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THE CURRENT: Why does President Trump think the US can buy Greenland?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network.

Last week the Wall Street Journal reported that President Trump has been interested in buying Greenland from Denmark. After the Danish prime minister said that the issue was not up for discussion, the White House canceled its planned trip and meeting with Prime Minister Frederiksen.

With us today to address this is Scott Anderson, David M Rubenstein fellow in Governance Studies and a senior editor at Lawfare.

Scott, there's a long and usually unpleasant history of colonial powers buying huge tracts of land from each other regardless of the wishes of the people who lived in said tracts of land. Aside from it being generally frowned upon now, there are actually international laws against this sort of thing. Can you tell us about that and provide us the context of what Greenland's relationship with Denmark is currently?

ANDERSON: Yeah, absolutely. Let me start with the second half of your question, and I'll come back to the self-determination issue. Greenland has been part of the kingdom of Denmark for many centuries, in many ways going back to the Viking era. They had close political, social, and economic ties. In the 20th century, it has gained increased autonomy through a number of laws adopted by the Danish parliament, so that Greenland now operates fairly autonomously when it comes to its economy, when it comes to aspects of its foreign policy, and a variety of other issues.

This trend over the 20th century reflects the emergence and broad global acceptance of a principles that's often referred to as self-determination. This is an idea that really began to come to the fore as a critique of colonialism in the late 19th century. It played a major role in the League of Nations era in the post-WWI era, and then ultimately found its way most importantly into the UN charter, and there became a foundational principle of the United Nations.

How the principle is supposed to be implemented as a legal issue is the subject of a little bit of ambiguity and a little bit of dispute, because it's not clear who exactly has a right of self-determination, under what circumstances and all cases they can exercise it. Does it mean that I can choose to secede from the US in my house, in my neighborhood? No, for a variety of reasons. But where the exact line is is often a point of dispute. But most people accept that it does mean that countries and then particularly peoples, meaning certain type of communities, that have a certain identity and have a tie to a certain territory have the right to self-determination, meaning, a voice in their own political arrangements and in the sovereignty arrangements that govern them, meaning the types of government that they have or the relationship to other governments that aren't strictly local.

In the case of Greenland, since the 1970s, Denmark has, again, given them increasing autonomy, which they call Home Rule. In 2009 they enacted the most recent law that really does give Greenland higher levels of autonomy. Most notable about this is, as I mentioned earlier, it lets them

exercise a lot of influence over types of international agreements that affect Greenland, particularly where they primarily affect Greenland, they have something very close to a veto over those types of international agreements. And also sets up a procedure where Greenland could choose to secede from the kingdom of Denmark if it so desired, which would require a referendum by the people of Greenland and then approval by the parliaments both in Greenland and of Denmark.

PITA: The US has had a military air base in Greenland since WWII – what are the reasons the US, or anyone else for that matter, would be interested in owning Greenland outright?

ANDERSON: Greenland has a lot of strategic value. This is something that has been recognized since the WWII era and has increased only since then. Greenland is very close to the United States and very close to North America – it's part of North America even though it's an island, it's part of the continental grouping of North America. It has pretty extensive mineral resources and other natural resources as well as good fishing waters and other things like that, some of which are becoming more accessible now because of climate change, although climate change is also posing major challenges and difficulties to the people who live there. And perhaps most importantly, it is very proximate to the Arctic Circle and to Russia. For that reason, Thule Air Base that is there, that the United States maintains in coordination with NATO and with the consent of Denmark and more recently Greenland through international agreements, plays a key role in monitoring potential incoming attacks from Russia, such as through ICBMS. It also plays a key role in monitoring developments in outer space because of its geographic location. So Greenland is really a strategically valuable asset in a lot of ways. In that sense, there is a kind of base logic as to why the United States or any entity operating in this area might wish to have access to it or more control over it, or at minimum, the sort of facilities that we have at Thule Air Base.

PITA: Denmark is a founding member of NATO, they've been a longtime US ally – how big a breach is this causing in the relationship with Denmark? In terms of diplomatic norms, where does this fit?

ANDERSON: This has proven to be an escalating situation, or crisis – crisis may be going too far at this point, but it may yet get there. As of last week when this idea started getting floated, it caused a lot of confusion on the part of Europeans. The key takeaway from the self-determination trend that we see in the Denmark-Greenland relationship is that Denmark really doesn't think it has the legal authority to sell Greenland. It's been really clear about that in these laws. It has given Greenland the ability to control its own affairs. It's given Greenland and the people who live there the authority to secede from Denmark and then potentially join another territory if they so desire. So this idea that they can sell the territory to the United States is really an antiquated one. That was an activity that countries pursued prior to the 20th century. It was something that Americans had proposed both in the 1860s and the 1940s that Denmark ultimately declined, but in the modern era it just seemed very anachronistic.

But after that confusion, and in part because of the unorthodox nature of the idea, the prime minister of Denmark described in public statements the idea as "absurd" – or at least, it was translated as "absurd." And then evidently gave Pres Trump and the Trump administration clear signs that they were not interested in selling Greenland. It should be noted the Greenland government also said "we are not for sale" in a fairly polite tweet and series of public statements. President Trump then appears to have taken umbrage at the description of the idea as absurd, which he later described as "nasty," and it seems that that may have weighed in to his decision to cancel his visit in two weeks, which was supposed to be a major head-of-state visit to Denmark.

As you noted, Denmark's a major ally. Denmark was one of the first countries to cooperate with the United States in its campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. They have deployed troops to Afghanistan. They've suffered almost 50 casualties, which is a lot when you consider it's a country of only six million people, give or take. And they've been a really strong ally of the United States on a lot of key national security and other global issues. So it's a bit of a shocking development if it really is motivated, and by all appearances it is, by their rejection of an idea that didn't have any credibility from

the outset. And frankly, the fact that the Trump administration seized on this idea and appears to have become so committed to it without vetting it by people who could've told them how absurd it is and how the Danes were likely to react, I think it's a sign of a real failure in the policymaking process being pursued by the Trump administration. They set themselves up for failure in this; now they're suffering the consequences, but instead of retreating and trying to fix the situation, they're doubling down and turning it into an international incident. It's not clear to me how that benefits them, how that benefits Denmark, or how that benefits, frankly, anybody.

PITA: Has there been reaction from other US allies? Iceland this week also canceled a meeting between its prime minister and Vice President Pence when he's due to visit in September. What are the broader repercussions?

ANDERSON: I think we have to wait and see a little. It's not clear that the Iceland cancellation is clearly a response to this Greenland situation. There had been conflicting issues between the schedule of Iceland's prime minister and from Vice President Pence prior to this. There's also just a real political disconnect there: Vice President Pence is a well-known conservative, has spoken out strongly about ideas such as LGBT rights, whereas the prime minister of Iceland, that's her key set of issues. She's very, very progressive on a number of social and economic issues, such as labor issues. She's actually going to speak instead at, I believe, a labor conference among Scandinavian countries instead of meeting with Vice President Pence, although she claims that this was previously scheduled, and is something that the vice president knew and wasn't able to accommodate a different schedule, so they had this conflict. It definitely could be perceived and probably will be perceived, not inaccurately, as a sign that Iceland is not anxious to meet with Vice President Pence, but I'm not sure it's a direct response to this.

Really I think that, at this point, the response is going to depend on what steps the Trump administration takes next. Everyone in the official sphere was willing to just let the Greenland idea die, once it became evident it was not a realistic idea from the outset. But President Trump, with the support of people in his administration, appeared to be interested in now making it an incident. If they keep making it an incident by canceling trips or appearing to treat close allies in a negative fashion, then I think it makes it much more likely that other countries are going to feel the need to stand up in Denmark's defense and say, "look, you floated an absurd idea that had no real basis in reality, and you can't punish Denmark for giving what anybody could have predicted as this response. You made a mistake and you should suffer the consequences of that, but don't hold it against Denmark." So if the United States continues to embrace this belligerent attitude towards Denmark, or in response to this general situation, then I think you may see other European allies in particular feel the need to say something in Denmark's defense. If the United States does what I think is the wiser move and the Trump administration says, "We are going to let this go and we're not going to focus on it anymore," then I think a lot of people are going to be happy to let this issue die and we'll cease seeing mention of it on the front pages of newspapers pretty soon.

PITA: All right, Scott, thanks for explaining this today.

ANDERSON: Great, thanks for having me.