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Justifying Annexation: Barry Scott Zellen and the United States' Annexation of Greenland

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Over the past five years, Barry Zellen has developed a complex narrative that seeks to justify the annexation of Greenland by the United States. While Washington's interest in acquiring Greenland as a United States territory was a non-issue during the Biden presidency, Zellen sought to diligently lay the intellectual groundwork to justify a United States takeover of the island, using military and strategic vulnerabilities, resource development, "hearts and minds" anti-colonial rhetoric, and historical interest to frame United States expansionism as a contemporary "white man's burden" that should be welcomed by Greenlanders and Europeans alike. Although we have not attempted to measure the effectiveness of this messaging, his decision to publish elements of this narrative in Northern Canadian newspapers – including the *Hay River Hub* and the *Yellowknifer* – leads us to infer that he seeks to create an undercurrent of pro-annexation messaging that can legitimize the United States' Greenland ambitions in the minds of Northerners, seeking to destabilize Arctic communities across North America and advance a "Donroe Doctrine" asserting the purported American right to control the continent.¹ Much of Zellen's argumentation is grounded in purported national security concerns and various experiences of colonial trauma that have not been effectively redressed by colonial governments. What is most conspicuous, however, is Zellen's abject disregard and denial of the United States' own failings in addressing, let alone acknowledging, its history of colonial violence. Furthermore, Zellen ignores how the United States' interference in the sovereign territory of an ally could undermine its alliance and thus heighten national security risks. Cumulatively, his selective narratives are crafted and mobilized to rationalize the idea that the United States has a legitimate claim to Greenland and should be welcomed as an emancipatory force rather than a coercive actor – a narrative that is diametrically opposed to that articulated by the vast majority of Greenlanders.

Zellen's initial justification for Greenlandic annexation appeared in his 2021 writings on Arctic geopolitics.² Zellen's concerns about increasing Chinese activity in the Arctic and Russia's "resurgent ...

¹ Adam Lajeunesse and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "The Donroe Doctrine 'spheres of influence' extend to the Arctic," *The Chronicle Herald [Halifax]*, 23 January 2026, <https://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/halifax/opinion-halifax/opinion-the-donroe-doctrine-spheres-of-influence-extend-to-the-arctic>.

² Barry Scott Zellen, "Geopolitics, Indigenous Peoples, and the Polar Thaw: Sub- and Transnational Fault Lines of the Coming Arctic Cold War," *Nordicum-Mediterraneum Icelandic e-Journal of the Nordic and Mediterranean* 16, no. 2 (2021) and "High

appetite for foreign intervention” are compounded by his perception of Greenland’s strategic vulnerability.³ Greenlanders’ road to independence from the Kingdom of Denmark poses, in Zellen’s mind, a strategic vulnerability to North America: Greenland’s small population and economy make it a good target for “stealth invasion” by overseas actors seeking to create dependencies in the region.⁴ As Greenland moves closer to independence, Zellen warns, it will require economic aid and partnerships, making it more vulnerable to pernicious external actors seeking to invest in Greenland’s resources and thus gain a foothold in the North American Arctic. Zellen’s response to this is simple: Greenland should consider pursuing alternate forms of independence, with the favoured routes being to join with other North American states – Canada, Nunavut (proposing a “dual secession” creating a new, larger Indigenous state), and/or the United States.⁵ By bringing Greenland fully within the North American sphere of influence, he insists, Greenland would continue to be protected by NATO and ensure the Northern flank of North America is not vulnerable through its European connections.

Zellen insists that an independent Greenland with no economic prospects and no defensive alliances *would* make it a strategic vulnerability. In this sense, his premise for revisionist action is future-oriented, predicated on what *might* happen as necessitating preventative action to secure American interests. While ostensibly acknowledging Greenland’s right to self-determination and progress towards decolonization, Zellen both anticipates and echoes American defence analysts and officials who fear that an independent Greenland *could* choose neutrality or fail to join NATO, thus *potentially* denying the US critical access to the Pituffik Space Base and the strategically vital GIUK Gap. Rather than stating this explicitly, however, Zellen seeks to discredit longstanding relationships, suppress Greenlandic agency, and castigate Denmark as both a weak and destructive colonial power, all while trumpeting the alleged benevolence of the Trump Administration and the global power of the United States.

Greenland’s independence movement generally has followed a pragmatic approach marked by incremental legal milestones rather than revolutionary upheaval calling for breaks from European and North American allies and relationships. This peaceful pursuit is anchored in the securing of Home Rule in 1979, under which Greenland elected its own parliament (Inatsisartut) and government (Naalakkersuisut) for the first time (while maintaining their two seats in the Danish Parliament), and the *Act on Greenland Self-Government* in 2009 which explicitly recognizes Greenlanders as a people under international law with the right to self-determination. This framework provides a clear, democratic pathway to independence, stipulating that any decision to secede rests with the Greenlandic people and must be followed by negotiations with the Danish government.⁶ Traditionally, Greenland’s political leadership

Stakes in the High North: Alternative Models for Greenland’s Ongoing Constitutional and Political Transformation,” *Nordicum-Mediterraneum Icelandic e-Journal of the Nordic and Mediterranean* 16, no. 2 (2021).

³ Zellen, “High Stakes in the High North.”

⁴ Zellen, “High Stakes in the High North.”

⁵ Zellen, “High Stakes in the High North.”

⁶ See, for example, Astrid Nonbo Andersen and Rachael Johnstone, “Greenland between decolonization, the US, and international responses,” Danish Institute for International Studies, 26 January 2026, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/greenland-between-decolonization-the-us-and-international-responses> and United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, “Greenland: UN experts urge United States to respect international law and

emphasized the idea of “peaceful Inuit” and some envisaged their island as a future demilitarized zone, downplaying military or security concerns to focus on achieving fiscal self-sustainability. This “desecuritization” discourse⁷ has shifted since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with Greenlandic officials taking clear positions on international security and in support of NATO, demonstrating solidarity with Ukraine “with our adherence to the international sanctions on Russia,” and announcing that Greenland welcomes cooperation to strengthen Arctic security against Russia and China all while continuing to reject initiatives that imply a loss of self-determination.⁸ Nonetheless, Zellen suggests that security through alliances is insufficient, and that an independent Greenland could choose non-alignment and thus open a power vacuum exploited by adversaries – a position increasingly apparent in the Trump Administration’s foreign policy with respect to the island.

Zellen’s narratives also intimate that Circumpolar Arctic cooperation and collaboration must be upheld at all costs – although his frame increasingly limits this logic to the relationship between the three “great powers.” Following the seven like-minded Arctic states’ “pause” in participation in Arctic Council activities following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Zellen wrote an op-ed for *Nunatsiaq News* in which he noted that “Russia’s actions in Ukraine are reprehensible,” but he characterized the boycott of Arctic Council meetings with Russia as “illogical” because the “issues facing the Arctic . . . cannot be paused.”⁹ Zellen did not provide any alternatives to symbolic diplomacy, suggesting instead that the Arctic Council should be able to continue despite disagreements – such as it had when the United States reversed its position on climate change in 2019.¹⁰ Zellen’s insistence that the Arctic states should compartmentalize international affairs did not play out, however, and he laments the hardening of Arctic borders and the erecting of an “Ice Curtain” between the “Arctic 7” and Russia, of which Zellen is increasingly critical.¹¹ He fixates in particular on the negative consequences for Indigenous Peoples within Russia’s sphere of influence, as well as the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO which Zellen sees as disruptive for circumpolar cooperation.¹²

right to self-determination,” 14 January 2026, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/01/greenland-un-experts-urge-united-states-respect-international-law-and-right>.

⁷ Marc Jacobsen, Ole Waever, and Ulrik Pram Gad, eds., *Greenland in Arctic Security: (De)Securitization Dynamics under Climate Thaw and Geopolitical Freeze* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024).

⁸ See, for example, Martin Breum, “Greenland halts fisheries quota swaps with Russia,” *Arctic Today*, 14 December 2022, <https://www.arctictoday.com/greenland-halts-cooperation-on-fish-with-russia/>; Wilfrid Greaves and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Comparing Governance and Security in Inuit Nunaat: Preliminary Observations,” *NAADSN Strategic Perspectives* (June 2024), <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/24jun-Strategic-Perspectives-Comparing-Governance-and-Security-in-Inuit-Nunaat-Greaves-Lackenbauer.pdf>.

⁹ Barry Scott Zellen, “Op-Ed: Arctic Council ‘Pause’ Endangers Humanity’s United Stand Against Climate Change,” *Letters, Nunatsiaq News*, 7 May 2022.

¹⁰ Barry Scott Zellen, “Commentary: As War in Ukraine Upends a Quarter Century of Enduring Arctic Cooperation, the World Needs the Whole Arctic Council More than Ever,” *The Northern Review* 54 (2023): 137–60.

¹¹ Barry Scott Zellen, “Forced Contraception Victims Deserve More Contrition from Denmark,” *Arctic Today*, September 2, 2025. On an “ice curtain,” see Heather Conley and Caroline Rohloff, *The New Ice Curtain: Russia’s Strategic Reach to the Arctic* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) and P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Suzanne Lalonde, eds., *Breaking the Ice Curtain? Russia, Canada, and Arctic Security in a Changing Circumpolar World* (Ottawa: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2019).

¹² Barry Scott Zellen, “The Dark Side of NATO Expansion - Part I,” *The Arctic Institute*, 18 September 2025 and “The Dark Side of NATO Expansion - Part II,” *The Arctic Institute*, 23 September 2025.

In the *Juneau Empire*, Zellen criticized the seven-like minded Arctic states for changing the consensus-based circumpolar governance regime and expanding NATO to include Finland and Sweden, alleging that this created a “new and unnecessary Cold War.”¹³ He asserted that this new dynamic requires a new approach to Arctic security, and a fundamental rethinking of Arctic strategies. While Zellen’s response to the Biden Administration’s updated Arctic Strategy in late 2022 was generally positive, with its focus on cooperation and commitments to engagement with Arctic Indigenous Peoples,¹⁴ his attention abruptly shifted to consolidating defence of the Arctic against alleged Chinese threats in the wake of Trump’s 2024 re-election.¹⁵ This reorientation is ostensibly a response to the strategic challenges associated with managing Arctic relationships in a post-consensus environment (as reflected in the Department of Defense’s updated *Arctic Strategy* released in 2024), but more ominously reflects what Zellen sees as the opportunities for strategic acquisition in a bifurcated and externally-threatened Arctic.¹⁶

A common refrain from Zellen over the past six years is the necessity of managing climate change. Curiously, while Zellen argues that climate change is an existential threat to the Arctic and humanity, he has also argued that the constantly changing nature of the Arctic environment over geologic time has contributed significantly to globalization, suggesting that trans-polar routes have and will continue to benefit humanity.¹⁷ Zellen oscillates between the idea that the opening of the Arctic will translate into a new age of polar globalization and the notion that the opening of the Arctic poses threats to United States hegemony. While Zellen admits that the regional threat posed by China (specifically to Greenland) has decreased since 2019,¹⁸ he also insists that the United States can only fulfill its vision of ascending to “the pinnacle of global power” by becoming a polar power, noting that it “can and indeed must do a better job understanding the Arctic... and more smartly defending our corner of it.”¹⁹ Zellen’s suggestion that United States’ interests in the Arctic require submarines rather than expensive sovereignty-mission icebreakers indicates his belief that the Arctic has the potential to become a kinetically-contested region – painting a picture of Canada and/or Greenland as the most likely belligerents as shipping routes become navigable. This undergirds his insistence that bringing Greenland fully under the United States’ sphere of sovereign influence remains a strategic, defensive priority.²⁰

¹³ Barry Scott Zellen, “My Turn: Making the Arctic Great Again,” *Juneau Empire* (Juneau, Alaska), 18 November 2024.

¹⁴ Barry Scott Zellen, “As Russia-Ukraine War Rages, America Refocuses on the Arctic,” *Georgetown Journal of International Law*, 18 November 2022.

¹⁵ Zellen, “My Turn: Making the Arctic Great Again”; Barry Scott Zellen, *The Pentagon’s New (Upside Down) Arctic Map* (The Arctic Institute, 2024), https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Zellen_Pentagons-New-Arctic-Map_report.pdf.

¹⁶ Zellen, *Pentagon’s New (Upside Down) Arctic Map*.

¹⁷ Barry Scott Zellen, “720 Million Years of Arctic Globalization, from Snowball Earth to the Anthropocene: Insights from Paleohistory,” *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* 20, no.1 (2025): A20-A21.

¹⁸ Barry Scott Zellen, “Arctic March of Folly? Misperceptions and Apprehensions Torpedo America’s Goodwill Mission to Greenland After Stunning Election Turnabout,” *The Arctic Institute*, 6 May 2025.

¹⁹ Barry Scott Zellen, “Making Waves: Looking Beyond Today’s Illusory ‘Icebreaker Gap’ and Troubled PSC Program to a Cheap, Quiet, and Plentiful Polar Sub Fleet for Tomorrow,” *Small Wars Journal*, 28 October 2025.

²⁰ Zellen, “Making Waves.”

Nonetheless, the existential threat of climate change represents a key reason why the Arctic Council continued to meet following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine,²¹ as well as the United States' continued focus on cooperation and co-management with Indigenous Peoples in Alaska and throughout the Arctic in American Arctic strategies.²² As late as December 2024, Zellen insisted that "the West can still pivot back to its important, inclusive and collaborative work of saving the Arctic (and humanity) from the real and truly menacing dangers of climate change, environmental risk, and the many other pressures of our modernizing world which ... [have become] increasingly (and regrettably) de-prioritized" in favour of pursuing a hard power approach to "overstated, indeed illusory, threats."²³ What Zellen means by managing the threat of climate change, however, is increasingly unclear – particularly as he intends to align his writings with a Trump Administration that fundamentally denies climate change, publicly mocking global warming as a "hoax" while rolling back US climate regulations and withdrawing the country from major international climate agreements.²⁴ In 2024, Zellen cast climate change activists who challenge Trump's dedication to energy independence as "America's very own 'green colonizers' intent on keeping Alaska's vast reservoir of natural resources frozen for all time, and preventing Alaska from achieving the prosperity its bountiful natural resource base could easily support."²⁵ He alleges that the same is true for Greenland, which aspires to "develop its own vast reservoir of untapped resources, whether under its retreating ice cap or offshore beneath its increasingly open coastal waters."²⁶ In Zellen's eyes, climate change represents an economic opportunity for Arctic states – a view diametrically opposed to most narratives by the Arctic Indigenous Peoples for whom he claims to be an advocate.

Zellen's Arctic hero in this scenario is President Trump, who he believes is poised to reshape the Arctic and exploit the economic opportunities in the region. Zellen celebrates Trump's unorthodox statecraft which, in his view, ended the War in Afghanistan because of the president's "out-of-the-box thinking"²⁷ which Zellen touts as necessary to "[save] the Arctic (and humanity)."²⁸ Zellen suggests that as the Arctic's "archipelagic nature becomes increasingly apparent" due to climate change, opportunities to navigate through the Northern Sea Route (NSR), Northwest Passage (NWP), or other trans-Arctic routes are emerging that create both strategic vulnerabilities²⁹ and will heighten globalization³⁰ by bringing "a strategic transportation corridor uniting the continents."³¹ Zellen suggests that is the "logical outcome of

²¹ Zellen, "Op-Ed: Arctic Council 'Pause' Endangers Humanity's United Stand Against Climate Change."

²² Zellen, "As Russia-Ukraine War Rages, America Refocuses on the Arctic"; Zellen, *Pentagon's New (Upside Down) Arctic Map*.

²³ Zellen, *Pentagon's New (Upside Down) Arctic Map*.

²⁴ See, for example, Scott Waldman, "Trump sidelines climate contrarians in science rollback," *Politico*, 13 February 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/02/13/trump-sidelines-climate-contrarians-science-rollback-00779098>.

²⁵ Zellen, "My Turn: Making the Arctic Great Again."

²⁶ Zellen, "My Turn: Making the Arctic Great Again."

²⁷ Barry Scott Zellen, "An Indecent Proposal: Let's Make Greenland an Offer They Can't Refuse!," *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* 20, no. 1 (2025); and "Annexing Greenland: Six Questions," *Small Wars Journal*, 29 April 2025.

²⁸ Zellen, *Pentagon's New (Upside Down) Arctic Map*.

²⁹ Zellen, "Geopolitics, Indigenous Peoples, and the Polar Thaw."

³⁰ Zellen, "Insights from Paleohistory."

³¹ Barry Scott Zellen, "Greenland During Trump 2.0: Is America Poised for an Historic Arctic Territorial Expansion?," *The Arctic Institute*, 21 January 2025.

a generation of globalization linking East and West since the Cold War,”³² extolling the global economic benefits of widespread participation in Arctic economic activities. Zellen wrote in 2025 that “China is rising to the challenge of Arctic development made possible by failures in the West to fully develop its own remote Arctic territories,” leading him to trumpet that “China should therefore be welcomed as an economic partner . . . not as a spoiler intent on disrupting the Arctic status quo.”³³ This is a drastic shift from his 2019 writings, and also contradicts the alleged geostrategic necessity for the US to acquire Greenland lest it be dominated or controlled by a rival great power.

In Zellen’s assessment, climate change-induced economic development opportunities provide an opportunity to decolonize the Arctic. He often refers to Greenland’s colonization by Denmark, noting that it remains the last Arctic colony.³⁴ Accordingly, Zellen seeks to justify “Trump’s strategic interest in Greenland” as a practical stance rooted in enabling Greenland to become independent and prosperous³⁵ - a strange contortion given Trump’s insistence in early 2026 that the United States would acquire the island, using whatever means necessary, without regard for Greenlanders’ preferences or rights. In Zellen’s justificatory narrative, however, climate change activists opposed to Trump’s approach prefer to “keep Greenland colonized, its resources undeveloped, and its peoples trapped in poverty and dependent on external subsidies.”³⁶ By linking a lack of resource development in Greenland with colonization, Zellen positions the United States as a potential “saviour” of Greenland by enabling it to develop its resources – though admittedly at its own expense.³⁷

Over the past six months, Zellen has continuously attacked the colonial practices of Denmark in Greenland and highlighted examples of historical colonial oppression.³⁸ Through this narrative, he seeks to tap into the deep-rooted trauma that Greenlanders have and continue to experience, and which he recognized as an important aspect of the Greenlandic independence movement.³⁹ While Zellen’s depiction is partially grounded in Greenland’s contemporary political discourse, which reflects a persistent sense of colonial trauma under Danish control and reinforced by renewed public attention to past abuses,⁴⁰ his approach weaponizes that colonial history to serve American interests. Seeking to

³² Barry Scott Zellen, “A Grand Illusion: America’s Anti-China Arctic Policy Is Rooted in Paranoia and Political Bias, Not Strategic Reality,” *The Arctic Institute*, 21 October 2025.

³³ Zellen, “A Grand Illusion.”

³⁴ Zellen, “My Turn: Making the Arctic Great Again.”

³⁵ Zellen, “My Turn: Making the Arctic Great Again.”

³⁶ Zellen, “My Turn: Making the Arctic Great Again.”

³⁷ Zellen, “An Indecent Proposal: Let’s Make Greenland an Offer They Can’t Refuse!”

³⁸ Zellen, “Greenland During Trump 2.0”; Zellen, “Forced Contraception Victims Deserve More Contrition from Denmark”; Barry Scott Zellen, “Copenhagen’s ‘Sorry’ Must Mark the Beginning and Not the End of Denmark’s Atonement,” Commentary, *The Arctic Institute*, 4 September 2025; and Barry Scott Zellen, “For Greenland, The Unimaginable Is Now On The Table,” *Arctic Today*, 12 January 2026.

³⁹ Zellen, “Forced Contraception Victims Deserve More Contrition from Denmark”; Zellen, “Copenhagen’s ‘Sorry’ Must Mark the Beginning and Not the End of Denmark’s Atonement.”

⁴⁰ See, for example, Tine Bryld, *I den bedste mening* (Nuuk: Atuakkiortfik, 1998); Søren Rud, *Colonialism in Greenland: Tradition, Governance and Legacy* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017); Anne Kirstine Hermann, *Imperiets børn: Da Danmark vildledte FN og Grønland for at beholde sin sidste koloni* (København: Lindhardt & Ringhof, 2021); Astrid Nonbo Andersen, “The Greenland Reconciliation Commission: Moving Away from a Legal Framework,” *The Yearbook of Polar Law* 11

appeal to the hearts of minds of Indigenous People and their allies, he suggests that the colonial practices of Denmark and Canada are so brutal and problematic that Indigenous citizens in those states ought to leave and join the United States.

Zellen's emancipatory, decolonial narrative, however, is highly selective and dismisses Greenlandic assertions of national identity and autonomy in his declarations that the United States must control the island. Greenlanders and Indigenous Peoples in other Arctic states have suffered under colonialism, but Zellen fails to acknowledge or address the United States' own colonial practises or complicity in colonial violence in its own country and territories. Instead, Zellen has argued that the United States has been a leader in working with its Indigenous population, including by initiating land claims in the Arctic.⁴¹ In crafting this self-serving narrative of American benevolence, Zellen refuses to recognize or address abuses toward Indigenous Peoples, never mind the active erasure of Indigenous Peoples from US history by the sitting president. Instead, Zellen actively positions Trump as an "imperfect reflection of a changing America" with an "impressive diversity of political base" and ranking officials (citing Usha Bala Chilukuri Vance as "America's most diverse Second Lady in history") in an attempt to trumpet Trump's broad public appeal and inclusivity.⁴² Zellen's examination of the colonial harms perpetuated by other states is a clear attempt to control the narrative of colonization and to encourage Arctic Indigenous Peoples to embrace the United States by mobilizing an ahistoric accounting of the United States' own record of colonial violence and trauma. Zellen's use of these "hearts and minds" tactics – particularly in local, Northern newspapers – seeks to undermine the trust between Indigenous Peoples and the Kingdom of Denmark and Canada, in hopes that this will secure American control over North American Arctic Indigenous peoples and allow the United States to exploit the resources in and on Indigenous lands (as discussed earlier).

The United States' own imperial history, coupled with the nefarious intentions behind that country's coercive actions designed to acquire Greenland immediately during Trump's second term, undermine Zellen's decolonization justification for annexation. His suggestions that the United States could simply purchase Greenland (with Greenland's own resource development profits),⁴³ or that the United States might force the Balkanization of Greenland⁴⁴ or even attempt a coup such as what occurred in Venezuela,⁴⁵ exposes that the real intention is not to support Greenland and ensure its independence but to annex it to serve American interests (or at least those of the Trump Administration and its close allies). Zellen's recent opinion piece in the *Yellowknifer* on 19 January 2026 suggests that the United States has entered into a "neo-Monroeian era" in which the United States will seek to "decolonize" the Arctic to

(2019): 214–244; and Helene Thiesen, *Greenland's Stolen Indigenous Children. A Personal Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

⁴¹ Zellen, "High Stakes in the High North"; Barry Scott Zellen, "From Knowledge to Power: Co-Management, Knowledge Co-Production, and the Re-Empowerment of Arctic Indigenous Peoples," *The Arctic Institute*, 10 June 2025.

⁴² Zellen, "Arctic March of Folly?"

⁴³ Zellen, "An Indecent Proposal: Let's Make Greenland an Offer They Can't Refuse!"

⁴⁴ Barry Scott Zellen, "Trump's Plans for Greenland Are Still Unclear. Here Are the Key Issues," *Arctic Today*, April 16, 2025.

⁴⁵ Barry Scott Zellen, "After Venezuela, Could Greenland Really Be Next?," *The Hay River Hub*, 12 January 2026; and "For Greenland, The Unimaginable Is Now on the Table." For a critical response, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Seeking to Legitimize American Conquest? A Response to Barry Scott Zellen," *NAADSN Quick Impact*, 19 January 2026, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/26jan19-Lackenbauer-Seeking-to-Legitimize-American-Conquest-NAADSN-QI.pdf>.

enable its “hemispheric defense strategy.”⁴⁶ This grand strategic design, shrouded in the language of decolonization, elucidates the logic of Trump and his inner circle’s “real estatism” in which Arctic Indigenous Peoples are not respected as rightsholders but are seen as obstacles standing in the way of American manifest destiny.

The “neo-Monroeian era” that Zellen espouses is highly disconcerting. Arguing that the United States has a historical right to Greenland by pointing to Robert Peary’s exploration of the Northwest coast during the nineteenth century, Zellen suggests that “Pearyland” should become an American colony by rights of discovery and its longstanding interest in the Greenland.⁴⁷ He goes so far as to suggest that the United States was “robbed” of Greenland.⁴⁸ Despite the ahistorical nature of this claim (the United States actively chose not to pursue a colony in Greenland and the Danes had already established varying levels of sovereignty over the island in the centuries prior to Peary’s arrival), Zellen invokes Peary’s historical explorations in Greenland to justify a twenty-first century American land grab. More than a century of Danish activities reaffirming their sovereignty, including the 1933 *Eastern Greenland* case in which the Permanent Court of International Justice decided that Denmark was the sovereign authority of the whole island (a case in which the United States did not participate), followed Peary’s explorations, including the ongoing political negotiation of Greenlandic Home Rule (1979) and Self-Government (2009). Greenland and the Kingdom Denmark have both rejected previous offers by the United States to purchase the island, and at no point during the ninety-two years between the PCIJ decision and Trump’s second term interest in the island has the United States been considered the sovereign of Greenland.

Zellen observes that the United States has maintained an interest in Greenland through its military activities at Pituffik Space Base (previously Thule Air Base) since the Second World War, suggesting that this also legitimizes its need to control the island.⁴⁹ While the United States has enjoyed a longstanding military footprint in Greenland as part of the overall defence of North America for more than eighty years, and enjoys significant military rights to operate the base under a NATO framework (with both countries as founding members in 1949), this hardly constitutes a sovereignty claim. Instead, the American presence grew with explicit acknowledgment of Danish sovereignty, with Washington and Copenhagen signing the landmark *Defense of Greenland Agreement* in 1951. This agreement gives the U.S. extensive rights to establish and operate defence areas in Greenland, including construction of Thule Air Base (now Pituffik Space Base). This agreement remains the core legal framework, supplemented by the 2004 *Igaliku Agreement* updating the framework for US operations on the island.⁵⁰

Zellen proclaims that, given this history, an American “invasion could feel more like a liberation” – without any evidence that this reflects Greenlanders’ views (as all available evidence suggests exactly the

⁴⁶ Barry Scott Zellen, “Plan Accordingly for What Happens Next with Greenland,” *The Yellowknifer* (Yellowknife, NWT), 19 January 2026.

⁴⁷ Zellen, “Annexing Greenland: Six Questions”; “Arctic March of Folly?”; and *Why Taking Greenland Won’t Break NATO*, 22 January 2026.

⁴⁸ Zellen, “An Indecent Proposal: Let’s Make Greenland an Offer They Can’t Refuse!”

⁴⁹ Zellen, “High Stakes in the High North”; Zellen, “A Grand Illusion”; Zellen, “Plan Accordingly For What Happens Next with Greenland.”

⁵⁰ Agreement between the United States of America and Denmark, 6 August 2004, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/04-806-Denmark-Defense.done_.pdf.

opposite). His comparison to the United States' uninvited deployment to Iceland and construction projects in the Canadian North during the Second World War fails to distinguish between wartime necessity and peacetime agreements, upon which sovereignty has been clearly established by the Danes and Greenlanders and accepted by the United States.⁵¹ The long history of negotiated agreement by which the US has access to the island, without holding sovereign rights, is the tangible precedent that obviates the need for American sovereignty over Greenland to secure its national security interests. Although Zellen argues that the United States (and only the United States) can ensure that Greenland remains free from foreign domination,⁵² the long-standing alliance between the Kingdom of Denmark and the United States as founding members of NATO renders this unconvincing.

In these writings, Zellen deliberately downplays the importance of NATO as part of the defence agreement framework between the United States and Denmark/Greenland. He suggests that the defensive capabilities offered by NATO are insufficient to protect Greenland⁵³ (which is particularly odd given that the United States is a founding member of NATO), while also insisting that NATO will persist despite the threat by NATO's largest power (the United States) to annex territory from another member (Denmark).⁵⁴ That Zellen is "not worried about NATO's survival or alliance cohesion"⁵⁵ is striking and assumes a problematic double-standard for alliance relations in light of his concerns about the survival and cohesion of the Arctic Council while Russia held the council's chairship in 2022.⁵⁶ At that time, the seven like-minded states' pause in participation in the Council led him to advocate for an end to the boycott against the largest circumpolar nation in order to preserve unity as a paramount consideration.⁵⁷ By this logic, Zellen suggests that a threat against a large nation must be mitigated, while a threat against smaller nations (such as Denmark) can be ignored: a "Great Power Exceptionalism" logic that underlays Zellen's vision of international relations and plays into the preferred narratives espoused by the Russians and Chinese.⁵⁸

Zellen asserts that the Trump Administration's coercive rhetoric regarding Greenland does not threaten the unity or cohesion of NATO simply because the alliance has survived border disputes in the

⁵¹ Zellen, "Trump's Plans for Greenland." For an alternate reading, see Aqqaluk Lyngé, "Autonomy in Action: Inuit and the Case of Greenland," presentation to the Symposium on "The Right to Self-Determination in International Law" organised by Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and others, September 2006, <https://www.unpo.org/downloads/AqqalukLyngé.pdf>;

⁵² Zellen, "Trump's Plans for Greenland."

⁵³ Zellen, "Trump's Plans for Greenland."

⁵⁴ Zellen, *Why Taking Greenland Won't Break NATO*.

⁵⁵ Zellen, *Why Taking Greenland Won't Break NATO*.

⁵⁶ Zellen, "Op-Ed: Arctic Council 'Pause' Endangers Humanity's United Stand Against Climate Change."

⁵⁷ Zellen's concerns about the Arctic Council were substantiated by "a hardening of borders through military deployments and fortifications, erecting a new 'Ice Curtain' across the Arctic" in the years that followed. Zellen, "The Dark Side of NATO Expansion - Part I."

⁵⁸ See P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Troy Bouffard, and Adam Lajeunesse, "Russian Information Operations: The Kremlin's Competitive Narratives and Arctic Influence Objectives," *Journal of Peace and War Studies* 4 (2022): 161-186; Adam Lajeunesse and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Selling the 'Near-Arctic' State: China's Information and Influence Operations in the Arctic* (Washington: Wilson Center, 2024); and Mathieu Landriault and Anne-Rose Savard-Deiana, "Russian Press Agencies on the US-Annexation-of-Greenland Crises: Lessons for Canada," *NAADSN Quick Impact*, 16 January 2026.

past.⁵⁹ His comparisons to the expansion of maritime jurisdiction and to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus against the backdrop of decades of instability are incongruent. First, the context of Greenland slowly developing independence with the support of the Kingdom of Denmark differs dramatically from that of Cyprus or of disputed maritime fishing grounds. Second, the United States' hegemonic position within NATO is substantially different than that of 1970s Turkey, and even of late-twentieth century Britain. Finally, the Kingdom of Denmark and most of its European allies have been explicit about what a United States takeover of Greenland would mean for NATO. Zellen's dismissal of European leaders' statements downplays the importance of trust in diplomatic relationships and alliances – or simply demonstrates his belief that the United States, as the most powerful country on earth, can do whatever it wishes without strategic consequences amongst its allies.

In our assessment, Zellen's ongoing discussion of the United States' pursuit of Greenland exemplifies the attempt by a functional actor to encourage the securitization of the Arctic and encourage the Trump Administration to take extraordinary action – in this case, the annexation of Greenland. He ultimately seeks to provide justification for annexation, whether through an American purchase, political coercion, or military intervention. Seeking to provide this rationale for Trump's "neo-Monroeian era" positions Zellen as an apologist for contemporary Arctic colonialism that promises something better, while obfuscating and weaponizing history and international affairs, and abjectly dismissing and negating the agency of Greenlanders to choose for themselves. Zellen's one-sided attack on Denmark suggests an intent to absolve the United States of colonial responsibility for its own actions which have not been addressed, redressed, or even acknowledged, and to shame Denmark, Canada, and other states for their treatment of Indigenous Peoples. This is a concerning angle of examining the legacy of colonization as it not only externalizes the problem for the United States, but also actively attacks and degrades states who are acknowledging and attempting to address their own colonial histories by attacking attempts at redress in states such as Denmark and Canada.

For Canada, Zellen's references to the similarities between Greenlandic and Canadian High Arctic vulnerabilities are compounded by subtle language evoking a challenge to Canada's sovereignty. Suggesting that the conclusion to potential Greenlandic annexation by the United States may result in "new and unexpected alignments of interest" such as the creation of North America's only Indigenous state, allowing for a "robust and enduring foundation of a true North, strong and free," reflects his earlier sentiment that Greenland and Nunavut undertake a dual secession that would, ostensibly, be controlled by the United States.⁶⁰ Zellen's zealousness in trying to lay the intellectual foundations for the application of the "Donroe Doctrine" across the North American Arctic serves as a reminder that Canadians must "plan accordingly for what happens next with Greenland" (as he noted in an article in the *Yellowknifer*). After all, his own work represents an overt attempt to undermine Greenlandic and Canadian stability and lay the groundwork for a hearts-and-minds insurgency that advances the Trump Administration's strategic agenda against the interests of its stalwart North American allies.

⁵⁹ Zellen, *Why Taking Greenland Won't Break NATO*.

⁶⁰ Zellen, "An Indecent Proposal: Let's Make Greenland an Offer They Can't Refuse!" and "High Stakes in the High North."