly threatened.

Hence there is a strong case for the entire Greenland to be administered by the United Nations as a zone of neutrality, peace and environment protection. Under such an arrangement, ecologically protective livelihoods and basic facilities will be ensured by a UN administered program, which will treat the entire island as an area of ecological protection where any exploitation of natural resources will be strictly controlled and no warfare will be allowed. In addition there will be a very careful well-planned effort for undoing the damage already done.

As the snow melts with global warming, the remains of what was once a nuclear-powered military station (Camp Century) of the USA will open up, requiring a very careful clean-up effort. An even bigger danger exists in the form a nuclear weapon which was lost here in a bomber airplane accident in 1968. This was the peak of the cold war period when some USA bomber planes carrying nuclear weapons used to be in the air all the time and the Thule military base in Greenland was a special place for these operations due to the relative proximity of Russian targets from here. The airplane accident took place when the USA bomber containing nuclear weapons was approaching this military base in Greenland. The USA had obtained the permission of the Denmark government to set up this military base but it is not at all certain whether the Denmark government, let alone the local communities, had been informed about the transactions here involving the transport of nuclear weapons.

Actually the plane contained four nuclear weapons and three could be recovered. In the salvage operation in 1968 thousands of pieces of debris as well as millions of tons of ice, suspected to contain radioactive debris, were collected. Still one weapon could not be found despite the huge research effort. Workers employed in the clean-up work suffered from cancer later and have been claiming compensations till recently.

It is by now widely accepted that in this accident as many as four nuclear weapons were endangered, three were recovered more or less in tact but one hydrogen bomb was never recovered. One aspect of a UN-administrated protective future should be to be on constant alert for any tell-tale signs of damage from this so that a potential catastrophic event can still be prevented.

While the wider paradigm of future development should be based on ecological protection, protective livelihoods, peace and neutrality, within this paradigm local people should have all the autonomy for highly decentralized governance. There should be a special program of mental health and well-being to bring down the high rate of suicides and substance abuse in the region.

Clearly there are several serious issues in Greenland which have to be sorted out. A big effort with continuity has to be made to ensure a more protective future for Greenland which is in fact important for the entire world.

Hence all the recent talk of the buying or selling of Greenland is deeply worrying and such deals are likely to be the starting point of ecologically destructive activities at a time when the urgent need is for ecologically protective planning. Hence the buying and selling of Greenland should be opposed and instead there should be emphasis on ensuring policies based on welfare of local people and protection of environment.

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