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United States Expansion: What Next?

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Countries have expanded, merged, shrunk, or even disappeared over time. These days, we are hearing about incoming United States President Donald Trump making Canada the 51st state, buying or outright annexing Greenland, and reclaiming the Panama Canal. Many people are worried by these pronouncements and question whether they should be taken seriously. When you look at US history, what Trump is saying is not new. Since the thirteen states founded the United States, it has expanded by purchasing land or taking it by force.

Purchasing and Annexing

The first major land acquisition occurred in 1803 when the United States purchased Louisiana from France. With this annexation, the United States expanded to encompass the whole Mississippi River basin. However, there were border issues with Spain. The United States claimed that West Florida was part of the Louisiana Purchase, which Spain challenged because it had held West Florida as a separate province since 1783. The inhabitants of West Florida rebelled, establishing the Republic of West Florida. This was a short-lived republic (approximately 2-3 months) in 1810. Later that year, the United States occupied and annexed the territory. The Louisiana Territory was eventually partitioned into numerous states.

The feud with neighbors is not new either. Texas used to be part of Mexico. After Texas gained independence and established the Republic of Texas, it was annexed and recognized as the twenty-eighth state, expanding the United States southwest to the Rio Grande. A few months after the annexation, the Mexican-American War broke out.

Let us not forget about the expansion within the continent against the Native Americans. Despite numerous treaties with the tribes, the United States continued to seize their territory and drive them to reservations. The Indian Appropriations Act of 1871 terminated the recognition of sovereign Native countries.

In the 1840s, guano became a popular agricultural fertilizer and source of saltpeter for gunpowder. The United States then passed the Guano Islands Act, which allows it to take ownership of unclaimed islands holding guano deposits as long as they are not occupied by inhabitants of another country and are not under the jurisdiction of another government. It also authorized the president to use the military to defend such interests in these territories. Under the Act, the United States controlled 94 islands. By 1903, 66 of these were designated as US territories.

The history of the last two states to join the US is noteworthy. Another significant purchase was Alaska, which was acquired from the Russian Empire in 1867. This was owing to Russia's devastating defeat in the Crimean War and its need for cash. Furthermore, because Canada was then part of the British Empire, it would have been difficult for Russia to defend Alaska.

Hawaii formed a unified, internationally recognized kingdom in 1810 and remained autonomous until American and European businesses deposed the monarchy in 1893, resulting in annexation by the United States in 1898.

Alaska and Hawaii became states in 1959.

Then there are the territories that have achieved independence or desire to do so. Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, Spain ceded Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the United States. As a result, it is neither a sovereign nation nor a US state, undecided between statehood and independence without obtaining either.

The Panama Canal

Bridging the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans with a canal was an idea that began in the nineteenth century. The United States signed a Treaty with Colombia in 1903 which for \$10 million would have granted the Washington a renewable [lease](#) in perpetuity from Colombia on the land proposed for the canal. However, when the Colombian Senate rejected the Treaty President Theodore Roosevelt supported the separation of Panama from Colombia and signed a Treaty with the new Panamanian government. Washington even prevented Colombia from stopping this separation and Panama declared independence that year. This treaty gave the US some rights to the canal "in perpetuity", but in article 22 limited other rights to a lease period of 99 years. The US formally took control of the canal the next year and construction was completed ten years later.

After the [Suez Crisis](#) in 1956, when Washington pressured France and the United Kingdom to abandon their attempt to retake control of the [Suez Canal](#) from Egypt, demands for the United States to hand over the canal to Panama increased. Finally in 1977, the United States and Panama signed a Treaty that gave back control to the Panamanians, as long as

the canal remained neutral. Full Panamanian control was established on 31 December 1999. Now Trump is accusing that others are taking control of the canal and US ships are being charged exorbitantly in violation of the treaties. He has not ruled out [economic](#) and [military action](#) against Panama to seize control of the canal.

Basically, what President Trump is considering is nothing new. Washington has followed the same blueprint since its inception.

The European Union Model

Quite the opposite in terms of how the European Union expands, despite the fact that numerous European countries had previously attempted annexation. The original six countries of the European Union have fought each other in various forms over the centuries. The same is true for the other members who applied to join the Union. The primary purpose of forming the EU was to rid the European continent of conflict, which they accomplished at least among themselves. Arguments and even border issues have been resolved diplomatically. The United Kingdom left the Union quietly as well.

The EU fared poorly during Yugoslavia's succession wars and is currently hesitant to admit the remaining Balkan countries. Nonetheless, this is a voluntary process on the part of the applicant country and a political choice by the EU. All enlargement decisions, while contingent on meeting certain conditions, are based on political considerations. Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted the EU to give candidate status to not only Ukraine but Georgia and Moldova, which is the latest example of politics.

What Future for Greenland

Among Trump's statements, the acquisition of Greenland must be treated in a different manner. He had mentioned this even during his first term. Positioning the US defensively may make it more rational for Washington to assume control of the island. However, the US already has agreements and a base on the Island, and most importantly, Greenland is a European Union Overseas Country and Territory belonging to Denmark, therefore part of both NATO and the European Union.

This is not the first time the United States has expressed interest in seizing the island. In 1867, Washington considered the prospect of purchasing Greenland. This project came to an end due to opposition in Congress. When Nazi Germany conquered Denmark during World War II, the United States occupied Greenland in 1941 to defend it from a possible German attack. This occupation lasted until 1945. Following World War II, the United States developed a geopolitical interest in Greenland, offering to buy the island from Denmark in 1946 for \$100,000,000. However, Denmark rejected the offer.

Greenland joined the then-European Community alongside Denmark in 1973. Greenland lacked autonomy from Denmark until 1979. Interestingly, after obtaining self-rule,

Greenland quit the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1985, citing disagreements with the EEC's commercial fishing laws and an EEC ban on seal skin products. Nonetheless, Greenlandic citizens hold EU citizenship.

A Test for The International Institutions

The question now is how the Trump administration will implement his ideas. For many reasons, a military solution should not be an option for either Panama or Greenland. Panama and Greenland are small countries, but they are sovereign and should be treated accordingly. Any attempt to seize control of Panama and/or Greenland by force would also violate international law and further damage the already tarnished reputation of the United States. The real test, however, will be how the United Nations, the European Union and NATO will react if Trump puts his ideas into practice.