



GREENLAND OBVIOUSLY HAS ITS OWN DEFENSE POLICY

– but it needs anchoring to be sustainable

Historically, Danish decisions have not always put Greenlandic interests first. Although defense policy is formally under Danish jurisdiction, decisions only have the legitimacy necessary if Greenland participates in the decision-making processes. Because in Greenland, military activities and installations interfere intimately with civic society.

Increased rivalry between the great powers in the Arctic produces challenging issues for the constitutional community consisting of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Denmark. Denmark and Greenland must make the role they each want to play in the international community clear and rethink the responsibilities and coordination procedures of the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Greenland should develop foreign policy strategies that address the dilemmas arising from the great powers' increased focus on the Arctic in general and Greenland in particular
- Denmark should get used to the fact that Greenland has its own considerations, interests, and positions in defense and security policy
- Danish parliamentary multiannual defense spending agreements should be based on real, equal, and respectful involvement of the Parliament and Government of Greenland
- The Parliament and Government of Greenland must develop more knowledge and capacity relating to security and defense policy

“ Denmark is slowly learning, that *not* involving Greenland thoroughly only creates problems. ”

Otherwise, Greenland and Denmark risk contributing to increased tension in the Arctic – and Greenland risks missing out on potential gains from the growing attention from the great powers.

Denmark can no longer rule alone

In February 2021, six Danish politicians, led by the Minister of Defense, presented an extension of the existing multiannual defense spending agreement dubbed the ‘Arctic Capacity Package’ of 1.5 billion DKK. The core budget elements came as a response to the U.S. demand for better airspace surveillance over Greenland and the North Atlantic. Hence, the budget was meant as a signal that Denmark makes an effort to live up to its responsibilities in the Arctic. Moreover, a new program for military training based in Greenland was on the drawing board.

If one refers exclusively to the provisions of the Danish Constitution and the Act on Greenland Self-Government one may get the impression that the Folketing and the Danish government are free to dispose in such matters. However, that is not the case in practice. Hence, the text of the agreement states how: “Political support from the Faroe Islands and Greenland to the radars and planned construction work is of key importance. The Danish Ministry of Defense has a close dialogue with the Faroe Islands and Greenland and looks forward to their responses and a continued close cooperation.”

Nevertheless, shortly after the publication of the Arctic Capacity Package, both Faroese and Greenlandic parliamentarians proclaimed that the two parliaments had not been adequately involved in the deliberations on the package. Following the April 2021 parliamentary election in Greenland, the newly formed Government of Greenland made it clear that the contents of the package needs to undergo a close scrutiny before Greenland potentially decides to approve.

Greenland must come off the fence

In Greenland, defense policy is closely intertwined with wider societal development. As part of the current distribution of responsibilities, the Danish Armed Forces handle tasks that are crucial for civilian society in Greenland – including parts of the fisheries inspections as well as search and rescue. Moreover, existing and planned military infrastructure interferes with the Self-Government’s plans for civilian infrastructure. A series of earlier Danish decisions and cover ups in defense matters lures in the background: Forced relocation of civilian population to make room for expanding the Thule Air Base, Danish acceptance of U.S. nuclear weapons in Greenland and pollution from military sites.

With these experiences in mind, it appears unsustainable for Greenlandic politicians not to involve in defense policy, just as it is unsustainable for Denmark to deny Greenland insight and involvement. Hence, over the years, standard procedures have been formalized to ensure that Denmark does not make decisions without the involvement of Greenland. Most recently, a new coordination committee involving the governments of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Denmark has been established, chaired by the Danish prime minister.

EXCERPTS FROM THE COALITION AGREEMENT “SOLIDARITY, STABILITY, GROWTH”, INUIT ATAQATIGIIT AND NALERAQ, APRIL 2021

“The coalition will work to ensure that Greenland appears increasingly independent on the foreign policy scene”

“Based on Greenland’s geographical location in the Arctic, we will demand greater influence on defense policy. We want to emphasize that Greenland must be demilitarized, and that nothing should happen about us without us”.

(translated from the Danish version)



The Arctic Capacity Package is presented without Greenlandic participation.

“ If Greenland wants to have the most influence, it requires clear and well-thought-out strategies with the long-term credibility made possible by a solid parliamentary base. ”

However, the underlying logic guiding these procedures and practices is that initiative and interests originate from either Copenhagen or Washington. Greenland's role has so far mainly been responsive (most often accepting U.S. and Danish initiatives). Correspondingly, the procedures have a hard time accommodating the way Greenland is increasingly acting on a strong desire to determine its own position in both the Arctic and globally. Greenland's increased self-awareness makes it both natural and necessary for it to take a stand in relation to military presence on its territory. This was expressed after the 2021 election in the government coalition agreement. If Denmark is to lend credibility to the constitutional community with Greenland by living up to the preamble of the Self-Gov-

ernment Act and “foster equality and mutual respect” to, it needs to take seriously that Greenland is formulating its own interests – also when it comes to defense policy.

Danish parliamentary traditions leave out Greenland

Making law in the Danish parliament is basically about counting a majority of 90. When it comes to core societal institutions – as the Armed Forces – a tradition has developed to make them solid over time by ensuring broader parliamentary majorities. The case of the Arctic Capacity Package illustrates that if such agreements should be sustainable, not just across Danish parliamentary elections but also across the North Atlantic, the participation of the Greenlandic

and Faroese political systems must be enhanced, and their approval ensured at an earlier stage.

Over the years, the Government of Denmark has indeed discussed some of the elements of the capacity package with changing Greenlandic ministers. However, the involvement appears to have been ad hoc – and the policy-making process has neither been transparent nor binding in relation to the Parliament of Greenland.

This is due to the fact that the Government of Greenland is not legally obliged to involve its parliament in the same way as the Government of Denmark has to involve the Danish parliament in matters of foreign and security policy. While this legislative lack of obligation might be considered a domestic issue for Greenlandic democracy, the fate of the Arctic Capacity Package shows that it also challenges the sustainability of Danish defense policy. And if it is not possible to make lasting contributions to common security and defense issues, it may challenge both Greenland's and Denmark's legitimacy as alliance partners. Ultimately, this

uncertainty may contribute to increased security tensions in the Arctic.

Greenland should make its own strategies

Denmark must get used to the fact that Greenland has distinct interests in relation to the great powers. Only on this basis, will it be possible for Denmark and Greenland to find lasting ways of cooperating that can accommodate differences and bring them closer together when necessary.

As the world powers' focus on the Arctic increases, decisions concerning Greenland will inevitably be made. Denmark is slowly learning, that not involving Greenland thoroughly only creates problems. If Greenland wants to have the most influence, it requires clear strategies that are well thought through. In recent years, the U.S. has made great efforts to signal goodwill towards Greenland. Greenland can only take full advantage of this situation if its strategies have the long-term credibility made possible by a solid parliamentary base.

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Read more: Olsvig & Gad: 'Grønland som udenrigs- og sikkerhedspolitisk aktør', in Rahbek-Clemmensen & Sørensen (eds.) *Sikkerhedspolitik i Arktis og Nordatlanten*. Published 2021 by DJØF Publishing

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