

Donald Trump's aspiration to acquire Greenland: Understanding 'issue-attention' cycles in news coverage and their relevance to small states and territories

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ABSTRACT: The value of understanding 'issue-attention' cycles in news coverage has been recognised since the 1970s and has been elaborated in various forms, most recently with regard to how populist political figures can exploit such cycles through both conventional media interaction and through use of social media. This article applies such perspectives to a particular news event that occurred in August 2019: the revelation of (then) US president Donald Trump's interest in purchasing Greenland, his flirtation with the idea and his subsequent abandonment of it due to adverse reaction. The article specifically focusses on two aspects and the disparities between them. The first concerns international anglophone media coverage and the manner in which the fate of an autonomous territory (i.e., Greenland) was bandied about with minimal consideration of the country's constitutional status, its right to self-determination and its right to participate in debates about its potential acquisition by another power. The second involves the response to international media coverage of Trump's statements in Greenland and related Greenlandic responses to Danish politicians' engagements with the news event. In addition to examining Trump's disruptive presence on the global stage, the article highlights the manner in which his government's geo-political gambits both substantially resembled previous US ones and ignored Greenland's recent trajectory towards autonomy and/or future independence. The issue-attention cycle concerning Trump and Greenland illustrates the highly limited power that small states and territories have to respond to international news cycles, let alone set agendas for these.

Keywords: Denmark, Donald Trump, Greenland, issue-attention cycles, news, small states, small territories, US expansionism

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Introduction: Greenland and modern geopolitics

Greenland (indigenous name: Kalaallit Nunaat) is a subnational island jurisdiction located off the north-eastern coast of continental North America, separated from the far eastern islands of Canada's Nunavut territory by Baffin Bay and with most of its land mass falling within the Arctic Circle. The island is sparsely populated, with around 56,420 people living on an area of about 2.1 million km², 32% of whom reside in the capital city, Nuuk. Like Nunavut, the overwhelming majority of Greenland's population is Inuit (c88%), and with most of the rest being of Danish extraction (*World Population Review*, 2003). The official language is

(West) Greenlandic; but many tertiary-educated professionals and migrants also speak Danish. While there were Norse settlements in Greenland in the late 900s, modern Dano-Norwegian colonisation of Greenland developed in the early 1600s leading to the stationing in 1721 of Dano-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede in West Greenland by the Danish King, Frederik IV and subsequently Denmark-Norway officially claiming the island as a colony in 1775. Following Denmark and Norway's separation in 1814, Denmark assumed colonial sovereignty over Greenland. At the time, the island was almost entirely populated by Indigenous people, many of whom had little awareness of European powers' claims to sovereignty over their ancestral lands and, in many cases, had little – if any – interaction with their representatives.¹ Denmark attempted to address the latter situation and to substantiate their authority through more active colonisation from the late 1800s on, although this was interrupted in 1940, when Germany invaded Denmark and when the United States occupied Greenland to stop Germany establishing bases there. Danish control over Greenland resumed in 1945. After the end of World War II, the founding charter of the United Nations (UN), which was ratified by all members, including Denmark, included provisions designed to encourage member states to acknowledge their colonial possessions and improve their conditions, including regular reports on progress on their initiatives, as well as to develop self-government and take due account of the political aspirations of the peoples of these non-self-governing territories. This created something of a dilemma for Denmark, since:

Although Denmark had governed Greenland as a colony, Danish civil servants and politicians were reluctant to see Greenland as on a par with other colonial territories. They argued that, as Denmark had never exploited Greenland as other European powers had done in Africa or Asia, the Charter did not apply to Greenland. Ultimately, however, Denmark did choose to report Greenland as a Danish colony ... Thereafter, Danish uncertainty about Greenland's future status grew as anti-colonial sentiments increased in the following years (Mølholm Olesen, 2019).

In line with United Nations' principles, and an increasing anti-colonial sentiment on the part of the US and USSR, a Danish commission of inquiry resulted in the island being formally declared as an *amt* (county) within the Danish state in 1953. In the years leading up to the annexation of Greenland as a county, Denmark provided the UN with misleading and incorrect information, with the intent to convince the UN that Denmark could keep Greenland as its territory in the Danish Kingdom, rather than giving Greenland the option of full independence (Hermann, 2021). Denmark convinced the UN that Greenland and its Indigenous population had been fully integrated in Denmark and even stated that they therefore no longer existed as distinct entities (Hermann, 2021). Concurrently, Denmark withheld crucial information from the Greenlanders, to avoid scrutiny in an attempt to legitimize its claim to keep Greenland as its territory, thereby reinforcing Denmark's claims to be an 'Arctic state' at a time when the polar region was a major focus of interest for a variety of powers. This all led to attempts to 'de-Greenlandise' and assimilate the population through the prioritisation of Danish as an official language and through the minimisation of support for Greenlandic language and culture in education. (Poiret, 2021; Hermann, 2021). Resistance to this policy led cultural activists to campaign for increased cultural and legislative autonomy. This led to the Danish Government holding a consultative referendum on the island in early 1979. Its positive outcome paved the way for the Danish Government to pass the *Home Rule Act* later in the year, with Denmark retaining control of security and defence, international relations and natural resources. The

¹ Indeed, in areas of the north, local peoples' principal interaction with foreigners in the late 1800s and early 1900s had been with US expeditions, such as the *Perilous* voyage of 1871-1873 and Robert Peary's expeditions in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

continuous Greenlandic political struggle for independence led to a further referendum in 2008, which was also successful. The referendum resulted in the *Act on Greenland Self-Government*, in which the Danish Government recognized the Greenlandic people as a people with the right to self-determination under international law within Denmark by the delegation of governance powers to the Greenlandic Inatsisartut (rather than through any change in the national constitution) (Danish Parliament, 2009).

One complicating factor in both the Danish administration of Greenland and the more recent autonomy granted to it has been the United States' strategic interest in the region and continuing military presence there since 1940. US strategic interest can be understood within the scope of the Monroe Doctrine, first advanced by President James Monroe in 1823 (Sexton, 2011). The doctrine considered any political or military intervention into any independent states in North, Central or South America by European powers as a potential threat to US security. Notably, the doctrine did not apply to the (relatively few) remaining European colonies in the Americas. The doctrine substantially influenced US foreign policy over the next two centuries but encountered a dilemma in 1916 when the US was in the early stages of negotiating the purchase of three Caribbean islands – Saint Thomas, Saint John and Saint Croix (formerly known as the Danish West Indies/Antilles/Virgin Islands) – from Denmark. In the early stages of negotiation, Denmark specified that in order to proceed it required the US to recognise exclusive Danish sovereignty over Greenland (Tansill, 1932, p. 468) and the US acceded to this request in 1916 despite a high-profile campaign mounted by US Arctic explorer Robert Peary, who wrote, with considerable prescience:

With the rapid shrinking of distances in this age of speed and invention, Greenland may be of crucial importance to us in the future... Greenland in our hands may be a valuable piece in our defensive armor. In the hands of hostile interests it could be a serious menace (Berry, 2016, p. 107).

Despite the US's acceptance of Danish sovereignty, Peary's perspectives continued to inform US strategic thinking and the German invasion of Denmark in 1940 gave it an opportunity to act on this. The (then neutral) US responded to the possibility of a German invasion of Greenland by unofficially sending in a group of purposefully discharged Coast Guard personnel, acting as an 'irregular force', to secure key assets. Following the *Agreement relating to the Defense of Greenland (ADG)* signed in 1941 between the Danish ambassador to the US and the US Government, the latter was able to send in regular forces to secure the island, establishing a US navy base at Grønnedal. The agreement was specifically formulated to address German threats to the territory but had an ambiguous clause with regard to its longevity and the conditions for its curtailment that led it to continue after the defeat of Germany in 1945.² While it was kept strictly confidential at the time, documents in the US National Archives came to light in 1991 that revealed that in 1946 President Truman's government proposed three options to Denmark concerning Greenland and US bases maintained there under the *ADG*: a) a long-term enhancement of US military presence in Greenland; b) Danish acceptance of the US providing full military protection of Greenland for Denmark; and (c)

² "The agreement, after explicitly recognizing the Danish sovereignty over Greenland, proceeds to grant to the United States the right to locate and construct airplane landing fields and facilities for the defense of Greenland and for the defense of the American Continent... The agreement accordingly provides that as soon as the war is over and the danger has passed, the two Governments shall promptly consult as to whether the arrangements made by the present agreement shall continue or whether they shall then cease". (US Department of State, 1941, pp. 203, 206).

Truman's preferred option, Denmark agreeing to a US purchase of Greenland.³ The Danish government were reportedly surprised by the purchase offer and declined it (Associated Press, 1991), opting instead not to push for curtailment of the 1941 *ADG* and reconciling themselves to an ongoing US presence on the island.

The outbreak of the Cold War between the Soviet Bloc⁴ and the West led to the establishment of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) in 1949, in which the US was a major player, along with Canada and eleven European countries, including Denmark.⁵ This stiffened US resolve to maintain a security presence in and oversight of Greenland.⁶ As a major player in NATO, the US was able to engineer a NATO request for the US and Denmark to conclude a new *Defense of Greenland Agreement (DGA)* that would replace the (still operational) WW2 *ADG* and give the US a major role in Greenlandic security. The *DGA* included provisions (itemised under Article II) that gave the US the right to establish “defense areas” within Greenland that US forces could access at any time and to conduct structural developments around them (including deepening harbors, channels, entrances and anchorages [II vi]). While Article III handed control of the Grønnedal naval station back to Denmark, Clause 1a guaranteed US ships free access to the port facility. A weather station at Thule was also earmarked for development as a major US airbase, with construction being completed in 1953. One of the crucial details of the Agreement was detailed in Clause II of its final Article (XIV), namely that the Agreement, “being in implementation of the North Atlantic Treaty remain in effect for the duration of the North Atlantic Treaty”, which shows no signs of being dissolved; and with NATO now substantially larger than in 1949 and with other states – such as Finland, Sweden and Ukraine – having recently joined or are seeking to join. While the *DGA* was satisfactory to the US on a number of levels it clearly compromised Danish sovereignty over the island. Indeed, Olesen (2019) has asserted that during the Cold War period “Denmark could only uphold a fictitious sovereignty over Greenland as defense of the island was in practice out-sourced to the US”. The Thule base was the most obvious manifestation of the latter. By the late 1950s, when it was a key component of NORAD, the joint US-Canadian North American Air Defense Command, it was maintained by over 10,000 US personnel (Beaufort Gyre EP, 2023) in a country which at that time had a total population of around 31,000. The number of personnel at the base declined sharply after the peak of the Cold War with around 1,000 military staff currently working there in a facility that was redesignated as the Pituffik Space Base in 2023.

Enduring issues about the base – in addition to its apparent permanence – have primarily concerned the lack of Greenlandic oversight over any significant expansion of the scale and purpose of the facility. The latter, in turn, reflects the extent to which the US continues to regard Greenland as being within its defensive sphere of influence. This aspect was evident during Barack Obama's presidency when the US administration became concerned when the Chinese General Nice company secured the lease on the open-cast Isua iron ore mine site in south-western Greenland in 2015 from the bankrupt London Mining Greenland (LMG) company (which had been granted the lease in 2013). The initial LMG lease was awarded by the

³ The purchase offer was made after Truman had initially considered offers to swap areas of Alaska (itself a territory purchased by the US) for Greenland.

⁴ Comprising the USSR and their Warsaw Pact associate states Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

⁵ The other founder members were Belgium, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom.

⁶ Indeed, the preamble to the Defense of Greenland Agreement between the US and Denmark signed in 1951 identifies that the agreement was made at the “request” of NATO, in which the US was a dominant partner.

Greenland Government under the terms of the 2012 *Storskalaloven* ('Large Scale Project Act') which permitted foreign companies to bring in substantial numbers of foreign workers for major mining schemes deemed to be in the national interest. The Act represented an increased assertion of autonomy by the Greenlandic Government, testing the boundaries of its power over resources and foreign relations. These boundaries were challenged when the General Nice company both gained the lease (and the capacity to bring a large Chinese workforce in) and sought to purchase the abandoned Grønnedal navy base site in the following year (Breum, 2016). Misusing their claimed discretionary powers over foreign affairs and resource development, the Danish government intervened to have the offer withdrawn, largely, it appears, due to their perceptions of likely US objections about the Chinese gaining a foothold in Greenland and the long-established nature of US-Danish defence agreements that might be imperilled by a breakdown in relations (Matzen, 2017; also Allan, 2020, p. 28). A similar clash of interests occurred in 2017 when Greenland prime minister Kim Kielsen visited Beijing by invitation from the Chinese embassy in Denmark. The primary purpose of the visit was to establish contacts and create connections in the seafood industry, with a smaller delegation from Kalallit Airports looking into possibilities to include Chinese banks and contractors for the bidding process (Elkjaer, 2017). US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis contacted his Danish counterpart Claus Frederiksen to express the US's strong objection to the plan on the basis that:

Greenland's aid-dependent government could struggle to repay a loan for the \$555 million project, and after a few missed payments, China's government could take control of runways that could potentially be used by warplanes on an island where the U.S. has a missile-tracking air force base. A presence in Greenland could also help China access new shipping lanes and resources under the Arctic's retreating ice (Hinshaw & Page, 2019).

Denmark took advantage of the misunderstanding that confused the US and created a narrative that the Greenlandic Government was actively seeking Chinese involvement in the airport project, although no concrete talks of Greenland taking loans from China ever manifested regardless of the aforementioned visit to Beijing (Broberg, 2019). The Danish prime minister subsequently signed an agreement with the Greenlandic prime minister on the airport project, thereby ensuring the continuation of stable Danish-US relations. The extent of US-Danish interference in the matter proved controversial in Greenland. Paired with the dissent revolving around the lack of proper socio-economic planning concerning the airports, the pro-independence party, Naleraq (formerly Partii Naleraq) resigned from the ruling coalition in protest.

Subsequent sections of this article address the brief, curious and disruptive stage of US-Greenland relations that occurred during the presidency of Donald Trump in 2017-2021 that was primarily performed as a news event over a short period. Unlike the more conventional diplomatic manoeuvres that characterised 20th century geo-politics, Trump's aspirations to acquire Greenland were taken up, reflected and refracted by the media in manners that made it unclear as to the intent and seriousness of Trump's administration over the issue. In this regard, Greenland – an autonomous island jurisdiction – was something of a 'plaything' for international players who were involved in the creative co-creation of a media story and diplomatic event that rapidly gained its own momentum.

Donald Trump, the media and news cycles

As is widely acknowledged, Donald Trump's accession to the US presidency in 2017 caused a significant disruption to existing patterns of US international relations (Haas, 2020; Schier, 2022). His administration substantially confounded and disconcerted the Canadian Government on a variety of trade and border matters (Macdonald, 2020; Massie & Vucetic, 2020), generally demonised Mexico and the Mexican government (Klingner, 2017; Mendoza-Denton, 2017) and mounted various critiques of the European Union and NATO (Schneider-Petsinger, 2019; Benitez, 2019). Another area that Trump disrupted was traditional presidential communications, most obviously by his uses of social media to bypass traditional media channels and through general criticisms of the mainstream media for circulating 'fake news' (particularly about him) (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018; Meeks, 2020) and through his embrace of Fox News as his preferred TV News outlet (Mayer, 2019; Grossman & Hopkins, 2019). In the case of the media episode reported below, traditional media coverage (in the form of a press exposé); an appearance on Fox News by one of his advisors; a presidential tweet; and comments made by Trump at press conferences all played their roles in creating a story that went from hot to cold within one week.

In the discussion that follows, we draw on aspects of communication and media studies and, in particular, on aspects of "issue-attention cycles," to demonstrate the manner in which media reports and public statements can feed off each other in ways that have political impacts on states and territories, particularly those that are lesser economically or militarily enabled than major nations. The position of Greenland exemplifies this. This aspect has been little discussed to date within island studies or by scholars whose work addresses small states and territories more broadly; but is an important factor within the ambit of state and territorial security. Our study demonstrates this with regard to power imbalances between the US, Denmark and Greenland and how a brief news event reverberated outside the turbulent arena of Washington politics during the Trump presidency.

Issue attention cycles were first addressed in the 1970s by scholars such as Anthony Downs who opened a (now seminal) paper on public engagement with ecological issues with the characterisation that:

American public attention rarely remains sharply focused on any one domestic issue for very long ... Instead a systematic "issue-attention cycle" seems strongly to influence public attitudes and behaviour concerning most key domestic problems. Each of these problems suddenly leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then... gradually fades from the center of public attention (Downs, 1972, p. 38).

Some fifty years later, when western publics are served by 24/7 news outlets and with a plethora of social media channels that were far beyond the horizon when Downs initially advanced his concept, issue-attention cycles are far more rapid than the "gradual" shifts he envisaged. As early as 1999, Kovach and Rosenstiel entitled their book-length study of "America in the age of mixed media" *Warp speed*. Along with their characterisation of the speed of news events, they highlight that the "continuous" "mixed media culture" produced between traditional media and online forms is highly problematic for established forms of news media in that:

the press is increasingly oriented toward ferrying allegations rather than first ferreting out the truth. Stories often come as piecemeal bits of evidence, accusation, or speculation:

to be filled in and sorted out in public as the day progresses. The initiating charge is quickly aired. Then journalists vamp and speculate until the response is issued. The demand of keeping up with and airing the to and fro leaves journalists with less time to take stock and sort out beforehand what is genuinely significant. Ironically, it means the news is delivered less completely. This gives the reporting a more chaotic, unsettled, and even numbing quality... It also makes it more difficult to separate fact from spin, argument, or innuendo, and makes the culture significantly more susceptible to manipulation (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999, p. 14).

Warp speed was published five years before Facebook launched and seven years before Twitter commenced. All the factors noted by Downs and by Kovach & Rosenstiel are still pertinent but are also complicated by political actors' increasing uses of social media to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. This results in a blurred space in which it can be difficult to distinguish facts from contentions and to respond in appropriate manners (Cosentino, 2020). With particular regard to Twitter (now X) – once Trump's preferred medium of communication⁷ – Duncombe (2017, p. 545) has noted that:

[while it] challenges traditional notions of diplomacy... conducted through formal channels of communication and informal face-to-face social engagement... we must ask how instrumental social media is as a tool for signalling intentions, and whether this medium can be an effective platform for dialogue and trust development.

As she also emphasises:

social media posts by state representatives reflect and frame state identity and how a state wishes to be recognized by others (Duncombe, 2017, p. 545).

The latter characterisation is also applicable to the off-the-cuff remarks Trump habitually made during the brief and chaotic open-air exchanges with journalists that had replaced formal White House press conferences by 2019. These were often made in close proximity to helicopters about to whisk him away, constituting what press critics have characterised as “chopper talk”: a “whirligig of boastfulness, slingshot attacks and public self-therapy” (Calderone & Lippman, 2021) that presents no opportunity for close questioning, resulting in tweet-like comments that were subsequently circulated as news items expressing the views of a head-of-state.

The news event unfurls

On August 16th 2019, *The Wall Street Journal* (henceforth *WSJ*) published a story about Donald Trump having aspirations to buy Greenland for the USA. Under a photo of a scenic, summery vista of the Greenlandic capital, Nuuk, the story was entitled ‘President Trump eyes a new real-estate purchase: Greenland’ (Salama, Ballhaus, Restuccia & Bender, 2019). The subtitle indicated that the story did not concern a firm proposal but rather a concept that had been entertained at the highest levels of government. The opening sentences of the article echoed its title by stressing Trump's previous career in real estate acquisition and development, commenting that:

⁷ Until his account was suspended in 2021 in the wake of the assault on the US Capitol which he was adjudged to have encouraged.

President Trump made his name on the world's most famous island [i.e. Manhattan] Now he wants to buy the world's biggest (Salama et al., 2019).

The feature related that on a number of occasions Trump had sought information on the island's resources and strategic significance and – interested in these aspects – had raised the issue of whether the US could acquire Greenland. The article went on to relate that his hunch that such a purchase might be possible arose from information that he had received that suggested Denmark was financially stretched by its annual subsidies to Greenland, which the article put at US\$591 million. The authors also suggested that he was interested in making a territorial acquisition that could form part of his enduring legacy as president. Despite the tentative and speculative nature of the story, the unexpected and bold nature of the proposal attracted rapid and intense media attention, being picked up by other outlets whose stories essentially regurgitated aspects of the *WSJ* feature and added various items of contextual information and/or speculation (as per Kovatch & Rosensteil's previously cited characterisation).

As the initial *WSJ* story and a variety of other reports noted, one significant problem with Trump's approach was that Greenland was not simply a possession of the Danish state, a piece of land or real estate that it was able to trade away; but, rather, it was an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark with its own parliament and with an elected prime minister. While Denmark formally represents Greenland in international organisations that require members to have status as a state, Greenland has diplomatic missions to the European Union and to the United States as well as a few other countries and thereby has a degree of recognition from the USA as an autonomous jurisdiction of the type often referred to as a *quasi-state* or *state-like* entity.⁸ Reflecting this, the Greenlandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) speedily tweeted a response to the *WSJ* story on the day it appeared that used the publicity about the country to spruik its tourism appeal and rich natural resources while firmly stating “We're open for business, not for sale” (MFA, 2019). The next significant aspect of the story occurred on Sunday August 18th via two communications, both of which confirmed the *WSJ*'s story's principal thrust and sidestepped the media ridicule that had been heaped on it on August 16-17th by asserting that Trump was seriously investigating the idea. The first took the form of off-the-cuff remarks made by White House economic advisor Larry Kudlow at the end of a wide-ranging interview with Dana Perino on *Fox News Sunday*, when she teased him about the emerging story by asking whether she could accompany him if he was sent to do a site survey in Greenland since Trump was so interested in purchasing it. Chuckling in response to the question, he stated:

It's an interesting story, it's developing, we're looking at it, we don't know. Years ago Harry Truman wanted to buy Greenland. Denmark owns Greenland, Denmark is an ally, Greenland is a strategic place up there and they got a lot of valuable minerals. I don't wanna predict an outcome I'm just saying the president, who knows a thing or two about buying real estate, wants to take a look at a potential Greenland purchase (Kudlow, 2019).

There are a number of interesting aspects to these impromptu comments. The first concerns characterisations that the “story” was an “interesting” one that was implicitly developing under its own momentum, rather than as a result of White House priming, and that Trump's team were “looking at it” as it developed. Kudlow's remarks also gave historical context and precedent for the scheme, giving it more gravity than the media had accorded it in

⁸ Such as the Faroe Islands [within Denmark], Åland [within Finland] or Puerto Rico [within the USA]).

the preceding 48 hours. Kudlow's remarks about his president knowing "a thing or two about buying real estate" were insightful in equating purchasing the world's largest island and its population with buying patches of real estate of the type that Trump had built casinos, hotels and golf courses on. The latter emphasis, of course, chimes with the general approach of Trump's government, seeing the territory as effectively US Inc. and able to indulge in all manner of financially predatory activities. Later in the day, in a typically brief press conference, Trump confirmed the *WSJ* story and Kudlow's remarks, stating that while the matter was not "Number 1 on the burner," he was interested and perceived the matter similarly to Kudlow, describing it "essentially [as] a large real estate deal" that would be mutually beneficial, removing a substantial cost to the Danish economy and being strategically "very nice" for the US.⁹

The swell of media stories around the plan and Trump's overt expression of interest in it prompted several political figures to respond in different ways. Former Greenlandic Minister of Foreign Affairs and member of Parliament Pele Broberg took the opportunity to open a debate on alternatives to the current political model wherein Greenland is situated in the Kingdom of Denmark. Broberg posed the question whether the rising interest of the US could help propel Greenland forward in its path towards independence. One of the points Broberg made was that the US already guarantees Greenland's security described earlier in relation to the *DGA*, and that Greenland could start a negotiation process with the US around what the US could offer in return for keeping bases in Greenland when Greenland leaves the Kingdom of Denmark (Turnowsky, 2019). On a later occasion Broberg proposed that Greenland should opt for a Coast Guard model resembling that of Iceland which entails a bilateral defence agreement with the US and a membership of NATO (Møller-Andersen, 2021).

Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen also responded to the informally circulated proposal. Coincidentally visiting Nuuk on August 18th to meet with its premier Kim Kielsen, Frederiksen gave a press conference in which she asserted that "Greenland is not for sale, Greenland is not Danish, Greenland is Greenlandic" and added that "I strongly hope that there is nothing serious intended" (in reports of the purported White House plan) (Jørgensen, 2019). She followed these up with more pointed critiques in an interview with the Danish public service television network DR, commencing with the comment that the discussion was "absurd" as "thankfully, the time when you buy and sell other countries and populations is over"¹⁰ (DRE, 2019) before affirming the value of the US-Denmark relationship.

Frederiksen's remarks are notable in terms of the characterisation of the current moment ("time") being untenable ("over") for financial transactions that trade territory and people between third party entities since – in an allusion that Frederiksen may or may not have had in mind – Denmark was one of the last European countries to be involved in just such an enterprise. As previously outlined, Denmark sold three Caribbean islands to the United States in 1916 and also required the US to recognise exclusive Danish sovereignty over Greenland. This historical factor colours the clarity of Frederiksen's declaration. While Frederiksen may be correct in that there might be a prominent (even majority) opinion amongst nations that the moment for such transactions may be passed, in the era of decolonialisation heralded by the UN's *Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples* (1960),

⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QprdN9wCJkw>

¹⁰ It is uncertain whether Frederiksen was making any specific allusion here. However, it is notable that Denmark made numerous attempts in the mid-late 19th century to sell its Caribbean colony, comprising Saint Thomas, Saint John and Saint Croix islands, before successfully offloading them to the USA for US\$25 million in 1917, with no consultation with the islands' populations.

any characterisation of “absurdity” in the US proposal is contingent on both a particular political-moral high-ground and sense of history that might not be shared by all players concerned. Transactions over territory still occur, the most recent being the transfer of Tiran and Sanafir islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia in 2017 in return for a US\$22 million “aid” package to the former from the latter.¹¹ With this comparison, though, it should be noted that the two islands in question were uninhabited and therefore distinctly different from the case of Greenland since Greenland is inhabited by the Greenlandic people who are recognized as a people according to international law as well as being Indigenous People subject to ILO-169 ratified by Denmark in 1997. Rasmus Leander from the University of Greenland, asserts that it would not be possible for Denmark to sell Greenland to the US due to rules established by the international community regarding Indigenous Peoples as well as the fact that Greenlanders are recognized as a people according to international law (Nørmark, 2019).

Rather than Frederiksen’s significant stresses on Greenland not being a Danish possession and of the unconscionability of buying and selling populations along with land in the 21st century; the buzz-term that was picked up on by global media was “absurd” (e.g., Reuters, 2019; AP, 2019). Indeed, the term was an indelicate one within the usually cooler discourse of diplomacy but one that reflected the bind Frederiksen was in, being in Nuuk when the incident blew up. She had little alternative to taking a strong stand and to reaffirming Danish support for Greenlandic sovereignty even if it risked aggravating the notoriously peevish US president (Sorensen & Pérez-Peña, 2019). It is unclear when news of Frederiksen’s comments reached Trump but he (or, in all probability, his social media managers) made an unusual contribution to the broader media story and to US-Greenlandic communications by tweeting a striking image to his followers on August 20th. The tweet was engagingly humorous and surprisingly self-deprecating for an official Trump communication. The image neatly parodied his opponents’ perceptions of his real estate developments as crass and grandiose and indicated the bizarre nature of imagining them occurring in Nuuk (rather than Manhattan). At the same time, his promise not to produce such structures was expressed in a phrase that implied that he anticipated having the power to initiate developments in Greenland at some future stage: hardly a reassuring message for Greenlanders and Danes. Notably, the tweet exemplified the conflation between Trump the president and Trump the real estate developer that marked his whole presidency.

Next day, Trump went on the offensive, responding to Frederiksen’s rebuff by declaring the cancellation of his imminent state visit to Denmark. He followed this up in a press conference on August 21st, clarifying his decision by criticising her comments as “nasty”. He told reporters:

I thought it was not a nice statement, the way she blew me off ... She shouldn’t treat the United States that way... She said ‘absurd.’ That’s not the right word to use (Noack, Wagner & Sonmez, 2019).

News of his cancellation was poorly received in Denmark, with a range of current and former politicians seeing the move as intemperate and unfortunate and others perceiving it as marking a distinct chill in US-Danish relations (Noack, Wagner & Sonmez, 2019).

¹¹ Under the *Agreement of maritime delimitation between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Arab Republic of Egypt* (2017) <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/No%20Volume/54577/Part/I-54577-08000002804c42e7.pdf>

The news event elaborated above lasted six days, from the *WSJ*'s initial report of considerations about purchasing Greenland to Trump becoming more actively interested in the idea, to Kielsen and Frederiksen rejecting it and to Trump taking offence and cancelling a state visit to Denmark. What is notable is that – unlike the Truman Government's confidential discussions with the Danish Government, which did not come to light until 55 years later – the whole, tripartite international interaction was conducted through non-diplomatic channels,¹² unfolding in the media through online news items, tweets and press conferences.

Context and outcomes

While the original *WSJ* story that started the Trump-Greenland news cycle described above merely characterised the purchase plan as a concept that was knocked around the White House without being operationalised in any way – at least, that is, until news of it leaked out and Trump publicly expressed interest in it – subsequent accounts have provided a different picture. Although Trump has claimed that he came up with the idea of purchasing Greenland himself (Levin, 2022), investigative journalist Peter Baker (2022) has contended that Trump became interested in the idea after it was presented to him by Ronald Lauder, a billionaire supporter, and that “a special team” within the National Security Council was “assigned to evaluate the prospects, resulting in a memo that laid out various options, including a lease proposal akin to a New York real estate deal.” Responses from senior members of his team appear to have been mixed, with Baker reporting that “one mystified Cabinet member was struck by the delusional nature of it” while “other advisers tried to keep the idea from leaking out for fear that it would cause a diplomatic incident”. Baker contends that, despite being sceptical of the possibility of a purchase of the island, national security advisor John Bolton was supportive of the broad intent of the plan, given his unease about growing Chinese influence in the Arctic. According to Baker, Bolton assigned his aide Fiona Hill, to discuss US concern over security issues around Greenland with the Danish ambassador and to develop an options memo for consideration. If that characterisation is correct, it is possible that the Danish government was less blindsided by the nature of the *WSJ* story in 2019 than may have appeared (but in all probability would still have been surprised by its crossover into public debate). Another revelation that attracted media attention in its own right (e.g., Levin, 2022) was Baker's claim that Trump actively countenanced either withdrawing US financial support for Puerto Rico and earmarking it for the Greenland purchase; or, even more surprisingly, offering Puerto Rico to Denmark in exchange for Greenland.¹³ There was evidently little support for these options from his team.

Trump appears to have lost interest in the purchase plan after Kielsen's and Frederiksen's rebuffs and turned to more pressing matters such as attempting to coerce The Ukraine Government to support corruption allegations against the Biden family in return for his approving military aid to the country. But Greenland returned to the Trump government agenda in early 2020 in a very different manner, when his administration shifted back to more traditional diplomatic approaches, securing Danish and Greenlandic support to set up a permanent US consulate in Nuuk and sweetening the deal with a US\$12.1 million investment in sustainable economic development projects in the territory. In 2021, following the installation of a Democrat Government in Washington DC, US Secretary of State Anthony

¹² With the exception of one phone conversation between Trump and Frederiksen on August 20th, details of which have not been revealed.

¹³ While it is uncertain whether Trump had any awareness of it, there is a degree of historical precedent - and even 'symmetry' in the exchange idea – in that, as identified in fn 3 – the US had purchased the three islands of the Danish Antilles in 1917.

Blinken visited Greenland and continued the reversion to a more conventional exercise of influence, confirming that the US is now no longer interested in purchasing Greenland (Sullivan, 2021). In view of this statement, the US's move to shore up its strategic presence in Greenland by assigning the latest range of F-35 stealth fighter planes to the Thule airbase in early 2023 (Cenciotti, 2023) shows that it is determined to manage and enhance its defence assets on the island within the terms of its established presence there. On the other hand, the overall media frenzy surrounding Trump's ideas of purchasing Greenland invigorated political discourse in Greenland revolving around Greenlandic independence and presented alternatives and opportunities that sparked intense internal debates around the country's current political status. In this regard, at least, the brief news-attention cycle energised local discourse, for all that it illustrated the minor role that minor states and territories have in international news agendas and agenda-setting.

Conclusion

This article's focus on the media attention cycle over Trump's aspiration to acquire Greenland for the United States indicates the manner in which the early 21st century media environment generates what might be termed "signal activity" relatively independently of specific political actions or events. This activity, and the news-attention cycles produced by it, often have some connection to actual policies and/or political lines of thought within political elites and may, on occasion, report the deliberate floating of ideas in informal contexts in order to gauge reactions to them (allowing politicians the option of distancing themselves from them if they prove too contentious). In this regard, while the initial *WSJ* journal story does not seem to have been a strategic leak by the Trump administration, a positive response from Greenland and/or Denmark may have emboldened the Trump administration to pursue the idea in a more methodical manner. In the event, responses were negative, supporting Eriksen's contention that the proposal was untimely and inappropriate. But, viewed against the history sketched in the Introduction to this article, the quiet fade-out of the event's issue-attention cycle – as the Trump administration opted not to stoke the issue's 'fire' – did not so much signal the decline of US strategic interest in Greenland as its lack of optimism in getting the particular tactic to succeed. Greenland remains firmly on the US foreign policy radar as Greenland's geopolitical and strategic position since the beginning of the last century has proven its importance for US security and strategic interests. However disruptive Trump may have been to US politics more broadly, his clumsy re-assertion of previous US aspirations towards Greenland in the media proved most disruptive to Denmark's perception of the firmness of their neo-colonial hold over Greenland and to Greenlandic factions aspiring to smooth progress to full independence for their island. Instead of the latter, Greenland's pro-independence parties have been galvanised to push for full independence to stave off any potential "hostile takeover" from the US and/or Danish moves to forestall independence as a means of assuaging US anxiety over other powers (such as Russia or China) gaining a foothold there.

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