

Denmark to open Arctic military command

By Niall Green
22 July 2009

The Danish government announced last week that it would expand its permanent military presence in the Arctic. The plans involve the establishment of a regional joint-service command in the Faroe Islands, in the North Sea, and the expansion of an existing military base in Greenland.

The melting of the summer extent of sea ice in the Arctic Ocean, due to global warming, is opening up potential sea-lanes and areas for oil and gas exploration. The United States Geological Survey estimates that the region holds 90 billion barrels of oil and a significant proportion of the world's untapped natural gas.

To advance its claims to a portion of this potential bonanza, the Danish bourgeoisie must secure its control over the autonomous territories of Greenland, ruled by Copenhagen for three centuries, and the Faroe Islands, and rebuff the territorial ambitions of its rivals in the region.

The military base in Greenland is at Thule, in the far northwest of the territory. A United States Air Force base since World War II, Thule is the home of the 821st US Air Base Group and is a monitoring station for the Pentagon's Ballistic Missile Warning System. The base also houses facilities for the US military's spy satellite program.

The plan to expand Denmark's military capability at this important, long-term US facility indicates that Copenhagen is looking to Washington to back its claims in the Arctic. The Danish government is engaged in a claim under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to a vast swathe of the Arctic Ocean, based on its possession of Greenland.

A founding member of the US-led military alliance NATO, Denmark has long looked to US imperialism to advance its interests. The Danish government sent forces as part of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and has

participated in the occupation of Afghanistan. The US doubtless sees Denmark's possession of Greenland as a useful tool through which to develop its own claims in the region, and to rebuff those of its rivals, principally Russia.

Denmark has also cooperated with Canada over Arctic sovereignty, proposing that territorial rights to the ocean be based on the "median line method" that would divide the Arctic waters between countries according to their length of nearest coastline. This would give Denmark the Pole itself, due to its proximity to Greenland, while Canada would gain significant territorial waters.

Ottawa and Copenhagen have a longstanding territorial dispute in the region, however. Both countries claim a small island between Greenland and Canada's Ellesmere Island, possession of which is crucial to control the waterway between the two territories, a route that could develop into an important shipping channel should the summer extent of the Arctic ice continue its rapid retreat. The US also has territorial disputes with Canada in the Arctic.

The Canadian and Danish claims to the Arctic Ocean are largely directed against Russia. Moscow is seeking to establish sovereignty over much of the region using a different interpretation of international sea laws. The Russian method to determine territorial waters is based on the extent of the country's undersea continental shelf. The Lomonosov Ridge extends from Siberia towards the North Pole, potentially giving Moscow a legal claim to hundreds of miles of the Arctic Ocean around this geological feature.

While the main players in the Arctic region are pursuing claims through international law—with the exception of the United States, which does not recognize the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea—all are preparing to advance their interests through military means as well.

Denmark's announcement of a stepped-up military presence in the Arctic is only the latest expression of this. In 2007 the Canadian government announced it would develop a new Arctic fleet and expand its military presence in the far north, while Russia has resumed air force flights over the Arctic and is planning to build a new fleet of nuclear powered icebreakers.

In February foreign ministers from Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland announced they would cooperate in a new Nordic military alliance to protect their interests in the Arctic. Last month Norway announced it would move the Operational Command Headquarters of its armed forces north, into the Arctic Circle.

The deployment of Danish troops to the US base at Thule is not only directed against the Danish bourgeoisie's foreign rivals. Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory with a population of just 57,000, has pushed for greater independence from Copenhagen in recent years. Should large-scale oil and gas production commence there, or its coastline become an important shipping route, Denmark, under the tutelage of Washington, hopes to be able to act forcefully to maintain its authority.

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