

US NATIONAL MISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEM AND THE THULE AIR FORCE BASE IN GREENLAND



The issue of upgrading the radar facilities at the U.S. Air Force Base in Thule (Pituffik) in North-West Greenland to serve in the U.S. missile defense system is the most important foreign policy issue in Greenland and Denmark for many years. Since a new phased-array radar at Thule is essential in the American missile defense system project dubbed “Star Wars”, the Danish government – which administers the foreign and defense policies of Greenland – has the power to stop the project, which most European and Asian countries fear will lead to a new nuclear arms race.

The public position of the Danish government to NMD has so far been a ‘wait and see’ line until there is a formal request from the U.S. administration to up-grade the Thule radar. Denmark has made it clear, though, that the ABM treaty must be respected (or revised with Russian consent),¹ and that the Greenland Home Rule will be continuously informed and consulted before any decision is taken. The Danish foreign minister Mogens Lykketoft has also stated that some level of understanding with China is needed to avoid a new arms race. Most foreign and defense policy experts in Denmark have expressed strong criticism to NMD, e.g. prof. Ole Wæver, University of Copenhagen: “If Denmark takes a clear stand against, then the Americans will perhaps understand that they are all alone. The rest of the World thinks that the plans are insane.”²

“To us it is important – if NMD is going to be deployed – that it happens in understanding with Russia and China and not in contravention with international agreements. [...] If it happens in conflict with everybody else and contributes to a new arms race then it's worrying. [...] We know that there are strong proponents for the project in the new administration in Washington. But I will also assume that it will matter a lot for new administration to talk this through with the Europeans. Therefore the Danish government is wise to wait with taking any decision until we have a concrete description of the American project.”

– Danish foreign minister Mogens Lykketoft to Berlingske Tidende, 8 January 2001.

According to the Danish government, up til now it has only been receiving information on the NMD system from the Americans, but observers believe that U.S.-Danish contacts on NMD are far more advanced. Already in November 1999 the Danish foreign minister discussed NMD with Sandy Berger, Strobe Talbot and Madeleine Albright in Washington, and officials from the Prime Minister’s Office, the foreign Ministry and the Defense Ministry had consultations on NMD during their visits to the Pentagon and to the U.S. Space Command in Colorado Springs in February 2000. The, in August 2000, a high-level U.S. delegation led by John Hollum had ‘orientation meetings’ in Greenland with Danish officials and the Greenland Home Rule on NMD/Thule. The Los Angeles

¹ The foreign minister told the parliament on 15 August 2000 that the 1987 motion (motiveret dagsorden) on ABM systems on Thule still forms the basis of Danish government policy on the issue (Folketing records, S 1457). The 1987 motion states (among other things) that the Thule facilities may not be used offensively and “**may not be applied in connection with SDI or ABM systems**” (Folketing records, F21 – D 36, 1987).

² Jyllands-Posten, 23 August 2000.

Times has reported that outright negotiations on Thule between the U.S. and Denmark have been on-going from April 2000.³

Wide-Spread Star Wars Opposition in Greenland

The question of Thule Air Force Base and the U.S. wish to upgrade the early warning radar there for the Star Wars missile defense system is heatedly debated in Greenland. Opposition to Star Wars in Greenland is pervasive, not least due to the way the United States and Danish authorities have acted in past (see section on the history of Thule below). Greenland never wanted to be part of the Cold War, and most Greenlanders would like to see a de-militarized Arctic. The official position taken by the Greenland Home Rule government is extremely sceptical of NMD, and the government insists that Greenland must have it's say this time.

The mayor of Thule has said that the people of his village are scared and are unanimous in their opposition to the NMD, and the Vice-President of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), Uusaqqak Qujaukitsoq, a hunter from the Thule region, has stated that "in the event of a conflict, we will surely be the first target."⁴ In addition, ICC President Aqqaluk Lynge has noted "that the 'existing military infrastructure in our Inuit homeland was installed during the Cold War without consulting Inuit because both former superpowers treated the Arctic as an uninhabited wasteland, and without recognizing that we actively use and occupy this land.' Mr. Lynge expressed concern that the NMD is another, albeit post-Cold War, example of ignoring the inhabitants of the Arctic."⁵

"The Greenland Home Rule cannot support the plans for upgrading the Thule radar, if it contraves the provisions of the ABM treaty. Moreover, an upgrade of the Thule radar must in no way contribute negatively to the existing World peace"
– **Greenland Home Rule press statement, 8 December 2000.**

"My personal opinion is that one should avoid NMD, that's for certain. [...] I don't think you can find a single person in Greenland who in any way is positive towards NMD."
– **Greenland Prime Minister Jonathan Motzfeldt to Ritzau news agency, 12 January 2001.**

"I believe [NMD] reflects American schizophrenia. [...] Globally it's not a good direction, so personally I'm against it."
– **Hans Pavia Rosing, Danish MP elected on Greenland to Ritzau news agency, 9 August 2000.**

FACTS ON GREENLAND

The Viking, Eric-the-Red, discovered and named Greenland over 1000 years ago. Denmark claimed it in 1605 and attempted to make it into a productive colony. In 1979 the Greenlanders were granted Home Rule.

Greenland covers app. 2.175.000 km², and is approximately 86% covered with ice. The icecap is 665,000 square miles (1,726,400 sq. km.) of glaciers and ice up to 2 miles (3 km.) thick. The population totals app. 55.000, and largest town and capital is Nuuk with some 12.000 inhabitants.

Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, and while the 1979 Home Rule agreement accords a large degree of autonomy to Greenland, the Danish government runs Greenland foreign and defense policy matters from Copenhagen.

The Home Rule consists of a 31 seat parliament (Landstinget) and a seven person government (Landsstyret). Greenland is a member of the Nordic Council, the Arctic Council and participates in the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) which has NGO observer status in the United Nations.

³ Los Angeles Times, 23 July 2000.

⁴ ICC press statement, 6 August 2000.

⁵ Ibid.

While the 1979 Home Rule agreement gives the Danish government the powers to administer foreign and defense policy matters of Greenland, almost without even asking Greenland, the Danish government has promised to involve Greenland in any NMD/Thule decision. Partially in response to the critique of past U.S. and Danish behaviour, a Danish-Greenland commission has been tasked to look at ways to improve the Home Rule arrangement that will certainly end up advising to hand over more powers to Greenland, but this process is not expected to lead to full Greenland independence in the short/medium term.⁶

Thule Air Base History During the Cold War

Due to the strategic importance of Greenland during the Cold War, Greenlanders have again and again experienced that decisions affecting their lives were taken in Washington and Copenhagen without even consulting them. Now the same thing may happen with the U.S. Star Wars missile defense plans.



The 1953 Forced Resettlement of Thule Inuits

During 1951-53 the U.S.-Danish weather station and air strip located at Pituffik in Greenland was turned into the large U.S. Thule Air Force Base. In order to make room for building defenses for the base, the local Inuit (Eskimo) community from the Uummanaq area was forced to move away from their ancient hunting grounds. In May 1953, with only a few days notice, 30 Inuit families were ordered to move and to resettle in Quanaaq, North of Thule, and only on 20 August 1999 did a Danish court (Østre Landsret) award compensation to the Inuits. The verdict did not fully recognize the Inuit claim of the land at Thule Air Base, however, and *Hingitat 53*, the group representing the Thule Inuits in the trial, has appealed the ruling to the Danish Supreme Court. Mr. Qujaukitsoq, the chairman of *Hingitat 53*, argues that Denmark cannot legally make decisions regarding the future use of Thule until the Supreme Court has spoken, asserting the land belongs to the Inuits.⁷ The case is expected to go before the Supreme Court in Autumn 2001.

The Radioactive Legacy of the B-52 Accident in 1968

On 21 January 1968 a B-52 Stratofortress carrying four nuclear weapons crashed on the ice in Bylot Sound near Thule. The impact triggered conventional explosives, which led to fragmentation of the nuclear weapons on board, and the plutonium spread over the ice. Clean-up crews, including Danes, Greenlanders and Americans, removed the debris from the crash and the upper layer of contaminated snow. However, it was agreed that not all the plutonium was recovered (one bomb basically missing), and some unknown amount fell to the bottom of Bylot Sound. Subsequent environmental studies carried out by Denmark have concluded that approximately half a kilogram of plutonium sank to the underlying sediments.⁸ Those involved in the clean-up after the accident were not aware of the possible health effects of their sinister work. In 1988 a group representing workers involved in the clean-up was formed after reports of

⁶ The Danish government will surely insist on retaining ultimate control over Greenland defense issues, whereas concessions are more likely to be given with regard to economic foreign policy matters.

⁷ Aktuelt, 10 August 2000; Ritzau, 17 August 2000.

⁸ AMAP: "Arctic Pollution Issues – A State of the Arctic Environment Report".

increased cancer occurrences, early deaths and mysterious illnesses, and in 1995 the Greenlanders and Danes involved in the clean-up were each granted a 50.000 DKK compensation from the Danish state.

Nuclear Weapons at Thule Air Force Base During the Cold War

While the official Danish policy has always been that of ‘no nuclear weapons on Danish territory’, it became known in 1999 that there had been American nuclear weapons on the Thule Air Force Base during the Cold War. According to a secret letter from defense secretary William Perry to the Danish government, leaked to a Danish researcher, United States had stationed four airborne Mk-36 hydrogen bombs at Thule in eight months of 1958, and another 48 nuclear air defense missiles (W31/Nike Hercules Sam and W54/Falcon/GAR-11) were stationed at Thule from 1959 to 1965.⁹

In addition, B-52 planes carrying nuclear bombs have regularly overflown and landed in Thule as exemplified by the 1968 crash. The presence of nuclear weapons on Danish territory apparently took place with the secret consent of the Danish prime minister at the time, but the Danish parliament was never informed.

“The first phase is designed to protect the 50 states. It will still require the support of our allies. We have the one X-band radar at Shemya, but we also have the upgraded early warning systems, mostly software that would be put into our allies’ system. So you still need allied support even on phase one.”

– U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 25 July 2000.

Now the question is whether the popular opposition towards Star Wars in Greenland and Denmark will be heard and respected by the American and Danish governments, or if Greenland will yet again be seen as merely a piece in a geopolitical chess game.

The Role of Thule in National Missile Defense

Current US National Missile Defense (NMD) plans are to deploy the system in three phases between 2005 and 2015. This system consists of seven separate elements – all of which are all crucial if the system is to work. Of these there are two which will require the support of particular European nations.

The first is the five existing early warning radars at Fylingdales in United Kingdom, Thule in Greenland, Beale in California, Clear in Alaska and Cape Cod in Massachusetts. These radars are in place to detect and track incoming enemy missiles and all require upgrading to enhance their tracking capability and enable them to provide better data so intercept points can be calculated and incoming missiles destroyed.

Further down the line, at least two years later, it is the intent of the U.S. to have operational brand new radars, known as X-Band radars, constructed at Clear, Fylingdales and Thule as well as one new site, Shemya in the Aleutian Islands. As U.S. Defense Secretary Cohen admitted to the Senate:

“Well, in the sense that, can you have an effective NMD without them [Britain and Denmark], and the answer at this point would be no. It’s not a question of having the interceptors. We could develop and deploy as many interceptors as we want or think that we need, but if you don’t have the forward deployed X-band radars, then you can’t see the missiles coming, therefore your interceptors are not worth very much. So having the forward-deployed radar is critical. Having the support of your allies to have that is critical. It’s up to the President and those of us in the administration to persuade our allies this is something that’s in our interest and in their interest.”

⁹ Information, 21 October 1999.

– U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 25 July 2000.

Further details were provided in a memorandum to the British parliament’s Foreign Affairs Select Committee by the British Foreign Office. In this memo they explained that RAF Fylingdales role in U.S. Star Wars plans was to track ballistic missiles “launched from the Middle East”. According to the memo Fylingdales would not affect U.S. plans to meet any threat from North Korea but that “its effectiveness in meeting threats to the United States from the Middle East would be likely to be significantly impaired.”

The Thule radar facility, whilst in Greenland, requires the permission of the Danish government as they administer Greenland’s defence and foreign policy before the U.S. can make any modifications. The Thule radars role is to track any ballistic missiles launched from the central part of Russia. Therefore the implicit support of the Danish and British Governments for the Star Wars program is essential if the Star Wars program is to continue on any level.