Making Greenland Strategically Usable: Negotiated Territorial Conversion in U.S.–Danish Security Cooperation, 1941–1968

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ABSTRACT	How did Greenland become a platform for recurrent U.S. defence activity while remaining under Danish sovereignty? Existing scholarship explains strategic demand, alliance access, institutionalisation, and hierarchy, but not how site-specific permission becomes repeatable capacity. This article develops negotiated territorial conversion, a sovereignty-preserving process allocating complementary rights, enacting them organisationally, and maintaining them through intergovernmental correction. A theory-building process trace of agreements, diplomatic and defence records, technical material, and scholarship follows the U.S.–Danish Greenland regime from 1941 to 1968. The evidence confirms the 1951 legal allocation of construction, movement, supply, communications, and jurisdictional rights; material capacity at Thule; recurrent airborne activity under a standing service rule; and a 1968 correction requiring Danish consent for peacetime nuclear storage and overflight. The allocation-to-routine transmission remains plausible rather than confirmed. Greenland therefore confirms the model's components and Denmark's retained capacity to narrow disputed uses, but not the full causal chain across missions.

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INTRODUCTION

Greenland's Cold War strategic value is familiar; the creation of a routine U.S. military capacity there under the continuing Danish sovereignty is not. The island lay along transpolar routes, but its location conferred neither authority nor an operating system. The 1951 agreement preserved Danish sovereignty over Greenland while authorising the United States "to improve and generally to fit the area for military use" and granting "free access to and movement between the defense areas through Greenland" (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 1951, ARTS. II(3)(B)(I), V(3)). By 1964, Cyrus Vance reported that flights over Greenland required no "formal clearance or notification" because "existing service-to-service agreements" governed them (VANCE, 1964, P. 3). The puzzle is this institutional transformation: Denmark enabled routine U.S. operations there without surrendering its capacity to restrict them.

That tension yields the article's research question: through what causal process did the U.S.–Danish cooperation produce strategic usability in Greenland between 1941 and 1968 while Denmark retained the legal and political capacity to constrain the related U.S. operations? Strategic usability is the outcome to be explained. It denotes the capacity to conduct an agreed class of military missions repeatedly from or through a foreign territory without renegotiating the foundational bargain for each operation. It is not a synonym for access permission or physical basing; alliance membership may facilitate both but guarantees neither. Those are possible inputs. What requires explanation is their conversion into an operating practice that can be repeated without a new diplomatic decision for every mission. Strategic usability therefore joins operational recurrence to continuing host control.

This article proposes negotiated territorial conversion as the explanation to be probed. Conversion does not mean a transfer of title, annexation, or the disappearance of host sovereignty. It denotes a change in the institutional uses available within a territorial defence regime. The process begins when a foreign military user needs recurrent activity but lacks an independent territorial authority. The user and host negotiate their complementary rights over the functions that the activity requires. Military and civilian organisations enact those rights through facilities, operating procedures, supply arrangements, and service relationships. When a disputed use exceeds what the host will accept, the governments can correct that

practice without dismantling the wider regime. The case supports the explanation only to the extent that the record connects those activities; the coexisting components do not by themselves establish the full causal process.

The mechanism addresses a narrower problem than existing alliance theories. Snyder (1984, ABSTRACT, PARA. 1) places alliance politics in the "tension between fears of entrapment and abandonment". Leeds and Anac (2005, P. 183) associate alliance institutionalisation with "significant peacetime costs" and "military coordination". Carson et al. (2025, P. S104) state that "access refers to decisions by states to allow other states' military and intelligence services to operate inside their borders", while Lake (1996, P. 1) orders security relations by the parties' "rights of residual control". Together, these approaches explain alliance risk, institutional depth, access, and hierarchy. They leave unspecified how regime-specific rights become operating routines while remaining open to selective host revision. The unit here is the U.S.–Danish territorial defence regime, with sites and mission classes treated as embedded observations.

The same gap appears in Greenland scholarship. Petersen (1998, P. 1) describes the 1951 talks as a "skewed, though regular negotiation process" and concludes that the U.S. outcome "was not a dictate". His study of Iceworm identifies plans for the "mobile deployment of up to 600 MRBMs under the Greenland Icecap" (PETERSEN, 2008, P. 75), while his later work examines efforts to "overcome the hostile Greenlandic environment and harness it for military purposes" (PETERSEN, 2013, P. 294). Nielsen et al. (2014, P. 443) call Camp Century an "experimental-military American city built entirely inside the ice sheet". This scholarship reconstructs the bargaining and individual projects, but it does not ask how those observations form a causal sequence from negotiated authority through recurrent operation to host correction. That is the empirical gap addressed here.

The case of Greenland permits the proposed links to be tested against distinct documentary expectations, although the record is not equally complete for each one. The 1941 agreement joined the recognised Danish sovereignty to a U.S. right to "construct, maintain and operate" defence facilities (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 1941, ARTS. I–II). The 1951 bargain establishes a legal allocation; later records must show whether organisations relied on it when building facilities and routines.

The unrealised Iceworm proposal can be used to test whether the technical experimentation necessarily produced a host-authorised operational capacity. The 1968 crash makes the retained authority observable: the related settlement barred nuclear storage and overflight "without the consent of the Government of Denmark" and became "an integral part" of the 1951 agreement (RØNNE, 1968B, DOC. 22). Causal inference therefore depends on connecting evidence, not chronology or base survival alone.

The theoretical contribution is a meso-level mechanism connecting alliance bargaining to a territorial defence regime. Threat and technology create military demand, but do not determine whether the use rests on annexation, a lease, case-by-case permission, or standing rights under the host's sovereignty. Negotiated territorial conversion predicts recurrent use only when a connected legal allocation is put into organisational practice. The 1968 episode then tests the regime's political durability. After the crash, "Airborne Alert flights over Greenland were abandoned" (PETERSEN, 2011, P. 90); on 31 May, Denmark secured a formal consent condition while the wider agreement remained legally intact. This pattern supports the model, but does not establish post-settlement continuity for every operation. The contribution is therefore a bounded plausibility claim, not a restatement of the idea that alliances facilitate access.

The argument is bounded to Greenland and the relations between the United States and the Danish state. Canadian records appear in the study only where they document Greenland's place in the continental warning network, but here Canada is neither a comparative case nor the subject of a second process trace. A further boundary concerns political authority. The analysis explains authorisation by the Danish government, not Greenlandic consent or the legitimacy of the Danish rule. The institutional durability between Washington and Copenhagen cannot establish either. The historical process trace also ends in 1968. A final discussion considers what the mechanism can and cannot illuminate about later U.S.–Danish disputes over Greenland, but it does not treat those disputes as additional observations within the historical test. These limits preserve the article's causal focus while keeping the politics of sovereignty explicit.

FROM ALLIED ACCESS TO STRATEGIC USABILITY: NEGOTIATED TERRITORIAL CONVERSION

Access is not enough. Permission may remain narrow, facilities may lack an operating connection, or each new mission may return to diplomatic bargaining. The unresolved question is how an initial allocation becomes a working territorial regime while the host retains consequential authority. The case of Greenland makes that question visible: Denmark preserved its sovereignty, the United States obtained extensive operating rights, and recurring missions followed. Denmark could still contest and revise the politically sensitive use of Greenland. Negotiated territorial conversion refers to the proposed passage from authorised possibility to bounded operational capacity. Its object is the territorial defence regime, not alliance depth or a collection of independent site cases.

Strategic usability, rather than militarisation broadly conceived, is the dependent outcome and a property of the territorial defence regime. It exists for a mission class when recognised authority and implemented means support recurrent operations without reopening the foundational sovereign bargain each time. A radar installation may therefore exist without establishing recurrence, while a single landing or transit demonstrates access rather than usability. Occupation can generate military capacity but falls outside the sovereignty-preserving outcome examined here. Political review is analytically separate. When a dispute occurs, it tests whether the parties can revise the contested use without necessarily dismantling the remaining legal and operational arrangement.

Strategic demand under sovereign constraint is the antecedent condition, not a part of the outcome. Jervis (1978, P. 169) observes that "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others", while Walt (1987, P. 22) defines threat through "aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions". Morrow's (1991, P. 904) asymmetric alliance model anticipates a bargain in which "one partner receives autonomy benefits, and the other, security benefits". These accounts explain demand and unequal exchange but do not determine the territorial form. The proposed process begins when a prospective user values recurrent activity but cannot treat the territory as its own. A negotiated allocation precedes an organisational

enactment, and a recurrent operation is the outcome. Intergovernmental maintenance later interprets or corrects the arrangement.

Rights-bundling solves a problem of functional complementarity. Permission to land cannot sustain a warning station unless personnel, equipment, supplies, communications, movement, construction, and jurisdiction can also be organised. Separate rights matter causally when officials join them because the proposed mission would otherwise remain impracticable or dependent on repeated requests. Broad treaty language alone cannot establish this link. The relevant evidence consists of contemporaneous records showing that officials identified an authority deficit, bargained over connected functions, considered narrower alternatives, or related particular provisions to anticipated missions. The counterfactual is an incomplete allocation in which one missing function blocks or delays execution. Rights-bundling changes what the actors can lawfully organise next, but it establishes an authorised possibility rather than a completed military capacity.

Operational enactment converts the rights bundle into usable capacity. Military and civilian organisations construct facilities, allocate resources, establish logistics, issue procedures, and create service relationships that make the authorised mission executable. Construction alone is insufficient evidence. Records must connect negotiated authority, or an implementing arrangement derived from it, to the practices supporting repeated operations. Once those arrangements exist, a covered mission can proceed with less administrative and political delay than a fresh diplomatic request. This is the mechanism's recurrence logic, not a claim of irreversibility. Routines stabilise expectations and reduce the need to renegotiate basic authority, but they can still be suspended or redirected. Evidence of institutional reliance, operational implementation, and repeated use is therefore more probative than a chronological sequence of agreements, projects, and missions.

Intergovernmental maintenance addresses uses omitted or disputed after enactment. Cooley and Spruyt (2009) establish the contractual problem: parties "cannot foresee or specify contingencies" (p. 30), and renegotiation can "restrict U.S. use rights" (p. 110). The article does not present incomplete rights or host revision as new. Its narrower contribution is the proposed operational link between allocated authority and recurrent capacity. Negotiated territorial conversion also

differs from historical-institutionalist conversion, under which rules remain "formally the same but are interpreted and enacted in new ways" (MAHONEY & THELEN, 2010, P. 17). Here the modifier negotiated requires an explicit allocation of complementary territorial functions before organisational enactment. Maintenance then supplies a durability test: correction changes a disputed use while preserving the wider legal arrangement. Termination or a unilateral override would indicate a different outcome.

The mechanism answers a different question from that addressed by alliance theory, alliance institutionalisation, or access research. Snyder (1984, ABSTRACT, PARA. 1) locates alliance politics in the "tension between fears of entrapment and abandonment". Leeds and Anac (2005, P. 183) distinguish arrangements involving "little initial investment or joint planning" from those incurring "significant peacetime costs" through "military coordination". Carson et al. (2025, P. S104) state that "access refers to decisions by states to allow other states' military and intelligence services to operate inside their borders". These approaches explain alliance bargaining, organisational depth, and permission. They do not, however, specify how complementary authority over one site is enacted as a recurrent capacity and later revised. A highly institutionalised alliance may lack the required site rights, while the formal access may remain narrow, unused, or episodic.

Foreign-base and hierarchy scholarship provides the closest conceptual foundation for this. Schmidt (2014, P. 817) identifies the sovereignty-preserving form as "the long-term, peacetime presence of one state's military on the territory of another equally sovereign state". Lake's (1996, P. 1) continuum is defined by the parties' "rights of residual control", but a foreign presence does not establish a hierarchy by itself. Zemanová et al. (2015, P. 5) describe small-state power through "dynamism and relativism"; material asymmetry alone therefore cannot establish that the Danish authority was inconsequential. Schmidt (2022, P. 917) later writes that changes in sovereignty norms "render the linkage between foreign military basing and hierarchy contingent". Cooley and Nexon (2013, P. 1034) likewise show that basing networks remain "vulnerable to political cross-pressures, intermediary exits, and periodic bargaining failures when dealing with overseas base hosts". These works establish the concepts of sovereign basing, contingent hierarchy, and host bargaining. Conversion then adds the operational link between allocated rights and recurrent capacity.

The mechanism applies in cases where a user seeks a recurrent rather than a one-off activity at a strategically valuable foreign site, and the host's sovereignty remains legally and politically consequential. In such cases, both governments must prefer negotiated use to acquisition, coercion, or repeated ad hoc requests, although their bargaining power may be markedly unequal. The relevant organisations must be capable of implementing the allocation, and officials must retain channels through which ambiguity and contestation can be managed. The U.S.–Japan alliance is a plausible setting for a separate test carried out at sites where the same sequence can be documented; alliance membership alone is not evidence that a conversion occurred. These conditions are absent in cases where a territory is annexed or occupied, the host's authority is nominal, access remains episodic, or every mission requires a separate approval. Nor can conversion be inferred merely from an enduring base. The concept concerns a particular combination of recurrent capacity and consequential host authority, not a foreign military presence in general.

The empirical test distinguishes conversion from its principal rivals. Threat and technology explain demand or mission change, but not why complementary rights were negotiated or why a host intervention altered a disputed use. Alliance institutionalisation predicts coordination, but not necessarily reliance on a regime-specific authority. A partial hierarchy is compatible with conversion; only a complete displacement of the host's residual control can predict that a consequential objection will not affect practice. Bureaucratic incrementalism predicts dispersed project development without a connected allocation-to-routine trace. The model gains support only in cases where contemporaneous evidence connects sovereign constraint to the bargain, the legal allocation to organisational enactment and recurrence, and host intervention to bounded revision. A failure to document any of these connections limits support for the explanation.

METHOD AND CAUSAL TESTS

This article uses explaining-outcome process tracing as a theory-building plausibility probe disciplined by theory-derived tests to assess Greenland's strategic usability rather than estimate the average effect of alliances on foreign basing. George and Bennett (2005, P. 206) define the method's object as "the causal chain and causal mechanism

– between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable". Bennett and Checkel (2014, p. 7) likewise emphasise the "analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case". The analysis reconstructs the proposed process and tests each link against rival expectations. Chronological order is necessary here, but it is not treated as a causal proof.

The analysed case is the U.S.–Danish Greenland defence regime, with Thule as its principal embedded site. In this case, the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS), airborne missions, Camp Century, and Project Iceworm are mission-specific evidence clusters, not independent cases or interchangeable observations. The 1941 agreement provides a pre-NATO wartime baseline. The tested conversion process begins with the negotiations that produced the 1951 agreement and ends with the correction following the 1968 Thule crash. An episode is included in the study only when it exposes a distinct link or boundary and when there are surviving contemporaneous records from actors who were positioned to negotiate, implement, contest, or revise the arrangement.

Strategic usability is established separately from its proposed cause. For a specified mission class, the evidence must show recognised authority, implemented facilities and procedures, and recurrent operation without a renewed foundational authorisation for each mission. A completed installation or single transit does not meet this standard. The 1968 settlement therefore tests the durability and limits of an outcome that already existed rather than constituting an additional element of it. Mahoney (2012, p. 570) describes process-tracing inference as combining "preexisting generalizations with specific observations from within a single case". Evidence of recurrence establishes the outcome; separate connecting evidence must explain how negotiated authority produced it.

A stage is credited in the study only when it precedes the next one, a contemporaneous actor invokes or responds to it, the predicted intermediate activity appears, and the source comes from an organisation positioned to perform that activity. The observation must also be hard for a specified rival to explain. Collier (2011, p. 823) defines process tracing as the "systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed

by the investigator". Four assessments guide the findings: "confirmed" means that a contemporaneous source from an organisation positioned to record the activity directly documents the link; "triangulated" adds independent corroboration; "plausible inference" denotes a temporal and substantive fit without an explicit reliance trace; and "evidentiary gap" denotes a connection that the available record does not establish.

Table 1 lists the four regime-level tests before the findings and records the strongest conclusions the surviving evidence can bear.

TABLE 1: REGIME-LEVEL CAUSAL TESTS

Link	Predicted trace	Main rival	Evidence and limit
Demand under sovereign constraint	Officials connect a recurrent requirement to Danish authority and a politically feasible form.	Threat explains demand but leaves lease, acquisition, unilateral control, and negotiation open.	Confirmed and triangulated. Demand and constraint are clearly present; they do not determine the 1951 form.
Legal allocation	A bargain assigns complementary construction, movement, supply, communications, and jurisdictional functions.	NATO membership or a mission-specific permission leaves functions unresolved.	Allocation confirmed. The bargaining logic of bundling and, later, reliance remains inferential.
Enactment and recurrence	Implementing records connect allocated or derived authority to facilities, procedures, and repeated missions.	Technology, bureaucracy, or an independent service rule produces capacity without treaty reliance.	Capacity and recurrence confirmed separately. The transmission between allocation and routine is an evidentiary gap.
Correction	The host's objection changes a disputed practice while the wider regime survives.	Complete displacement predicts no consequential change; breakdown predicts a termination or broad retrenchment.	The consent rule and legal continuity confirmed for a different mission class. Post-settlement operational continuity is not demonstrated.

The source search covered the relevant Greenland documents in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes for 1941, 1945, 1947, 1950, 1952–1954, 1958–1960, and 1964–1968; declassified State and Defense records reproduced by the National Security Archive from RG 59, RG 330, and the Eisenhower and Johnson libraries; the Danish foreign-ministry record of H. C. Hansen's 1957 note; U.S. operational and technical reports; and the scholarship listed in the references. The documents were selected on the basis of whether they record the negotiation, implementation, contestation, or revision of the regime between 1941 and 1968. The search was a targeted one rather than an exhaustive census of every relevant box. A missing trace therefore counts against a claim only when the responsible office and decision file are represented in the surviving record.

The documents were assessed according to their provenance, purpose, temporal proximity, institutional position, and independent corroboration. Internal records can reveal official assessments but may also advance an agency's preferred policy. A U.S. assertion that Denmark accepted a practice does not establish its consent without Danish or bilateral corroboration, and silence is never coded as consent. Dispute records are diagnostically useful because they expose competing interpretations and considered alternatives, but the participants may frame the rules strategically. The absence of a predicted trace counts against an explanation only when the relevant files were likely to record it and the search covered those files. No single source is treated as establishing both an actor's intention and its practical effect.

The episodes and rivals are assigned distinct types of analytical work. The 1941 agreement supplies the baseline, and the 1951 agreement the legal allocation. The BMEWS and recurrent flights test enactment for different mission classes; Camp Century and Iceworm separate working experimentation from an unrealised proposal; and the 1968 settlement tests retained authority in a different nuclear practice. Soviet capabilities and technology explain the demand, NATO planning and unequal bargaining shape the setting, and incomplete contracting explains the later ambiguity. The main rival mechanisms are ad hoc permission, bureaucratic accumulation without reliance on the bilateral allocation, and complete displacement of host control. The observations are embedded within one regime and do not constitute replications of a complete same-mission chain.

The design has some important limits. The U.S. records are more extensive than the Danish material, while Greenlandic perspectives are the least represented; the declassification also favours disputes reaching senior officials over routine implementation. Thule is both the best-documented and most outcome-positive site, which creates a source-availability bias. Narsarsuaq and Sondrestrom therefore establish the breadth of the legal allocation, not parallel demonstrations of the mechanism. The study can assess which components operated and where evidentiary gaps remain in this case, but cannot estimate their frequency elsewhere. It also cannot recover the social and environmental experience of militarisation, and Danish governmental authorisation does not establish Greenlandic consent, inclusion, or legitimate rule.

FINDINGS: MAKING GREENLAND USABLE

FROM A WARTIME PRECEDENT TO A STANDING RIGHTS BARGAIN, 1941–1951

The first causal link predates NATO. In February 1941, the U.S. State Department identified "a certain dominant interest in Greenland" while reaffirming its policy "to respect Danish sovereignty in Greenland" (HULL, 1941A, DOC. 31). Its April instructions likewise required that the relevant defence measures remain "consistent with the maintenance of free Danish sovereignty over Greenland" (HULL, 1941B, DOC. 35). These paired observations establish a strategic demand under sovereign constraint. Together, they contradict an account in which a recognised necessity dissolved authority. They also separate the strategic trigger from the institutional process subsequently required to satisfy it. Geography supplied a reason for the military use of Greenland, but not its legal basis or its institutional form.

The 1941 agreement addressed that constraint by separating sovereignty from operating authority. It reaffirmed the U.S. "recognition of and respect for" Danish sovereignty while granting the U.S. rights to "construct, maintain and operate" military facilities in Greenland (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 1941, ARTS. I–III). Within defence areas, Denmark "retains sovereignty," but the United States obtained "exclusive jurisdiction," though it is subject to the stated exceptions (art. VI). Briggs (1941, P. 507) likewise described the U.S.'s "exclusive jurisdiction" over areas in which Denmark "retains sovereignty." The arrangement showed that territorial title and delegated authority could coexist. It established institutional possibility, not strategic usability. Because it preceded NATO and arose during the occupation, it was a wartime antecedent rather than evidence of a recurrent allied capacity.

The precedent was durable but contestable. Article X kept the agreement in force "until it [was] agreed that the present dangers" had passed and then permitted its termination after consultation and notice (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 1941, ART. X). After liberation, Danish minister Henrik Kauffmann reported that "both Chambers unanimously gave their consent" to continuing it and that the King formally approved the agreement on 23 May 1945 (KAUFFMANN, 1945, DOC. 569). Denmark and the United States nevertheless held "widely divergent interpretations" of its meaning (BEUKEL ET AL., 2010, P. 49).

Copenhagen therefore "requested early consultations as provided in Article X" in May 1947 (HICKERSON, 1947, DOC. 431). The post-war use of Greenland required a politically sustainable bargain, not merely surviving wartime installations.

Washington's continuing demand is clear. NSC 2/1 stated that "Greenland lies astride the most probable route of enemy attack" and identified possible "early warning and interceptor sites" there (NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL, 1947, P. 2). A State Department guide later recorded that the U.S. Department of Defense wanted "the quick reentry of US forces" and "the reestablishment of US military installations" in Greenland (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 1950, DOC. 128). These observations confirm the demand but discriminate poorly among institutional explanations because threat and technology also predict them. They show why Greenland mattered, not whether its recurrent use would rest on unilateral control, episodic permission, or a sovereignty-preserving bargain.

More discriminating evidence connects the military requirement to what Denmark could accept. A Secretary-approved statement recorded by John H. Morgan sought a settlement that would "take fully into account Danish sovereignty over Greenland" (MORGAN, 1947, DOC. 421). George C. Marshall later recorded Gustav Rasmussen as attributing pressure for termination of the military cooperation to "various sections of Danish public opinion" (MARSHALL, 1947, DOC. 433). Marshall therefore asked how U.S. needs could be met "in a form that would be politically possible" for Denmark (IBID.). Officials treated political feasibility as a part of the institutional solution rather than an external cost. The exchange records both demand and a constraint on form.

Secondary accounts disagree about the force of that constraint. Nielsen (2013, P. 129) concludes that "Denmark had little option but to consent". Petersen (1998, P. 1) instead finds that "the US got the best outcome" but that it "was not a dictate"; he also observes of the Danish negotiators that "there were limits to how far they could be pushed" (P. 20). Their disagreement yields a test: the consequential Danish authority should affect the institutional form despite the U.S. leverage. If it did not, Denmark's retained sovereignty would be symbolic rather than causally relevant. The documents support the idea that there was a constrained asymmetry because Danish sovereignty and domestic exposure excluded

some outcomes and made political sustainability part of the bargain. This does not imply that the two parties had equal bargaining power.

These records confirm that in this case, there was demand under sovereign constraint, but nothing more. The 1941 agreement established a sovereignty-preserving precedent, while the post-war record shows that the continued U.S. use of Greenland required a new bargain that Copenhagen could sustain. Threat explains the demand, but ordinary alliance bargaining and Danish domestic politics remain compatible explanations. The inference is bounded: the sovereign constraint shaped the feasible form, but the bargain's operational effects remain to be demonstrated. Without such effects, the evidence would establish negotiated access rather than territorial conversion.

THE 1951 BUNDLE AND ITS ENACTMENT

The 1951 agreement replaced the wartime precedent with a standing legal allocation of territorial authority. Although it located the parties' responsibilities within NATO plans, the rights themselves were negotiated bilaterally (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 1951, ART. I). "Without prejudice to the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark", the United States could fit defence areas for military use, construct and operate facilities, store supplies, move between the areas in Greenland, and exercise specified jurisdiction within U.S.-operated areas (IBID., ARTS. II(3)(B), V(3), VIII). The *Technical Schedule* applied these functions to Narssarssuaq, Søndre Strømfjord, and Thule (TECHNICAL SCHEDULE, 1951, PP. 1–2). The text confirms a complementary legal allocation at bounded sites. It does not by itself confirm why the functions were bundled or that later organisations relied on them; those causal links require separate evidence.

The allocation was extensive without being unconditional. The operational responsibility remained subject to an intergovernmental agreement, and the U.S. commander had to consult the attached Danish officer on important local matters affecting Danish interests (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 1951, ARTS. II(2), II(3)(A)). Movement was governed by rules jointly agreed and issued by the appropriate Danish authority (IBID., ART. V(3)). The interpretation of the agreement was reserved for the Danish foreign minister and the U.S. ambassador; its modification required "mutual consent",

and the agreement endured "for the duration of the North Atlantic Treaty" (IBID., ARTS. XIII(2)–(3), XIV(2)). The settlement was thus neither an episodic permission nor a transfer of title. It delegated operating discretion within defined areas while retaining procedures for omissions and disputed uses. The implementation should therefore reveal standing facilities or rules that avoided reopening the sovereign bargain for each covered mission. A later Danish objection would test whether the reserved authority still affected the practice.

The U.S. acquisition debates clarify how officials distinguished operating rights from a title. In 1955, Arthur Radford judged base rights to be "adequately provided for in the 1951 treaty" while Denmark remained a cooperative NATO partner. He added that "United States sovereignty over Greenland would remove any doubt as to the unconditional availability of bases" (RADFORD, 1955, P. 3). An assessment enclosed in a 1957 lease study maintained that a long-term use of selected base areas had been "in effect already accomplished" under the agreement, while the attached State Department letter warned that the purchase "could well be regarded as an insult by the Danes" (SPRAGUE, 1957, ENCLOSURES, SCAN PP. 2–3). In 1959, William Kerrigan described an arrangement under which Washington was "permitted to do almost anything, literally, that we want to in Greenland" (KERRIGAN, 1959, P. 1). These internal U.S. judgements neither settle the agreement's bilateral meaning nor prove the Danish acceptance of it. They present wide operating rights as valuable but politically conditional.

The BMEWS supplies the clearest evidence that the legal allocation was followed by a material capacity at Thule. An earlier continental air-warning policy, NSC 139 of 1952, sought "three to six hours of warning" of approaching aircraft and assigned the Department of Defense the responsibility for "developing, installing, and operating" that system (NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL, 1952, DOC. 958). By August 1959, a defence paper reported that the construction at Thule was "more than 50% complete" and described a planned "630 mile long Tropospheric Forward Scatter Communications System" extending to Baffin Island and the United States (BOGGS, 1959, DOC. 193). *Time* reported that Air Force personnel rated the project as "something fantastic" and described radar screens built to withstand "185-knot gales" (TIME, 1959, PARA. 2). NSC 6006/1 later called Greenland's installations "of vital importance to the defense of the continental United States" (NATIONAL SECURITY

COUNCIL, 1960, DOC. 300). These sources establish the construction and planned network integration, not the authority on which the implementers relied.

Threat, technology, and environmental adaptation also explain the BMEWS construction. Martin-Nielsen (2012, P. 69) argues that "Greenland's exceptional geography and environment forced the US military to reassess its relationship with nature". The legal permission could have therefore remained dormant unless organisations mastered Arctic construction and supplies. The 1951 schedule placed Thule within a defence area and granted functions that were needed to build and service a warning site. Yet no located memorandum states that a treaty clause caused the BMEWS decision or governed its implementation. The material capacity is confirmed; the reliance on the 1951 allocation remains a plausible inference. Narssarssuaq and Søndre Strømfjord show the allocation's geographical breadth, not a parallel enactment. This evidentiary limit prevents the physical construction from becoming a proxy for institutional conversion.

The strongest evidence of recurrence comes from the airborne-alert records. In May 1964, Cyrus Vance reported that "no formal clearance or notification is required" under the existing service agreements with Denmark and Spain, although the informal notification continued (VANCE, 1964, P. 3). The procedure removed a repeated formal decision without ending the related contact. An enclosure labelled the related route "HARD HEAD ROUTES (2 ACFT/DAY) (PROVIDES SURVEILLANCE OF BMEWS AT THULE)" (IBID., 1964, ENCLOSURE 3, SCAN P. 9). The following year, Earle Wheeler called that monitoring "an important benefit" and reported surveillance "on a continual basis at all times" (WHEELER, 1965, PARA. 5, SCAN P. 5). The documents establish a standing rule, a frequency, and a purpose, as opposed to an ad hoc access account in which each flight would require a fresh approval. Neither document derives the service agreement from the 1951 settlement. The recurrence is confirmed; the transmission from the regime-wide bundle to this routine remains inferential.

Camp Century shows a different form of enactment. The Army's official history described it as "an effort to learn how to construct military facilities on the Greenland Ice Cap" and concluded "that nuclear power offers significant advantages in reducing the logistical burden" (CLARK, 1965, P. V). Nielsen et al. (2014, P. 443) call it an "experimental-military American

city built entirely inside the ice sheet"; later research confirms that it was "used continuously for 3 years, and then seasonally, until its abandonment in 1967" (COLGAN ET AL., 2023, P. 919). This establishes a working capacity, not merely a proposal. Kinney (2013, P. 344) shows how the Army used mass media to demonstrate its Cold War relevance, with Greenland serving as "the staging area for the effort". *Popular Science* likewise presented the camp as proof that the Arctic could be "tamed" (JOHANSEN, 1960, P. 88). Such publicity reveals institutional self-presentation, not Danish consent. Neither the technical record nor the periodical coverage connects every activity to a treaty provision.

Project Iceworm marks the point at which the expanded capacity did not become strategic usability. Petersen (2008, P. 75) describes the proposed "mobile deployment of up to 600 MRBMs under the Greenland Icecap" and concludes that it failed for mainly technical and organisational reasons and "was never broached to the Danes". Nielsen et al. (2014, P. 443) identify Camp Century as the precursor to a larger missile installation "which never materialized". Iceworm was therefore neither a host-authorised mission nor a recurrent one, and the Danish opposition cannot be credited with stopping a proposal Copenhagen was not asked to approve. Weiss (2001, P. 31) offers a bureaucratic rival: "interservice rivalries, strategic considerations, technological developments, and the competition for a share of funding" shaped decisions about the Army's nuclear role. These factors explain why experimentation produced ambitious plans without showing that the territorial regime converted them into operations. Broad rights and an existing installation enlarged the feasible set, but did not ensure recurrence.

The evidence supports a differentiated finding. The 1951 text confirms a legal allocation of complementary rights; BMEWS records confirm the built capacity at Thule; the Vance and Wheeler memoranda document recurrent surveillance under a standing rule; and Camp Century demonstrates sustained experimental use. Iceworm neither materialised nor reached the status of Danish consideration. No located document, however, derives the BMEWS, the flight rule, or Camp Century's full programme from a named provision of the agreement. The archive therefore confirms the components separately while supporting the allocation-to-routine transmission only as a plausible inference. Bureaucratic accumulation and mission-specific arrangements remain viable for parts of the process. Next, the nuclear

dispute is used to test whether the Danish authority could revise one practice within the regime; it does not complete a same-mission causal chain.

MANAGED NUCLEAR AMBIGUITY

In the analysed case, standing rights routinised covered missions, but nuclear storage tested the regime's boundaries. In August 1957, Deputy Under Secretary of State Robert Daniel Murphy told Assistant Secretary of Defense Mansfield D. Sprague that the agreement was "sufficiently broad to permit the use of facilities in Greenland for the introduction and storage of such weapons" (MURPHY, 1957A, P. 1). This was a U.S. interpretation, not a shared rule. The legal breadth therefore shifted the problem from permission to political interpretation. In October of the same year, the atomic energy adviser Philip J. Farley considered whether "simply to take the action without creating the opportunity" for Denmark to object, yet asked Ambassador Val Peterson to judge "the possible Danish reaction and its consequences" (FARLEY, 1957, SCAN P. 2). The potential Danish objection therefore remained politically consequential.

Peterson instead consulted Danish Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Hans Christian Hansen privately. Hansen noted that Peterson "did not submit any concrete plan" or "ask questions as to the attitude of the Danish Government". He responded: "I do not think that your remarks give rise to any comments from my side" (HANSEN, 1957, THE "KILDE" SECTION). Peterson reported that in this case, Hansen opposed "publicity of any kind now or later" (PETERSON, 1957, P. 1). Murphy then concluded that Washington was "now in a position to go ahead with the deployment" (MURPHY, 1957B, SCAN P. 2). Hansen neither authorised nor prohibited the storage. The trace establishes Washington's conversion of a private non-objection into an internal decision to proceed, but not Danish permission.

The observations discriminate among three rivals. First, an unrestricted U.S. control predicts no need to solicit a Danish response or keep it confidential; the consultation contradicts that expectation. Second, an explicit delegation predicts an affirmative, mutually acknowledged authorisation; Hansen's non-answer fails that test. Third, a categorical prohibition predicts a veto once the issue reaches the head of government, but none appears. The best-supported interpretation is

a managed ambiguity. Washington joined a broad legal claim to a privately elicited non-objection, preserving its operational latitude without settling the agreement's shared meaning. Søborg Agger and Wolsgård (2001, P. 109) identify "rather ambiguous signals" in Denmark's 1957 policy; the causal point here is that secrecy sustained political maintenance. It was an asymmetric accommodation, not an agreed settlement of nuclear authority. The accommodation survived because the disputed interpretation did not enter a formal intergovernmental or domestic review.

The record does not establish Hansen's intention, Danish approval, Greenlandic consent, or the scope of the nuclear practice. The U.S. records show Washington's interpretation; Hansen's text confirms his words, but not their meaning. Non-objection cannot become proof of authorisation. Broad rights accommodated a disputed mission, while confidentiality postponed the decision to accept, reject, or revise the related use of Greenland. This maintenance was less robust than an explicit rule because it depended on non-disclosure. Its durability could be tested only when secrecy ceased protecting the arrangement. The 1968 Thule crash removed that condition and forced a choice among unilateral continuation, prohibition or rupture, and negotiated correction. The response therefore provides the more diagnostic test of whether the Danish authority could alter an embedded practice without dismantling the regime.

THE 1968 THULE CORRECTION

The earlier accommodation depended on keeping nuclear practice outside public decision-making; the Thule crash removed that condition. On 21 January 1968, a nuclear-armed U.S. B-52 crashed near the Thule air base. Olesen (2011, P. 116) describes the resulting episode as "a diplomatic crisis for the U.S. and Danish governments". The following day, Foreign Minister Hans Tabor stated that Danish nuclear policy "also applies to Greenland and also the air space over Greenland" (AS CITED IN U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2001B, DOC. 1). This statement did not create sovereignty for Denmark or settle the agreement's meaning. It did, however, make the contradiction between the declared policy and the recurrent practice publicly answerable. The causal question is therefore whether exposure enabled Denmark to alter an embedded operation without dismantling the wider defence regime.

Here public accountability acquired bargaining force when it entered formal negotiations. Danish ambassador Torben Rønne identified a "lack of consistency" between Danish policy and the 1951 agreement, requesting that no nuclear weapons "be stored in or introduced into Greenland including Greenland air space" (RØNNE, 1968A, DOC. 11). This was a categorical prohibition, not the consent rule that was eventually adopted. A State Department memorandum judged that "some formal USG assurance is necessary in order to maintain our present defense capability in Greenland" and that Denmark held "the strongest cards" in the bargaining (MCKILLOP, 1968, DOC. 8). Because the file does not record an approval, the memorandum cannot establish a settled U.S. policy. It remains probative, however, because an official seeking to protect the access treated the Danish objection as consequential.

The negotiations then compared targeted correction with broader institutional change. U.S. ambassador Katharine Elkus White reported that Rønne believed reopening the agreement would create "far more serious problems than it would solve", partly because Greenlandic sensitivities could enter the negotiations (WHITE, 1968, DOC. 7). Washington preferred a limited change for strategic reasons. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Warnke hoped a compromise would prevent the issue from "jeopardizing the important 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement" (WARNKE, 1968, DOC. 17). Assistant Secretary of State John Leddy was more explicit: the renegotiation might restrict "the operation of the Thule Air Base and the maintenance of an extremely important segment of the BMEWS" (LEDDY, 1968, DOC. 21). The actors thus named both the institutional alternative and the capacity at risk.

The exchange of notes on 31 May adopted a narrower, consent-based settlement. The United States undertook not to store nuclear weapons in Greenland or conduct nuclear-armed overflights "without the consent of the Government of Denmark"; the notes would "form an integral part" of the 1951 agreement (RØNNE, 1968B, DOC. 22). The Danish Foreign Ministry said that the result "creates harmony between the Defense Agreement of 1951 and Danish atomic policy" (AS CITED IN U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2001A, DOC. 23). The issue of nuclear storage and overflight thus moved from a tacit non-objection to formal prior consent without the wider framework being replaced. Petersen's (2011, P. 90) finding that "Airborne Alert flights over Greenland were abandoned" after the crash corroborates

the operational change. The notes themselves establish a legal correction and continuity, not the subsequent performance of every Thule function.

The settlement did not eliminate hierarchy or ambiguity in this case, however. Warnke's concurrence depended on the preservation of a possible U.S. requirement for nuclear overflight during "a serious crisis without advance notification or approval" (WARNKE, 1968, DOC. 17). When Leddy repeated that position orally, Rønne objected that it made the proposed agreement "less than binding"; Leddy replied that the written agreement remained the "governing instrument" (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 1968, DOC. 19). Leddy later recorded that the Danish Foreign Office had "formally noted" the U.S. statement (LEDDY, 1968, DOC. 21), but the record does not show that Copenhagen accepted it as an exception to the written rule. The outcome remained asymmetric but was not equivalent to unilateral control. The Danish authority changed the rule for ordinary nuclear operations, while Washington preserved its contested claim to emergency discretion.

This sequence supplies the article's most diagnostic evidence of retained authority. The final notes added a consent rule to the 1951 framework, and the deliberations explain the bounded legal form: both governments resisted a wider reopening while the U.S. officials connected the limited settlement to protecting Thule and the BMEWS. A complete displacement of the Danish residual control predicts no consequential correction, while a breakdown predicts termination or a broad retrenchment. Neither fits the legal outcome, however. The evidence shows that exposure activated the host's authority, narrowed a disputed practice, and left the wider allocation legally intact. It does not demonstrate the post-settlement operation of every core function, an equal partnership, or Greenlandic consent. The finding is therefore a legal continuity with a bounded operational correction, not a fully traced same-mission durability chain.

DISCUSSION

The Greenland case supports a bounded regime-level contribution, not a general claim that alliances produce access. Carson et al. (2025, P. S103) define access as "permission from allies and partners to engage in military and intelligence missions within their borders", while Lake (1996, P. 1) locates hierarchy in the parties' "rights of residual control". Alliance

institutionalisation covers "military coordination" and "significant peacetime costs" (LEEDS & ANAC, 2005, P. 183). Rosendorf's (2023, P. 35) call to examine "the full spectrum of possible institutional arrangements" is therefore pertinent. Negotiated territorial conversion specifies a candidate process within one such arrangement: the complementary legal authority is organisationally enacted and remains subject to the host's correction. The concept of negotiated territorial conversion complements access, institutionalisation, hierarchy, and incomplete contracting rather than replacing them.

The evidentiary support differs across the proposed links. The sovereign constraint and the existence of a 1951 legal allocation are directly documented, while the bargaining rationale for bundling every function is only partly visible. Operational enactment and recurrence are independently confirmed, but no located record derives the BMEWS decision or the service rule from a named 1951 provision. The 1968 correction supplies the strongest connecting evidence because in it, the officials compared alternatives. John Leddy warned that a wider renegotiation might hinder "the operation of the Thule Air Base and the maintenance of an extremely important segment of the BMEWS" (LEDDY, 1968, DOC. 21). The final notes establish legal continuity, but the archive does not trace the subsequent performance of every Thule function.

The rival explanations retain delimited roles. Threat and technological change account for the shifting demand but not the territorial response. NATO institutionalisation explains the common planning, while alliance bargaining and Danish domestic accountability shaped the 1951 and 1968 bargains. Incomplete contracting anticipates ambiguity and amendment, but not organisational enactment. Bureaucratic incrementalism remains plausible in this case because the record does not reveal a single comprehensive plan. The unequal discretion and the contested U.S. emergency claim show hierarchical features, but a partial hierarchy is compatible with the model. Only the complete displacement of the host's control is weakened by the consent rule and the abandonment of airborne-alert flights, while the wider agreement remained legally intact (PETERSEN, 2011, P. 90).

This finding qualifies two established interpretations of Greenland's asymmetry. Petersen (1998, P. 1) describes the 1951 talks as a "skewed, though regular negotiation process" and concludes that although "the US got

the best outcome, it was not a dictate". Discussing U.S. nuclear activities, Jacobsen and Olsvig (2024, p. 126) argue that these "basically did not depend on Danish acceptance", while also acknowledging the 1968 supplementary agreement. The present evidence supports each claim, but within certain limits. The concealed experimentation and broad U.S. discretion show that the Danish control was often incomplete, whereas the 1968 consent rule shows that public contestation could make the Danish authorisation operationally consequential. Conversion therefore does not imply equal control. It identifies a narrower condition in which host authority can revise an embedded practice while leaving the surrounding allocation legally in place.

Generalisability follows from the sequence, but not from the presence of U.S. forces in another allied state. A comparable process would require a recurrent strategic demand under consequential host sovereignty, complementary territorial rights, organisational enactment and an intergovernmental capacity for a later revision. Different missing links generate different expectations. Rights without enactment constitute latent access; mission-specific approval remains episodic access; a use that overrides a consequential objection approaches coercive or hierarchical control; failed maintenance produces retrenchment or termination. Annexation, occupation, nominal host sovereignty and one-off permissions therefore fall outside the concept. These are comparative propositions generated from one case, not established cross-case frequencies. Further research must test whether the links recur, whether they occur in the proposed order and which combinations of power asymmetry and domestic accountability permit correction without institutional rupture.

Interstate durability must be separated from representational consent. Jacobsen and Olsvig (2024, p. 123) observe that "[n]o Greenlanders whatsoever were acknowledged as part of the relevant audience at the time"; Danish authorisation therefore cannot be equated with Greenlandic consent. On 4 March 2025, U.S. President Donald J. Trump linked Greenland to "national security and even international security" and predicted that "[o]ne way or the other, we're going to get it" (Trump, 2025, p. 16). On 6 January 2026, however, seven European leaders stated that "[i]t is for Denmark and Greenland, and them only, to decide" (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2026, p. 1). These statements mark a boundary, not a present-day process trace. An application of the agreement today would require

evidence of Danish and Greenlandic authorisation, enactment and revision; a completed transfer of title would fall outside the mechanism.

CONCLUSION

The Greenland record supports negotiated territorial conversion as a plausible regime-level explanation rather than a completed causal demonstration. Strategic demand under sovereign constraint preceded the 1951 legal allocation of construction, movement, supply, communications, and jurisdiction. Vance's report stating that flights proceeded under "existing service-to-service agreements" without "formal clearance or notification" provides the clearest evidence of recurrent use without mission-by-mission diplomacy (VANCE, 1964, P. 3). Yet the surviving record does not derive those service-to-service arrangements or the BMEWS construction from a named treaty provision. In 1968, the nuclear consent rule became "an integral part" of the 1951 agreement (RØNNE, 1968B, DOC. 22). The archive thus confirms allocation, capacity, recurrence, and legal correction more strongly than the allocation-to-routine transmission joining them.

The contribution of the study is not the familiar claim that alliances facilitate access. It is a regime-level framework separating legal allocation, organisational reliance, recurrent missions, and host correction. Stronger tests must identify the contemporaneous reliance on complementary authority and, after the dispute, the continued core operations under the revised rule. Threat, technology, NATO coordination, unequal bargaining, and incomplete contracting remain relevant here but do not supply that transmission. The process applies where recurrent foreign use is sought, host sovereignty constrains practice, and the governments can implement and revise the bargain. It excludes annexation, occupation, episodic access, and nominal host authority.

Yet the authority observed was intergovernmental, not inclusive. Jacobsen and Olsvig (2024, P. 123) observe that "[n]o Greenlanders whatsoever were acknowledged as part of the relevant audience at the time". The Danish revision therefore cannot be equated with Greenlandic consent or legitimate territorial governance. The related contemporary claims lie outside a trace ending in 1968; testing them would require Danish and Greenlandic authorisation, implementation, and revision procedures.

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