

Not for Sale: Trump, Greenland and Danish Naval Diplomacy

On 15 August 2019, *The Wall Street Journal* revealed that US President Donald Trump had been asking his advisors about the possibility of buying semi-autonomous Greenland from Denmark.¹ Rather than passing the report off as ‘fake news,’ Trump and other Republicans doubled-down on the idea, justifying it on national security and strategic grounds.² The situation escalated to the point that, after receiving Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen’s public rebuke of the suggestion (any realignment decision belongs to Greenland, not Denmark), Trump cancelled his September visit to Copenhagen and called Frederiksen ‘nasty’ on Twitter.

Little-noticed in the media at this time was the presence of a US Navy *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, USS *Gravely*, in Greenlandic waters. At the end of its eight-month deployment to northern Europe, *Gravely* was met by the Royal Danish Navy (RDN) warship HDMS *Absalon* on 16 August. The two ships conducted a series of passing exercises, and their helicopters practised landing on each other’s flightdecks. All in all, it was completely unremarkable: two warships belonging to NATO allies sailing and exercising together in the North Atlantic. What could be a better sign of normal diplomatic relations?

But there was, in fact, something unusual in this meet up. HDMS *Absalon* was no regular patrol ship. It was not part of the RDN’s 1st Squadron dedicated to everyday sovereignty assertion and maritime security duties in the northern waters off Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Rather, *Absalon* is in 2nd Squadron, Denmark’s primary

combat force of five new warships built specifically for the country’s post-Cold War expeditionary-focused defence policy. Sharing a common hull, the two *Absalon*-class ‘support ships’ and the three *Iver Huitfeldt*-class air-defence frigates (one of which, *Peter Willemoes*, immediately preceded and succeeded *Absalon* in the Arctic region) of the 2nd Squadron were designed to facilitate long-endurance operations far away from the Danish mainland as part of international missions under the United Nations and NATO. They replaced the Cold War-era near-coastal defence force structure designed primarily to halt the Soviet Baltic Fleet. With the demise of the USSR, homeland defence was seen as no longer necessary, and the strategic situation enabled Denmark to align its defence structure much more closely with its internationalist foreign policy in the post-Cold War world.³

At the time of the new fleet’s conception, it was not considered likely that the ships would be deployed to Greenland. Unlike the 1st Squadron, 2nd Squadron’s ships do not have ice-strengthened hulls. Their 6,000-7,000 ton hulls make use of advanced sensors and the Standard Flex (STANFLEX) modular system, allowing them to switch out weapons and utility equipment as needed. This allows the re-use of existing legacy systems such as Harpoon missile launchers and 76mm OTO Melara guns, as well as accommodating newly-procured 35mm Oerlikon close-in weapons systems (CIWS). By re-using many of the weapon modules from the first generation STANFLEX ships of the *Flyvefisken*-class, the costs of the new ships were kept down, and maintenance can be more easily conducted.

Furthermore, the two *Absalons* are equipped with an extra deck compared to their *Iver Huitfeldt*-class cousins, allowing them to load and carry the equivalent of seven Leopard II main battle tanks via a stern ramp. In contrast, the *Iver Huitfeldt*-class ships are equipped with a midships 32-cell Mark 41 vertical launch system and a SMART-L long-range surveillance radar paired with an active phased-array radar to provide area-air defence. Employed together, the 2nd Squadron’s vessels can conduct a number of high-end warfare missions, from fleet escort in contested areas to amphibious landings on hostile territory.

So why were *Absalon* and *Peter Willemoes* in Greenland, which is already attended by 1st Squadron’s rotating force of four *Thetis*-class and three *Knud Rasmussen*-class patrol ships? The answer stems from a 250-page review, “Defence Ministry’s Future Tasks in the Arctic,” published in June



Credit: MC2 Jessica Dowell, US Navy

The ‘support ship’ HDMS *Absalon* (left) and destroyer USS *Gravely* conduct sailing exercises off the coast of Greenland, 16 August 2019. This summer marked the first time Denmark’s combat-oriented 2nd Squadron operated under the country’s Joint Arctic Command.



The *Thetis*-class offshore patrol ship HDMS *Hvidbjørnen* seen docked in Nuuk's main harbour, May 2019.

2016, which surveyed the increasing commercial, social and military activities occurring in the region and the future role of the Danish military. The recommendations from it were put into action in December 2016 in a budget agreement by the government adding 120 million DKK (approximately \$24 million CAD) in funding for certain Arctic military activities over the next several years. Crucially, the review noted that airspace sovereignty was not then a task of Denmark's Joint Arctic Command, and accordingly there was a lack of long-range airspace monitoring capability in existing Danish military forces in the Arctic region.⁴ This gap could, at least in the short term, be cheaply filled by deploying a 2nd Squadron frigate, with its much better aerial surveillance radars, during the ice-free summer months when traffic is at its highest and the region is in need of greater monitoring capacity. The funds for Arctic frigate deployments were thus included in the December 2016 budget agreement, though it was not until summer 2019 that the first such deployment was carried out.

That *Absalon* and *Peter Willemoes* were chosen for this task highlights one of the options proposed in the review regarding the replacements for the 30-year-old *Thetis*-class that would have to be acquired in the late 2020s. The review suggested that due to an expected need for

greater armament, better aerial and underwater sensors, and increased transportation capacity, a reasonable starting point for the replacement ships could be an ice-capable derivative of the *Absalon*-class, though it would have to be reduced in size to sail in some of the Greenlandic and Faroese inland waters.⁵ In the meantime, the existing *Absalon* and *Iver Huitfeldt*-class ships can operate in the region with geographical and temporal limitations, contributing greatly to the aerial picture.

And thus, USS *Gravelly*'s visit off Greenland was met by the 'support ship' *Absalon*, which may be more appropriately called an amphibious frigate. This was an impressive show of force in a region that had until then been tended to by the minimally-armed ships of 1st Squadron. Photos of the passing exercise showed *Absalon*'s midships modular missile deck fully packed with 16 Harpoon anti-ship missile canisters (most NATO frigates carry a maximum of eight, and *Gravelly* had none) and at least 24 Evolved Sea Sparrow anti-air missile cells. These were in addition to the permanent bow 5" gun and the pair of 35mm Oerlikon Millennium CIWS guns fore and aft.

By having a 'peer' vessel meet the American ship at a time when the political relationship had been inflamed, Denmark was able to carry out, intentionally or not, naval diplomacy in the form of James Cable's "expressive force": the ambiguous use of naval force to "emphasize attitudes" and "lend



Credit: Danish Defence Gallery

Although the United States currently has a lack of icebreakers, such was not always the case. Here, the US Coast Guard Cutter *Northwind* approaches the Grønnedal naval station in Greenland some time during the Cold War.



The third and latest *Knud Rasmussen*-class patrol vessel, HDMS *Lauge Koch*, conducts boarding exercises in front of Sermitsiaq Mountain's distinctive peak in the Nuup Kangerlua fjord off Nuuk in May 2019.

verisimilitude to otherwise unconvincing statements.⁷⁶ While *Absalon*'s deployment was never accompanied by any specific demands to Denmark's erstwhile American ally, it did emphasize attitudes – i.e., that Greenland was part of the Danish realm – and perhaps lent verisimilitude to unconvincing statements on the importance of Arctic sovereignty to Denmark. In publicizing *Absalon*'s presence alongside *Gravelly*, Denmark was arguably able to head off Danish citizens who might doubt their military's ability to ensure the sovereignty of the Danish realm. A lack of Danish naval presence might have been used by American Trump supporters to argue that Denmark was failing to spend enough on Greenland's defence and the United States should acquire and defend the territory instead. Admittedly, it seems unlikely that such concerns would have exacerbated the political situation, but foreign actors seeking to inflame relations between NATO allies might have taken note and used the situation to their advantage. In any case, the political drama between the

two countries could not have come at a better time for Denmark. If the Americans had to send a naval ship while the US President was disrespecting Danish sovereignty, at least it was when Denmark had its own heavy naval units in the Arctic for the first time.

While passing exercises between NATO allies are hardly unusual, how the event is interpreted by the public may differ wildly. What we today call national security is not the sole province of governments and militaries: the passion of the public cannot be ignored. To the extent that they would look past their seablindness and take notice (or be encouraged to do so by foreign actors), the public has the power to frame and transform otherwise innocuous cooperative exercises into something laden with political conflict. (Canadian readers need only recall consistent public concerns over their navy and coast guard's inability to monitor foreign transits in the Arctic.⁷⁷) In the charged political atmosphere between Denmark and the United States in mid-August, images of an American destroyer dwarfing a regular Danish escort (or unescorted!) off of Nuuk, Greenland, might have inflamed the discourse.

Thankfully, the deployment of *Absalon* provided the presence of a robust (but friendly) force reminding all involved that Greenland's sovereignty was wholly, and ably, being asserted by Danish defence forces. Lest it seem farfetched for one NATO ally to view another as a threat, in November 2019, Denmark's Defence Intelligence Agency emphasized Greenland as the country's top security item, highlighting specifically Trump's interest in buying the territory.⁷⁸ Although *Absalon*'s deployment was originally meant to be a stop-gap measure for improving aerial surveillance, the increasing great power interest in Greenland makes it likely future deployments will take on roles serving greater political purposes. 🍷

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Notes

1. Vivian Salama, Rebecca Ballhaus, Andrew Restuccia and Michael C. Bender, "President Trump Eyes a New Real-Estate Purchase: Greenland," *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 August 2019.
2. Daniel Lippman, "Trump Greenland Gambit Finds Allies Inside Government," *Politico*, 24 August 2019.
3. For an examination of Denmark's shift in foreign and security policies, see Hakon Lunde Saxi, "Defending Small States: Norwegian and Danish Defense Policies in the Post-Cold War Era," *Defense and Security Analysis*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2010), pp. 415-430.
4. Danish Ministry of Defence, "Forsvarsministeriets fremtidige opgaveløsning i Arktis," *Forsvarsministeriet*, June 2016, pp. 61, 73.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 234-236.
6. James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy: Political Applications of Limited Naval Force* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 63.
7. For examples, see Paul Koring, "Canada Should Beware the Ice Dragon," *iPolitics*, 9 February 2018; Dennis Patterson, "Canada Must Assert Sovereignty over the Arctic While There's Still Time," *National Post*, 2 November 2017.
8. Laurence Peter, "Danes see Greenland Security Risk Amid Arctic Tensions," *BBC News*, 29 November 2019.