Greenland, the Island of Military Bases: 
Negotiations for Turning the Island into 
a Missile Defense Stronghold

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Introduction

In the wake of the Second World War numerous US military bases and meteorological 
stations were built in Greenland, the territory of Denmark in the Far North. Many of 
those were closed or transformed for civilian use after the end of the Cold War, but the 
Thule Air Force Base, the sixth American overseas base in the world in terms of asset 
value, continues to play an extremely important strategic military role. During the Cold 
War Era, the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line was established, and the base, with its
strategic Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) radars, served as an early warning post for the West. Since the end of the Cold War, with its anti-intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities, the base has played a part in the defense of North Atlantic. In contrast with the Keflavik naval and air force base in Iceland, also located in the Arctic, which was closed in 2006, the Thule base still receives large funding for adding missile defense capability.

Greenland has had to deal with various issues in relation to the Thule base. In 1950 the local indigenous population was forced to relocate because of the base construction, while secret “prior consultations” were conducted behind the curtains between the US and Denmark regarding the use of the base. In the 1960s Greenland had to face the reality of radiation contamination when an American bomber carrying four hydrogen bombs crashed at the base. At the same time it became apparent that, although Greenland had promulgated the policy of prohibiting the importation and deployment of nuclear weapons on its territory, such weapons were indeed present. A race in the development of nuclear weapons from the 1970s onwards further increased the importance of the Thule base, which is geographically located halfway between Washington and Moscow. In the second half of the 1980s, thanks to scholarly interviews and an increasing public disclosure of secret diplomatic documents, various problems from the Cold War era came to light. It became clear that the Thule base had not only functioned as a major communication and reconnaissance outpost for defending the American homeland but also possessed the capability of carrying out a nuclear attack on the Eastern bloc.

This prompted Greenland to consider policies that could put an end to its position of a ruled entity. What is interesting is that Greenland was made keenly aware of its position as a ruled entity in its asymmetrical power relations with the US and not in relation to Denmark. Instead of simply agreeing or disagreeing with Copenhagen’s decisions as a constituent of Denmark, what Greenland did was to request the powers to directly conduct negotiations with the US so as to be able to fulfil its responsibilities and duties as an agent constituting Denmark. In other words, rather than questioning the level at which it can accept the agreements reached in international talks, Greenland, from the standpoint of an internal constituent, sought to get actively involved in the talks with the US as one of the negotiators. Greenland saw the essence of the problem not in Denmark’s, but in the America’s rule. On the other hand, Denmark, reflecting on the history of its complicity with the US could not ignore Greenland’s wishes. Thus, in the 2003 Itilleq Declaration Greenland was given the status of an agent that can participate and exercise an influence equal to that of Denmark in matters regarding the Thule base.
Of course, the legal right to make the final decision lies with Denmark, and Greenland cannot negotiate on its own and make unilateral decisions. Nonetheless, Greenland’s ability to practically influence the negotiations based on the Itilleq Declaration should not be overlooked. This is because the local entity can, in practice, become one of the decision makers if the local voice is successfully incorporated in the legislature in the process leading up to its enactment, even if the final legislative act is in the hands of the central government. In 2004 Greenland actually participated in the negotiations regarding the modernization of the systems in the Thule base as part of the US missile defense plan. That year a multilateral agreement called the Igaliku Agreement, involving Denmark, the US and Greenland, was signed. In Greenland various opinions exist, including skepticism regarding the efficacy of the Itilleq Declaration and concerns regarding the inclusion of Greenland in the US missile defense shield. Nonetheless, in its efforts to actively participate in the negotiations as an internal constituent, we can see Greenland’s attempt to accept the reality that it is an island of military bases.

Here, after presenting an outline of the transformations of the Thule base, I will look back on the negotiation process in 2004 and attempt to shed light on the policy intentions of Greenland, which has been trying to play the role of an international negotiator while keeping the status of an internal constituent.

I  The debate regarding Missile Defense and Greenland’s Home-Rule

1. Year 2002 as the starting point

On 17 December 2002 Denmark received a request from the US to upgrade the Thule base in Greenland as a missile defense outpost. This was a part of the plan by the President George Bush administration to create a defense system that could intercept enemy’s missiles on multiple levels in accordance with their range and phase of flight. In Denmark and Greenland, even before that request, a continuous debate was conducted on the issue, triggered by an earlier statement on missile defense issued during the Clinton administration in 1999. In that debate Denmark opted to postpone the decision on the inclusion of the Thule base in the American missile defense shield, while Greenland was strongly opposed to the inclusion of its territory into the missile defense area.

The crucial point in Greenland’s opposition at that time was its understanding that boosting of missile defense is essentially one with the strengthening of offensive capabilities. Since the construction stage, Greenland had been asking for the Thule base to be defensive in character and strongly opposed to the type of missile defense that could
involve offensive capabilities. Opinions that saw the offensive character in the American missile defense plans, it should be noted, tended to problematize political issues that follow the deployment of a missile defense system (such as the critical reaction of countries regarded as possible enemies), rather than the technical aspects of that deployment or the military installations themselves. In other words, those critical of the missile defense tended to point out the factors that could potentially cause political instability, such as a military buildup, because they believed that boosting missile defense was inseparable from developing offensive capabilities, even though they were aware of the argument by the supporters of missile defense that the missile systems are technologically just a defensive tool. In that regard, the post 2002 dispute regarding the Thule base was no exception. Rather than being purely an argument about the theoretical grounds for missile defense, it became a clash of Nuuk’s and Copenhagen’s stances towards Washington. Thus, Greenland expressed a strong opposition to the upgrading of the Thule base.

However, on 6 August 2004 Greenland signed a comprehensive military agreement called the Igaliku Agreement. By doing so it accepted, to a certain extent, the incorporation of the Thule base into the US missile defense plans. Preceding the Igaliku Agreement, on 14 May 2003 Greenland acquired the powers to exercise autonomy in the field of security and was thus able to stand shoulder to shoulder with Denmark as one the signatories of the agreement. The question, then, is why did Greenland, which opposed the upgrading of the Thule base at the time the US submitted its request, later choose to accept? To shed light on this, I must first grasp the content of the debates regarding missile defense and understand Greenland’s defense and security situation, as well its aspirations for autonomy. Because Greenland made the turn in regard to the missile defense for the purpose of acquiring and enhancing its autonomy, while at the same time keeping in mind Denmark’s wish to maintain the alliance with the US.

In this paper I wish to set two tasks. First, upon offering an outline of Greenland’s defense and security situation, I wish to shed light on Greenland’s and Denmark’s intentions and expectations regarding the missile defense plan and the Igaliku Agreement. I shall do so by drawing on the information and knowledge gained from parliamentary and committee minutes, public hearing reports, newspapers and my own field interviews. Second, I wish to bring to light the reasons why Greenland expressed certain approval for the Igaliku Agreement despite being skeptical about the missile defense.

2. Reaction to the Missile Defense Plan

Missile defense became one of the topics of talks between Greenland and Denmark even
before the official request in 2002. The debate started after the Clinton administration issued a statement on missile defense in 1999. However, since 2002 the talks on that issue between Greenland and Denmark become more concrete. For example, in April 2003 in the Greenland’s Home-Rule Government headquarters a public hearing took place in which government officials, pundits and representatives of the people of Greenland took part (People residing in Qaanaaq, just next to the Thule base also participated). The discussion comprised not only of the question whether to accept the American request or not, but also of the question of what impact would missile defense have on the overall security of Greenland and the Danish state. Voices concerned that the missile defense plan would trigger an arms race and a military buildup could be heard all over the world, and in Greenland, right after the reception of the US request, the concern regarding the military buildup was also expressed in connection to the “offensive character” of the missile system.

3. Denmark’s Pro-American stance

Taking into consideration the anxiety towards the missile defense and various negative aspects accompanying it, Denmark exhibited caution, but, nonetheless, took an overall positive stance towards the strengthening of the missile capabilities in the Thule base. For example, former Danish foreign minister Niels Helveg-Petersen, who participated in the public hearing, expressed a relatively positive view: “I do not see missile defense as something that could make the Thule base a target of an attack.” A Danish politician Line Barfod outlined the path in which Greenland and Denmark could exchange their opinions and work on assuaging Greenland’s fears and accepting the missile plan, while also deepening the discussion about where the Danish state should go in the future. An American journalist James Brooke has characterized Denmark’s stance toward the US as a “charm offensive”. It may be said that Helveg-Petersen and Barfod’s statements embody that stance and are representative of Denmark’s attitude towards the US.

Since joining NATO in 1949, Denmark as a whole has been dependent on the US in terms of security. For Denmark, which regards itself as a small country, guaranteeing security for the territory of the whole country, including Greenland, has been a difficult task. By letting the US use Greenland’s territory, Denmark simultaneously addressed the problem of protecting the entire territory and secured an important position for itself in the alliance with the US. In that sense, it may be said that Greenland has played the role of a “bargaining space” for Denmark and the US. Bertel Heurlin has termed the relationship between Denmark and the US as “a sort of special
relationship". It is worth noting that Denmark’s pro-American stance was further deepened during the rule of the government headed by Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen from 2001 to 2009. Commenting on the foreign policy of the Fogh Rasmussen administration, Nobuhiko Yoshitake states remarks that “It has actively cooperated in the US war on terror, and continued to send Danish troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. That is a reaction different from other Scandinavian and EU countries.

The pro-American stance during the Fogh Rasmussen administration can be found in the words of Per Stig Møller, who served as Foreign Minister in that government. Touching on the present-day unipolar system with the US as the only global power, he stated the following: “If Denmark wishes to make its presence felt as a player in international politics, it has no other way but to establish direct and open cooperation with the US.” Furthermore, in a speech on the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks Lars Løkke Rasmussen, who led the country as Fogh Rasmussen’s successor in the Prime Minister’s seat from 2009 to 2011, called Denmark “one of America’s staunchest allies.” Denmark’s choice to entrust the defense of its whole country to the US is supported by its people’s pro-American sentiment, and has been inherited by successive governments. This pro-American stance has continued to be an important variable for explaining Danish foreign policy regarding missile defense. More than in the nitty-gritty of the military aspect, the ultimate goal of Denmark in the negotiations after the reception of the American request for incorporating Thule in its missile defense was in obtaining Greenland’s agreement and avoiding the transformation of the American request into a political issue between Copenhagen and Nuuk in the process. Denmark’s primary goal was to continue maintaining the above-mentioned alliance with the US.

4. The 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement as the Baseline for Negotiations

To achieve that goal, Denmark started considering a new mode in which the American request could be accommodated, while also showing consideration for Greenland’s wishes. In search for a new mode, Denmark chose to revise the 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement that gives guarantees for the presence of the Thule base. There were two reasons for that. One was the understanding that Greenland had desired a revision of that agreement since the late 1980s. For example, during the 2003 public hearing President of the Committee for Foreign Policy in the Danish Parliament Jens Hald-Madsen gave both the domestic and foreign public an indication of Denmark’s stance that missile defense plans should be considered in relation to the 1951 defense agreement and stated that Denmark should come closer to Greenland’s position: “I understand well the arguments
regarding missile defense in Greenland and Thule. And, of course, I understand that those arguments must have a certain impact on the 1951 defense agreement.” 20 Another reason why Denmark took the revision of the 1951 agreement as a departure point for the negotiations regarding missile defense is that the US showed a positive stance towards it. 21 Since the second half of the 1980s Greenland had been aspiring for a reexamination of the 1951 agreement that defines the role of the Thule base. Despite that, the revision of the agreement was not taken up for discussion for quite a while, because Denmark believed that the US did not desire such a change (or at least thought it unnecessary). According to the statement of Jensine Berthelsen, President of the Greenland Home-Rule Government Committee for Foreign Relations and Security at the above-mentioned public hearing, following the request by in December 2002, a revision of the defense agreement was proposed by the US, and Denmark, in response to that, decided to make the revision the baseline for the negotiations. 22 As already mentioned, Denmark’s policy priority was to continue maintaining the alliance with the US and to obtain Greenland’s approval for the American request while escaping the politicization of the issue. The negotiations about missile defense, in as much they were negotiations regarding the role of the Thule base, inevitably had to involve the discussion of the 1951 defense agreement as the baseline, which, as a consequence, provided Greenland with an opportunity to further acquire new powers and enhance its autonomy.

5. Debates on Autonomy and Missile Defense

In its negotiations with Denmark about missile defense, Greenland deftly read Denmark’s intentions as well as the security environment of the entire Danish state, and attempted to rectify its “marginal” position in that environment by adopting a moral stance. That meant attempting to renew the defense agreement and acquire further powers for autonomy. Greenland conducted negotiations with Denmark citing “the Thule affair” (which here stands for all the issues and accidents concerning the Thule base). In other words, at the hearing as well as in their local parliament and in direct talks with Denmark, Greenlanders were pointing out that the 1951 defense agreement, concluded in the colonial times, harshly restricted Greenland’s autonomy in the field of defense and security, and that such situation had since continued. For example, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) president Aqqaluk Lynge, in regard to the Thule affair and the debate on missile defense, called for the expansion of Greenland’s autonomy. 23 Danish scholar Kristian Søby Kristensen put forth an analysis in which he concluded that Greenland’s representatives had effectively used the moral authority Greenland possessed as a military
and political power resource to conduct negotiations in their favor. The gist of his argument is that Greenland made a moral appeal that its autonomy in the field of defense and security had been restricted by several incidents and accidents committed by Denmark and the US (i.e., by the 1951 defense agreement). This moral authority was based on the claim that the people of Greenland, like other indigenous peoples, is an “agent under the International Law” that has the ability to exercise the right to self-determination. That is, Greenland, in connection to the right of indigenous people to self-determination, made an appeal that its autonomy in the field of security was being restricted by the structure Denmark-US—the 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement.

What is important about this argument is that Greenland’s actions in the context of missile defense should not be understood in terms of opposition to Denmark (as a part of the interplay between separation and integration in the center-periphery relationship with the central government). For example, Josef Motzfeldt Deputy Premier of the Greenland’s Home-Rule Government was calling for the revision of the 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement between the US and the Kingdom of Denmark that brought about various incidents in the vicinity of the Thule base, but in doing so did not criticize Denmark as an agent, or the Danish state as a system. Rather, he was pushing for the revision in order to secure agency for Greenland because, according to him, Greenland “has a responsibility to act as an agent constituting the Danish state”.

Denmark, reflecting on its history as an “accomplice” of the US and taking into account the criticism of the international community regarding the Thule affair, had no choice but to accept the said requests by Greenland. In that sense, as Søby Kristensen adjudged, the negotiations regarding missile defense included the dimension of negotiations on Greenland’s autonomy. Denmark was not able to limit the negotiations on missile defense to the issue of its security relations with the US (that is, it was not able to conduct the negotiations by bypassing Greenland). Another reason why Greenland’s desire for autonomy became an important factor in the negotiations on missile defense can be found in the maturity of Denmark’s democracy. It is true that in recent years’ populist policies have been advanced by the Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti). For example, in an attempt to make it clear who enjoys rights, based on the logic of equality and exclusion, a new law on foreigners has been adopted that envisages the restriction of the number of immigrants and refugees accepted and urges the “foreigners” already living in Denmark (the Danish “other”) to better integrate. Because we can point out such, partial, changes in the Danish society, quickly linking Greenland’s autonomy with the maturity of the Danish democracy may seem too simplistic. However, past problems and
incidents, of which the Thule affair is a representative example, were, in general, discussed in the context of Denmark’s rule over the minority society of Greenland, and in such a context denying Greenland’s desires for autonomy was not a realistic option for Denmark. Denmark was pressed to find a solution acceptable to both sides in response to Greenland’s requests, because accepting Greenland’s claims to the largest possible extent was a necessity for Denmark if it was to avoid an international backlash.

II  Toward the Conclusion of the Igaliku Agreement

1. The Trigger for a Turnaround

In such circumstances, Denmark gave Greenland the powers for home-rule in the fields of defense and security through the 2003 Itilleq Declaration. This was an extremely rare move if we look at what had been the conventional approach in the world in relations between the mainland and the entity possessing autonomy in internal matters. This is because it can be said that Greenland, although the Denmark’s territory with internal autonomy, thus gained the powers in the field of external relations, within the state system. Greenland was now in the position that enabled it to influence Denmark’s decisions on the matters of defense and security. Of course, de jure the final decision still rested with the central government, i.e. Denmark. Nonetheless, Greenland’s de facto ability to exert influence cannot be ignored, as Mikiko Iwasaki points out: “Although the ultimate legislative powers lie in the hands of the central government, a local area can practically become one of the decision makers if its voice is reflected in the bills in the process leading up to the enactment of laws…” In that sense the Itilleq Declaration deserves a special mention here. In the history of Greenland-Denmark relations it can be regarded as the especially important turning point in the talks on missile defense that bestowed on Greenland the opportunity to participate in negotiations as an autonomous entity and, thus, exercise new rights. Mikaela Engell from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs made the following observation: “When trying to understand the foreign relations of the Danish state, one first has to bear in mind the existence of the Itilleq Declaration” . For that reason, what was required of Denmark was to pay attention to Greenland’s proposals and lead with caution, while maintaining the path of continuing alliance with the US.

2. Approval for the Igaliku Agreement

The results of the negotiations between Greenland and Denmark were submitted to the Danish Parliament on 26 May 2004 by the Danish Foreign Minister Stig Møller in the
form of a “Response” to the official request made by the US in December 2002. In the “Response”, it was written that Greenland and Denmark had achieved consensus that the forthcoming agreement (which later became known as the Igaliku Agreement) should not be restricted solely to the field of security, but would be a complex, three-point agreement that also includes economic and technological cooperation, as well as cooperation in the field of environmental protection. The “Response” became the basis of the Igaliku Agreement concluded on 6 August 2004. Two points in relation to the “Response” require attention. One is that it reflected Greenland’s argument to a fairly large extent. This was clearly visible in the fact that the forthcoming agreement was made multidimensional. Inuuteq Holm Olsen, Advisor on Foreign Relations in the Greenland Home-Rule Government explained the meaning of the Response in following words: “The ‘Response’ is a proof that Greenland and the US have established friendly cooperation in many areas”.

Thus, according to Olsen, even if the strategic military interest in Greenland should fall for some reason and the defense agreement should become an object of questioning, the provision on economic and technological cooperation would still be standing because Greenland’s relations with the US would not be determined by military matters alone. The Prime Minister of the Home-Rule Government Hans Enoksen expressed the same opinion. At a New Year meeting held in January 2006 Enoksen emphasized the need of forging multilevel ties with the US: “The cooperation between Greenland and the US has entered a new phase. We have established a Joint Committee consisting of Greenland, Denmark and the US, and have made a huge progress thanks to the efforts of all the parties”.

Another point worth mentioning in regard to the “Response” is that in it Greenland and Denmark officially agreed to the 2002 US request. Greenland’s approval can be viewed as a switch from an opposing stance. If one only looks at the surface, since the approval was given for the 2002 request, it would seem that Greenland agreed to the missile defense. Although the term “missile defense” does appear in several places in the “Response”, it was emphasized that the word “consent” did not mean the consent to missile defense, but rather to “the upgrading of the radars in the Thule base”. The official view in Greenland was that it agreed to the request for upgrading the base and not to the missile defense. Denmark also emphasized that its consent as stated in the “Response” referred to the upgrading of the radars in the Thule base. Thus, what Greenland and Denmark both agreed to was not the inclusion of the Thule base into the US missile defense system.
3. The Igaliku Agreement and Greenland

On 6 August 2004 a complex agreement known as the Igaliku Agreement was concluded based on the “Response” submitted by Stig Møller on 26 May of the same year. The agreement followed the content of the Response and consisted of the “consent to update the 1951 defense agreement”, a “joint statement on economic and technological cooperation” and “joint statement regarding environment”. In other words, the Igaliku Agreement is a package consisting of one agreement and two joint statements. It is worth repeating that the starting point of the negotiations that led to the Igaliku Agreement is the 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement, and that an update of that agreement forms the core of the Igaliku Agreement. Nonetheless, as indicated by the following comment by Stig Møller, it is impossible to deny the importance of the remaining two parts of the agreement for the future of the alliance between Greenland, Denmark and the US: “The Agreement we are signing today is bringing a qualitatively new meaning to our relationship. This agreement reminds us of the growing influence of the US and of Greenland as its collaborator. One of the items the agreement is made of is related to defense, but the US will be present in Greenland through a wider cooperation that will also include research on environment, trade and tourism”.

The Igaliku Agreement is a trilateral agreement between Greenland, Denmark and the US that followed Stig Møller’s “Response”. It is important to note that in the agreement there is a clear reference to Greenland as an autonomous entity in external relations. In the first part of the agreement that refers to the updating of the 1951 agreement, Greenland is referred to as an “equal partner” with Denmark and the US. This meant that Greenland was able to engage in the talks on an equal footing with Denmark and the US. Herein lies the crucial difference with the 1951 defense agreement.

However, there was also an important difference between the Igaliku Agreement and the Response. Namely, the term “missile defense” that barely managed to find its way into the Response was completely left out of the Igaliku Agreement. This fact leads to discussions about what it was that the signatories agreed on and to heated debates in many venues, such as academia and media. The question was: why is it that there is no mention of missile defense in an agreement that was being developed in parallel with the negotiations on missile defense and represented the conclusion of those negotiations? To state the answer first - this had a lot to do with the turn in Greenland’s stance on missile defense. Needless to say, Greenland opposed to the transformation of the Thule base into a stronghold for missile defense and only chose to agree when the base upgrade was limited to a radar upgrade. For example, the above-quoted Olsen insisted that the Igaliku
Agreement only involved the upgrading of the radars in Thule, and one of the signees Josef Motzfeldt from the Home-Rule Government also emphasized several times in an interview for the Greenland newspaper *Sermitsiaq* that Greenland’s negotiators agreed on nothing more than an upgrade of the radars at Thule. Motzfeldt insisted that the US request in 2002 only called for “minor changes” such as “the improvement of the radar installations” (although it contained the term “missile defense”) (See the text of the official request). He stated that the US would have to submit a new request if the base was to be transformed into a missile defense hub, thus distinguishing the Igaliku Agreement from missile defense. The fact that missile defense is not mentioned at all in the Igaliku Agreement shows that Greenland’s arguments were fully adopted. In relation to that, Denmark, which wanted to avoid confrontation with Greenland, gave priority to incorporating Greenland’s wishes into the agreement, at least on the surface. That is why no mention of missile defense was made.

However, several problems that should not be overlooked emerged regarding the agreement. First, although the part of updating the 1951 defense agreement boldly talks about changes intended for bringing it up to date, the Igaliku Agreement, in fact, follows the crux of the old agreement. For example, Article 1 of the section on upgrading the 1951 defense agreement entitled “Defense Areas” states that the Thule base is the only defense area in Greenland. Similarly, Article II of the 1951 defense agreement refers to the establishment of new defense areas and, accords the US the right “to construct, install, maintain and operate facilities and equipment” in the Thule base (Article II, IIIb ii). Furthermore, in the second article of the section on updating the 1951 document in the Igaliku Agreement entitled “NATO Status of Forces Agreement (NATO SOFA)” it is stated the parties consent that article VII of the 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement shall serve as a complementary agreement to NATO SOFA. The article VII, however, states that the importation into Greenland of any tools, equipment and supplies required for the functioning of the base will be permitted, and that they will not be subjected to inspection or taxation. Therefore, it is questionable whether this is the update that Greenland sought. That is, doubt remains whether the agreement means that Greenland has managed to break out from the Cold-War era center-periphery relationship with the US (Article VII.1).

The second problem is the relationship between the Igaliku Agreement and missile defense. As already mentioned, although developed in parallel with the negotiations on missile defense, the agreement contains no mention of missile defense. Greenland insisted that it had agreed to the upgrading of the base radars, but not the upgrade of missile
defense. However, radars are an extremely important part of any missile defense. Thus, although the term “missile defense” was not included, it cannot be said that the Thule base has nothing to do with the US missile defense plans and the strengthening of that defense. As proof of this, a statement by the base commander Thomas Walker can be cited. Asked about the meaning of the Igaliku Agreement, he said that the possibility now exists to equip the base with the systems necessary for dealing with possible attacks from countries which he termed “rogue states” - a term often brought up in justifications of the missile defense shield\(^3\). Thus, it may be said that the Igaliku Agreement includes possibilities that could be a source of concern for Greenland’s future security.

The third issue is the problem of the flexibility of the 2003 Itilleq Declaration, a point that can also be found in the remarks of the Greenland’s government official Mininnguaq Kleist. Thanks to that declaration, Greenland acquired the right to autonomy. However, that autonomy is inevitably restricted by the Article 19 of the Danish Constitution which envisages legal supremacy of Denmark in foreign relations. Such a restriction could clearly be seen in the Article 11 of the 1978 law guarantying Greenland’s internal autonomy. In it, it was stated that Denmark “holds the jurisdiction in matters that can affect external relations of the Danish state.” Therefore, Greenland still faced a strong legal restriction of its status as an autonomous entity in external relations. In that sense, it may be said that Denmark succeeded in having Greenland smoothly accept the American request by giving it some additional powers for home-rule, and that on top of that it managed to show its loyalty to the US.

4. The Truth about the Updating of the 1951 Agreement on the Defense of Greenland

The reason Greenland accepted the Igaliku Agreement is that, after the 2003 Itilleq Declaration, it was able to have its aspirations reflected in the agreement. Thanks to the declaration, Greenland managed to acquire the right to have a certain say, not only in internal, but also in external matters. Using those new powers, Greenland achieved the status of an “equal partner” with Denmark and the US in revising the 1951 “Defense of Greenland: Agreement between the US and the Kingdom of Denmark” that guaranteed the existence of the Thule base. However, on the other hand, Greenland’s turn from opposition to approval also caused concern in the sense that it brought about the possibility that Greenland’s security situation might become unstable. In this section, I wish to give a brief outline of what might be the future impact of that Greenland’s policy turn. As a hint of what might come I would first like to quote a comment by the then Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was one of the signees of the Igaliku Agreement, together with
Stig Møller and Josef Motzfeldt. At the time of the signing, Powell declared that the goal was for all the parties to cooperate together to build a 21-century security environment that could deal with international terrorism, and used the term “missile defense” during the speech although he was talking about the agreement that contains no mention of missile defense\(^{38}\). Since he made no reference to the Czech Republic, it is conceivable that Powell thought of the radar installations in Greenland when talking about missile defense, but I have no space here to go into that question deeper. John David Holum, who served as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security during the administration of President Bill Clinton, said that “Thule is a basic element in the N.M.D. architecture”\(^{39}\). Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Space and Defense Policy Frank Rose has even expressed gratitude to Denmark and Greenland for being among the first supporters of the missile defense shield and for not sparing efforts to improve the Thule base\(^{40}\). Powell’s statement has a strong resemblance with Holum’s and Rose’s views.

However, the negotiations regarding the strengthening of the Thule base were revolving more around the notion that the offensive character should somehow be removed from it, than around the theoretical grounds for missile defense. In that sense, from Powell’s words one can see a marked discrepancy between Greenland’s and US’s understanding of the Igaliku Agreement. In the section on updating of the 1951 defense agreement (Preamble of the agreement), striving for international peace and peaceful coexistence were listed as the main duties of the Thule base, but Powell spoke of its purpose in connection with missile defense. Powell’s speech, consequently, added fuel to the debate about what was being agreed to that was raging since Møller’s “Response” in 2004. Political scientist Ole Waaver, upon pointing the above mention difference in perception, concluded that in the Igaliku Agreement “Greenland did not only accept the upgrading of radars, but in effect also agreed to accept the concept of missile defense itself”\(^{41}\). According to him, the US had already given Greenland the “compensation” for that by letting Greenland take part in the negotiations as an autonomous entity in external relations and by accepting to add economy and technology, as well as environment to the package to be agreed on. Waaver also warned that in the future the US would probably gradually strengthen the capability of the Thule base (by, for example, adding more capability for intercepting missiles). In his opinion, the Igaliku Agreement was a compensation that was necessary in order to secure a smooth realization of American commitment to Greenland in the future.

5. Voluntary Agreement

The debate about the meaning of the Igaliku Agreement continues even today. The one
undisputable fact about it is that Greenland agreed to it voluntarily. This is very important in terms of predicting Greenland’s future in the field of defense and security. Because Greenland accepted the position of a constituent of the missile defense shield practically of its own free will. Jan Øberg in his paper in which he analyzes the meaning of the Igaliku Agreement writes: “By concluding the Igaliku Agreement of its own free will and by establishing an alliance with the US, Greenland has made further distancing from the US foreign policy difficult”\(^{(42)}\). Øberg thus portrays Greenland as headed for a voluntary confinement. Øberg also poses the question whether the Igaliku Agreement would be accepted if it had been put to a vote at a referendum. The conclusion of the agreement was to a large extent the result of the Home-Rule Government’s pursuit of interests and gains rather than the choice of the people. Furthermore, political scientist Nikolaj Petersen, expressing concern about the increase of the influence of the US on Greenland, remarks that “the establishment of broad ties with the US, in effect, increased the presence of the US in Greenland”\(^{(43)}\). He concludes his paper by pointing out that with the Igaliku Agreement the two-way relationship between Greenland and Denmark turned into a complicated three-way or trilateral relationship, and that future policy making regarding security will be fraught with difficulties. In fact, upon the conclusion of the Igaliku Agreement, Russia expressed concern regarding the incorporation of Greenland into the American missile defense shield\(^{(44)}\). Due to the melting of Greenland’s ice sheet and the emerging issue of conflicting interests in the Arctic in recent years, the Thule base has been slated to become the domicile for the North Pole Forces that would include warplanes and quick reaction forces. If we analyze Greenland’s security environment, we cannot deny the possibility that, depending on future developments, Greenland may come under pressure from Russia. However, advisor on foreign relations in the Greenland Home-Rule Olsen opined that Øberg’s and Petersen’s analyses are “overtly critical and do not reflect reality” and urged a more a balanced approach in assessing the practical role of the Thule base in the missile defense plans\(^{(45)}\). In any case, the Igaliku Agreement is the first agreement in the field of defense and security that Greenland signed as an autonomous entity and what is certain is that the agreement has taken Greenland into a situation it had never before experienced.

**Concluding Remarks: The Future of the Trilateral Relationship**

The purpose of this paper was to examine the change in Greenland’s position between the time of the American request for upgrading the capabilities of the Thule base and the
time of the signing of the Igaliku Agreement. The change in Greenland’s position regarding the strengthening of the missile defense capabilities in the base from that of opposition to that of approval was closely related to the past events in the field of security, that is, to the incidents and accidents here termed as the Thule affair. Greenland, it seems, did not view the changing American strategic interest, i.e., the establishment of the DEW Line, the radar position belonging to the BMEWS, as the missile defense concept as the core of the problem. Rather, it found the 1951 Defense Agreement that brought about the Thule affair as the core source of concern, criticized it and requested its revision. The debate about missile defense for Greenland meant the revision of its position of a periphery in the field of defense and security (especially in relation to the US). The 2003 Itilleq Declaration and the 2004 Igaliku Agreement were meaningful for Greenland in terms of overcoming of the peripheral position in relation to the US and establishing its autonomy. However, as Petersen points out, it is not easy to predict what kind of impact, positive or negative, will the influence of Greenland, which managed to acquire broad powers even though it is not a sovereign state, have on the trilateral defense and security relations (especially on the relations with the US). Thus, a good sense for balancing between its broad autonomy rights and strategic military position is increasingly becoming a necessity for Greenland if it is to strive for stability in the field of defense and security.

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