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Review by **Valur Ingimundarson**, University of Iceland

In January 1968, a U.S. B-52 bomber aircraft crashed near the Thule base in Greenland, leaving four unexploded, if damaged, nuclear bombs in the ice and causing widespread radioactive contamination in the area of impact. Six crew members managed to eject safely from the aircraft, but the seventh incurred fatal injuries. The episode led to a crisis in Danish-American relations and put the Danish Government—which had publicly banned nuclear weapons on Danish territory—under intense public scrutiny. The timing of the accident added to the political drama: it happened less than 48 hours before parliamentary elections in Denmark.

In this article, Thorsten Borring Olesen, a Professor of History at the University of Aarhus, discusses the political fall-out of the crash in Danish-American relations and puts it into historical perspective by examining Danish nuclear policies and U.S. military rights in Greenland as spelled out in the bilateral defense agreement of 1951. Together with U.S. primary source material and recent Danish publications on the Cold War, he largely bases his analysis on a government-mandated report—which was written by a small group of Danish researchers, including Olesen, and published in 1997—on the role of Greenland in Danish security policy.¹ What prodded it was the public debate generated by the 1995 publication of a top secret Danish Foreign Ministry document dating from 1957 on the question of the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons to Greenland.

¹ See "Grönland under den kolde krig: Dansk og amerikansk sikkerhedspolitik 1945–1968," 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Danish Institute of International Affairs, 1997). The conclusion of the report was translated into English and published under the title "Greenland during the Cold War: Danish and American Security Policy 1945–1968." The researchers who wrote the report were: Nikolaj Petersen, Thorsten Borring Olesen, Svend Aage Christensen, and Frede P. Jensen.

This is a complex and multilayered Cold War narrative about the nature of the Danish-American relationship; Danish sovereignty over Greenland; the strategic importance of Greenland to the United States; Danish domestic politics; U.S. global military strategy and bureaucratic politics, and threat perceptions of the Soviet Union. Equally important, it is also about lies and deception in politics—with leading Danish politicians secretly condoning U.S. nuclear activities in Greenland despite an official policy to the contrary—and unstated colonial practices underscored by the non-visibility and non-participation of Greenlanders in decision-making on the military use of Greenland.

Olesen, an expert on Danish foreign and security policy during the Cold War and on the European Union, focuses on the Danish government's motivations, in the aftermath of the 1968 crash, for pressing—successfully, it turned out—for a change in U.S. nuclear policy with respect to Greenland and on the U.S. decision to accept, albeit with oral caveats, the Danish demand for banning peacetime storage of nuclear weapons on Greenland territory, including overflights. This was confirmed by the signing of a bilateral supplement to the 1951 agreement less than four months after the nuclear accident. Thus, the Danes managed to get a written commitment from the United States that it would respect the Danish policy on nuclear weapons except in the case of emergency.

As Olesen makes clear, the crisis was about alliance politics—with two NATO allies at odds—as well as a bilateral dispute between a superpower and a small state, with the latter exerting considerable leverage because the nuclear disaster put the United States on the defensive. It had its origins in the ambiguity of the defense agreement, which paved the way for the construction of the Thule base during the 1950s. Since the agreement was silent on the deployment to—and use of atomic weapons from—Greenland, it did not give the United States permission for nuclear missions in time of war. Yet, as Nikolaj Petersen has argued, neither party was interested in seeking clarity when the agreement was concluded. The Americans sought to ensure maximum flexibility in interpreting it as part of U.S. global military posture and strategic war plans. They always proceeded from the assumption that they were legally entitled to introduce nuclear weapons into Greenland. The Danes were aware of the U.S. intentions to use Greenland for strategic base operations. But they did not want to become “fully co-responsible”—as one Danish foreign ministry official put it—for the possible nuclear use of Greenland against the Soviet Union.² Given the strategic importance of Greenland, they refrained from challenging the U.S. legal interpretation of the agreement, even if it would have strengthened their official policy on the non-stationing of nuclear weapons on Danish territory.

² See Nikolaj Petersen, “SAC at Thule: Greenland in the U.S. Polar Strategy,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13:2 (Spring 2011), 98.

The ambiguity over this issue was secretly removed in 1957, when the Danish Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, H.C. Hansen, personally gave the Americans a green light to store nuclear weapons in Greenland. He did so by replying to a U.S. note—about whether Denmark wanted to receive prior notice if the United States deployed such weapons—that he had no comments. In February 1958, the Americans stored four nuclear bombs at Thule, which they removed later in the year. In addition, a Nike Hercules battery and Delta Dagger squadron, which made up the air defense of Thule, became nuclear in the period of 1959–1965. Finally, the Airborne program—designed to keep U.S. long-range bombers in the air at all times with ready nuclear weapons on board—operated from Greenland from 1961 until the 1968 crash. Apart from Hansen, Nils Svenningsen, the Permanent State Secretary of the Foreign Office, was the only person who knew about the tacit agreement given to the Americans. It was not shared with the Danish Government, the Danish Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee, or the public. Even a central political figure like Jens Otto Krag did not learn about it until he had become Foreign Minister in 1958 (he was critical of it, but did nothing about it). The conduct was made even more questionable, because Hansen was at the same time preparing a public declaration—eventually made at the December 1957 ministerial meeting of the NATO Council—that Denmark, of which Greenland was a constitutional part since 1953, would remain nuclear free.

Olesen offers several explanations for the double standard embedded in a policy that stipulated a ban on the stationing of nuclear weapons on Danish territory, which, in practice, did not apply to Greenland. He argues that Hansen's and Svenningsen's decision stemmed from their view that blocking the U.S. initiative would have been impossible on either legal or political grounds. Thus, the need for secrecy was rationalized on two grounds: first, the Danes wanted to keep the presence of nuclear weapons in Greenland secret from the Soviet Union to minimize the risk of political and military pressure on Greenland. Second, the nuclearization of Greenland would have led to the downfall of the government due to the anti-militarist stance of the two smaller coalition partners of the dominant Social Democratic Party. What also exacerbated the dilemma—according to Olesen—was the U.S. policy of neither confirming nor denying the whereabouts of its nuclear arsenal. If the Danish government had declared publicly that the United States had obtained the right to store nuclear weapons in Greenland, it would have prompted questions of whether they were actually stationed there. In the absence of a clear answer, the Danish government would have faced criticism for not being able to exercise sovereignty over Greenland.

These are important factors, which help explain Danish policy with respect to Greenland. The argument, however, contains two weaknesses: the first one relates to the considerable, if undeveloped, role Olesen accords the Soviet Union in Danish thinking and the second one to the lack of a discussion of Danish attitudes toward Greenland and the Greenlanders, whose absence from the narrative is a stark reminder of how they were marginalized in Danish-American relations during the Cold War. Olesen is certainly correct in emphasizing the political constraints faced by the Danish government

stemming from the fact that Greenland was much more important to U.S. military strategy than continental Denmark. Adopting a global strategic approach, the United States saw Greenland as a key defensive post as well as a forward staging base against the Soviet Union. But given this strategic significance, it is more than likely that the Soviets suspected the Americans of having nuclear weapons on the island irrespective of any Danish reassurances to the contrary. After all, as Olesen points out, the group of individuals who suspected that nuclear operations were going on in Greenland “may have included most of the politically conscious segment of the Danish population.” The lack of parliamentary support for the nuclearization of Greenland and deep-seated concerns about government instability if it became public—seems to have been more important than worries about a harsh Soviet reaction. To portray these two factors as being interdependent runs the risk of overemphasizing the external dimension at the expense of the internal one.

Olesen notes that Denmark was a “reluctant ally” that did not refrain from opposing the United States within NATO; until the 1968 crash, however, it remained silent on U.S. military activities in Greenland. While conceding the temptation to explain this behavior by the willingness of leading Danish politicians to accept a double standard in the way they handled military issues in continental Denmark and Greenland—and claiming that “this explanation cannot be entirely discarded”—he distances himself from it. Instead, he stresses that Danish politicians knew that the U.S. security guarantee to Denmark was based on the military importance of Greenland, not on continental Denmark. As noted, this Cold War logic was undoubtedly a key motivation for giving the United States a free hand in Greenland. Nonetheless, Olesen’s failure to engage the non-representation of the Greenlanders in the official story leaves out an important part of it: the persistence of Danish colonial attitudes vis-à-vis Greenland. It was obvious that Danish politicians made a clear mental distinction when it came to Denmark proper and Greenland. Such an official mindset made it far easier for Danish politicians to normalize “Othering” practices—to exempt Greenland from the ban on the stationing of nuclear weapons on Danish soil and to bypass the Greenlanders with respect to U.S. military activities on the island.

Apart from these points, this is a convincing and well-argued article written by an expert in the field. Olesen gives plausible explanations for the willingness of the United States to offer concessions to the Danes after the 1968 crash. First, the nuclear episode coincided with other crises, such as the Tet offensive and the Pueblo affair, which required more urgent attention; second, the Americans feared that a renegotiation of the 1951 agreement would not only entail more constraints on their military activities in Greenland; they also worried that the Icelanders, who followed developments in Greenland with intense interest, would use the occasion to demand the revision of the U.S.-Icelandic defense agreement of 1951. While this was an unlikely scenario in 1968, with a pro-American coalition government in power, a left-wing government made the revision of the agreement a centerpiece of its agenda in 1971 (even if nothing came of it in the end). Third, the signing of the supplementary agreement was accompanied by a U.S. oral

statement diluting it. In a situation of “grave and sudden threat” and under “circumstance beyond our control,” the United States would retain the right to undertake overflights with nuclear weapons without prior consultation. Finally, there was much pressure within the U.S. government to end the Airborne Alert program dubbed “Operation Chrome Dome” over Greenland and elsewhere because it was considered too costly and dangerous. Thus, while the Americans were reluctant to give in—and resented the Danish refusal during the 1968 crisis to take into account the historical record of the Danish tacit approval of their nuclear activities in Greenland—they considered their concessions as being acceptable both from a military point of view as well as from a political one.

Denmark’s policy on nuclear weapons during the early Cold War was based on a deception that remained a secret for almost forty years. In addition, as Olesen observes, Prime Minister Jens Otto Krag’s claim—after the 1968 crash—that nuclear weapons were not present on Danish territory, including Greenland, “and that there can therefore be no overflights of Greenland by aircraft carrying atomic bombs,³” was also deceptive because he was one of the few Danes with intimate knowledge of Denmark’s secret nuclear policy. In the Thule crisis, the Americans presented Danish officials with a detailed record of the 1957 exchange, but refrained from making it public, because they did not want to embarrass the Danish Government or jeopardize their military rights in Greenland. Thus, it was not until 1995 that both governments revealed Danish complicity in the nuclearization of Greenland. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, “[S]ecrecy—what diplomatically is called “discretion”...—and deception, the deliberate falsehood, and the outright lie used as a legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us from the beginning of recorded history.”⁴ In the final analysis, the Greenland nuclear saga is about such deliberate falsehood to promote specific political goals.

Olesen offers an informed and engaging treatment of this important episode in Danish-American relations. While not adding much to the record on the 1957 exchange, the article contains a perceptive and persuasive analysis of the 1968 crisis and puts it in its proper Cold War context.

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³ *Greenland during the Cold War*, p. 32.

⁴ Hanna Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” in Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), p. 4.

Balkans. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Among his most recent publications are: *The Rebellious Ally: Iceland, the United States, and the Politics of Empire, 1945–2006* (forthcoming, 2011); “Territorial Discourses and Identity Politics: Iceland’s Role in the Arctic,” in James Kraska (ed.), *Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, 2011); “Die Kartierung der Arktis: Bodenschätze. Großmachtpolitik und multilaterale Governance” [Mapping the Arctic: Natural Resources, Great Power Politics and Multilateral Regimes], in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 5/6 (2011); “A Crisis of Affluence: The Politics of an Economic Breakdown in Iceland,” *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 21: 1 (2010), 57–69; “Iceland and the High North: Identity Politics, Security Policies, and Geostrategic Interests,” in *Skírnir* 284:2 (2010), 261–283; *The geopolitics of Arctic natural resources* Report (Brussels: European Parliament, 2010); “Iceland’s Post-American Security Policy, Russian Geopolitics, and the Arctic Question,” *RUSI Journal*, 154: 4 (2009), 74–81; and *A Risk Assessment for Iceland: Global, Societal, and Military Factors: Findings of an Interdisciplinary Commission* [Editor and Chairman] (Reykjavik: Icelandic Foreign Ministry, 2009); *Reconfiguring Icelandic Foreign and Security Policy 1991–2007* (Reykjavik: The Icelandic Literary Society, July, 2008 (ed.)); “Iceland’s Security Policy and Geopolitics in the North,” in Kjetil Skogrand (ed.) *Emerging from the Frost: Security in the 21st Century Arctic* (Oslo: Institutt for Forsvarsstudier, 2008); “From Uncertainty to Dissolution: The Rupture in U.S.-Icelandic Security Relations, 1991–2006,” in Valur Ingimundarson (ed.), *The Reconfiguring Icelandic Foreign and Security Policy*; “The Politics of Memory and the Reconstruction of Albanian National Identity in Post-War Kosovo,” *History and Memory* (2007).

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