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**Nikolaj Petersen. "SAC at Thule: Greenland in the U.S. Polar Strategy." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13:2 (Spring 2011): 90-115. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00138.**

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Review by **Poul Villaume**, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

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**H**istorical research on the nuclear polar strategy of the U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC), as far Greenland is concerned, has received little attention so far in Cold War literature in the English language. Hence, Nikolaj Petersen's excellent and well-researched overview of this important aspect of U.S. military strategy during the early Cold War is to be welcomed.

The significance and scope of the SAC polar strategy and of the Thule Air Base in North Western Greenland in the 1950s and the 1960s is illustrated by Petersen's mentioning of the dramatic Operation Power House in December 1956, shortly after the crises over Suez and Hungary: a total of some 900 SAC bombers with tanker aircraft flew simulated missions over the North Pole as part of the nuclear Airborne Alert flights programme, which would continue over Greenland until 1968 (103). A few months earlier, in the Spring of 1956, Thule was also used when more than 50 SAC reconnaissance aircraft and/or bombers with tanker aircraft photographically and electronically mapped the high north areas of the Soviet Union, culminating in SAC bombers flying in attack formation in broad daylight several hundred miles into northern Soviet air territory. Moscow launched a diplomatic protest, but according to Petersen, Soviet authorities probably never realized the full scope of the risky operation (108).

Using the "bottom-up" perspective as methodological approach, Petersen manages to unfold a fascinating narrative of the highly secretive offensive and defensive preparations for war by the U.S. military in the remote arctic areas of Greenland, mainly as seen from the local and operational ground level. In passing, Petersen also touches upon the small state "bottom-up" perspective of the Danish authorities on the activities of U.S. military on what was after all – albeit remote – Danish territory. However, this latter perspective could have been elaborated somewhat more in order to explain more fully the remarkable

freedom of action enjoyed by the U.S. military in Greenland, and in order to illustrate the delicate position of the Danish Government during the 1950s and 1960s with respect to the enforcement of its sovereignty in Greenland.

Hence, a few supplementary points on the perspective of Danish authorities in Copenhagen may be useful. First, there are no indications that Denmark became an original signatory of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 *because of* its possession of Greenland. The strategic interests of the United States in Greenland were so strong that the island would have been included in U.S. national security arrangements even if Denmark had chosen to stay outside of the Atlantic Treaty; indeed, some Pentagon analysts regarded militarily weak and exposed Denmark as a liability rather than an asset for the new North Atlantic alliance.

Yet at the same time, for bureaucratic reasons Danish membership was seen in Washington as convenient since this would automatically include Greenland. From the perspective of Danish decision makers, the hope was that Danish membership in the Atlantic Alliance would change negotiations over the strategic role of Greenland from a bilateral Danish-U.S. relationship in which the great power would inevitably have the upper hand, to a multilateral transatlantic framework where U.S. bargaining power would be balanced by that of the European powers. In this sense, Danish hopes were not met, as witnessed as early as 1951 by the Greenland Defense Agreement; while formally negotiated in the framework of NATO, the agreement was in effect a purely bilateral U.S.-Danish affair which, as Petersen correctly notes, gave the U.S. military near-total freedom of action in Greenland.

Even so, and in return, at times Danish decision makers played with the option of using what was confidentially termed ‘the Greenland card’ as a lever to obtain other benefits – U.S. arms supplies, and U.S. and NATO acceptance of a somewhat lower Danish contribution to the common defense effort, including the ban on permanent U.S./NATO air bases (1953) and nuclear weapons (1957/58) on (southern) Danish soil – a cautious posture taken by the Danish front-line small state for non-provocative reasons, facing the Soviet neighbouring Bloc.<sup>1</sup>

However, there are few if any indications at all that the ‘Greenland card’ was actively used by Danish officials in their dealings with the Americans over NATO issues.<sup>2</sup> The main reason is that beyond the strategic value of Greenland, Denmark possessed other assets of importance to the U.S. and the Atlantic Alliance: As a social-liberal democratic and egalitarian country with a strongly anti-Communist population, Denmark was a sort of

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<sup>1</sup> See Poul Villaume, “Neither Appeasement Nor Servility: Denmark and the Atlantic Alliance, 1949-1955”, in: *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 89:2, 1989, 155-179.

<sup>2</sup> Poul Villaume, *Allieret med forbehold. Danmark, NATO og den kolde krig. En studie i dansk sikkerhedspolitik 1949-1961* (Copenhagen: Eirene, 1995), 278f., 850 ff.

Western showcase in the ideological Cold War competition in Europe; in addition, valuable signal intelligence facilities close to the East Bloc in the Baltic Sea region (including the island of Bornholm) could be used by NATO.

Apart from this, the basic Danish approach to the activities of the U.S. military in Greenland during these two decades may aptly be characterized as that of the three famous monkeys – do not see, do not listen, do not talk. Danish authorities realized that there was little if anything Danish authorities could – or even should – do to influence U.S. activities or overriding U.S. strategic interests in Greenland; hence, officials in Copenhagen were inclined to choose to take at face value what their American counterpart told them (which certainly wasn't much anyway) about the vital importance of Greenland in general and the Thule base in particular to the overall Western nuclear deterrence posture towards the Soviet Union. This much was confidentially admitted to the British ambassador to Denmark by Danish Prime and Foreign Minister H.C. Hansen in April 1957.<sup>3</sup> In essence, this was also the rationale behind the crafty 'non-response' of H.C. Hansen to the secret U.S. request to him in late 1957 concerning the deployment of nuclear munitions at Thule.

Nevertheless, officially the territory of Greenland was always included in the formal Danish policy of banning nuclear weapons on Danish soil in peacetime. As accurately noted by Petersen (106), while constitutionally Greenland was part of Denmark, mentally the remote island belonged to a different category for most Danes. Significantly, it should be added, even the otherwise well-informed and outspoken activists of the independent Danish anti-nuclear weapons movement of the early 1960s choose to completely ignore the issue of U.S. military activities in Greenland.<sup>4</sup>

Also, it is well documented that at least by 1966, during an official visit at the SAC Headquarter in Nebraska, Danish Prime Minister J.O. Krag was informed about the Airborne Alert routine flights over Greenland territory by B-52 bombers carrying hydrogen bombs.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding this fact, when a B-52 bomber with four hydrogen bombs crashed at Thule in January 1968, Mr. Krag officially claimed to be surprised; released Danish archival material reveals that subsequently even Danish parliamentarians from the highly anti-nuclear and NATO sceptical political parties chose to show a very

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<sup>3</sup> Poul Villaume, *Ibid.*, 851; Thorsten Borring Olesen & Poul Villaume, *I blokopdelingens tegn, 1945-1972. Dansk Udenrigspolitik Historie*, vol. 5 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2005), 193-200, 313-323, 640-643: p. 851.

<sup>4</sup> Dansk Udenrigspolitisk Institut [DUPI], *Grønland under den kolde krig* (Copenhagen: DUPI, 1997), 451-484.

<sup>5</sup> Borring Olesen & Villaume, *I blokopdelingens tegn*, 568.

low profile on this issue, despite the obvious U.S. violation of Danish proclaimed policies.<sup>6</sup>

The quiet consensual Danish position on U.S. polar strategies in Greenland outlined here, verging on being a non-policy, reflected the pragmatic survival strategy of the exposed Danish small state during tense periods of the early Cold War. In contrast, at the same time Danish diplomacy was all the more active, at times even activist, in pursuing and blazing the trail for East-West détente during the 1960s, culminating in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) process of the 1970s in which Denmark played a not insignificant role, along with other smaller European countries in and outside of NATO.<sup>7</sup> Here, in the European theatre, Danish foreign policies could make a difference by diplomatic and political means, as opposed to illusory or even unwanted attempts to influence the military priorities of the friendly super power in Greenland -- priorities which Nikolaj Petersen's article demonstrates so well.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 635-644; DUPI: *Grønland under den kolde krig*, 470-477.

<sup>7</sup> Poul Villaume & Odd Arne Westad, "Introduction: The Secrets of European Détente", in Poul Villaume & Odd Arne Westad (eds.): *Perforating the Iron Curtain: European Détente, Transatlantic Relations, and the Cold War, 1965-1985* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 15 f.; Borring Olesen & Villaume, *I blokdelingens tegn*, 575-595, 648-665.