

# From bilateral to trilateral agreement: The case of Thule Air Base

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*Pituffik or Thule in Greenland has always been controversial within foreign and security policy between three parties: Denmark, Greenland and the USA. The Thule-base in Greenland has had an important role during the Cold War as part of the US military sphere in the North. The role of the base has changed over time to become a radar station, but it is still part of the overall US defense system. Recent tensions around the base regarding the contract and subcontractor's role have intensified discussions about the existence of the base and who actually has power over the base. The Greenlandic government has had a wish to be more influential on what is going on in the far north, but things have been held secret from the public and local politicians. This has resulted in some skepticism between Greenland and Denmark on the one hand, but also between Greenland and the USA on the other. This paper will shed light on the development from the bilateral to the trilateral relationship outplayed between the three major actors and how this relates to foreign and security policy within the Kingdom of Denmark and the relationship towards the USA.*

## Introduction

Pituffik or the Thule base in the far north of Greenland has been a controversial matter from the start. During the Second World War, Greenland became under the US protection and the Danish ambassador in Washington D.C. (Henrik Kauffmann) acted as the link between the US and Greenland at the time. The defense agreement from 1941 became a step towards more American involvement in Greenland. Navy bases and land based military bases were established around Greenland. US Coast Guard vessels were patrolling the Greenlandic waters (Archer, 2003; Ackrén & Jakobsen, 2015). Greenland became a focal point for North America because of its strategic location for any potential hostile power coming from the East and as a transit point between North America and Europe. Greenland also provided important meteorological information, and the mineral wealth of cryolite was of value for the aircraft industry in the US and Canada (Archer, 2003).

Greenland's long-term negotiations and concerns with replacement of the defense agreement in 1951 and a further revision in 2004 is linked to the Thule base. Before the construction of the

Thule base, 27 Inughuit families had to be relocated further north in 1953. Another negative impact was the radioactive pollution caused by a crash in 1968 of an American B-52 carrying four hydrogen bombs (Loukacheva, 2004). The Thule Air Base was constructed during the years of 1951-55. In its heyday, over 6000 American soldiers were stationed here (Gilberg, 1976; Taagholt, 2002: 67). Already back in 1946, Greenland was on the US Joint Chiefs of Staff's (JCS's) shortlist of six essential bases, three of which (Greenland, Iceland and the Azores) were declared as of utmost importance (Petersen, 2011: 92).

The negotiations back in 1951 were in a formal sense set by NATO, when the secretaries of the Atlantic Planning Group in January 1951 asked Denmark and the United States to initiate discussions to fulfill the military requirements of the adopted NATO Medium Term Plan (Petersen, 1998). The outcome of the negotiations was the agreement referred to as "the Defense of Greenland and the rest of the North Atlantic Treaty area" (Petersen, 1998). The Americans' wishes were fulfilled to freely operate bases in Greenland and have full access to the Greenlandic airspace.

With the establishment of the Thule base, joint Danish-American defense areas could be established and operated and be used by NATO countries in a war situation. The US Air Force officially took over Thule from the US Corps of Engineers 1 November 1952. In this way Greenland became an integrated part of the US nuclear strategy (Taagholt, 2002: 46-47). The Thule Air Base was possible to include six functions: an emergency landing strip, a weather station, a navigational aids station, an advanced radar station, a search and rescue station, and a base for sled dog patrol units (Petersen, 2011: 98).

Denmark has always played the 'Greenlandic card' in its relations towards the USA. In the past the 'Greenlandic card' meant that Denmark was giving the USA free access in Greenland in order to have a more favorable position within NATO (Bjørnsson, 2017). But in recent years it is not only Copenhagen that uses this card in its negotiations with the superpower. Greenland is also using the 'Greenlandic card' for its own purposes. This has been seen in the recent negotiations between all three players (Denmark, Greenland and the USA). On the one hand, Denmark is forced to maintain good relationships with the self-government of Greenland, but the Danish government is also keen to keep the good relationship with the USA at the same time (Søby Kristensen, 2004). The Thule Air Base is still the most important American asset in Greenland. From a Danish point of view the strategy is to keep a presence in the Arctic region and to maintain sovereignty over the region (Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2014).

On 18 December 2002, the then US Secretary of State Colin Powell made a public request to upgrade the radar at Thule Air Base, stating that it could be integrated into the radar structure on which the missile defense system depends (Søby Kristensen, 2004). This was again an example where Denmark and Greenland had a dispute on how to proceed. Denmark is still the sovereign power when it comes to foreign and security policy within the Danish Realm, but Greenland has reached some important steps towards a more independent stance in security matters. The results of the negotiations regarding the upgrade of the Thule radar station led to what has been called the "Igaliku Agreement". On 24 May 2004, the agreement came into place. An amendment of the 1951 Agreement was signed that gave Greenlanders increased influence on matters concerning the Thule Air Base, and Greenland is acting as a cosignatory on the amendment. Furthermore, an agreement on economic and technical cooperation between Greenland and the USA was signed

(Søby Kristensen, 2004; Dragsdahl, 2005). The ceremony in Igaliku was held after years of consultations, debate and negotiations starting 1999 when the Clinton administration had plans for National Missile Defense (NMD) architecture (Dragsdahl, 2005).

For American administrations, the use of the Thule Air Base has been seen as a key component in recent Missile Defense (MD) plans. Parliamentary foreign policy committees in both Greenland and Denmark were informed during the summer of 1999 of an upcoming upgrade of the Thule Base, but was under strict conditions of confidentiality (Dragsdahl, 2005).

This article will shed light on the complex relationships between Greenland, Denmark and the USA in relation to the Thule base and in the context of foreign and security policy addressed in the three countries. This will be highlighted through the two-level or even three level game outplayed between the three major players in relation to the Thule base.

### **From bilateral to trilateral relationship**

According to Putnam (1988) there is a two-level game analysis of negotiations taking place both on the international (level one) and national level (level two) at the same time. At level one national governments seek to maximize their own ability to enhance their stance internationally, to stand the pressure from the domestic politics, while minimizing any potential foreign attack. At level two domestic groups try to pursue their interests in order to pressure the national government to adopt favorable policies (Putnam, 1988; Archer, 2003). In the Greenlandic case we have the two-level game played out between the USA and Denmark on the international level and the negotiations between Denmark and Greenland at the national level, however, a third level occurs between the USA, Denmark and Greenland simultaneously, where we have a combination of the international, national and local level.

Historically, a level-two game has been played out, since negotiations have taken place between the USA and the Kingdom of Denmark (including Greenland). Greenland was a colony until 1953 and became an integral part of Denmark until Home Rule was implemented in 1979. After Home Rule was established Greenland became more active in international relations, and since the end of 1990s and onwards Greenland has been taking a stance in international issues on its own.

The various games that are played out between the three different levels might all have diverse objectives and strategies. For Denmark it is essential to have good relations with its ally, the USA, on the international level. It is also equally relevant for Denmark to have a good relationship with Greenland on the national level, since this is the gateway to Arctic relations. The third level with all three parties participating is also to show good will from the Danish side to include Greenland as a co-partner and at the same time live up to the legislative relationship that the Kingdom of Denmark stands for. According to the Greenlandic Self-Government Act from 2009, for instance, it is stated that Greenland and Denmark constitute equal partners (see *Lov om Grønlands Selvstyre*).

The Itilleq declaration gives Greenland a position within foreign policy, especially in matters which are directly linked to the island. This was a national agreement between Greenland and Denmark and it is therefore linked to the level two game. The Igaliku agreement of 2004 amends and supplements the 1951 treaty between the USA, Denmark and Greenland and in this case include the voice of the Greenlandic government (Bjørnsson, 2017). This is an example of a level three game.

## **The Thule Air Base**

In the beginning Thule's strategic role was linked to the first generation of US jet bombers, the B-36 and B-47. In mid-1954, Thule was declared fully operational and its base was upgraded to wing status. By now Thule had a 10,000-foot by 200-foot runway, 29 hardstands for heavy bombers, and six hangars for heavy bombers. Furthermore, a special program called Sea Weed was created for the prepositioning of supplies, and the scheduled staging of 21 B-36s in wartime was completed (Petersen, 2011: 100-101). There is evidence that strategic reconnaissance flights from Thule were occasionally made in the period from early 1956 to mid-1959 (Petersen, 2011: 110). In March 1958 the Danish government approved the extension of the Canadian Distant Early Warning Line (DEW) against bomb attacks across southern Greenland, but the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) radar built at Thule in 1960 was far more important. BMEWS consisted of three radars based in Alaska, United Kingdom and Thule. These radars gave a precious fifteen-minute warning of a missile attack (Petersen, 2011: 111).

Thule Air Base represented a conundrum between an American defense strategy based on nuclear weapons and a ban on nuclear weapons on Danish soil in peacetime, but Greenland was not part of the Danish ban against nuclear weapons and no one claimed anything about that either (Bjørnsson, 2017).

## **The US foreign and security policy**

Greenland was of the utmost importance for the US defense during the Cold War. First, Greenland had an important strategic position between North America and Europe. The US military invested deeply in northern Greenland, building the Thule Air Base, the under-the-ice nuclear-powered city called Camp Century, and a handful of separate research installations on the ice cap (Doel et al, 2016). Second, Greenland was seen as a laboratory for earth sciences or geophysics for the Pentagon and in this sense a lot of new knowledge was obtained, especially about climate change, geological features and atmospheric patterns. Finally, Greenland illustrated an example of small state politics by Denmark as the faithful US ally (Doel et al, 2016).

Greenland was two times considered for purchase by the Pentagon leaders and the White House officials in the first decade of the Cold War, however, this was never realized. Greenland was part of Danish sovereignty and therefore the island was not for sale (Doel, 2016: 26). During the Second World War Greenland had been of particular significance for US military leaders. The island was a midway point for bombers, troop transport, and cargo aircraft flying between bases in northeast North America to England (Doel, 2016).

The interest in Greenland and the Arctic was also an effort to learn more about the physical characteristics of this part of the world. This was coordinated through the Pentagon's Research and Development Board (RDB). The RDB was created in 1946 and gathered civilian scientists and military scientists to discuss major unsolved problems whose solution would benefit national security, including the North American continental defense (Doel, 2016). The research of the ice cap meant that civil and military scientists enhanced their understanding of the properties of the ice cap and how it could be used in eventual warfare (Doel, 2016). The early Cold War years were

certainly a golden age for the earth sciences. It culminated in the International Geophysical Year of 1957-58. This was the largest international scientific undertaking at the time (Doel, 2016).

The interest in Greenland diminished at the end of the 1960s. This was due to new military technology. Polaris missiles were successfully deployed from US Navy submarines, making it possible to launch nuclear weapons at the Soviet Union from even closer proximity than Greenland (Doel, 2016: 40).

The US Arctic policy has been fluctuating over the decades from interest during the Cold War to non-interest after the Cold War. The relationship towards the Arctic has been uncertain. The US thinking after the Cold War was to focus on the role of the USA as being the world's sole superpower. President George H.W. Bush's "New World Order" did not take the Arctic into account (Corgan, 2014). With President Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama Arctic strategies came into place. The first Arctic strategy came under the Clinton administration in 1994, but it was after September 11, 2001, that the real attention towards homeland security came on the table, including the Arctic region (Corgan, 2014). The National Security Presidential Directive/NSPD-66, Homeland Security Presidential Directive/HSPD-25 and Arctic Regional Policy came under the George W. Bush administration. Within the Arctic Regional Policy document, it is stated that the USA is an Arctic nation and that focus is on national policies on homeland security defense. Other themes are climate change, the Arctic Council, the fragility of the region and its potential for resource extraction (Corgan, 2014).

In May 2011, the US Department of Defense released a report regarding Arctic operations and the Northwest Passage. In this report it is also stated that the US should involve Indigenous communities in decisions that affect them. A footnote also states that the US should operate in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), even though the US has not ratified the Convention (Corgan, 2014).

During the Obama Administration a new Arctic strategy came about in 2013, called the 'National Strategy for the Arctic Region'. Here wordings such as peaceful, stable and free of conflict in relation to the Arctic region are emphasized. Another phrasing is in connection to Alaska, where Alaska is seen as a partner with the international community. Three major aims are stated in the document: enhancement of US interests in the region, pursuing a responsible Arctic region stewardship, and strengthening international cooperation (Corgan, 2014).

The current Trump administration is reopening a representation in Nuuk and has already appointed an ambassador for the job, Sung Choi. It has been over 60 years since the last American representation was in place in Nuuk (*Sermitsiaq*, 2019). A new report from the US Coast Guard called "Arctic Strategic Outlook", which was released in April 2019, reveals that the US Coast Guard will partner with other Arctic nations, as well as with allies and other stakeholders having Arctic interests in order to keep the Arctic as a conflict-free zone. Furthermore, it is mentioned that the US Coast Guard and the Russian Border Guard should continue with their cooperation as they have done so far (*Arctic Strategic Outlook*, April 2019).

The current use of the Thule Air Base in Greenland from an American point of view is to focus on space defense. The US Air Force Space Command's 21<sup>st</sup> Space Wing, headquartered at the Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, US, uses the military base in Greenland to house its suite of space sensors. This system is a global network of US and foreign radars that provide information

on various defense activities. For this purpose, the Thule Air Base is strategically valuable to locate any space threats in the Arctic region (Husseini, 2019). Furthermore, it is the mission of the 821<sup>st</sup> Air Base Group to enable force projection, space superiority and scientific research in the Arctic region for the US but also for the US' allies (Canada, Denmark, Greenland). The group operates and maintains Thule Air Base in support of missile warning and space surveillance and satellite command and control operations missions (*Peterson Air Force Base*).

For the US it is of vital importance to have good relationships with Greenland and hence Denmark in order to utilize the space for its own defense system. The strategy has been to give Denmark some favorable position within the NATO system in order to have free access to the Greenlandic soil in the North.

### **Danish foreign and security policy**

During the 1950s, it was considered that foreign aid was a tool to improve poorer countries and societies and this was also integrated into Cold War foreign policy. Denmark had large projects to improve the infrastructure, living conditions, housing and health as part of keeping Greenland as an integrated part of the Kingdom (Nielsen, 2016). These schemes were later called G-50 and G-60 (see e.g. Skydsbjerg, 1999).

In 1957, Prime Minister H.C. Hansen had solved the nuclear issue by sending an informal note to the US Ambassador to Denmark Val Paterson, allowing the Americans to deploy nuclear weapons in Greenland, while simultaneously officially stating that Denmark would not accept nuclear weapons on its territory in peacetime (Nielsen, 2016). This double-edged politics continued for a long time in Danish foreign and security politics. From 1982 to 1988, Denmark used a “footnote” policy within the NATO framework, making reservations involving the build-up and deployment of nuclear weapons. This “footnote” policy influenced the relationship between Denmark and the USA (Nielsen, 2016).

In recent decades, Denmark has been using activism in their foreign and security policy. It started back in the end of the 1980s, when the Baltic countries were about to become independent from the Soviet Union and continued during the 1990s with China's violation of human rights (Olesen, 2017). During the recent 25 years, Denmark has been active in military operations in several countries in the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East, especially Afghanistan and Iraq with or without the UN mandate (Olesen, 2017).

The relationships with USA have been rather direct with Danish foreign ministers contacting their US counterpart directly to solve problems. One example is the contract issue in relation to the Thule Air Base, where the American company, Exelis, won the lucrative service contract, which had been reserved for Danish and Greenlandic companies in the past (Olesen, 2017). Denmark has used a pro-US orientation on the strategic level and this reflects the fact that Denmark is a small state searching for security and influence through the strong bilateral relationship that the state has with the superpower (Dragsdahl, 2005).

President Trump has critiqued Denmark's share of support for NATO, which was 1.2 per cent of GDP back in 2016. NATO has a goal of 2 per cent of GDP for every member. USA's support lies at 3.6 per cent of GDP. The current Danish government has been promising that the defense budget will increase in the years to come (Olesen, 2017).

As already mentioned, Greenland is seen as an important region for the Danish Arctic strategy to keep on the one hand a foot in Arctic cooperation, and on the other keeping the Kingdom of Denmark intact in relation to the sovereignty issue.

The Thule Air Base has always been used as a brick in the two-level game between NATO and Denmark. There are some who suggest that Denmark is paying less in return for having the American base present in Greenland.

### **Greenland in foreign and security policy**

In the period before the second World War Greenland was kept as a Danish trading colony and every major decision was made in Copenhagen. The Greenlandic society was kept away from international affairs (Heinrich, 2018). During the Second World War Greenland was under US protection due to the German occupation of Denmark. This also meant that the two governors in Greenland were given *de jure* authority over Greenland's foreign policy (Heinrich, 2018).

In 1995, a permanent Danish/Greenlandic official group was established in order to discuss all foreign and security matters that were related to Greenland. An agreement between the Greenlandic Home Rule and the Danish Foreign Minister was signed to have annual meetings regarding these issues (Taagholt, 2002: 87).

The Home Rule Government presented its initial position regarding the upgrade of the Thule Air Base on 19 November 1999. Greenland stated that an approval would not happen if the Agreement from 1951 was to be transgressed or if the Americans were to act unilaterally. Furthermore, the Home Rule Government wanted direct access in the discussions and that the upgrade would not lead to a negative impact on the existing world peace (Dragsdahl, 2005).

During the period from 2002 to 2004 Thule was being seen as less of a strategic problem and more as a strategic resource. The background being the occurrence of 9/11 and the change of government in Denmark in late 2001 (Dragsdahl, 2005). The two main parties in Denmark in power: the Liberals and the Conservatives were more sympathetic towards US requests (Archer, 2003). In 2003, Greenland and Denmark signed a joint declaration in Itilleq regarding the Greenlandic involvement in international affairs. Greenland was now given influence within foreign and security policy of significance for the island (Ackrén & Jakobsen, 2015). Another significant step was the signing of the Act Concerning the Conclusion of Agreements Under International Law by the government of Greenland (the so called Authorisation Act). This piece of legislation gives the government of Greenland the right to negotiate and conclude international agreements, which relates to the competences held by the authorities of Greenland (Loukacheva, 2007).

Local politicians and the Government of Greenland are welcoming the establishment of the reopening of an American representation in Nuuk, since this will give Greenland a more direct link to the USA. Greenland is waiting to see if this will further stimulate trade and investments with the North American continent and whether it will lead to possible flights between Greenland and the USA in the future, when the new extended runways are in place in Nuuk and Ilulissat. Shipping between Nuuk and the port in Portland Maine will already be a starting point during 2019 (*Naalakkersuisut*, 2019).

Recently, the Greenlandic Minister for Education, Culture, Church and Foreign Affairs, Ane Lone Bagger, met with high-level officials and politicians in Washington D.C. where she argued that it would be best if Greenland had the opportunity to get back the service contract for the Thule Air Base (*Sermitsiaq*, 2019). This has a symbolic value for local firms and people involved in logistics, cleaning and food transport.

### **Some future perspectives**

The future of the Thule Air Base seems to be withheld by the US. At the time being it is very much an American affair, since all contracts have been going to US firms, so in a sense the US has a strong hold on the base. The two-level and three-level games will probably continue between the three major players: the USA, Denmark and Greenland. However, with Greenland's aim to become independent in the future the positions in the games might change. Greenland might then have to play the two-level game directly with the US, and Denmark's role might be diminished in relation to the Thule Air Base. It is, though, doubtful if Greenland ever will have its own military and therefore the most likely scenario would be that Greenland takes shelter directly underneath the USA or NATO. This is usually a very common strategy amongst small states with Iceland as one prime example (Thorallsson & Steinsson, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Historically, Thule Air Base has been of utmost importance during the Second World War and the Cold War as a transit point and strategic placed base between the American and European continent. In the past with the Defense Agreement from 1941 and then a renewed Agreement from 1951 we see a level one game played out between the Kingdom of Denmark and the USA. With the Greenlandic development from a colony towards self-government we see that the island receives more power and competences and since 2004 with the Igaliku Agreement a three-level game has come into play. During the time of development also two-level games have been played out between the USA and the Kingdom of Denmark on the one hand, and between Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark on the other hand. The issue regarding Thule Air Base will still puzzle the Greenlandic Government and local politicians for years to come and it is also hard to detect what happens between the Danish and American Foreign Ministers at the state level. With more interest in Greenland and the upcoming renewed American representation in Nuuk maybe a clearer picture of what the US purposes are will come into the forefront.

Foreign and security policy usually contains a level of uncertainty with "top secret" documents and confidentiality between partners and therefore it is not always possible to receive all information about the exact relationships and what is going on behind the scenes.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank Klaus Brummer who acted as a discussant for the poster presentation at the ISA-2019 in Toronto, Canada and gave helpful and constructive comments on a very first draft of this article, as well as, the two anonymous reviewers for the Arctic Yearbook, who gave constructive comments on the first draft of the article.



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