

THE GREENLAND TABOO  
AND  
DANISH ARCTIC POLICY

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## **1. Introduction**

As the ice melts at an increasing pace, the Arctic region continues to gain geo-political importance in the international system due to new trade opportunities and changes to international maritime borders. The region has long played an important role in securing global influence and security, as shown by the central role it played in U.S. missile and anti-air defense against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Today, securing a position in the Arctic is once again a goal for states who want to remain economically, politically, and strategically competitive in the international system. Greenland lies at the crux of this power competition with its almost 2.2 million square kilometers of territory Northeast of the North American mainland, which boasts access to important waterways, an abundance of natural resources and advantageous geo-strategic positioning in relation to the U.S., Canada and the Russian Federation. However, Greenland presents quite a conundrum as it, despite covering a landmass that is 50 times the size of Denmark proper, only holds the equivalent of 1% of Denmark's population and is therefore heavily dependent on Denmark's military and economic resources to maintain territorial sovereignty. This lays the basis for a complex give and take relationship between Denmark and Greenland, which are both interdependent. Greenland needing Denmark for maintenance of territorial integrity and Denmark needing Greenland to secure continued access and influence on the global stage. This relationship has long been contentious and presents both countries with significant challenges.

For better or worse, 2018 was an eventful year for Danish-Greenlandic relations with several Greenland-related cases topping the Danish political agenda and receiving significant coverage by the press. This comes at a time of reckoning for Denmark regarding its

relationship with Greenland and status as an Arctic nation thanks to Greenland's inclusion in the Kingdom of Denmark. In recent years, the Arctic has gained traction in Denmark's strategic discussions and was determined one of the top five security priorities in the 2015-2017 Foreign and Security Policy Strategy for the first time in history, maintaining a position in the top six priorities for the 2018-2019 Strategy.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the high priority assigned to the Arctic, a major obstacle continues to haunt Denmark's strategic maneuverability and decision-making in the region, and thereby also its positioning, namely, the Greenland taboo. The taboo permeates Danish-Greenlandic relations in the security and foreign policy field, for which decisions remain under Danish purview, by continuously fomenting distrust between the parties and restricting Denmark's self-perceived ability to discuss controversial topics and make decisions for fear of offending Greenland's government.

As elaborated on in the following, although the literature does mention the taboo in passing and often uses it as an explanation for Denmark's actions in the Arctic, no academic studies focus purely on the taboo, its manifestation and effects. This paper seeks to fill that gap by answering three questions:

1. Why does the Greenland taboo exist?
2. How does the Greenland taboo manifest itself in modern-day Danish-Greenlandic relations in the security realm?

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<sup>1</sup> "Udenrigs- og Sikkerhedspolitisk Strategi 2017-2018", *Regeringen*, June 14th, 2017, <https://www.regeringen.dk/publikationer-og-aftaletekster/udenrigs-og-sikkerhedspolitisk-strategi-for-2017-2018/>; "Udenrigs- og Sikkerhedspolitisk Strategi 2019-2020", *Regeringen*, <http://um.dk/da/udenrigspolitik/aktuelle-emner/udenrigs-og-sikkerhedspolitisk-strategi-2019-20/>.

3. How can policy-makers deal with the taboo in order to strengthen the Kingdom of Denmark internally, while solidifying its position in the Arctic?

The paper is organized in six sections set up to develop answers to these questions through reviews of the literature, analyses of case studies and conducting interviews with experts and involved parties. Section one outlines the methods adopted to investigate the topic. Section two looks into the joint history of Denmark and Greenland to illustrate past developments that have led to the contemporary relationship. Section three provides an overview of current literature on the Greenland taboo and the explanations currently provided on its causes. Section four explores three recent security-related cases involving Denmark and Greenland to uncover and identify the main drivers, manifestations and effects of the Greenland taboo. Section five discusses the findings, their implications and limitations, while section six concludes and makes policy recommendations.

## **2. Methods**

Several methods are used to explore the Greenland taboo. First, the literature was surveyed to understand the historical background and academic frameworks that explain the phenomenon. This survey offers insights into ways the taboo has manifested itself and provides some explanations for its occurrence. The literature is comprised by primary sources, including policy documents and media interviews with central actors, as well as secondary sources such as history books, academic reports, opinion pieces and podcasts. Second, three cases studies have been analyzed to explore how the Greenland taboo manifests itself in contemporary interactions between Denmark and Greenland. These case studies followed the Delphi method of openly exploring the cases to uncover what they say about the phenomenon under study.

Third, interviews have been conducted with central actors in Danish-Greenlandic decision-making to gain a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of the Greenland taboo and explore different perspectives between Greenlandic, Danish and American actors. All interviews were anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

### **3. Danish-Greenlandic History**

Danish-Greenlandic relations are shaped by a history of colonialism and contested sovereignty. Insight into these developments is important to understand the current situation and what has shaped the post-colonial identities of both countries and the approaches they take towards the world and the Arctic more specifically.

#### **Early History**

Greenland is the biggest island in the world and is home to some of the world's Northernmost settlements. It had been inhabited by people for millennia before Icelandic and Norwegian Vikings discovered it in 875 and was settled by Erik the Red in 982 as one of the first settlers on Greenland, naming it such to attract more settlers from home. Via Norway's inclusion in the Kingdom of Denmark, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Iceland fell under Danish rule until the 1400s.<sup>2</sup> After a 300-year break in relations, in 1721, the Norwegian priest Hans Egede travelled to Greenland as a missionary under the auspices of King Frederik the 4th, launching 150 years of missionary work and trade in the region. In the mid-nineteenth century local district councils were established giving Greenland some political sovereignty, while real authority was kept in Copenhagen.

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<sup>2</sup> "Grønlands Historie", *Aarhus Universitet*, <http://danmarkshistorien.dk/leksikon-og-kilder/vis/materiale/groenland/>.

Denmark struggled throughout the beginning of the 20th century to have its sovereignty in Greenland acknowledged. The U.S. debated buying it, but decided not to, instead accepting Danish ownership, while Norwegian hunters and fishers disputed Danish sovereignty in Eastern Greenland but lost the bid in the International Court in the Hague.<sup>3</sup>

### **WWII and the Cold War**

Relations with Greenland were severed with the Nazi occupation of Denmark from 1940 to 1945. In an attempt to avoid occupation and unsanctioned use of the island during the war, the Governors of Greenland entered the Greenland Treaty with the U.S. in 1941, leading to the creation of American military bases. In 1946, the U.S. offered 100 million dollars to purchase Greenland, which was considered “a military necessity”, however Denmark rejected the offer.<sup>4</sup> Instead, due to its strategic importance to the North American missile defense against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the U.S. and Denmark entered an agreement in 1951, which allowed the establishment of Thule Airbase in Northern Greenland. The base remains under U.S. control to this day. The establishment of the airbase in 1953, however, led to a forced relocation of Thule’s 127 citizens to Qaanaaq with three-days-notice.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. military presence has been, and still is, a major source of contention between Denmark and Greenland. The 1951 agreement allowed the U.S. to establish military

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<sup>3</sup> Søby-Kristensen, Kristian & Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon, “Greenland and the International Politics of a Changing Arctic: Postcolonial Paradiplomacy Between High and Low Politics”, *Routledge*, October 16th, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson, Dale, “Wanna Buy Greenland? United States Once Did”, *AP News*, May 2nd, 1991, <https://www.apnews.com/9d4a8021c3650800fdf6dd5903f68972>.

<sup>5</sup> Dall, Jakob, “Undskyld Grønland”, *Information*, December 30th, 2013, <https://www.information.dk/debat/2013/12/undskyld-groenland>.



installations in certain territories and required Danish permission to expand beyond these areas. However, the U.S. challenged this on several occasions, most notably with the construction of Camp Century, whose unsanctioned establishment was casually announced by the American ambassador at a 1959 Copenhagen cocktail party. In addition, with the declassification of Cold War documents, it has become clear that Danish politicians in the 1950s tacitly acknowledged U.S. deployment of nuclear weapons in Greenland.<sup>6</sup> This was a highly controversial decision, as the official Danish policy has always been not to have nuclear weapons on Danish soil in peacetime.

### **Increased Greenlandic Independence**

In 1953, changes to the Danish Constitution led to deeper integration of Greenland with Denmark, including two Greenlandic members in Danish Parliament and abolishing Greenland's status as a Danish colony. In 1979, Home Rule was introduced, giving Greenland greater political sovereignty and complete power over its economy. With this, economic support from Denmark changed from being a government expense to block grants administered by local Greenlandic institutions. In 2009, Self-Rule was introduced, which led to two important developments. First, the Greenlandic people were recognized as 'Greenlandic' in the eyes of international law, allowing Greenland to declare independence. Second, it transferred responsibility for natural resources from Denmark to Greenland, leaving the Danish parliament in charge of only foreign, defense and security policy in the region.

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<sup>6</sup> "H.C. Hansen-notatet til USA's ambassadør Val Peterson, 16. november 1957", *Aarhus Universitet*, <https://danmarkshistorien.dk/leksikon-og-kilder/vis/materiale/hc-hansen-notatet-til-usas-ambassadoer-val-peterson-1957/>.

## 4. Literature Review

As noted above, the Greenland taboo affecting Danish-Greenlandic relations has not been ignored, but it is short on in-depth research into what creates and fortifies it, and how it affects Danish decision-making in Arctic issues. Nonetheless, academic inquiry does provide three superficial explanations for the taboo: distrust, unclear jurisdictions regarding policy matters and Denmark's identity crisis as a post-colonial power.

### **Distrust**

There is a general acceptance among researchers and policy-makers, that the Greenland taboo is driven in large part by historic and contemporary Greenlandic distrust towards Denmark, which translates into Greenlandic skepticism towards Danish policy decisions and American intentions. Researchers relay back to five central cases that have sown distrust towards Denmark and the U.S.: the construction of Thule Airbase, uranium extraction, the shift of a service contract on Thule Airbase from a Greenlandic to an American contractor, secret CIA overflights, and clean-ups after chemical and radioactive spills in Camp Century.<sup>7</sup> There are several examples of how these cases intersect with the Greenland taboo, but they all boil down to the statement: Denmark acted poorly in the past, so why should Greenland believe them today?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Lange Olsen, Theis & Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon, "Fem sager der har sæt grønlandsk mistillid til Danmark og USA", *DR Nyheder*, September 11th, 2018, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/fem-sager-der-har-saet-groenlandsk-mistillid-til-danmark-og-usa>.

<sup>8</sup> See extensive works by Rahbek-Clemmensen (2016, 2017, 2018), Bech Hansen (2018), Breum (2017, 2018), Hansen (2018), Henriksen & Rahbek-Clemmensen (2017), Bjørnsson (2016). Also, see statements by Aleqa Hammond, Kim Kielsen and Vittus Kujaukitsoq.

Contemporary arrangements for coordination between Denmark, Greenland and the U.S. also receive their share of the blame for creating distrust. Rahbek-Clemmensen emphasizes the perception of the Joint Committee, which includes representatives from Denmark, Greenland and the U.S., as a useless talk shop. The Committee was established in 2004 to strengthen cooperation in education, scientific research, tourism and other areas in Greenland in return for the continued U.S. military presence. The Committee has not succeeded in this as Greenlanders believe they are getting too little out of the American presence and that they would be better off negotiating without Denmark, a perception grounded in the suspicion that Denmark makes secret deals with the U.S. that ignore Greenland's interests.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Danish officials find it difficult to have strategic conversations about the Arctic, because even a small misstep could result in a large counter-reaction from Greenland, making the costs of such conversations far greater than the benefits. In this vein, Greenland expert Martin Breum argues, that Greenland and Denmark should be better at speaking openly about the use of Greenland in strategic conversations with the U.S., as transparency is the only way to make up for past mistakes.<sup>10</sup> This logic falters, however, when being put into action. As Breum explains, it is still taboo to admit that Denmark uses Greenland's importance to the U.S. to its own advantage. According to Breum, this brake on conversation is anchored in postcolonial deceit, and although his argumentation explains the root cause, it does not suggest a way out of the self-perpetuating circle of silent distrust that Denmark and Greenland have become entrenched in.

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<sup>9</sup> Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon, "Playing the Greenland Card", *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies*, April 17th, 2018, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/playing-greenland-card/>.

<sup>10</sup> Breum, Martin, "Hvad er Grønland Værd i Trumps USA?", *Martin Breum Blog*, March 24th, 2017, <http://www.martinbreum.dk/hvad-er-groenland-vaerd-i-trumps-usa/>.

Alternatively, Rahbek-Clemmensen and Thomasen consider the Illulissat Declaration an example of Danish-Greenlandic relations at their best, showing their contribution to effective diplomacy in the Arctic. The Illulissat Declaration was adopted by the five coastal nations of the Arctic (Denmark, Norway, Canada, the Russian Federation and the United States) in May 2008. With their signature, these nations committed themselves to ensuring peaceful cooperation and development in the Arctic, as well as peaceful settlement of territorial disputes that go beyond the framework of international law and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Interestingly, the authors mention the central role of Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig-Møller in forging trust between the parties in 2008.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the authors do not provide in depth analysis of the personal character of his impact as an individual on the reconciliation process, leaving a potentially influential factor on the Greenland taboo unexplored.

### **Unclear jurisdictions regarding policy matters**

A second, less discussed, explanation is the unclear jurisdiction regarding policy matters, which makes it difficult for officials to determine who should be involved in and bear ultimate responsibility for specific policy issues. Infrastructure development, for example, has become a point of contention in this regard, culminating in 2017 with a Danish-American effort to block a Chinese company from renovating three of Greenland's airports. In most cases, infrastructure is a domestic issue, but what if the infrastructure has the potential to be dual-use for both civilian and military purposes? Does that constitute a defense issue? In this respect, Bech Hansen calls "the Greenland card" a double-edged sword that opens doors in the U.S.

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<sup>11</sup> Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon & Thomasen, Gry, "Arktis: Da Danmark og Grønland gjorde en forskel", *Berlingske Tidende*, May 21st, 2018, <https://www.berlingske.dk/kronikker/arktis-da-danmark-og-groenland-gjorde-en-forskel>.

but gives Greenland the impression that Denmark engages in modern-day colonialism by taking advantage of their strategic importance. The issue, he says, is particularly serious when it comes to Chinese investments in Greenland, where Greenland considers it a double standard that Denmark can trade with China but hinders Greenland in doing the same. He highlights the poor delineation between issues under Danish or Greenlandic jurisdiction, but also calls for a conversation in Denmark about what the relationship with Greenland means to the country and how it should be handled.<sup>12</sup> Rahbek-Clemmensen also illustrates how it has been historically difficult to navigate the policy-making landscape created by Greenlandic Self Rule. As a result, it remains unclear to both sides how and when a case is deemed a security issue under the auspices of the Danish government and when it is a Greenlandic, domestic question. The lack of a clear dichotomy makes it difficult for policy-makers to avoid stepping on each others' toes, which exacerbates the Greenland taboo.<sup>13</sup>

### **Denmark's identity crisis as a post-colonial power**

A third explanation of the Greenland taboo is Denmark's identity crisis as a post-colonial power, albeit, it is often considered secondary to those mentioned above and rarely makes it into official rhetoric. One aspect of the discussion is grounded in a definitional dispute between researchers in Denmark about whether or not Greenland is still de facto a Danish colony. Raising eyebrows and perhaps hitting a nerve, Hansen argues that what perpetuates the Greenland taboo is not so much Denmark's actions, but Denmark's thinking. He blames the country for being unwilling to admit that Greenland continues to be a modern-day colony

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<sup>12</sup> Bech Hansen, Thomas, "Spillet om Grønlands uafhængighed er en kamp på ord og jura", *RUC Website*, October 31st, 2018, <https://ruc.dk/nyheder/spillet-om-gronlands-uafhaengighed-er-en-kamp-pa-ord-og-jura>.

<sup>13</sup> Lange Olsen, Theis & Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon, "Fem sager der har sået grønlandsk mistillid til Danmark og USA", *DR Nyheder*, September 11th, 2018, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/fem-sager-der-har-saet-groenlandsk-mistillid-til-danmark-og-usa>.

and contends that Denmark is convinced that colonialism ended in 1953, while most Greenlanders still consider themselves under pseudo-colonial rule. He argues that Danish thinking about Greenland is entrenched in pre-1953 understandings, which clash with the contemporary reality, prohibiting an equal relationship.<sup>14</sup> Rahbek-Clemmensen argues directly against this, maintaining that the definitional requirements for a colonial relationship are not fulfilled. He does, however, agree that Denmark should rethink how it interacts with and talks about Greenland. In his perspective, the status quo has failed, but placing the blame solely on Denmark is also counter-productive.<sup>15</sup> Both Hansen and Rahbek-Clemmensen raise important questions about the Danish discourse surrounding Greenland, but lack recommendations on how this insight could improve Danish-Greenlandic relations beyond simply “communicating”, which has proven easier said than done.

Along those lines, Rahbek-Clemmensen claims that the 2016 foreign policy review, written by Ambassador Peter Taksøe-Jensen at the request of the Danish government in order to clarify Denmark’s strategic interests towards 2030, attempted to appeal to a new Danish understanding of nationhood that emphasized the *Kingdom* of Denmark and Denmark as an ‘Arctic great power’. He claims that the shift created awkward tensions when Denmark trapped itself by attempting to create cohesion between Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands through policies shaped purely by Danish values and interests. He argues that cooperation is hampered by the clash of challenges to the Danish understanding of nationhood

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<sup>14</sup> Hansen, Klaus Georg, “Forsker: Grønland er fortsat en dansk koloni”, *Videnskab*, June 2nd, 2017, <https://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/forsker-groenland-er-fortsat-en-dansk-koloni>.

<sup>15</sup> Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon, “Forsker: Nej, Grønland er ikke en koloni”, *Videnskab*, June 6th, 2017, <https://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/forsker-nej-groenland-er-ikke-en-koloni>.

combined with Greenlandic and Faroese perceptions of that relationship as inherently unequal and shaped by postcolonial guilt.<sup>16</sup>

### **Lack of literature dedicated to the taboo**

Clearly, the Greenland taboo plays an important role in Danish-Greenlandic relations and Danish decision-making on security issues in Greenland. Evidently, however, the taboo is also rarely discussed in the open as a documented fact. This paper seeks to delve deeper into the Greenland taboo, exploring its effects and identifying the drivers that fortify its existence. This allows exploration of the central factor that currently harms the Danish-Greenlandic cooperation and hence the efficiency of Denmark's Arctic policy. The analysis will provide policymakers with insight into the taboo's depth and largess, the costs incurred from it and the ways it can be mitigated.

## **5. Cases**

The following section, examines three cases in order to explore the way in which the Greenland taboo has influenced Danish decisions regarding security policy in the Arctic region and the consequences of this. The three cases comprise the clean-up of Camp Century, the transfer of a service contract on the Thule Airbase from a Danish-Greenlandic to an American contractor and Chinese investments in Greenlandic airports. These cases were chosen because they are diverse in terms of their causes and effects, while all have also experienced significant developments during 2018. The section concludes with a discussion of findings.

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<sup>16</sup> Rahbek-Clemmensen, Jon, "Denmark Engages in Arctic Nation-Bending", *World Policy*, May 25th, 2016, <https://worldpolicy.org/2016/05/25/denmark-engages-in-arctic-nation-bending/>.

## **Camp Century**

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began construction of Camp Century beneath the ice of Northwestern Greenland in 1959. Publicly described as a “research facility”, Camp Century was a cover for a U.S. military project called Iceworm entailing plans to dig 2500 miles of tunnels to enable launch of 600 nuclear missiles towards the Soviet Union. The underground town was inhabited year-round and included a chapel, a theater and many shops.<sup>17</sup> In the 1951 U.S.-Danish defense agreement regarding Greenland, the U.S. was required to ask for permission to build military facilities outside of previously agreed upon areas. The U.S. applied for this in 1959 but was rejected by the Danish authorities due to concerns about a potential Soviet counter-reaction. Later this year, however, the U.S. ambassador to Denmark informed the Danish Foreign Minister that the camp’s construction was already underway and that nothing could be done to stop it.<sup>18</sup> Naturally, this caused immense worry among Danish politicians, who tried to keep Camp Century’s existence hidden from the Danish population. Camp Century lasted less than 10 years and was evacuated in 1967 as tunnels started to crash under the melting ice. But nothing was dismantled, and as the entire installation was abandoned under the ice, it was expected to remain hidden for generations.<sup>19</sup> As a result of climate change, the ice has melted faster than expected and a 2016 report determined that rising global temperatures will expose the camp and uncover the previously isolated diesel oil,

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<sup>17</sup> “Camp Century (Project Iceworm)”, *Atlas Obscura*, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/camp-century>.

<sup>18</sup> Jex, Catherine, “Ny bog afslører USA’s forsøg på at få kontrol over Grønland”, *Videnskab*, January 29th, 2017, <https://videnskab.dk/naturvidenskab/ny-bog-afsloerer-usas-forsog-paa-at-faa-kontrol-over-groenland>.

<sup>19</sup> “Camp Century (Project Iceworm)”, *Atlas Obscura*, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/camp-century>.



PCB, waste water and other emissions stemming from its use<sup>20</sup> making a clean-up necessary. This raised the question about who had the responsibility to clean the place, Denmark, Greenland or the U.S.?

Greenland has always been adamant that it is not responsible, due to its historical exclusion from defense policy decisions. Meanwhile, Denmark claims that the 1951 defense agreement assigns responsibility to the U.S., which conversely claims that Camp Century is governed by a separate agreement with a clause that frees the U.S. of clean-up liabilities. Both Danish and Greenlandic interviewees expressed indignation towards the U.S. approach although the feeling was stronger among Greenlandic representatives. They expressed concern that Denmark had been too forgiving of the U.S., whereas the Danish position observed in conversations was that to expect U.S. involvement is “unrealistic” and the costs of pushing U.S. responsibility outweighs the benefits.<sup>21</sup>

In 2017, Greenland asked the UN to investigate whether Denmark violated Greenlandic human rights by failing to clean up after the U.S. military installations. As former Minister for Foreign Affairs in Greenland Vittus Qujaukitsoq argued: “This is about forcing the Danish government to treat Greenland properly.”<sup>22</sup> In 2018 the Human Rights Council concluded that Denmark is responsible and recommended that Denmark enhance Greenlandic

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<sup>20</sup> Colgan, William, Machguth, Horst, MacFerrin, Mike, Colgan, Jeff D., van As, Dirk & MacGregor, Joseph A., “The abandoned ice sheet base at Camp Century, Greenland, in a warming climate”, *AGU Publications*, August 4th, 2016, <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/2016GL069688>.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Greenlandic diplomat and politician; Interview with Danish diplomats.

<sup>22</sup> Breum, Martin, “Greenland brings Denmark before the UN for failing to clean up old US military pollution”, *Arctic Today*, May 17th, 2017, <https://www.arctictoday.com/greenland-brings-denmark-before-the-un-for-failing-to-clean-up-old-us-military-pollution/>.

involvement in decisions regarding the presence of foreign military forces in Greenland.<sup>23</sup> In the wake of the report, Denmark set aside DKK 180 million from the defense budget over the next five years for clean-up expenses and has promised to seek information from the U.S. regarding the scope and scale of the pollution.<sup>24</sup> This process has proven difficult as most Cold War information remains classified, which creates barriers to cooperation with U.S. counterparts.

### *Implications of the taboo*

In the case of Camp Century, the taboo manifests itself in the strong distrust Greenland maintains towards Denmark due to both prior and recent events. Historically, the distrust dates back to the classified, controversial activities in Greenland during the Cold War, which led to forced displacement of hundreds of indigenous people and engaged part of Denmark's territory in activities directly opposing its official nuclear policy. More recently, the distrust has been fomented by a belief that Denmark puts more weight on good relations with the U.S. than respect for the Greenlandic people in policy decisions and that these often are made in secrecy without any Greenlandic involvement. One Greenlandic interviewee was frustrated about the rare updates which Copenhagen provides Greenlandic politicians about ongoing U.S.-Danish talks regarding cases like Camp Century, noting that they typically are 6 to 12 months apart and often must be requested.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Council Ninth Session, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes on his mission to Denmark and Greenland", *Human Rights Council*, September 10th, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> "Aftale mellem miljø- og fødevareministeren og formanden for Naalakkersuisut om oprydning efter tidligere amerikansk militær tilstedeværelse i Grønland", *Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark*, January 11th, 2018, [https://mfvm.dk/fileadmin/user\\_upload/MFVM/Publikationer/Aftaletekst\\_Groenland\\_underskrevet.pdf](https://mfvm.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/MFVM/Publikationer/Aftaletekst_Groenland_underskrevet.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Greenlandic politician.

This highlights the clash between Danish and Greenlandic interests. Greenland has a domestic focus, concerned with environmental conditions and showing respect towards the Greenlandic people. Greenlandic politics are also characterized by certain elements of populism, which uses cases like the above-mentioned one to strike a chord with citizens more critical of Denmark. Securing funds for and global attention to Greenlandic issues, especially exploiting such a contentious phase in history, secures votes in Greenlandic elections. Denmark is also committed to environmental protection and finding the best solution for the Greenlandic people. However, as expressed by several Danes interviewed,<sup>26</sup> the extent of this commitment is balanced by a priority to maintain good relations with the U.S.; restraining them from pushing too hard.

As evident in this case, the implications for Denmark is a large financial expense on a project that will lack key information for years to come due to U.S. reluctance to declassify Cold War information. Ultimately, Denmark's reluctance to press the U.S., which Greenland correctly assumes is due to a desire to maintain healthy Danish-U.S. relations, does not deal with the core of the issue, namely holding open discussions about the contentious decisions Denmark made during the Cold War and their lasting consequences for the environment and people of Greenland.

### **Loss of Servicing Contract on Thule Airbase**

Another point of contention between Denmark and Greenland is the loss of a servicing contract on Thule Airbase by a Danish-Greenlandic company to an American enterprise in

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<sup>26</sup> Interviews with Danish diplomats.

2014. According to the defense agreement regarding Thule Airbase, it should always be serviced by a Danish-Greenlandic company to ensure societal and economic returns to the host country. Denmark previously chose the service provider to the airbase but delegated the task to the U.S. Air Force (USAF) in 2013 due to a concern that its dominant role violated EU competition law. Unfortunately, the first company selected under American responsibility was Exelis Services, which turned out to be a Danish-registered shell company for American Vectrus. The contract was worth DKK 2.4 billion over seven years.<sup>27</sup>

The decision resulted in a complaint from the three other companies bidding on the contract, who claimed that Exelis Services did not live up to the legal requirements for winning the bid. However, in 2015, the complaint was denied by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, which determined that Greenland Contractors would hold its contract until September 30th, 2015, after which Exelis Services would take over.<sup>28</sup> In February 2015, the Court of Federal Claims overturned this decision and determined that Exelis does not live up to the legal requirements and that once it has been determined what legally qualifies as a Danish-Greenlandic enterprise, USAF will conduct a new acquisition.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, former Secretary of State John Kerry admitted that the acquisition process was not supportive of Greenlandic society, in a rare public statement from the U.S. regarding Greenland.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “FAKTA: Omstridt selskab fravristes Thule-kontrakt”, *DR*, May 28th, 2015, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/fakta-omstridt-selskab-fravristes-thule-kontrakt>.

<sup>28</sup> “Decision on the matter of Per Aarsleff A/S; Copenhagen Arctic A/S; Greenland Contractors I/S”, *Government Accountability Office*, February 18th, 2015, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20141/almdel/UPN/bilag/137/1505931.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> “Joint Statement of the United States and the Kingdom of Denmark on the Resolution of the Thule Base Maintenance Contract Acquisition Matter”, *The Danish Parliament*, February 2015, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20141/almdel/FOU/bilag/70/1516118.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> “Minister: Kerry erkender USA-ansvar i strid om Thulebasen”, *Berlingske Tidende*, June 18th, 2016, <https://www.berlingske.dk/internationalt/minister-kerry-erkender-usa-ansvar-i-strid-om-thulebasen>.

*Implications of the taboo*

This case has had a significant impact on multilateral relations between Denmark, Greenland and the U.S., among other consequences, it has led to the suspension of the Joint Committee.<sup>31</sup> In addition, blame has been assigned in all directions. The Danish government opinion is that both Greenland and Denmark could have been more proactive and that ultimately Greenland did make an unreasonably large profit on the existing contract. Both Danish and Greenlandic interviewees considered this to be the reason why the contract was lost in the first place and almost expected it to happen. Nonetheless, Danish interviewees emphasized the need to maintain good relations to the U.S. Department of Defense, not allowing Greenlandic financial claims to damage that relationship.<sup>32</sup>

The Greenlandic opinion is more diverse. Some claim that the Danish government has not done enough, one interviewee pointing out that the case has been debated for almost five years without reaching a conclusion. Others claim that Denmark could have resolved the conflict by now if they wanted to, but that the concern for good U.S. relations has kept Denmark from doing so. They furthermore question whether Denmark even would have gone to current lengths to maintain the integrity of the Thule Airbase Agreement if Greenland had not been included in the discussions.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Joint Committee”, *U.S. Embassy in Denmark Webpage*, Accessed February 2019, <https://dk.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/u-s-greenland/joint-committee/>.

<sup>32</sup> Interviews with Greenlandic and Danish diplomats.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Greenlandic diplomat.

This uncovers another interesting aspect of the taboo surrounding decision-making in the Arctic, namely the “double negotiation” effect that it has on both Greenland and Denmark, which was highlighted in several interviews.<sup>34</sup> This means that any decision involving the U.S. requires two levels of negotiation before it can be finalized. First, between Denmark and Greenland to establish a mutually satisfactory position, and then a second round of negotiations with the U.S. This affects both countries. For Greenland it adds an additional hurdle to discussing any issue that could be classified as foreign or defense policy with the U.S., while it requires that Denmark ensures that what they pursue with the U.S. does not cause outrage in Greenland. Ultimately, this situation not only dilutes Danish and Greenlandic interests before they reach negotiation, but also creates a slower process risking that one party may abandon a potential agreement if the final negotiation outcomes are deemed unsatisfactory.

Interestingly, Greenland also blames the U.S., one interviewee asking: “why would the U.S. willingly make itself unpopular for something that is peanuts for them, but carries enormous costs from a Greenlandic perspective?”<sup>35</sup> He stressed that the frustration was exacerbated by the fact that just prior to this case a U.S. company won a marine transport contract over a Greenlandic competitor due to the U.S. Cargo Preference Act of 1904 that gives priority to U.S. operators,<sup>36</sup> thereby questioning whether the U.S. cares about Greenland.

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<sup>34</sup> Interviews with Danish, Greenlandic and American diplomats.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Greenlandic diplomat.

<sup>36</sup> The 1904 Act requires that 100% of cargoes "bought for the Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marine Corps" be carried on board U.S.-flag vessels.

The U.S. has been relatively silent on the matter but maintains that it has followed the acquisition guidelines for servicing its installations in Greenland. It also asserts that the American Embassy in Denmark contacted the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to clarify the legal status of Exelis Services but was directed to the Danish Business Authority. Communications between USAF and the Business Authority confirm that the company was deemed “Danish registered”, which USAF considered as a ‘green light’ to grant Exelis the contract.<sup>37</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims that USAF failed to clarify what the information was intended for, in which case the answer would have been more detailed. In the back-and-forth between courts, authorities, and enterprises, the message from Danish parliament is that no conclusion can be expected any time soon.<sup>38</sup>

### **Chinese Financing for Airports**

In 2017, Greenland set out in the pursuit of securing financing for three new airports at a total cost of around DKK 4 billion, which Greenland could not provide its own. The project would modernize two existing airports in Nuuk and Ilulissat to enable trans-Atlantic services and establish a new airport in Qaqortoq. The project is part of a greater strategy to enhance competitiveness, business development and tourism in the region.

The project was launched independently from Denmark and considered a demonstration of Greenland’s capacity to upgrade its infrastructure without Danish assistance,

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<sup>37</sup> Note from the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs regarding communication in the case regarding service contracts on Thule Airbase, *Danish Parliament*, March 7th, 2015, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20141/almindel/GRU/bilag/23/1505080.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> “GRU alm. del - svar på spørgsmål 29 fra Aaja Chemnitz Larsen stillet den 10. december 2018 til udenrigsministeren”, *Danish Parliament*, December 19th, 2018, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20181/almindel/gru/spm/29/svar/1543911/1993648.pdf>.

constituting a positive development towards independence. This notion, however, changed in March 2018 when Greenland pre-qualified the Chinese state-owned enterprise China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) to bid in competition with five other foreign entrepreneurs for the billion-dollar contract. CCCC was banned by the World Bank in 2009 due to fraudulent practices and is included on the bank's Listing of Ineligible Firms and Individuals.<sup>39</sup> According to the news media, their pre-qualification provoked a Danish bureaucrat to warn the Greenlandic government against moving forward, although the Minister of Foreign Affairs Anders Samuelsen denies this.

In June 2018, the Danish and Greenlandic governments agreed to explore the option of Denmark financing the airport project, as Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen expressed that the collective airport renovation project and its Chinese involvement has security and foreign policy perspectives that reach beyond Greenland's borders.<sup>40</sup> In other words, Denmark seemed to veto Greenland's cooperation with the Chinese construction company on this project. The situation was not isolated to Denmark and Greenland, but drew a strong U.S. reaction, which, according to some, was the only reason why Denmark ultimately reacted.<sup>41</sup> The American critique has been that Denmark was so worried about

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<sup>39</sup> "World Bank Applies 2009 Debarment to China Communications Construction Company Limited for Fraud in Philippines Roads Project", *The World Bank*, July 29th, 2011 <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2011/07/29/world-bank-applies-2009-debarment-to-china-communications-construction-company-limited-for-fraud-in-philippines-roads-project>.

<sup>40</sup> "Udtalelse efter mødet mellem statsministeren og formand for Naalakkersuisut Kim Kielsen", *Statsministeriet*, 13. juni, 2018, [http://www.stm.dk/p\\_14695.html](http://www.stm.dk/p_14695.html).

<sup>41</sup> Hinshaw, Drew & Page, Jeremy, "How the Pentagon Countered China's Designs on Greenland", *The Wall Street Journal*, February 10th, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-pentagon-countered-chinas-designs-on-greenland-11549812296>.



putting its foot down and offending Greenland, that it waited until the eleventh hour to react, which even then required a shove from the U.S.

To some extent the worry was justified for three reasons. First, Chinese involvement would have made China an unprecedentedly large driver of Greenland's economy, a development already underway through investments in natural resources.<sup>42</sup> Second, the runways in Nuuk and Ilulissat were to be extended to 2,200 meters, putting them near the runway length needed for military jet fighters. Some suggest that this indicated a risk of Chinese dual-use, however far out in the future, an option Denmark and the U.S. wanted to restrict to NATO.<sup>43</sup> Third, Greenlandic cooperation with CCCC would be morally unacceptable due to the company's status as a Chinese state owned enterprise, as well as its debarment by the World Bank for fraudulent practices until just one year prior to its pre-qualification for the airport project. In other words, CCCC would be a biased and unreliable partner that could not reasonably be expected to have Greenland's best interests in mind.

The situation provoked a strong reaction in Greenland after the Premier of Greenland Kim Kielsen signed an agreement with the Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen to explore other financing options more closely linked to Denmark. One Greenlandic politician

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<sup>42</sup> Mehta, Aaron, "How a potential Chinese-built airport in Greenland could be risky for a vital US Air Force base", *Defense News*, September 7th, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/09/07/how-a-potential-chinese-built-airport-in-greenland-could-be-risky-for-a-vital-us-air-force-base/>.

<sup>43</sup> McGwin, Kevin, "US defense investments in Greenland infrastructure would keep NATO in, China out and Russia at bay", *Arctic Today*, September 19th, 2018, <https://www.arctictoday.com/us-defense-investments-greenland-infrastructure-keep-nato-china-russia-bay/>.

stated that the case provided an example of direct meddling in Greenland's domestic affairs, which "questions the Greenlandic people's ability to do anything on their own".<sup>44</sup>

In the end, Greenland and Denmark signed an agreement in September 2018 in which Denmark promises to provide DKK 700 million for the airports in Nuuk and Ilulissat. In addition, Denmark will arrange a loan of up to DKK 450 million and guarantee additional funding of DKK 450 million from the Nordic Investment Bank.<sup>45</sup>

### *Implications of the taboo*

The Greenland taboo plays out slightly differently in this case, as the situation is not rooted in the past, but illustrates reactions to rising concerns about China enmeshed in contentious relations within the Kingdom of Denmark.

One Danish diplomat explained that the taboo most clearly demonstrated itself in Denmark's fear of confronting Greenland in the first place, because there was a risk that it might be considered offensive. He explained this as Denmark's consistent attempt to avoid being the "bearer of bad news", which he also identified in the handling of the servicing contracts case.<sup>46</sup> In the servicing contracts case, it seemed that everyone tried to demonstrate their intent to do the best for Greenland despite clearly prioritizing relations with the U.S.

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<sup>44</sup> "OVERBLIK: Balladen om Grønlands nye lufthavne", *Avisen*, September 10th, 2018, [https://www.avisen.dk/overblik-balladen-om-groenlands-nye-lufthavne\\_515199.aspx](https://www.avisen.dk/overblik-balladen-om-groenlands-nye-lufthavne_515199.aspx).

<sup>45</sup> "Aftale mellem Regeringen og Naalakkersuisut om dansk engagement i lufthavnsprojektet i Grønland og styrket erhvervssamarbejde mellem Danmark og Grønland", *Naalakkersuisut*, September 10th, 2018, <https://naalakkersuisut.gl/~media/Nanoq/Files/Attached%20Files/Formandens%20Departement/Aftalen%20mellem%20statsministeren%20og%20formanden%20for%20Naalakkersuisut%2010092018%20Da.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Danish diplomat.

Ultimately, Denmark's fear of grabbing the bull by its horns and communicate honestly with their Greenlandic counterparts drew a reaction from the U.S. and received a warning from Secretary of Defense Mattis,<sup>47</sup> which could have been avoided if Denmark had responded earlier. This critique was echoed by a Greenlandic diplomat, who considered it unfair to let Greenland go that far, just to snub the project in its final phase. He highlighted that a lot of energy had to be spent chasing off myths regarding the extent and threat of Chinese contributions to Greenlandic infrastructure. He argued that the situation was used to “cry wolf” and push Danish and U.S. interests in limiting Chinese expansion in the Arctic.<sup>48</sup> This view was seconded by another Greenlandic interviewee, who described the Danish knee-jerk decision to finance two airports as a desperate attempt by Danish Minister of Defense Claus Hjorth Frederiksen and Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen to reign Greenland into the Kingdom, once realizing the scale of Greenlandic distrust towards and disinterest in Denmark when alternative partners, such as China, are accessible.<sup>49</sup> In the eyes of both interviewees, the case was spun by Denmark and the U.S. to promote their interests and demonstrated a double standard, because Denmark also trades with China. As one person put it, Greenland “learned from the best”.

The airport case also illustrates the problems in the current bureaucratic structure for delineating policy decisions as Danish or Greenlandic issues. It requires consideration of how to deal with a situation in which a seemingly benign issue bleeds into security. This matters

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<sup>47</sup> Hinshaw, Drew & Page, Jeremy, “How the Pentagon Countered China’s Designs on Greenland”, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 10th, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-pentagon-countered-chinas-designs-on-greenland-11549812296>.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Greenlandic diplomat.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Greenlandic politician.

both in terms of what a warranted reaction looks like, but also determines whether one party is required to inform another about its actions. Clearly, there is a need to reform the current bureaucratic structure surrounding the delineation of policies issues between Greenland and Denmark, which requires understanding each others' interests and how these interests are affected by the actions of others.

Ultimately, Danish-Greenlandic relations and the brittle trust between them were hard hit by the case, in part due to a very delayed Danish reaction. It, once again, also led to financial costs for Denmark. As one headline put it: "Fear of China costs Denmark 700 million to Greenland".<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, some benefit has come from the situation as it has inspired a financial monitoring initiative similar to the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. (CFIUS). On a recent meeting between leaders from the Kingdom of Denmark, Denmark proposed the creation of a financial screening committee to screen all large investments in the Kingdom by foreign investors.<sup>51</sup> The committee would be able to identify issues like this one earlier on, while providing greater transparency regarding the criteria used to deem investments threats to security. Both the Faroe Islands and Greenland expressed interest in the idea, marking an important step in the right direction.

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<sup>50</sup> Larsen, Jan, "Frygt for Kina Koster Danmark 700 mio. til Grønland", *POV International*, September 11th, 2018, <https://pov.international/frygt-for-kina-koster-danmark-700-mio-til-gronland/>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Danish representative; Nørrelund Sørensen, Helle "Kielsen til Rigmøde på Færøerne", *KNR*, June 11th, 2018, <https://knr.gl/da/nyheder/kielsen-til-rigsm%C3%B8de-p%C3%A5-f%C3%A6r%C3%B8erne>.

## 6. Discussion

### The Role of Identity

“The Danes remind me of liberal white people of the American South”, an American diplomat stated when asked to describe the Danish-Greenlandic relationship. He continued to explain that to outsiders it looks like a relationship built on shame, which has pushed Denmark to be paternalistic, careful and worried whenever engaging with Greenland. He opined that Denmark is a victim of its post-colonial identity, its carefulness ultimately harming its ability to act.<sup>52</sup> This explanation captures one of the central elements challenging Denmark’s search for its post-colonial identity as an Arctic nation, namely shame. To a certain extent, this points towards the benefits of pursuing a clear, ethical policy towards Greenland that focuses purely on doing what is “morally correct” and formulating this as a primary priority, without hitches but still open to discussion.

When studying Danish-Greenlandic relations one must ask why Greenland is so important to Denmark in the first place, considering that Greenland seeks independence and that most Danes would prefer not using government funds to finance it. As one interviewee stated: “it is so far away, so why should people think about it?” The official answer to this question is that Greenland is integral to the *Kingdom* of Denmark and that cooperation within the Kingdom should be strengthened for the greater, as well as individual good. The honest answer is similar but adds to Greenland’s importance that it secures Denmark a position as an Arctic state and the ‘owner’ of strategically important lands, which has secured access and influence for Denmark since the early 1900s. This is challenged by Greenland’s quest for independence, which, exemplified by the airport case, is moving faster, and perhaps in a

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with U.S. diplomat.

different direction than Denmark would prefer. One interviewee explained that although the consequences of Greenlandic independence for Denmark's global position are never discussed officially, it figures prominently on the cocktail circuit and does generate some concern.<sup>53</sup> In addition to costing Denmark a strategically important geographic area that is currently used to increase Denmark's political weight on the global scale, the most likely scenario is not complete Greenlandic independence, let alone overwhelming Chinese or Russian influence. Rather, from a realpolitik perspective, as well as a desire to maximize own influence in the Arctic, the U.S. or Canada could step into the role in relation to Greenland, as military guarantor and economic supporter, that Denmark would leave behind. Simultaneously in recognition of the consequences associated with Greenlandic independence, the Arctic was deemed a top priority in Denmark's past two Foreign and Security Policy Strategies,<sup>54</sup> while a recent foreign policy review stated that the Kingdom should "maintain and develop its position as a leading Arctic actor".<sup>55</sup> This reveals a definitive discrepancy between political rhetoric and reality, which requires sound policy solutions to be mitigated.

Denmark's struggle with its identity as a post-colonial power and a nation heavily dependent on a former colony and distant land for global influence and access, determines Denmark's options in so far as neglecting its relationship with Greenland will diminish its global position and allow Greenland to fall into the sphere of influence of another ally.

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with U.S. diplomat.

<sup>54</sup> "Udenrigs- og Sikkerhedspolitisk Strategi 2017-2018", *Regeringen*, June 14th, 2017, <https://www.regeringen.dk/publikationer-og-aftaletekster/udenrigs-og-sikkerhedspolitisk-strategi-for-2017-2018/>; "Udenrigs- og Sikkerhedspolitisk Strategi 2019-2020", *Regeringen*, <http://um.dk/da/udenrigspolitik/aktuelle-emner/udenrigs-og-sikkerhedspolitisk-strategi-2019-20/>.

<sup>55</sup> Taksøe-Jensen, Peter, "Udredning: Dansk diplomati og forsvar i en brydningstid", *Udenrigsministeriet*, May 1st, 2016, <http://um.dk/da/udenrigspolitik/aktuelle-emner/dansk-diplomati-og-forsvar-i-en-brydningstid/>.

Unfortunately, Denmark is showing little development on this front and the Danish rhetoric about Greenland has not shifted much since the early 1900s.<sup>56</sup> The only effort to officially discuss ‘the wounds of the past’ through the establishment of a Reconciliation Committee by Greenland in 2014 was brushed off by Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt stating “we have no need for reconciliation.” This approach appears potentially harmful and is most likely unsustainable. Pushing away attempts by such an important partner to mitigate issues of the past, which has a negative impact on contemporary policy decisions would be counteractive. As one Greenlandic interviewee said: “Ignorance, rather than hatred is more poisonous in a relationship. If you hate each other at least you are showing some type of emotion.”<sup>57</sup> For Denmark to be serious about its role as an Arctic nation, it also must get serious about the elements of the Kingdom that gives it this position in the first place. Denmark must forge an environment in which strategic conversations are possible without the risk of incurring greater costs than benefits. In fact, the current silence and lack of transparency is generating the greatest costs. Denmark has an opportunity to change this trajectory when setting the next Foreign and Security Policy Strategy for 2020-21, which is due this year, by putting actions behind words and forging cohesion in the Kingdom beyond simply “cooperating more”.

### **The role of Individuals**

Unfortunately, it was not possible to get into the granularity of the cases in a way that allowed meaningful analysis of the role of individual people. However, many interviewees mentioned that specific individuals have had a significant influence on the way the cooperation has evolved depending on their backgrounds, interest in Danish-Greenlandic relations and the

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<sup>56</sup> Bjørnsson, Iben, “‘Vi har ikke behov for forsoning...’ Det danske selvbillede i relation til Grønland 1953-2015”, *temp - Tidsskrift for Historie*, June 1st, 2017, <https://tidsskrift.dk/temp/article/view/24985>.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Greenlandic politician.

organizations they represent. As one interviewee explained, the representative across the table not only represents him- or herself, but also carries the institutional baggage of the organization they represent. For example, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Greenland are looked upon with some suspicion and vice versa for Greenlandic representatives in Denmark.<sup>58</sup>

Nonetheless, the general understanding is that most people are pragmatic and that the most important difference an individual can make is to forge trust. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Per Stig Møller, was mentioned as an exceptional representative due to his extensive knowledge about Greenland and genuine interest in choosing the most beneficial solution for the Kingdom. His behavior as a role model, suggests all actors should engage with one another in more transparent and honest ways with an aim to find solutions that benefit the greater Kingdom, not just its individual elements.

## **7. Policy Implications**

The above analysis infers that policy must develop in at least two directions: towards a practical-political solution and a trust- and identity-building process.

### **Practical-political**

As the airport case illustrates, there is no official determinant as to when a matter moves from being a domestic concern to a larger security issue. Academics and practitioners alike have highlighted this issue and suggested that efforts must be made to clarify the administrative delineation between situations that fall under Danish or Greenlandic jurisdiction to prevent

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Greenlandic diplomat.



any misunderstandings. Both countries should contribute to determining criteria for when intervention or exclusion of either party is pertinent or acceptable. As several interviewees argued, this is not an easy task, as the line often is muddled, and interests and intent change over time. However, it would benefit both parties to at least have an understanding of how and when Copenhagen may or should involve itself in Greenlandic affairs, and when and how Nuuk should inform or engage Copenhagen.

To facilitate this process, inclusion of Greenlandic politicians and government officials in discussions regarding the foreign and security policy of the Kingdom should be significantly increased. Currently, only those considered “relevant actors” by Copenhagen are included in the policy-making process. Copenhagen should consistently consider Greenland a relevant collaborative actor. Defining what qualifies as a general security issue is tenuous; ensuring transparency and broader information-sharing between Nuuk and Copenhagen could reduce tensions and create a common understanding of the security interests of the Kingdom and the underlying drivers. This information, in turn, could be used in Greenlandic planning and decision-making, providing a better foundational understanding of the Danish perspective on various concerns, allowing Greenland to take those views into account before they become contentious issues, as in the case of Chinese investments in Greenlandic infrastructure. Establishing permanent and official joint involvement could also alleviate potential distrust arising from the fear of exclusion from important decisions.

Such a move would require modifications to the current level of secrecy maintained by the Danish government regarding its relations to Greenland and policy towards it. Currently, this secrecy is reflected in minimal transparency as illustrated by the reluctance of Danish

officials to partake in interviews for this paper. The secrecy is also reflected in general distrust towards Greenlandic officials, their capabilities and motives, resulting in reluctance to openly share sensitive information with them. Currently, Greenland is excluded from access to the Danish governmental IT system and Greenlandic officials are unable to gain security clearances and access to important internal documents. Both conditions represent some of the structural inhibitors to generate transparency and open information-sharing. Ultimately, the cooperation among geographically dispersed nations within the Kingdom of Denmark would benefit from easier access to information, even if constrained to a “need-to-know” basis, to increase inclusion into the joint policy-making processes.

### **Building Trust**

Denmark must consider its role as an Arctic nation to better understand the way it frames the relations with Greenland. It must determine what being Arctic means to Denmark, the nation, and the Kingdom of Denmark, why being Arctic is important and what is required to enforce that role. These questions should constitute essential elements of Denmark’s Arctic strategy, thereby contributing to forging strong relations with Greenland for mutual benefits rather than detracting from Denmark’s Arctic policy.

Furthermore, Denmark should pursue reconciliation to show good faith and commitment to developing its relationship with Greenland, if not in the format suggested in 2014, then in other structured, solutions-oriented and mutually acceptable ways. If the issues that have formed today’s mistrust are not being dealt with, the Greenland taboo will persist as will the premonition expressed by one interviewee: “I don’t know if we will ever build mutual

trust”.<sup>59</sup> The most challenging aspects of pursuing a more reconciliatory path, however, is determining who should conduct this conversation, and how it should be carried through. Nonetheless, policymakers must begin to think about this sooner rather than later. If reconciliation is ignored, Greenland and Denmark will continue to diverge from each other imposing costs on both countries as well as lost opportunities.

### **Theoretical implications**

This paper also has certain theoretical implications, providing examples of the second image’s influence in international relations<sup>60</sup> and the formation of embedded values and norms and their influence on policy matters.

The study of Danish-Greenlandic relations and their impact on Denmark’s ability to make decisions in the Arctic region on security policy issues, especially vis-a-vis the U.S., shows how past history, bureaucratic structures and politics affect a country’s international behavior. This meshes well with Alison and Zelikow’s theory on the importance of bureaucratic structures, power dynamics and agenda-setting within domestic governments, and the impacts these factors have on decision-making regarding international issues.<sup>61</sup> In this respect, it also challenges neorealist theory,<sup>62</sup> by giving an example of a state, Denmark, whose pursuit for power and security through collaboration with the hegemon, the U.S., is

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Greenlandic diplomat.

<sup>60</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N., “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Spring 1988.

<sup>61</sup> Allison, Graham & Zelikow, Philip, “Essence of Decision”, *Longman*, 1999.

<sup>62</sup> Waltz, Kenneth N., “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Spring 1988; Mearsheimer, John J., “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics”, *WW Norton*, 2001.

affected (even spoiled) by domestic political concerns. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of given norms in the relations between nations, illustrating how taboos are formed and institutionalized through complex interactions between various actors.<sup>63</sup>

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore why the Greenland taboo exists, how it manifests itself in contemporary Danish-Greenlandic relations and how policy-makers should mitigate the taboo in order to ensure an efficient Danish Arctic policy.

Three case studies provided evidence of existing explanations of the taboo, namely historic distrust between Denmark and Greenland, unclear delineation of policy responsibilities between the Danish and Greenlandic governments and Denmark's struggles with its Arctic identity in light of post-colonial sentiments. No specific evidence was found for the role of individual people, however interviewees did highlight the importance of individual interests and personalities.

The cases also illustrate how the taboo manifests itself today. The Camp Century case shows that historical decisions continue to affect Danish-Greenlandic relations and that a desire to preserve Danish-U.S. relations influence Danish actions. The servicing contract case exposed Denmark's fear of challenging U.S. interests and harming U.S.-Danish relations, where the taboo inhibits communication between Denmark and Greenland, resulting in economic costs for both countries. Finally, the airport case illustrates the bureaucratic issues

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<sup>63</sup> Viotti, Paul R. & Kauppi, Mark V., "Constructivist Understandings" in "International Relations Theory", *Pearson*, 2001.

surrounding Danish-Greenlandic relations with unclear delineations between security and non-security issues, and Danish and Greenlandic jurisdictions. It also highlights Denmark's reluctance to be 'the bearer of bad news' to Greenland in an effort to preserve relations.

The implications of the analyses point towards two key directions for Danish policy regarding Greenland: generating practical-political structures for forging solutions; and building trust through reconciliatory processes. In the practical-political realm, the Kingdom of Denmark must make a joint effort to create a clearer delineation between matters that fall under Danish or Greenlandic jurisdiction, while forming a better understanding of interests and concerns of both parties. This requires increased Greenlandic inclusion in political discussions and easier access to security clearances to facilitate information-sharing and transparency in the joint policy-making process. Giving Greenland insights and access to Danish thinking will allow it to include these perspectives in domestic matters, while providing guidance as to when the countries should consult with one another. In terms of identity- and trust-building, Denmark must think deeply about what it means to be an Arctic nation and how this reflects on interactions with Greenland. Additionally, Denmark must engage in a reconciliation process, as continually denying any need for it is disrespectful to Greenlanders and harmful to the Arctic policy-making process. Only some form reconciliation will allow Greenland and Denmark to rebuild the trust that has been lost throughout the recent past and allow successful implementation of the recommendations laid out above.

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### **Interviews**

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