

Denmark wants to claim the North Pole

According to a leaked draft of the official strategy for the Arctic, Denmark will make an official claim for the territorial rights for the North Pole before the UN deadline in 2014. This approach marks a new direction for its Arctic strategy: From now on, human needs must go before the needs of the environment

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For the first time, a Danish government now officially states that annexation of the North Pole into the Danish Realm is to be one of Denmark's official policy objectives.

This is spelled out in a draft of the official joint Danish-Greenlandic-Faroese strategy for the next 10 years in the Arctic, to be released in June. The document, which has been leaked, makes it clear that »the Kingdom [of Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands] is expected to claim the continental shelf at five sites around the Faroe Islands and Greenland, including the North Pole.« Previously, several Danish government ministers have suggested intentions to this effect, but this is the first documentation that the goal will be official Danish policy - and thereby susceptible to controversy with Russia and other nations with major interests at stake in the North Pole.

The seabed at the North Pole is not expected to harbour any noticeable deposits of oil or gas, and with water depths at 4,300 meters, oil og gas extraction of such ressources would at any rate be rather difficult. Nevertheless, the draft official paper on an Arctic strategy contains no other suggestion as to why the annexation of the North Pole should be considered an important priority. Notwithstanding, it is stated that the Danish-Greenlandic territorial claim on the North Pole will be put forward to UN no later than 2014. Privately, Greenland's Premier, Mr. Kuupik Kleist, professes the viewpoint that the North Pole should remain the property of mankind, but this idea is not mentioned anywhere in the draft of the official strategy.

Full speed ahead on oil

With *Strategy For The Arctic Regions 2011-2020*, the Danish government agrees to the principle that any extraction of large deposits of oil and gas Greenland would first and foremost require that due consideration is taken to the Greenlanders. The paper stresses that the Greenlandic government itself must decide which environmental considerations should apply to oil and gas extraction.

This marks another important victory for Greenland's government. Greenland has been pushing very hard to put the interests of the Arctic people over the strong focus on environmental issues, polar bears and climate change, which has so far dominated the international debate on the Arctic. Only last week, Greenland's Premier, Kuupik Kleist, stood up for this point of view at the Arctic Council session in Nuuk, where U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, attended for the first time. In the new Danish-Greenlandic strategy, it is stated that »it is a key objective for the Kingdom [of Denmark] that all decisions regarding the management and use of resources and the protection of the environment should be taken by the Arctic peoples of the Kingdom themselves.« It is emphasized that oil and gas exploration should only be done in accordance with the sharpest security measures, but the overarching priority of Greenland's economic development needs is now established.

The draft strategy describes the Greenland's cooperation relationship with the Scottish oil company Cairn Energy that found the first traces of oil off Greenland in 2010 as »very positive«, and Greenland's environmental requirements for the company are characterised as »high«. At the same time, the paper points out that Greenland and the Faroe Islands will continue to be »coveted areas for exploration« for oil companies. In this context, the strategy also confirms the ambitious oil plans, that Greenland's government has already put forward: Even

the heavily ice-plagued waters off the northernmost East Greenland are now to be opened for international companies. This extension of Greenland oil concessions which are the northernmost in the world will take place already in 2012.

There is no mention of the fact that Greenland's Home Rule Government just recently granted Cairn Energy permission to conduct new test drillings at water depths down to 1,500 meters this coming summer. During the oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, Greenland was invited to postpone Cairn's test drillings until the causes of the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico were better known. The Greenlandish authorities chose, however, to proceed without any delay, the reason being that the drillings in Greenland in 2010 were to take place at significantly lower water depths than the ones at the crashed drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, which were carried out at 1,500 meters depth. This year, Greenland has given its approval of deep water wells.

A binding strategy

The new Arctic Strategy will also bind a possible new centre-left-government [2011 is election year in Denmark] but a change of government could instigate interesting discussions with Greenland. After the latest Arctic Council session in Nuuk, Mr. Steen Gade – environment policy spokesman for Socialistisk Folkeparti [the likely junior partner in a new centre-left government] – has called for consultations with Denmark's foreign minister, Mrs. Lene Espersen, in the parliamentary environment committee and proposed new international treaty rules for the development of the Arctic region, where environmental concerns should take precedence. Still since 2008, the idea of an increased international regulation has been fiercely resisted by Greenland's home rule government as well as by Denmark, the U. S. A., Russia, Norway and Canada.

For Greenland and Denmark, a looser cooperation within the Arctic Council is the higher preference. Mr. Kuupik Kleist and Mrs. Lene Espersen were both very optimistic after the meeting in Nuuk, where for the first time its 15 years history, the Arctic Council

adopted a binding agreement for its eight member countries. The agreement may be modest in scope and deals primarily with emergency services for the benefit of seamen and tourists, but Espersen and Kleist believes that with time, the agreement will pave the way for further binding agreements, for instance on joint cleaning-up operations in the Arctic in case of oil spills. Observers of the environmental movement, including the WWF, were less optimistic, though. WWF criticized the Arctic Council for focusing solely on measures of cleaning up rather than preventing oil spills and to completely abstain from taking concrete steps to reduce climate change.

Gunpowder and bullets

The new Arctic Strategy cements plans for a stronger Danish military focus on the Arctic. Danish warships in the Arctic are already patrolling more intensively in the northernmost waters of Greenland than they used to and this will continue. In future, the Danish war ships will be given access to diesel fuel and other supplies at the U.S. base in Thule, thus enabling them to sail even further to the north. Greenland's Command and The Faroese Command is to merge into a common Arctic Command in Nuuk. The abilities of Denmark's Defence to engage in »sharp operations« in the Arctic must be reinforced with an »Arctic Reaction Force«. This force is to consist of soldiers with specific Arctic training, who can be mobilised and deployed from Denmark if the need arises. The idea of deploying fighter planes in Greenland which was mentioned in the latest defense agreement for 2010-2014, is however not mentioned in the new Arctic strategy.

Martin Breum is a Danish journalist. In March, he published the book: When the Ice disappears – Denmark as a major power in the Arctic, oil in Greenland and the struggle for the North Pole.