

Trump's threats to seize Greenland and the imperialist scramble for the Arctic

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As a rapidly developing third world war engulfs the globe in flames, the Arctic and Arctic Ocean have become a major arena of conflict in the imperialist drive to re-divide the world.

The emergence of the Arctic as a region of increasing economic and geostrategic competition is a process that has developed over the course of the past two decades, and has been largely overshadowed by developments in the Middle East, Central Asia, Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific. But the scramble for hegemony over the Arctic has now burst out into the open, with US President Donald Trump's remarks concerning Greenland and Canada rattling governments and drawing public awareness to the critical strategic and economic significance of this region.

Since the turn of the century, the interest of the imperialist powers and their great-power rivals in the Arctic has increased dramatically, and with accelerating speed. Driven by a renewed global struggle for natural resources, trade routes and geostrategic influence, the scramble for control over the Arctic is being fueled by the impact of climate change. It finds expression in the adoption by the North American and major European imperialist powers, first and foremost the United States, of new official Arctic "strategies" with a heavy emphasis on expanded military activity. For their part, Russia and China are attempting to advance their trading and economic interests in the energy-rich region, which offers the prospect of accessing substantially shorter trade routes when the Arctic Ocean becomes largely or completely ice-free.

On January 7, Trump announced at a press conference that he intended to annex Greenland and re-take the Panama Canal—using military might, if necessary. He argued the annexations are needed to secure US "national security" against Russia and China. He also has vowed to apply economic pressure to force Canada, whose vast Arctic territory is second only to Russia's, into becoming the 51st state of the US. Shortly after these remarks, his son Donald Trump Jr. visited Greenland's capital, Nuuk.

Making clear that Trump's remarks were far from idle bombast, members of Trump's fascist clique have unveiled a bill in Congress legitimizing the annexation of Greenland. The "Make Greenland Great Again Act," which as of Monday already enjoyed 10 co-sponsors, states: "Congress hereby authorizes the President, beginning at 12:01 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on January 20, 2025, to seek to enter into negotiations with the Kingdom of Denmark to secure the acquisition of Greenland by the United States." Although Trump did not mention Greenland specifically in his inaugural address, his aggressive threats against Panama and other countries, and vow that America's territory would expand under his leadership make clear that the prospect of American annexation of the world's largest island remains.

In clamouring for Greenland's annexation, Trump risks antagonizing the entire European Union (EU), of which Denmark is a member. The European powers, for their part, have been quick to respond by reasserting the need for Europe to continue to develop its own independent military capacities.

Trump has put bluntly the position that has been held by the American ruling class for some time—that US imperialism should exert total hegemonic control over the North American Arctic and its environs.

The US has had a military presence in Greenland since World War II, when the US military occupied the island to prevent a Nazi takeover. In 1946, at the outset of the Cold War, US Secretary of State James Byrnes offered \$100 million (over \$1.6 Bn today) to purchase Greenland from Denmark—an offer the latter declined.

Trump's threat to annex Greenland represent something new in the state of the breakdown of world geopolitical relations and the unbridled ferocity and ambitions of US imperialism. Trump is provocatively escalating tensions over control of the Arctic—via Greenland and Canada—as an arena of great-power strategic conflict, with the ultimate aim of subjugating Russia and China. Rather than pursuing a policy of NATO collaboration and the use of proxy wars in Ukraine and elsewhere, Trump proposes going straight for the jugular.

For Russia, for obvious reasons of geography, the Arctic and Arctic Ocean region is of tremendous significance. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Russia has invested considerable sums in developing its onshore and offshore Arctic territories from an economic standpoint, and in developing its military capabilities in the region. The prevailing narrative among the Western imperialist powers is that the US and NATO have "fallen behind" in respect to the Arctic, and that Russia is carrying out "aggressive" activities in the region. During this time, however, the US was waging wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, and pushing ahead with the expansion of NATO to Russia's borders. Nevertheless, this narrative has been invoked as a touchstone for the fierce and rapid militarization of the Arctic, particularly by Canada and the United States.

China, a rising capitalist power, has its own interests in the region. Having declared itself a "Near Arctic Power," China has placed considerable investments in scientific research, as well as mineral and oil and gas extraction. Equally important is the prospect of new Arctic sea lanes, which will provide the quickest routes to deliver export goods to Europe.

One key feature of Arctic militarization is the push to "modernize" NORAD—the joint Canada-US aerospace and maritime defense command established at the height of the Cold War. As part of this program, Canada has pledged to purchase 88 F-35 "stealth" fighter jets from the US. Washington and Ottawa will also introduce an "Over-the-Horizon" radar system designed for the early detection of ballistic missile prelaunch activity, and develop new radar and sensor systems under the "Crossbow" program aimed at detecting and destroying ballistic missile launch sites thousands of kilometres away.

Far from countering "Russian and Chinese aggression," there is nothing "defensive" about the NORAD modernization project. The imperialists' goals are aggressive and predatory: creating the infrastructure for US and Canadian imperialism to be able to wage a "winnable" nuclear conflict with Russia and China, and secure geostrategic hegemony in the Arctic.

No less important is the admission of Sweden and Finland into NATO, which now boasts membership among all Arctic states except Russia. With the admission of Finland in particular, NATO has now acquired a 1,340 km (830 mi) land border with Russia, circumventing buffer states such as Belarus. Plans are already underway to station US forces at Finnish bases, in particular at Ivalo and Sodankyla, both of which are located near to the country's northern borders with Russia. Murmansk, where Russia's Northern Fleet and nuclear submarines are stationed, is only a few hours' drive away from either base.

The Arctic plays an increasingly important role in the imperialist powers' drive to repartition the world for several reasons. First, it is a region rich in key raw materials, including oil and gas, and rare-earth minerals. The outcome of rival territorial claims to offshore Arctic Ocean land-ridges will be decisive in determining which powers can lay claim to these natural resources. Secondly, the Northwest Passage on Canada's northern coast and the Northern Sea Route along Russia's Arctic coast are quickly becoming viable trade routes that would massively reduce freight transport times and costs between Europe and Asia. Thirdly, control over the Arctic and its approaches would offer crucial military advantages during a third world war. Missiles fired by North America's imperialist powers against Russia and China could swiftly reach their targets by traversing the Arctic (and vice versa).

Rare-earth minerals and other raw materials

While it is true that control over rare-earth minerals is crucial for the transition to a "clean energy" economy, what is more significant is its technological and military implications. Unfettered access to such materials is critical for US military capabilities and infrastructure in its drive for global hegemony.

A 2013 report, published in *Foreign Affairs*, gives a concise breakdown of what is at stake in the mineral-rich Arctic:

The Arctic is already home to the world's most productive zinc mine, Red Dog, in northern Alaska, and its most productive nickel mine, in Norilsk, in northern Russia. Thanks mostly to Russia, the Arctic produces 40 percent of the world's palladium, 20 percent of its diamonds, 15 percent of its platinum, 11 percent of its cobalt, ten percent of its nickel, nine percent of its tungsten, and eight percent of its zinc. Alaska has more than 150 prospective deposits of rare-earth elements, and if the state were its own country, it would rank in the top ten in global reserves for many of these minerals. **And all these assets are just the beginning. The Arctic has only begun to be surveyed. Once the digging starts, there is every reason to expect that, as often happens, even greater quantities of riches will be uncovered.** [Emphasis added]

Greenland has an abundance of rare-earth minerals. The Tanbreez Mine, located on the southern tip of Greenland, was already a location of interest for US officials long before Trump began demanding annexation. Tanbreez has a large deposit of eudialyte ore, rich in rare-earth elements such as neodymium, cerium, lanthanum and yttrium. These elements alone, contained within just one mine, are critical for the production of: mobile phones; flat screen TVs; electronic hardware in wind turbines; batteries used in hybrid cars and portable electronics; radiation-absorbing glass, such as that used in night-vision goggles; microwave filters for radar; medical lasers; radiopharmaceuticals; as well as PET imaging and

MRI machines.

US State Department officials visited the Tanbreez mine twice last year, and its CEO told Reuters he came under heavy American lobbying not to sell the mine to China. A Chinese company is the largest shareholder in a rare-earth minerals project at Kvanefjeld, farther up the same network of fjords as the Tanbreez mine.

There is also a growing demand for fresh water on the world market. Greenland's ice cap, which is melting at an astonishing rate of 250 cubic kilometers per year, could prove a major fresh water supplier. The Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland found 10 locations suitable for the commercial exploitation of Greenland's ice and water, and has already begun issuing licenses. Fresh water could be used to irrigate farms and provide drinking water to American cities in the Western US, afflicted by a 22-year-long "megadrought."

Underneath Greenland's ice cap is "rock flour," ground into nanoparticles of dust by the crushing weight of the ice. Scientists have found that this glacial flour contains a particular nutrient composition that could regenerate depleted soils, vastly improving agricultural yields. One study in the use of rock flour on cornfields in Ghana, for example, produced a 30 to 50 percent increase in crop yields. The melting of Greenland's ice cap uncovers an estimated one billion tons of glacial flour per year. In total, there is enough rock flour in Greenland to cover every acre of agricultural land in the world. Thus, whoever controls Greenland's ice cap would have a considerable advantage in terms of future food security and access to clean water.

Finally, the Arctic holds vast potential for oil and gas reserves. There are 19 geological basins in the Arctic, each of which has the potential to bear oil and/or natural gas reserves. While some basins have been explored, such as the Alaska North Slope in Prudhoe Bay, these represent only half the total. A United States Geological Survey report published in 2008 estimated that areas north of the Arctic Circle may contain as much as 90 billion barrels of oil and 44 billion barrels of natural gas when liquefied—13 percent of undiscovered oil in the world. Of particular interest are three geologic provinces: Arctic Alaska, the Amerasian Basin, and the East Greenland Rift Basin. The annexation of Greenland would give US imperialism unfettered access to the entire East Greenland Rift Basin in particular.

Sea lanes and economic spheres of influence

Climate change, which is currently melting the polar ice cap at an alarming rate, has vast implications for maritime shipping routes. Melting ice is predicted to both improve the viability of existing Arctic shipping routes, while also creating entirely new sea lanes. One such future sea lane, known currently as the "Transpolar Shipping Route" (TSR) will provide quick, cheap, and direct access to the European market for China. The TSR will be the shortest shipping route between Europe and Asia, and does not pass through any of the Arctic powers' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

An article published in the international relations journal *Marine Policy* in 2021 dealt with this issue extensively. "At present," the article begins, "Arctic voyages require icebreaker escorts, but projections show that as early as the 2030s, unescorted navigation in the Arctic in the summer months might be possible, and by the 2050s it is likely." By the end of the 21st century, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) will be ice-free three to six months per year, while the Northwest Passage (NWP) will be ice-free two to four months of the year.

The article, written from the standpoint of US economic interests, described the potential of both routes, as well as the various competing

geopolitical interests involved. In particular, it noted issues with both Russian and Canadian territorial claims:

The United States disagrees with Russia's position that various straits in the NSR are internal waters, argues that the NSR is an international strait, and challenges Russia's excessive control over the route for environmental protection. . . The controversy over the legal status of the route and the Russia-imposed barriers could dissuade international shippers from utilizing the NSR even if doing so might save travel time and distance. . . If the route develops as a major sea route, international tensions will mount, and stakeholders will claim the route as a common resource.

Canada similarly argues that the NWP is an internal waterway and has long pressed the United States to recognize this claim:

The currently debated legal status of the NWP in the Canadian archipelago will likely become untenable as traffic increases. . . as traffic increases in the Northwest Passage, Canada and the rest of the international community, and especially the United States, will need to resolve the route's legal status.

This dispute was once again underlined by recent comments from Jean Chrétien, Canada's Liberal prime minister from 1993 to 2003, calling for a stronger response from Canada's political elite to Trump's threats. He declared, "We also want to protect the Arctic. But the United States refuses to recognize the Northwest Passage, ... even though it flows through the Canadian Arctic ... We need the United States to recognize the Northwest Passage as being Canadian waters."

While the author of the *Marine Policy* article wrote from the standpoint of the need for "international cooperation" (i.e., between the US, Canada and the EU) in resolving such territorial disputes, Trump proposes an alternative: seizing control of the NWP through the annexation of Greenland and Canada.

Securing these routes is of vital importance for both US and Canadian imperialism, in particular, to place a choke hold on China's economy. China is the world's largest manufacturing economy and the world's largest exporter of goods. For China, access to shipping routes is critical. Traditional trade shipping routes present problems. They are lengthy, less cost-effective and pass through various naval "choke points," like the Strait of Malacca. Since US President Obama initiated the "Pivot to Asia" policy in 2011, traditional shipping routes, especially in the Indo-Pacific, have become heavily militarized. The US Navy in particular maintains a heavy presence in geographically strategic areas which, in a war or war-crisis, it could effectively seize to block China's ability to receive oil and other natural resources, and ship goods. To access the lucrative EU market, her second largest export partner, China's ships must pass through the Strait of Hormuz and Suez Canal.

China's "One Belt One Road" policy, initially adopted in 2013, has placed a large emphasis on creating the infrastructure necessary for efficient over-land shipping. While this has been somewhat able to circumvent the challenges presented with naval shipping, it is not as cost effective. The emergence of new, viable sea lanes through the Arctic and the development of the infrastructure to support them—under a joint Russia-China initiative announced in 2017 under the name "Polar Silk Road"—would provide China with a means to overcome such transport restraints.

Arctic Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and Arctic Continental Shelf

claims are another major driving factor in the new imperialist scramble.

Through her continued colonial possession of Greenland, Denmark enjoys vast swaths of territory for its EEZ in the Arctic. Greenland's ice sheets are losing 270 billion tons of water per year, and it is speculated that the entire Arctic pole may be ice-free in summer by sometime in the 2030s. This unfreezing opens up vast opportunities for resource extraction, new trade routes, space and military bases, and new fishing zones.

Underwater resource exploitation is critical here. Through Greenland, Denmark has laid claim to large sections of the Arctic seabed. Her claim extends deep into territory also claimed by Russia, following the Lomonosov Ridge, an underwater ridge of continental crust in the Arctic Ocean spanning some 1,800 kilometers. Denmark has multiple Arctic Seabed claim disputes: with Russia, Canada, and Norway—including to one area that is claimed by it, Canada and Russia.

The NATO powers have largely avoided pressing their conflicting claims against each other, for the sake of a common front against Russia. In June 2022, just months after the outbreak of the US-NATO-instigated war with Russia over Ukraine, Canada and Denmark ended a 50-year-old dispute over ownership of Hans Island by agreeing to split the desolate island down the middle, with the eastern half, which lies closer to Greenland, going to Denmark.

However, should Trump annex Greenland, US imperialism would inherit all of Denmark's Arctic EEZs and her claims to the seabed. Unlike Denmark, which lacks the resources to enforce its claims, US imperialism under Trump could be expected to aggressively pursue them.

The only force within society capable of halting a global conflagration—which now poses an existential threat to the survival of humanity itself—is the international working class united around a socialist program. The struggle against the imperialist scramble for the Arctic must be combined with opposition to imperialist war around the world. This requires the building of an international anti-war movement led by the working class to fight imperialist aggression and all forms of oppression.



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