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The desecuritization of Greenland's security? How the Greenlandic self-government envision post-independence national defense and security policy

Rasmus Kjærgaard Rasmussen

President Trump's "offer" to purchase Greenland has placed the country at the heart of world affairs and great power rivalry in the Arctic. Greenland is currently enjoying considerable interest from both the U.S. and China while Russia is increasing its military capabilities in the region. Traditionally, Greenlandic politicians have not been interested in defense and military spending without civilian purpose. And as security policy is constitutionally outside the self-government's authority the issue has not been high on the agenda. However, as Greenland is actively seeking independence from Denmark, the future of Greenlandic defense has become crucial to understanding its independence aspirations. This article examines how the Greenlandic self-government and the political parties envision the future of Greenland's security framework through close readings of government coalition agreements, political statements and media texts. Based on The Copenhagen School of Securitization Studies, the main argument is that Greenlandic defense and foreign policy is characterized by desecuritization. That is, a tendency towards downplaying the security and defense aspects of independence while instead highlighting i.e. economic aspects. The article analyzes this logic in Greenland's recent foreign policy aspirations and in debates on defense. Analytically, desecuritization is linked to two underlying narratives which Greenlandic politicians use to rhetorically downplay security aspects of defense and foreign policy by referring to either economic self-sufficiency or identity politics of the Inuit.

Introduction: Greenland in the era of increased geopolitical competition

When the U.S. president in mid-August 2019 dramatically offered to "purchase" Greenland, as reported by the *Wall Street Journal* (Salama et al, 2019) and confirmed by the President himself on various occasions thereafter, it was the culmination of a renewed and intense U.S. strategic interest in the Arctic country. Greenland has in recent years become an arena for increased geopolitical and economic competition with China and the U.S. as the most active players. China has been investing strategically in mineral extraction and satellite systems in Greenland (see Brady, 2017) while the U.S. has reopened its diplomatic representation in Nuuk and signed an MOU on mineral exploration (Naalakkersuisut, 2019).

This development underscores that the entire Arctic region is currently experiencing a rapid transformation in its security framework from a path of diplomatic cooperation to intensified

economic and military competition between the three global great powers. In this race, Russia is building up military and SAR capabilities in the region (Devyatkin, 2018) while China is furthering its polar ambitions by defining itself as a “near-Arctic state” (Chinese Government, 2018). In response, the U.S. has considerably sharpened the rhetoric towards China and Russia, culminating with U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo’s critique directed at both countries at the Arctic Council’s latest meeting in Finland, May 2019: “We want cooperation to continue. But we can’t have one side cooperate, and the other side derogate its duties” (US Department of State, 2019). Moreover, the U.S. Department of Defense in its new Arctic Strategy states that the entire region is in an “era of strategic competition” (DoD, 2019), a shift from previous statements on the Arctic. There is a growing concern amongst observers and policy-makers of an actual militarization (DoD, 2019: 4) and risk of a “new cold war” in the Arctic (Jacobsen & Herrmann, 2017; see also Cohen, Szaszdi & Dolbow, 2008).

Still one particular development with implications for the balance of the entire Arctic security system stands out: the case of possible Greenlandic independence. Currently, Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark and as such allied with the U.S. and a member of NATO. As Greenland actively pushes to become a sovereign (micro) nation-state, however, this raises the question of what will happen to the defense obligations of this vast territory in the case of full economic and political independence from Denmark? A question that has been intensely debated after president Donald Trump’s offer to “purchase” Greenland (see e.g. Hansen, 2019; Veirum, 2019). Regardless of the recent spat between Denmark-Greenland and the U.S., most observers and scholars assume that Greenland will stay allied with the U.S. in some form (see Breitenbauch, 2019; Gad, 2019), affirming past consensus on the subject (see Turnowsky, 2018a; Breum 2018).

However, the diplomatic row also served to make it clear that parts of the political independence movement are mainly focused on the economic preconditions for independence. Thus, former Greenlandic premier, Aleqa Hammond (Nunatta Qitornaï), stated shortly after Trump’s proposal that the U.S. should instead “begin by paying for the presence at Pituffik-airbase” (Hansen, 2019). And Greenlandic MP, Pele Broberg, (Partii Naleraq) said that the U.S. offer should be taken seriously as a way of crowding out the current Danish block-grant (Veirum, 2019). Greenlandic politicians appear to have a habit of taking security out of defense and security policy, focusing instead on economic considerations.

Analyzing the absence of security and threats in Greenlandic politics

In this article I examine how the Greenlandic self-government and the political parties envision the future of Greenland’s security framework through close readings of government coalition agreements as well as media texts with official statements made by Greenland politicians on future defense policy. My main argument is that Greenlandic defense and foreign policy is characterized by *desecuritization*. That is, a propensity towards downplaying the security and defense aspects of Greenlandic independence and instead highlighting economic aspects.

This tendency to downplay security as a mode of governance is underscored by the fact that defense and security issues traditionally have not played a central part of Greenlandic politics. Jacobsen and Gad notes that “[w]hen Greenlandic politicians make (rare) demands for military investments in Greenland, arguments mostly relate to services provided for civil purposes (fisheries control, search and rescue, oil spill response, etc.)” (Jacobsen & Gad, 2017: 17). Additionally, the authors observe a lack of adversarial thinking in Greenlandic foreign policy

marked by i.e. “the near-total absence of Russia in Greenlandic foreign policy narratives” (ibid). Both the focus on the civilian aspects of defense policy and the absence of adversarial thinking emphasizes this drift towards desecuritization.

The article begins by briefly introducing the theoretical concept of desecuritization and the framework of the Copenhagen School of Securitization Theory. This is followed by an analytical section in two parts. In the first part, I unpack the self-government’s complex constitutional-legal relationship with Denmark. Here, I introduce the idea of understanding this as a ‘sovereignty game’ (Gad, 2016) with Denmark, in which Greenland attempts to *desecuritize* policy areas in order to gain more control over areas that help secure the path towards independence. I substantiate my argument by analyzing how desecuritization has been applied by the self-government to tone down the security implications of Greenlandic independence ambitions in its foreign policy efforts and in the recent controversy over Chinese investments. In the second analytical part, I investigate the narratives underlying the desecuritization moves made by the Greenlandic politicians. This is done by analyzing the 2017 public and parliamentary debate on the future of defense and the ensuing coalition agreement from 2018. Here I identify two main narratives which underpins the rhetoric of desecuritization: the “identity politics narrative of the Inuit” (Jacobsen & Gad, 2017) and “the self-sustaining economy”-narrative where independence is *framed* as economic and fiscal independence from Denmark (see Naalakkersuisut, 2012 and Self-Government Commission 2001). In a concluding section I discuss the strategy of desecuritization and its implications for independence and a potential partnership with the U.S.

Analytical framework: securitization and desecuritization as political and rhetorical strategies

In a frequently quoted definition, the process of *securitization* is described as “when a securitizing actor uses the rhetoric of an existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what under those conditions is ‘normal politics,’ we have a case of securitization” (Buzan et al, 1998: 24-25). Equally, the process of *desecuritization* is defined as the opposite of this dynamic: “a limitation to the use of the security speech act” (Wæver, 1995: 9) whereby an issue is brought back to the realm of normal politics. The purpose of desecuritizing moves is thus “to take security out of security, to move it back to normal politics” (Roe, 2004: 285). The key to understanding the theory of securitization and desecuritization is thus to view it as a model of politics that explains how threat issues are both created and dismantled in discourse. Nevertheless, most analytical and empirical attention has been given to securitization, while the centrality of desecuritization has been debated (Roe, 2004; Aradau, 2004. See Wæver, 2011 for a discussion).

Desecuritization has traditionally been found in cases where the securitization of a referent object has already been established. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003) desecuritization can follow two strategies where the political community either “downgrades or ceases to treat something as an existential threat to the valued referent object” (489). The history of nuclear weapons is a good example of the first desecuritization strategy where a threat issue is being downgraded. During the cold war, nuclear arms and their inherent ‘mutual assured destruction’ was deemed an existential threat by both U.S. and soviet leaders. Accordingly, nuclear armament was the epitome of national security in both superpowers. After the end of the cold war, however, nuclear weapons ceased to be considered an existential threat by these political communities and was downgraded to the level of other societal risks and handled within the realm of ‘normal politics’.

The latter strategy, where a political community stops treating an issue as an existential threat to the valued referent object, can be found in the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration with its absence of references to Arctic militarization. The Declaration was signed by the five Arctic coastal states and emphasizes the Arctic as a low-tension region where disputes are resolved peacefully building on “mutual trust and transparency” rather than “a new comprehensive international legal regime” (Ilulissat Declaration, 2008). The clear aim of the declaration is to avoid militarization and conflict in the Arctic even though militarization and great power rivalry is never mentioned by the text itself.

In terms of methodology, securitization theory is focused empirically on securitizing actors (leaders, governments, bureaucracies) and the rhetoric by which these make *securitizing or desecuritizing moves*. The theory hence suggests that we use discourse analysis “since we are interested in when and how something is established by whom as a threat. The defining criterion of security is textual: a specific rhetorical structure that has to be located in discourse” (Buzan et al, 1998: 76). This of course is also valid for the rhetorical structure of *desecuritizing moves*. Securitization theory further urges us to read “central texts” in which major instances of securitization take places (ibid) – this can be official statements by securitizing actors or central political debates.

I find these recommendations compatible with the present article’s analytical preference for narratives and rhetoric found in empirical texts such as speeches by heads of state, media texts, policy documents and interviews with key political actors (see Rasmussen & Merkelsen, 2017 for details on narratological security analysis. See also Greimas, 1971). Moreover, since desecuritization implies rhetorically downgrading or ignoring issues, it is crucial to have analytical sensibility to what is not mentioned directly in the text but alluded to. An example is the aforementioned where the text of the Ilulissat Declaration never mentions militarization – by some considered the chief threat to Arctic security. Another example is the abovementioned statement by Aleqa Hammond which frames the U.S.-Greenlandic relation in economic terms – thereby downplaying the crucial issue of security policy (alliances, bases etc.). With securitization theory as analytical lens we can see that Hammond is actually trying “to take security out of security”.

Greenland’s limited self-government and foreign policy: desecuritization as strategy and the controversies with Denmark

The constitutional-legal arrangement between Denmark and Greenland is complex, and can be hard to grasp for outsiders. The Kingdom of Denmark, a constitutional monarchy, consists of Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Greenland forming what is known as the Realm. The Faroe Islands and Greenland are autonomous territories with Home Rule (attained in 1948 and 1979, respectively) by which these two (micro) nations have had authority over their domestic policy. Yet Denmark and the government in Copenhagen controls foreign, security and defense policy for the entire Realm.

Since 2009, though, Greenland has had self-government which created a new division of jurisdiction between Nuuk and Copenhagen (Danish Government, 2009). This further extended Greenland’s authority over policy areas to include health services, education, fiscal policy, and, perhaps most importantly, from 2010 authority over its vast mineral resources and concurrent legal control over this area, including mining licenses. The Self-Government Act also stipulates that Greenland can legally take over responsibility for other areas which are currently under Danish

authority. This list presently includes 31 policy areas, including police and courts (Danish Government, 2019).

However, responsibility for conducting foreign policy for the whole Realm according to the Danish constitution still falls under the authority of the Danish Government. This means that Denmark controls Greenland's foreign policy as well as security and defense issues pertinent to it. (see Kristensen & Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017). This part of the constitutional-legal set-up has on several occasions spurred controversy. This is because there is no clear dividing line between what constitutes foreign policy and what constitutes economic or trade policy with international implications – issues which according to the Self-Government Act would be under Greenlandic authority. Nonetheless, the two countries have had quite different perceptions and interpretations of when economic, trade and investment issues entail foreign policy and/or security aspects. This has been painfully evident in the uranium dispute from 2009 to 2016 (Rasmussen & Merksel, 2017; Vestergaard & Thomasen, 2015) and in the recent quarrel over airport financing from 2017 to present (Bislev et al, 2018). Furthermore, Greenland has challenged the framework by striving for more direct bureaucratic and political control over the foreign policy field (see Kleist, 2019).

This constitutional-legal framework has thus resulted in a 'sovereignty game' (Adler-Nissen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2008; see also Gad, 2016) between Greenland and Denmark where the ultimate aim for Greenland is independence. Using securitization theory to understand this game makes it clear that independence is the valued *referent object* for Greenland and that Denmark to a certain extent can be seen as a *threat* to this goal.¹ Or as Gad and colleagues note on this perception: "Denmark stands in the way of Greenlandic independence" (Gad et al, 2018: 3). Moreover, we can analyze the recent controversies over what constitutes foreign policy in the constitutional arrangement as a manifestation of this underlying game. In this game, I argue that securitization and desecuritization moves are used as strategies for independence. And by applying the securitization model we can elucidate the narrative through which the Greenlandic government understands independence:

Greenland's securitization narrative

Referent object:

Independence from Denmark



Own foreign policy



"Existential" threat:

Danish securitization of economic issues (export, investments)

Danish securitization of foreign policy issues *par se*.

Seen in isolation, Greenland is clearly making a securitizing move, rendering independence the valued referent object. Seen in relation to the sovereignty game with Denmark, however, the Greenlandic strategy – by the logic of this game – is to *desecuritize* pertinent policy areas in order to either gain more control or to keep the status quo. In effect Greenland has pushed for more foreign political autonomy in order to secure its economic interests regarding fishery and foreign investments by delineating these areas from security policy (see Kleist, 2019 and Bianco, 2019).

In the following analytical section, I substantiate the argument that foreign and defense policy issues are being purposefully desecuritized by two examples of this strategy in practice. First, I introduce Nuuk's continuous bureaucratic and diplomatic ambitions to conduct foreign policy. Secondly, I analyze how desecuritization was used by Greenland's government in the recent

controversy over airport funding. I conclude this analysis by drawing attention to the outcome of this vis-à-vis Greenland's relationship to the U.S. and China. This can in turn explain the sudden shift in current Greenlandic foreign political outlook and strategies for obtaining foreign investments – and economic support.

A Room of One's Own: Greenland's diplomatic ambitions and the de-securitization of foreign policy

Control over foreign affairs is a notable point of contention and at the heart of constitutional-legal controversies with Denmark. For Greenland, foreign policy has implications for economic policy with international ramifications such as exports and foreign investments. Additionally, this policy field holds a particularly important symbolic value as proof of the coming independence. As minister of finance, Vittus Qujaukitsoq said in a recent speech held in Nuuk, May 2019 at the Future Greenland conference: "The ultimate political goal must be that Greenland takes over as much responsibility within these fields as possible" (Qujaukitsoq, 2019). Further corroborating this, is that fact that foreign policy (i.e. international relations and trade policy) is mentioned by all coalition agreements² since 2014.

However, within the current constitutional-legal set-up this is not possible and so far the self-government's strategy has e.g. been to engage in forms of para-diplomacy with representation in UN's forums of Indigenous people via membership of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (Jacobsen & Gad, 2017). It has also established (quasi)diplomatic representations in Iceland, Denmark, the U.S. (Washington) and the in European Union under the existing legal framework (Kleist, 2019). And in the 2018 coalition agreement between Siumut, Partii Naleraq, Attasut and Nunatta Qitornai there were even plans for representations in Canada and China (Naalakkersuisut, 2018a: 22). Moreover, the self-government has confidently renamed the department responsible for its foreign relations "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs" to its international stakeholders while keeping the less pretentious "Department of Foreign Relations" in its Danish language communication (Naalakkersuisut, 2019; Kleist, 2019).

It would seem that such display of symbols associated with a real sovereign state would violate the constitutional red line that stipulates that Greenland's foreign policy falls under Denmark's authority. However, Denmark has had no specific interest in curtailing Greenlandic efforts to secure i.e. foreign investments and trade and no official Danish criticism has been made of the name change. This follows the overall policy of the Danish Government established in the 2003-Itilleq Agreement which specifies that the Greenlandic Home Rule must be part of decisions involving foreign and security matters (Danish Government 2003, see also Naalakkersuisut, 2019).³ This probably dampens the Danish urge to securitize international matters with no clear defense or security aspect seen from the Danish perspective.

Additionally, the self-government in practice seems conscious in toning down defense and security policy aspects while emphasizing trade and economic aspects. In the most recent coalition agreement, it is stated that the foreign policy goal of Greenland is to work for "world peace, welfare and prosperity" and "how we as international citizens can participate in the global competition on trade and research" (Naalakkersuisut, 2018a). The unequivocal rhetoric of international trade and peace is a desecuritization move aimed at securing foreign political autonomy and maneuvering room with the current constitutional set-up.

While Greenlandic aspirations in international matters without clear security implications for the entire Realm have been consciously ignored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office, these actors have in other instances intensely contested Greenlandic authority over domestic policy with security implications and foreign policy ramifications. This has indeed been the case with uranium exports, the Chinese airport investments, and a planned Chinese purchase of the abandoned naval base Grønneidal (Breum, 2016).

So, although the Itilleq accord stipulates that all foreign and defense policy pertinent to Greenland must involve the self-government, the realities are that the Danish Government has felt compelled to invoke a rigorous interpretation of the legal-constitutional framework when the considerations to allies or international regimes outweighed the internal relations within the Realm. This dynamic is the main reason of the ongoing security controversy between the two countries.

The airport 'game': the loss of the Chinese dream and revival of the U.S. as sponsor

One of the most recent instances of the sovereignty game emerged in late-2017 around the plans to build three new Atlantic airports in Nuuk, Illulisat, Quarqurtoq (see Danish Government, Naalakkersuisut, 2016). What began as a triumph for Greenlandic-Chinese para-diplomacy ended in an impending security controversy with Denmark and the U.S. The row began when Greenlandic prime minister Kim Kielsen ventured on a controversial 'official' diplomatic visit to Beijing in October 2017. Purportedly, Chinese banks during these meetings showed interest in financing the airports on the premise that the building was made by a Chinese company (Hinshaw and Page 2019: 18). Later, media reported that China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) had indeed made a bid on airstrip development in Nuuk. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, U.S. officials were alarmed to find out that China was about to get a military foothold so close to the American homeland. Allegedly the Danish government was contacted: "Beijing must not be allowed to militarize this stretch of the Arctic, Mr. Mattis told his Danish counterpart Claus Frederiksen at a meeting in Washington in May 2018, officials close to the discussion said" (Hinshaw & Page, 2019).

During the summer the Danish government concocted a plan to crowd out Chinese state investments by offering Nuuk cheap development loans through a Danish state fund while stressing the grave security implications. In a joint statement, the Danish government rhetorically made it clear that it – and the U.S. – considered the airports a matter of foreign and security policy:

"I agree with the considerations behind the desire for an improved infrastructure in Greenland. It is on competitiveness, business development and better growth conditions for tourism. The current airport project can have *foreign and security policy perspectives that range beyond Greenland*, and for a number of years it will seize large resources in Greenland's economy.

I am therefore pleased that the chairman of the Greenland Government Kim Kielsen and I have today agreed that we initiate the joint investigation work. At the same time, a joint development fund could strengthen the opportunities for growth and development in Greenland" (Joint statement, quoted in Turnowsky, 2018b. Emphasis added).

In theoretical terms, the statement is a move towards securitizing Chinese investment in airports as an 'existential threat' to the Kingdom's alliances. In effect Kielsen's arm was twisted by both

threatening him with risk of jeopardizing Danish-U.S.-relations *and* offering Greenland funding for the first time since 2009. This strategy was a success and, in the joint statement, Kielsen and the Greenlandic government accepted the Danish securitization move:

I am very pleased with the openness and positive attitude I have met from the Prime Minister's side in our discussions on this topic. I am glad that the Prime Minister shares my opinion the importance of infrastructure for growth. Our discussions on cooperation on the airport projects are based on the current division of competencies between the Greenlandic and the Danish authorities and the wish for equal cooperation. On that basis, Naalakkersuisut will take a positive view of the cooperation with the Government on the possibilities for that Denmark can contribute with the financing of parts of the airport projects. This contains some exciting perspectives, both for the airport project's realization; but also, for the development in our mutual cooperation" (Joint statement, quoted in Turnowsky, 2018b).

Kielsen's decision to cave in to Danish demands was, however, not without political cost as the independence party, Partii Naleraq, left the coalition in protest, resulting in a governmental crisis (Lihn 2018). There are clear signs that the Danish-U.S. intervention (securitization move) has deterred China from investing further in the projects and the CCCC, which was named as a main bidder for the contract, has now officially pulled its bid. Additionally, a high-ranking Chinese general, Li Quan, in a recent news report, states that "China has a one-Denmark policy" (Turnowsky, 2019) probably signifying that Beijing respects Danish supremacy over Greenland's foreign policy in a broad sense.

In conclusion, the new game is hence more explicitly about security – rendering economic goals ('China') less important than security ('U.S.'). This is opposed to the narrative structure of the uranium game where Denmark, from the Greenlandic point of view, played the role as opponent trying to hinder China from being helper. In Greimas' narrative terms, *the actantial positions* (i.e. roles) have now changed as China in the new game has gone *from* helper *to* opponent while the U.S. has taken over the function as helper in Greenland's narrative (Greimas, 1971). Curiously enough, the U.S. is thus part of both Greenland and Denmark's stories as a 'helper', albeit sustaining almost opposite foreign political aspirations.

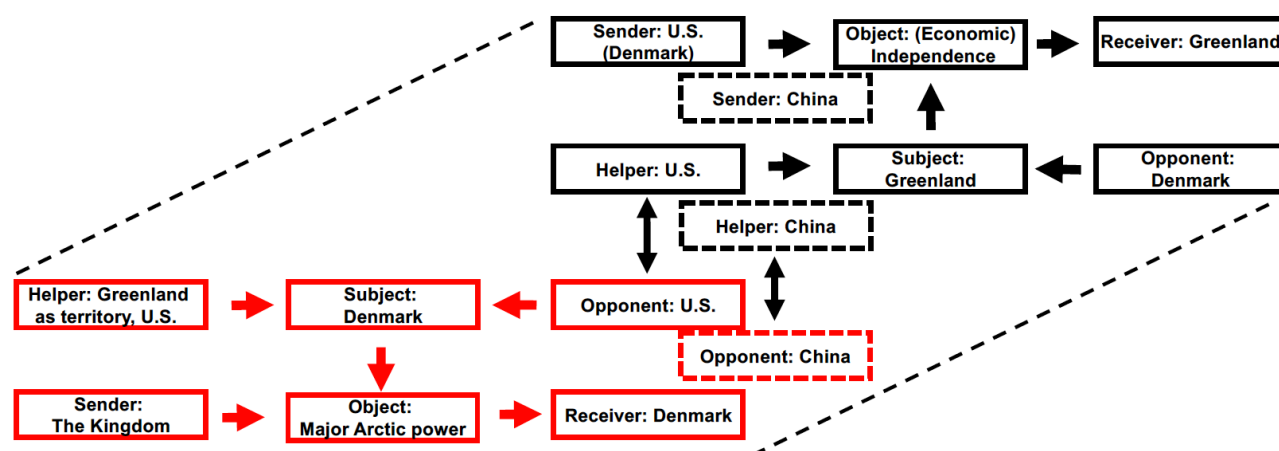


Figure 1 – The 'new' game. Reversing the roles from helper to opponent (based on Rasmussen & Merckelsen 2017: 96).

That is, if the U.S. increases its role as more of an economic sponsor for Greenland, it risks entering the role as an *opponent* in Denmark's ambition of staying a "major Arctic power" (Danish Government, 2016: 13) – see figure 1 above for an overview of actors and aspirations.

I will argue that Greenland's abandonment of its desecuritization of Chinese investments has rearranged the tectonic plates of U.S.-Dano-Greenlandic relations, shaking China's position as a viable investor while bringing the U.S. to the fore as a new sponsor and not just a security provider (see U.S. Government 2004). The closure of this game underscores the U.S. strategic interest in Greenland. And it can in turn explain the current shift in Greenlandic foreign political outlook towards North America in its strategies for acquiring foreign investments. The Greenlandic Government's desecuritizations of China and foreign policy have thus had the concrete aim of securing very specific investments while avoiding Danish interference. While these strategic desecuritizations are carried out at the level of the government's foreign policy bureaucracy we also find desecuritization moves made by Greenlandic politicians in the political debate – the focus of the second analytical section.

The narrative sources of the desecuritized defense: the self-sustaining economy and the peaceful Inuit

As mentioned in the introduction, Greenlandic politicians have not traditionally highlighted defense investments or that there is an absence of adversarial thinking in Greenlandic foreign policy discourse (Jacobsen & Gad, 2017). Greenlandic politician's statements on defense policy is therefore an important place to examine the political elite's tendency to "take security out of security." In this final section I therefore turn to examples from the 2017 political discussions on defense policy in order to investigate the underlying narratives of desecuritization.

Desecuritizations of defense and security made by Greenlandic politicians and parties are mainly framed rhetorically within two discourses which I term the "self-sustaining economy"-narrative (e.g. Naalakkersuisut, 2018b) and the "Inuit identity politics"-narrative (Jacobsen & Gad, 2017). In the following I'll tentatively link these two narratives with desecuritization statements on Greenlandic defense. The most recent installment in debate on the future of Greenland's defense began when Minister of Finance, Vittus Qujaukitsoq, drew the subject into the independence debate in a seminal speech at Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland in early 2017 (Breum, 2018). From here the issue made its way to the official political agenda as part of the parliamentary debates in June 2017 on the mandate of the Constitutional Commission and the subsequent discussions on what kind of sovereign nation Greenland shall be.

The speech by Qujaukitsoq contained a number of desecuritizations, building on the "self-sustaining economy"-narrative. The core of this narrative is, that independence is only possible when Greenland can free itself from the annual \$576m block grant provided by the Danish state (Naalakkersuisut, 2019: 8). The phrase "self-sustaining economy" entered the independence discourse around the year 2000 in documents by the Committee on Self-Rule Government (e.g. Self-Government Commission 2001) and has since been used extensively by the self-government to frame the economy of independence e.g. in relation to the need for mining revenues and investments (Naalakkersuisut, 2012). As Gad and colleagues note, the size of the block grant has been taken as a sign of dependence by the Greenlandic politicians (Gad et al, 2018: 7). Expenses to Greenlandic defense is currently approximately \$150 million annually (Rasmussen, 2019), and

this cost is not part of the block grant but paid by the Danish government via its defense expenditures. This additionally provides Greenlandic self-government and policy elites an incentive for keeping these costs out of independence deliberations.

This economic logic in the narrative was at stake when Qujaukitsoq downgraded Denmark as insurer of the territorial defense of Greenland: “The Danish defense today is not the actual defense of Greenland. Should there arise a real threat to our country from hostile powers, it is defended by the United States. It is the reality all know but nobody discusses” (cf. Breum, 2018). Notice how the U.S. entered the Greenlandic security narrative as the ‘true’ helper, pointing to the aforementioned role reversal in the new sovereignty game. However, the real consequence of his claim of the Kingdom’s ineptitude in the defense of Greenland is that it downgraded the perceived need for defense of the island *as such*. This in turn would render an independent Greenland’s economic obligations to defense smaller than the status quo – a clear sign of the “self-sustaining economy”-narrative’s logic. By undermining Denmark’s role as security provider, he is thus downplaying the significance of defense in the future autonomy from Denmark.

Qujaukitsoq further linked the desecuritization of defense with the foundation of independence, stating that “Greenland is just one of the world’s last colonies, which has not yet become independent. So, what does it mean for the defense of a future Greenland? The short answer is: not so much” (ibid). This is an apparent desecuritization move of the ‘downgrading’ type where the threat issue is ignored. And it possibly even represents an attempt to “pre-emptively” desecuritize Greenlandic defense (see Strandsbjerg & Jacobsen 2017: 25) and the threat from Russia. In this way, his speech also counters the numerous recent Danish securitizations of Russia in policy papers on Arctic security by the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS, 2016, 2015). The idea Qujaukitsoq promoted is that Denmark has no reason to further securitize the defense of Greenland because any real military threat would be impossible to counter by the Danish Defence, anyway.

Similarly, the link between the “self-sustaining economy”-narrative and political elites’ desecuritizing of defense is also visible in the 2018 coalition agreement between the four parties, Siumut, Atassut, Partii Naleraq and Nunatta Qitornai (Naalakkersuisut 2018a). Under the heading “Security and defense policy” the coalition agreement stated: “The parties in the coalition acknowledge that our geopolitical position holds great significance for defense policy” and the agreement stipulated the following:

341. The coalition parties stand firm, our country as an independent state must be a member of NATO.

(...)

343. The conditions of the service contracts in the civilian area of Pituffik, Thule Air Base, and most recently around the base supply agreements, the coalition parties will pave the way for Naalakkersuisut to enter into an agreement with the US to ensure that our country gains more from the US military presence.

344. The coalition parties will continue to work to ensure that our country's defense is based on its own people and under our own flag. We must engage our young people and adults who would like to work for and can participate in our country's defense. E.g. in fishing inspection and in The Sirius sledge patrol.

345. The coalition parties will therefore also work to ensure that programs are also initiated aimed at controlling our own borders.

346. The objective of the coalition parties is to ensure that, when inspecting our fishing territory, there are always two ships, which together carry out the necessary inspection. This will then happen in East Greenland and on the West Coast. This requirement will be addressed with the Danish government as soon as possible.” (The Coalition Agreement of 2018 between Siumut, Atassut, Partii Naleraq (ibid, 38-39))

Economic aspects of defense are emphasized throughout the text. Most articulated in the reference are to missing income from the US military presence and the loss of the infamous “service contract” on the Thule Airbase in 2013 to an American contractor. This issue has been a source of grave frustration for the self-government. Furthermore, the inclination to focus on fishery inspection, upholding of sovereignty and border control while leaving out the cost of the NATO-membership (item 341) and military capabilities is consistent with the general desecuritizations examined in this article. Even though the wish to increase the number of naval vessels (item 346) indeed amounts to ‘real’ defense policy, I would deem that this mentioning is aimed at the current arrangement with Denmark. Note also how more civilian investments in fishery inspection is framed as defense policy by rhetorically associating it with border patrol (item 344). In conclusion, the 2018 Coalition Agreement illustrates how the “self-sustaining economy”-narrative is active when the political parties and the self-government frames non-defense as part of security and defense policy. The aim of the text seems to be getting as much *symbolic* defense (border patrol and upholding of sovereignty) as possible without having to accept expensive securitizations of i.e. Russian build-up of air force capabilities.

While the “self-sustaining economy”-narrative is thus prevalent both in the agenda-setting and policy-making around defense, the more ideological “identity politics narrative of the Inuit” was active when defense policy was discussed in parliamentary debate on independence in the summer of 2017. The basis of this narrative, as Jacobson and Gad note, is an understanding, that “we, the Inuit, are peaceful; war and military affairs are not our affairs; at most it is a problem imposed upon us from outside” (Jacobsen & Gad 2017: 16). Evidence of this can be found in the discussion between MPs Ane Hansen (Inuit Ataqatigiit) and Justus Hansen on the role of Greenlandic defense. Justus Hansen introduced the idea that Greenlandic soldiers should take part in international operations. Allegedly, he was alone in these ambitions for Greenlandic activism. MP Ane Hansen said in reply: “We have always been a peaceful nation, and our role in the world community should be to spread the message of peace. We must not participate in wars” (Turnowsky, 2017). Again, desecuritization is the preferred strategy in matters of defense: the message of peace over international activism. Furthermore, the debate quite revealingly focused on ‘soft’ defense areas such as SAR and border patrol which were discussed above ‘hard’ military capabilities (ibid).

In the parliamentary debate the narrative of Greenlandic identity politics is clearly employed as an argument. This identity-based narrative on Greenlandic security in turn refers to a larger narrative of the Arctic as a unique area of intercultural and diplomatic cooperation with a special place in international affairs. This foreign policy discourse has been termed ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ as “states that comprise Arctic international society have intentionally negotiated a regional order predicated on a more cooperative framework than they pursue with each other elsewhere, and

have endeavored, implicitly, to compartmentalize relations there” (Exner-Pirot & Murray 2017: 51). This e.g. entails the idea that the Arctic must be a nuclear free-zone and the necessity of widened cooperation in environmental matters. Jacobsen and Strandsbjerg (2017) also connects Arctic exceptionalism to desecuritization as a governance strategy. For the authors this begins with Gorbachev’s famous 1987 Murmansk speech. I would add, that in a Greenlandic context, this strategy can be found in former premier Kuupik Kleist’s 2012 statement that the entire North Pole area in the spirit of world peace should be laid out as a “global commons” (Breum, 2019).⁴

Conclusion

Currently outside the self-government’s legal jurisdiction, both Greenlandic foreign policy and defense policy play an important symbolic role in the independence debate. The Greenlandic government and political parties have treated foreign and defense policy as a valued referent object which must be desecuritized. I found that this strategy is concurrent with the logic of the sovereignty game with Denmark where Greenland desecuritizes crucial policy areas in order to either gain control or keep the status quo.

The analysis shows that for the Greenlandic political elite, ‘defense’ is a referent object only insofar as it is linked to sovereignty and independence. For Greenland, defense is considered a threat to independence because defense is expensive and currently not factored into the financial cost of independence by the self-government. The reason for this strategy is twofold. Firstly, if defense is securitized it is harder for Greenland to move it (back) into the realm of normal politics. Secondly, when Denmark securitizes defense, it additionally bears a risk of a future cost for Greenland in military expenses. This is probably why the topic of NATO membership in all statements is only mentioned briefly and without any reference to cost.

The Greenlandic elites’ drift towards desecuritizing can thus be seen both as strategy in the sovereignty controversy with Denmark and as political mode thinking based on the self-sustaining economy-narrative. Furthermore, the propensity to desecuritize defense can also be seen on the backdrop of a deep-rooted romantic vision of a peaceful High North which ties in with the narrative of the peace-loving Inuit nation. In this, it is a national obligation to counter militarization and war – and desecuritization of defense is the perfect response to this call. The resultant political thinking of this, clearly has implications for the ongoing considerations in Nuuk regarding the U.S. as an alternative to Denmark as sponsor. Based on the findings in this article I deem it very likely that Greenland will base its strategy for independence on economic rather than geopolitical considerations. Time will show the virtues of this strategy but there is no doubt that the gravity of security and defense in Greenlandic independence will be downplayed rhetorically by the self-government in the coming deliberations.

Notes

1. It can be discussed whether the securitization theory term “existential threat” is applicable for a non-sovereign nation. However, the term is, in this case of an aspiring nation-state, illustrative of the status independence holds as the ‘valued referent object’ for the Greenlandic political elite.

2. Coalition agreements in the Greenlandic parliamentary system equals a program for official government policy.
3. This agreement was amended in 2005 with an administrative accord which specifies a cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Copenhagen and the Department of Foreign Relations in Nuuk.
4. The Foreign Ministry in Copenhagen were furious, and Kleist was forced to state that his idea did not reflect the official policy of the Kingdom. However, in a recent interview Kleist reiterated the idea, asserting that the North Pole is “an important symbol” (see Breum, 2019).

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