

# U.S. Has Long Been Fixated With Greenland

Trump's calls to take the territory are latest in decades of bids to control the island

BY SUNE ENGEL RASMUSSEN

IKATEQ, Greenland—Deep in a remote fjord in Greenland, hundreds of rusty fuel drums known locally as “American flowers” litter the icy wilderness.

Vehicles marked as property of the U.S. Army decay in the snow-covered valley near the abandoned remains of an aircraft hangar.

As President Trump seeks to expand U.S. territory with the island, this base, a remnant of World War II, stands as a reminder of the last time the U.S. tried to own Greenland.

Trump's insistence that the U.S. must control Greenland is the latest in a string of flirtations with the Arctic island going back over a century. It is, however, the first to threaten to splinter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

After weeks of closed-door talks among Washington, Copenhagen and Nuuk, Trump reignited public attention on Greenland this month by putting it front and center of his conflict with NATO ahead of a meeting with the alliance's secretary-general, Mark Rutte.

“We want Greenland. They don't want to give it to us. And I said: ‘Bye, bye!’” Trump said.

Fears among Washington's European allies of a U.S. invasion peaked in January when Danish forces transported explosives to the island to blow up runways and supplies of blood for potential casualties during a multinational exercise, a senior Danish official said. These actions were earlier reported by Danish broadcaster DR.

European allies also sent soldiers to show they were willing to help defend Greenland. The French were among the first,



Northern lights shine over dogs near Bluie East Two, a former Air Force base in Greenland.

sending some 50 troops, said Gen. Pierre Schill, commander of the French land army.

In talks with Denmark and Greenland, the U.S. is seeking to expand its military presence in three areas of Greenland, the commander of the Northern Command, Gen. Gregory Guillot, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March.

The locations are aimed at securing a presence for special forces and permanent access to Arctic waters, as well as expanding space and submarine monitoring. A senior Danish official confirmed two possible locations at Kangerlussuaq, formerly Sondrestrom, which houses a sizable airstrip, as well as the maritime gateway of Narsarsuaq. A third potential location could be a deep-water port near Pituffik, where the U.S. has a space base.

The real hitch of the negotiations is ensuring the U.S. respects Danish and Greenlandic sovereignty. The Danish government has said U.S. sovereignty over bases, akin to the British model in Cyprus, is unacceptable. Such a deal might satisfy Trump's desire for improved security but falls



short of his goal of ownership.

“This is not what Trump wants, deep down, but he might accept it if he can sell it as a victory,” said Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, senior researcher with the Danish Institute for International Studies. The U.S. is already permitted to expand forces under a 1951 treaty that allows virtually unimpeded access. “Trump could have achieved this without triggering a mas-

sive international diplomatic crisis,” Søndergaard said.

After meeting Trump, Rutte told reporters that the U.S. is also trying to ensure that any arrangement they reach with the Danes and Greenlanders remains in force if Greenland achieves independence.

The Danish foreign ministry declined to comment beyond saying Denmark has opened a diplomatic track with the U.S. Greenland, the world's larg-

## Rogue Danish Envoy Made Base Pact

The U.S. bases were built without Copenhagen's consent but with the help of a rogue Danish diplomat.

In 1941, Denmark's ambassador to Washington, Henrik Kauffmann, signed an agreement behind his government's back that allowed the U.S. to establish defense bases in Greenland, effectively turning the island into a U.S. protectorate. Copenhagen dismissed and charged Kauffmann with high treason. The charge was rescinded after Denmark was liberated from Nazi Germany.

During the war, bases such as Bluie East Two served as midway points for bombers and transport planes flying between North America and Europe. Bluie East Two was abandoned in 1947.

Today, Pituffik houses 150 U.S. troops. During the Cold War, some 10,000 U.S. soldiers were based there. The U.S. stationed long-range bombers in Greenland, some loaded with nuclear weapons. It deployed early-warning radar systems and built weather stations to get reliable forecasts for operations.

JULIETTE PAVVHORS FORMAT FOR WSJ

est island, is bigger than Mexico, but home to fewer than 60,000 people, with no roads connecting settlements. Building new bases would be costly and logistically challenging.

The base, Bluie East Two, was built in 1942 as part of a network of 17 U.S. bases constructed across Greenland during World War II, partly to prevent Nazi Germany—which occupied Denmark—from taking the island.

After the war, U.S. Secretary of State James Byrnes secretly offered Denmark \$100 million for Greenland, roughly \$1.6 billion today. Previous administrations also advocated purchasing the island in 1867 and 1910. The U.S. formally recognized Danish sovereignty in 1916 as a condition for its purchase of the Danish West Indies.

A 1951 defense treaty gave the U.S. the right to establish an indefinite number of bases in perpetuity, provided it informed Denmark and Greenland. That year, President Truman approved construction of Thule Air Base, 750 miles from the North Pole—today it is called Pituffik and is the northernmost U.S. military base on the planet.

Trump has suggested Greenland as a piece of his proposed \$185 billion Golden Dome missile-defense system, which is intended to create a shield over the U.S. against ballistic, hypersonic and cruise missiles using sensors and interceptors. The growing use of hypersonic weapons that can maneuver during flight, often at low altitudes, has pushed the U.S. to improve space monitoring, said Charles Galbreath, director for space studies at the Washington-based Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies.

“I do believe Greenland can play a role in that,” he said. “Having the combination of assets in Greenland and Alaska, that does help monitor the North Polar region very well.”

Greenlandic officials say despite U.S. rights to operate on the island, Greenlandic sovereignty must be respected.

“We have never felt this threatened before and it is by our ally,” said Pipaluk Lyng, chairwoman of the Greenlandic Parliament's foreign and security policy committee. “The White House has a lot of work to do to regain our trust in Americans.”