

# 'Irreplaceable' base and very little else

LONDON

## U.S. military has reduced its footprint in Greenland since the Cold War ended

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Decades ago, the United States had a big footprint in Greenland: thousands of troops, more than a dozen bases, strategic bombers, weather stations and a cavernous facility under the ice. Today, there is just one active base, a remote missile defense station. Some of the old ones have been turned into commercial airstrips. Others have faded into rusty ruins.

President Trump has said the United States needs Greenland for national security. After previously threatening to seize the island by force, he signaled last week that he's open to compromise. One proposal under discussion would allow the United States to own pockets of land in Greenland for military bases.

Greenland, which is an overseas territory of Denmark, and Denmark have bristled at giving up any of their sovereignty, and it's not clear that such a plan could work.

### WHAT'S THERE NOW?

The Americans have the Pituffik Space Base (pronounced Bee-doo-FEEK) in northwestern Greenland. Its 150 personnel run missile defense and space surveillance. Its location at the top of the globe, not far from the North Pole, allows its radar to detect missiles in their earliest moments of flight.

### The Pituffik base is relatively undefended, so one possibility would be to install short- to medium-range air defense weapons nearby.

"It is quite literally the outermost eye of American defense," said Peter Ernstved Rasmussen, a Danish defense analyst. "Pituffik is where the U.S. can detect a launch, calculate the trajectory and activate its missile defense systems. It's irreplaceable."

### WHAT USED TO BE THERE?

A lot. During World War II, the Germans invaded Denmark and set up clandestine weather stations on Greenland's east coast. Around the same time, the United States military built its own weather stations on the west coast to help forecast conditions for battles in Europe.

Soon, the United States was building airstrips in places like Narsarsuaq, Ikateq and Kangerlussuaq, all in the southern half of the island. These runways served as a steppingstone for long-range bombers flying between the United States and Europe.

After the war, many bases closed down. Some, like the Sondrestrom Air Base in Kangerlussuaq, remained under American control until 1992. During the Cold War, the United States set up a string of early warning radar stations across the island that could detect missiles flying over the North Pole.

Today, some of the old American

airstrips, like the one in Kangerlussuaq, have been upgraded into small commercial airports and are used by Air Greenland, the national airline.

Other bases, like in Narsarsuaq and Ikateq, lie in shambles. Most of the Cold War radar stations have been dismantled but one still stands on a hilltop in Kangerlussuaq. Locals call it "Mickey Mouse." Its two big circular dishes, which haven't been turned on in decades, resemble a pair of giant ears.

### POSSIBLE EXPANSION

Most of the old American bases are in such disrepair that they would be almost impossible to restore.

The most likely place to expand would be around the active Pituffik base, said Troy J. Bouffard, the director of the Center for Arctic Security and Resilience at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The site is relatively undefended, so one possibility would be to install short- to medium-range air defense weapons near the base.

"Otherwise, Pituffik gets destroyed easily," he said. "And then we're blind."

Another likely place for expansion might be the Kangerlussuaq airport, a Danish military official said. It was big in World War II and situated in a protected spot with reasonably good weather.

Mr. Trump has spoken about placing antimissile interceptors on Greenland as part of a so-called Golden Dome missile defense shield, but where they could go is not clear.

### U.S. SECURITY CONCERNS

American officials have indicated they are worried that their access to Greenland could be curbed if the island broke off from Denmark and went independent. If that ever happened, Greenlanders say it is most likely decades away.

Under a 1951 Danish-American defense pact, the United States already has sweeping access to build new bases and station more troops.

The Trump administration wants a new arrangement, and one proposal is modeled on the "sovereign base area" agreement in Cyprus, where Britain's military bases are British territory.

Mr. Trump has also repeatedly said that Russia and China threaten Greenland.

But China is too far away to mount a major incursion, said Mikkel Runge Olesen, a researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies in Copenhagen. And Russia's navy is inferior to NATO's sea capacity, he said.

"A Russian surface fleet making its way to Greenland?" he said. "They'd be massacred."

Dr. Bouffard said that even if there's no significant military threat to Greenland right now, the world is changing fast.

"Pituffik was never really a top-tier target before," he said, adding, "It's going to increase in importance — big time."

Experts say that as global warming melts the ice in the Arctic Circle, there will be a lot more competition for resources and shipping lanes that become more accessible.

Dr. Bouffard said that, contrary to what Mr. Trump claims, there is no immediate threat from Russia or China.

But, he added, "There will be."

*Maya Tekeli contributed reporting from Copenhagen.*