



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **The Kingdom of Denmark: Battleground for Great Power Competition over Control of the Arctic Region**

by Jan Top Christensen  
May 2020

# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

---

## **THE KINGDOM OF DENMARK: BATTLEGROUND FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION OVER CONTROL OF THE ARCTIC REGION**

by Jan Top Christensen

CGAI Fellow  
May 2020



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE  
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
1800, 421 – 7th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 4K9  
[www.cgai.ca](http://www.cgai.ca)

©2020 Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
ISBN: 978-1-77397-132-2



*“The United States and the Trump Administration are setting out to wake the West up from our collective complacency before other less trustworthy governments shape the values of the region after their own repressive image ...”*

**T**hese belligerent words, published in the major Danish web-based news outlet *Altinget* in late April, belong to Ambassador Carla Sands, the very undiplomatic top U.S. diplomat in Denmark. Sands, a 2016 Trump campaign supporter, thus started a lively debate in Denmark about Greenland, the Arctic and the U.S.’s role in this recently highly politicized region.

To avoid any misunderstanding about who the “repressive powers” are, both Russia’s and China’s behaviours were mentioned directly and blatantly, thereby mirroring what Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had already expressed one year earlier at the Arctic Council meeting in May 2019:

Russia’s pattern of aggressive behavior and increasing militarization in the Arctic is a looming global concern. It has restored many of its Cold War-era bases, established a new Arctic command, created four new Arctic brigades, refurbished old airfields and other infrastructure in the Arctic including deep-water ports, and established new military bases along its Arctic coastline.

China was not treated gently, either:

According to the 2018 white paper “China’s Arctic Policy”, the PRC seeks to establish a “Polar Silk Road” through developing Arctic shipping routes. This presence could enable the PRC to project its repressive values and advance its self-serving economic interests. The PRC is also trying to seize upon the region’s valuable resources by pursuing dual-use, civilian-military infrastructure and securing mining licences for several mineral deposits throughout the region, including uranium and other rare-earth minerals.

Russia’s ambassador to Denmark, Vladimir V. Barbin, reacted swiftly in the Danish press and with the same aggressive tone: “When the U.S. links financial assistance to Greenland with rough criticism of Russia, then the Americans are threatening peace in the Arctic. Instead of dialogue and co-operation, now (they present) exclusively a confrontational approach in the Arctic region, hoping to dominate this part of the world.” It is unprecedented for Denmark to be the battleground where two of the strongest Arctic powers are overtly fighting each other. It does not bode well for the future of Arctic co-operation.

The Chinese ambassador to Denmark, Feng Tie, took a bit longer to respond, but when he did he was equally clear in his message: “It is absurd and misleading, when the U.S.-ambassador indirectly says that the alternative to the U.S.-influence in Greenland is that Russia and China will take over Greenland. ... The U.S. should not use reference to China to cover up for [their] own military and economic interests in Greenland.” Furthermore, the Chinese ambassador used the opportunity to refer to a number of unresolved environmental hazards involving nuclear and toxic



waste associated with U.S. activities in Greenland. The way the Chinese ambassador responded is typical for the recently more assertive and aggressive style of Chinese diplomacy; a far cry from the polite and kind behavior I experienced myself from Chinese colleagues in New York twenty-five years ago while serving at the Danish Mission to the U.N.

### **U.S. Assistance: Bane or Boon for Greenland?**

In a one-two punch, Sands' next move was to announce a financial package to Greenland in the Danish media. Greenland, together with the Faroe Islands and Denmark, form the Kingdom of Denmark. The package, involving the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other U.S. authorities, will be worth some US\$12 million for the 56,000 inhabitants of the world's biggest island. The assistance will go to education, improving the English skills of the Inuit people, and developing the tourism and mining industries.

The aid package to Greenland triggered a wild media debate in Denmark. (How would Canadians react to direct USAID assistance to Nunavut?) Many see the package as another means for the U.S. to increase its influence in Greenland, following President Donald Trump's failed attempt last summer to buy Greenland, thereby vastly offending both Greenland and Denmark. Influence through financial assistance is certainly cheaper than buying the island itself, if you want to keep up the high level of welfare in Greenland.

Both the left and right in the Danish parliament, where thinly populated Greenland has two permanent seats, have criticized the U.S. package as an uncalled-for interference that undermines the Danish commonwealth. The criticism went from stressing the quid pro quo to being insulted, because that part of Denmark was offered development aid as if it were a needy Third World country. The opposition party in Greenland's local parliament also spoke out against U.S. assistance.

Meanwhile, Greenland's local government and Danish Foreign Minister Jesper Kofod have officially welcomed the package. Kofod stated that "all foreign embassies in Denmark may have a dialogue with representatives for Greenland and the Faroe Islands about issues within their jurisdiction." In early May, the minister found it necessary to ease the "heated debate" by publishing a newspaper article titled (in Danish) "The Danish "Realm" is not threatened by the US assistance to Greenland." Later in May, during a public hearing in the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, the minister stressed that he was in full support of Greenland's government's efforts to get civilian benefits included in the U.S. military presence in Greenland. Part of the increased U.S. interest in Greenland also includes the imminent re-opening of a consulate after its closure back in 1953. The U.S. consul and his staff will initially be hosted by the Danish Defence Office in Greenland.

The U.S. assistance may be seen as a very late follow-up to the 2004 Igaliku Agreement on the U.S.'s continued military presence in Greenland, signed by then-U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell. The agreement, which focuses on using the Thule airbase as part of the American missile



defence system, states in its article one that civil co-operation will take place within sectors of education, tourism and economic-technical development – all sectors within Greenland’s own jurisdiction.

Some may also view the US\$12 million as very modest in comparison with the other two contentious economic issues between the U.S. and Greenland/Denmark. Recently, Greenland lost a big civilian service contract for the maintenance of the U.S. Thule base. That was a substantial loss of annual income for Greenland’s local government. And there have been no recent indications that the U.S. is going to shoulder the estimated US\$30 million for cleaning up all the abandoned U.S. bases in Greenland. Today, they constitute a serious environmental hazard to the local Inuit people, a hazard that may increase significantly with the further melting of the ice cap.

### **Denmark’s Arctic Policy, a Balancing Act**

Denmark is facing serious diplomatic challenges with the increased tension in and around the Arctic region. Over the last decade, geostrategic and economic interest in the Arctic has grown exponentially. It is not only a question of understanding and relating to the many interests of the seven other Arctic states bordering the Arctic Circle and members of the Arctic Council, which was created in 1996. With the Arctic ice melting and the possibility of using new sea routes for more efficient economic exploitation of the rich natural resources in the region, other European countries with historical and scientific relations to the region have shown an interest in becoming more involved as observers to the Arctic Council. In 2013, five Asian countries (China, India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea) became observers. China also defined itself as a “near Arctic state” despite being 1,400 kilometres away from the Arctic Circle. Knowing China’s aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, it is important to carefully scrutinize any Chinese activities in the Arctic.

The physical and political conditions in and around the Arctic region are developing rapidly. Climate change, with the receding ice, is an unknown variable. We cannot fully predict how this development will affect the livelihood conditions and human security for the local people. We cannot precisely tell what the consequences for the exploitation of the natural resources will be, other than it is expected to become much easier. We know that The Northwest Passage and The Northeast Passage will gradually open up for commercial sea routes, significantly reducing the distance for a lot of the world’s trade, but we have difficulties foreseeing how soon it will be possible and under what circumstances. Russia’s renewal and expansion of its military bases along its northern coast, technological military advances (like hypersonic missiles) and China’s keen economic and research interest in the region, including plans for a Polar Silk Road, seem to have re-awakened American strategic thinking about the region and triggered more American activities (diplomatic, economic and military). The Pentagon’s 2019 [Arctic strategy](#) is a testimony to this development.



With more activity initiated by many countries, including non-Arctic states, comes a higher risk of conflicts – especially in an atmosphere characterized by mistrust and a zero-sum perspective – although open military confrontation does not appear to be likely for the time being.

In such a situation where circumstances are rapidly changing and more parties are getting interested in engaging in the Arctic Region, it seems very wise that Denmark has put its Arctic-2011-2020 strategy up for revision, in close cooperation with its two other partners of the Kingdom of Denmark. A new strategy is scheduled to be presented later in 2020.

The challenges are many for Denmark and the other Arctic states, including Canada. An open crack became visible in the Arctic Council institution in 2019, when Secretary Pompeo could not agree on a common text at the Council meeting in Finland, and the Council, for the first time, did not issue a common declaration following the ministerial meeting. It is important that the Arctic Council continues to produce constructive results. Otherwise, external powers may try to replace the Council with something else. Comprehensive strategies for the Arctic have to relate to, inter alia, the development within the following areas: human security and change of livelihood conditions for the local people; the governance structure of the Arctic – is it realistic to continue with a set-up where the Arctic Council does not deal with hard security issues? Should NATO get more involved and set up a structure that allows for exchange with Russia again since the dialogue dried up following the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014? It is important not to demonize all Russian behaviour, if a realistic dialogue should be re-established. Satisfying the livelihood needs while respecting environmental concerns for the very fragile eco-systems in the region is necessary. How to balance freedom of navigation while ensuring safety and capacity in case of emergencies? And how can the problem of overlapping territorial claims among the Arctic States be eventually solved?

The revision of the strategy may find some inspiration in [a report](#) published at the end of 2019 by the Danish Institute for International Studies, “Dealing with Intensifying Great Power Politics in The Arctic (Insights from Finland, Norway and Iceland).” The Institute is co-financed by the Danish Foreign and Defence Ministries.

The report presents six recommendations for Denmark, based on interviews with the three other Nordic countries. Some of these ideas may also be of relevance for Canada in the further development of the framework/road map for the Arctic that was presented in September 2019:

- 1) Ensure predictability and transparency when deploying new capabilities in the region;
- 2) Improve capacity to control crisis situations;
- 3) Clarify when and where the U.S. and NATO can play a role;
- 4) Support Finland’s proposal for an Arctic Summit to continue the spirit from the Ililissat Declaration of 2008;
- 5) Increase cooperation among the Nordic countries; and
- 6) Increased intelligence sharing.



Given the very dynamic nature of the Arctic region, it may be more realistic to settle for a five-year perspective for the new strategy.

Denmark cannot, of course, allow itself to become the puppet of any U.S. government's interests. Trump's "America First" policy is being imposed on all geographic regions and international institutions, including in the Arctic region. The Kingdom of Denmark also has to fully understand the interests and behaviour of Russia and China in the region, including the nature and perspective of cooperation between the two major powers. Denmark and other small/medium-sized Arctic states, including Canada, must be fully aware of the very dynamic and competitive reality in which they operate.

Close cooperation among likeminded countries in the Arctic Council is key to preserving the Arctic as a peaceful and stable region, using a rule-based approach to solving existing and future conflicts of interest.

## ► **About the Author**

---

*Jan Top Christensen is a retired Danish ambassador, a fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and an international consultant.*

## ► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

---

The Canadian Global Affairs Institute focuses on the entire range of Canada's international relations in all its forms including (in partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy), trade investment and international capacity building. Successor to the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI, which was established in 2001), the Institute works to inform Canadians about the importance of having a respected and influential voice in those parts of the globe where Canada has significant interests due to trade and investment, origins of Canada's population, geographic security (and especially security of North America in conjunction with the United States), social development, or the peace and freedom of allied nations. The Institute aims to demonstrate to Canadians the importance of comprehensive foreign, defence and trade policies which both express our values and represent our interests.

The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

In all its activities the Institute is a charitable, non-partisan, non-advocacy organization that provides a platform for a variety of viewpoints. It is supported financially by the contributions of individuals, foundations, and corporations. Conclusions or opinions expressed in Institute publications and programs are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Institute staff, fellows, directors, advisors or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to, or collaborate with, the Institute.