From Cold War to Arctic Battle?

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Published in:
Conditions

Publication date:
2012

Document Version:
Early version, also known as pre-print

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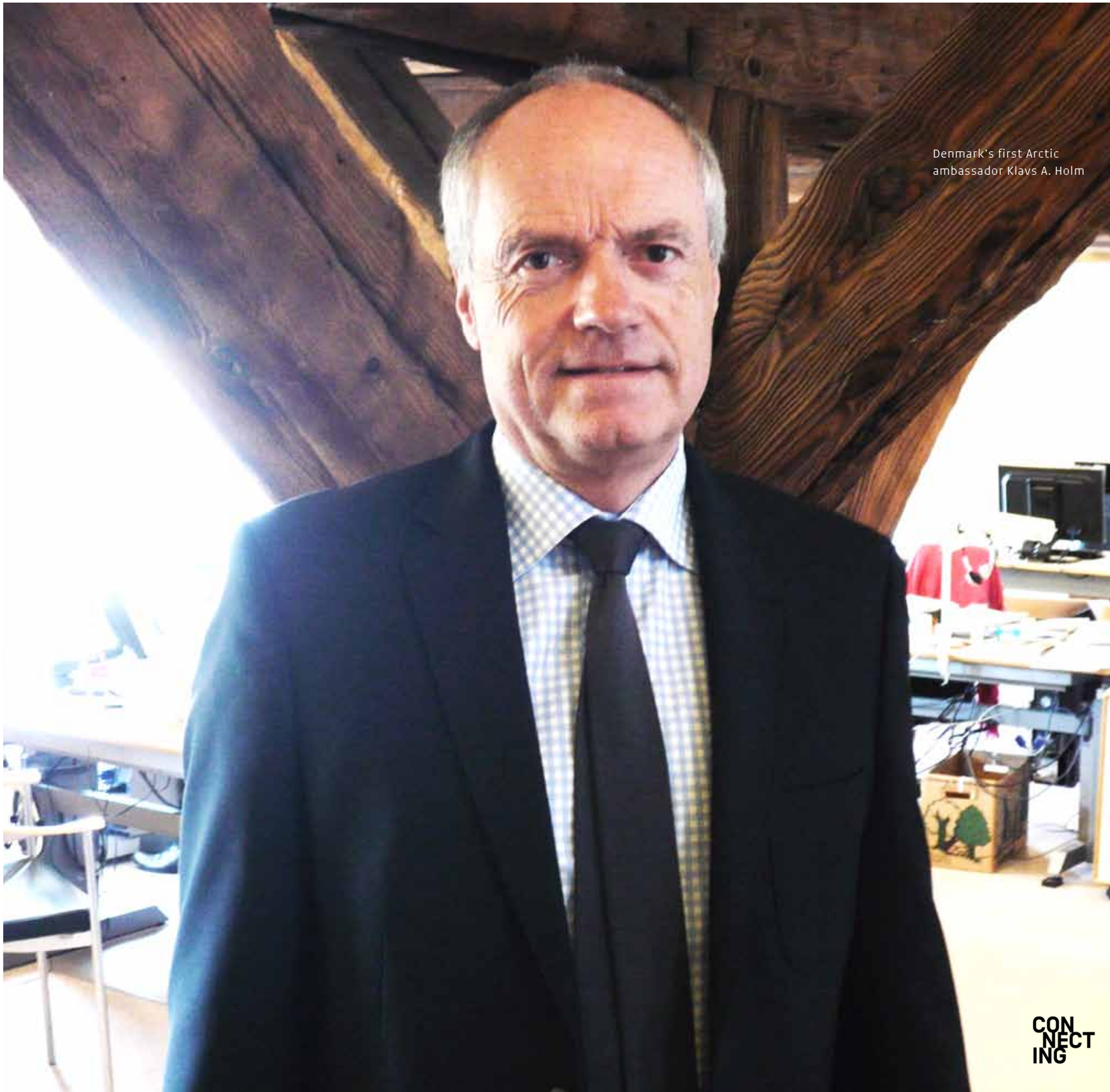
Interview with Arctic Ambassador Klavs A. Holm (The Foreign Ministry, Copenhagen, May 1st, 2012)

Greenland and the whole Arctic region is becoming a geopolitical hot spot. The opening of new potential sail routes to Asia and the possible exploitation of oil, gas and other natural resources like rare earth minerals are creating a window of opportunity for Greenland. What are the risks and who are the best strategic partners?

TEXT AND PHOTO BY BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN



Denmark's first Arctic ambassador Klavs A. Holm

BBJ: *Why does Denmark have an Arctic Ambassador?*
KAH: Denmark does not have an Arctic Ambassador; the Kingdom of Denmark does, because we operate as a national community with three constituent parts. What goes on in the Arctic region is of shared national interest, so that's obvious. I'm the Arctic Ambassador of the entire kingdom. The problems we face in the Arctic region do not merely concern Greenland or the Faeroe Islands or the Arctic Ocean, they concern the whole world because these problems are global by nature. They are inextricably linked to other countries. If you find vast amounts of oil in Greenland, it will influence our dependency on oil from the Middle East. It may upset the entire global geopolitical balance. If you find a serviceable North East Passage, it's important news for Singapore, Thailand and other countries as well. If you find gold or other minerals, it influences the African countries that produce them today. If you find strategic minerals, it will challenge China's de facto monopoly within this field. So there isn't a single one of the areas emerging, not a single one of the challenges we face or potentials we find in Greenland that does not have an international aspect. And then we haven't even mentioned the strategic importance of the entire area. This is why the Kingdom of Denmark has an Arctic Ambassador to efficiently defend the interests of the kingdom.
BBJ: *Has the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs formulated an overall political vision for the Arctic region, or has the EU?*
KAH: These are challenges that are so great—the size of the area alone is ten million square kilometers—that no country can "go it alone," so to speak. Everyone—countries, as well as private stakeholders, organizations, oil companies—has to join forces and do these things together. We don't look at it like now we have to stick to the European angle. We have noted with great satisfaction that there are many similarities between the approaches of the different countries to the area. First of all, everything must be solved through peaceful means. All the countries involved have pledged this from the very beginning. Now they will try to solve any disagreements as peacefully as possible through processes agreed on by everybody, through established forums, through clearly defined procedures that lead to negotiations between countries. For instance, concerns regarding the territorial borders across the Polar Sea according to the stipulations of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); or the Arctic Council, if we're talking about discussing what to do in case of an oil spill or the like. Even countries whose rhetoric used to be quite fierce have now said, "We're doing this together peacefully." That's very encouraging.
BBJ: *Is it naive to imagine that the*

Arctic might follow the example of Antarctica? That the entire area could be demilitarized and declared to be international territory? Or are the financial, geopolitical and military interests in the North Atlantic and the Arctic Ocean too great and too diverse for a "pacifist model" to make any sense?

KAH: The Antarctica is a huge inhabited area whereas the Arctic is the home for many people – among those also indigenous people. They have hopes and expectations regarding their future economic development. But that's not the same as saying that there is a confrontation underway. In fact, I'd caution people against thinking so. Many things suggest that the countries actually do have an interest in doing this together, because there isn't any country that can really do it alone.

BBJ: *Well, that sounds like a sensible and pragmatic solution, but is it possible to separate political ambitions and interests from military power?*

KAH: Well, you could say that there are certain places in which it is easier to use military force than others. A military presence is difficult to uphold in the Arctic because the area is so large. It is ten times as big as India. The distances are inconceivable. You cannot move around the same way as elsewhere in the world. Such a vast area is difficult to control. But that's not the same as saying that there are no strategic interests involved; there are—for instance in connection with the some of the rare earth. We have to acknowledge that. Those are materials used in computer screens, radar systems, fiber optic cables and a lot of other electronic products. Of course there will be interests involved. The same applies to navigation and the safety measures involved, and oil of course. So there are extensive interests involved, but to engage in a war you have to be able to see a clear benefit in it, and then you need the military capacity to do it. Following much of the rhetoric used by Russia, Canada and the USA, where you might sense a certain tension perhaps and presuppose some kind of confrontation looming—well, there isn't one. Of course, you can choose not to believe that. All I can say is that the rhetoric about future Arctic cooperation is very constructive and forthcoming compared to the Cold War rhetoric we've been used to. I'm very optimistic regarding the possibility of a comprehensive, pragmatic development. After all, we have made a Search and Rescue Agreement. We cooperate on scientific issues and cooperate with the oil industry and have joint access to research results. So there's a certain sense of team spirit about it all. The nations involved have also agreed to submit their petitions and territorial claims regarding the partition of the continental shelf beneath the Arctic Ocean. The deadline is in 2014, and then the case will develop a life of its own in the UN Law of the Sea Commission. It's going to be a long negotiation process. We even have some mechanisms in place to deal with it, like the International Court of Justice in The Hague. It will be a very long time before the resources of diplomacy are exhausted, if ever.

BBJ: *When I latch on to the connection between political influence, the ability to carry out a certain political agenda, and raw military power, it's because I know that China is a significant player here. It's no use looking at a globe in order to understand China's presence in the Arctic and their attempts to gain influence in the Arctic Council. It's a geopolitical demonstration really. They are there to make their political influence felt—which is backed by extensive military strength!*

KAH: I said initially that this is a global problem we're dealing with. Let's take these minerals, the strategic minerals, in which China has an interest. They have an extensive domestic production of such minerals. I actually don't think that the situation is all that strange. China is interested in doing business in Greenland. Denmark is very interested in doing business in China. When our companies do business in China and make money for Denmark, that's just fine, and something our government will appreciate. So it would be strange to say that China's interest in Greenland is illegitimate. They too have an interest in entering the Arctic market. We are a free trade country, and we accept this mutual interest of course. It's the basis of free trade and the advantage of free trade. That's the first reason. The second is that when we're talking multilateral diplomacy, Denmark has always been a proponent of extensive transparency and less secrecy. We don't think that the rich countries should be left to decide how things should be done on their own and then tell the developing countries, "This is how it's going to be." We have continually argued that the developing countries should be part of this, and we have provided development assistance in order to include them in the negotiation process. In short, transparency, openness, co-involvement and knowledge of what's going on—these are the kinds of things we advocate. So why wouldn't we do the same thing in the Arctic Council? If the member countries of the Arctic Council would like to talk without observers, they can just have an informal meeting —there's no harm in that. We can have dinner together and discuss some things among the eight delegations, without the various parties who would like to observe. I regard it as a completely natural thing, which shouldn't be overdramatized.

BBJ: *How big a role does the Arctic Council and the ICC play concerning the geopolitical questions?*

KAH: The discussions are grounded in the Arctic Council so to speak. That's an important organization, but also a young one. It's no more than eight or nine years old, and it is continually developing. It's establishing its secretariat in Tromsø, which will professionalize the organization and make decision processes easier. I think that it will soon be a streamlined organization. It's unusual because it has permanent observers and permanent representatives, i.e. the indigenous people in the area. That's an incredibly positive thing. Actually, it's a historical chance to do something right for once. I mean, to mine an area respecting the people who live there instead of just—as we saw during colonization and after it for that matter—letting big interests rush into a country and destroy it physically and socially. Plundering it and taking all the profit away, and all those ugly things we see. Here, we have the opportunity to create something decent from the beginning with the people living there, and that's why they are represented in the Arctic Council. A nice thought, I think.

BBJ: *I'd venture to say that Danish sovereignty over Greenland is guaranteed by the Americans, who have made it clear through the so-called Monroe Doctrine that no foreign power can make territorial claims on the American continental shelf through former colonies. To me, that raises the interesting question: What actually guarantees Greenland's independence and how can Greenland pursue an autonomous foreign policy without prior US consent? Would an independent Greenland not just become an American puppet state—the 51st US state as Colin Powell once put it by accident?*

KAH: I can only answer that all countries, independent and less independent, are subject to existing geopolitical conditions. Some will interpret this as being strongly influenced by the USA and others will say, "But we still retain a large degree of freedom to act; we can do as we see fit," etc. At any rate, no country can exist in a vacuum, particularly not if the development of the area continues. If everything is actually realized—the oil, the sea routes, the fishing, the raw materials and the strategic minerals—there is a very real, reality to wake up to. And of course there will be some power relations to consider, just as Denmark and Sweden and other countries do.

BBJ: *What do you consider to be the greatest threat against Greenland?*

KAH: What are you thinking of?

BBJ: *I'm probably thinking mainly of environmental disasters like the one in the Gulf of Mexico!*

KAH: I don't like to set up lists of likely horror scenarios, but I'll give it to you that that could easily become a very serious affair if there's an oil spill in Greenlandic waters. The Deepwater Horizon leaked 760million liters of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. They had every opportunity of containing it. It took a long time, I'll grant you, but they had so-called "skimmer ships"; they had people dredging up the oil; they had chemicals to sprinkle on the oil and plenty of people to help. The weather was tolerable, and part the oil evaporated. If the same thing happens in the ice-filled waters of the Arctic, you will then know that there's been an oil spill, but you won't be able to reach it because of the ice. The worst-case scenario is an oil spill taking place just as the sea has frozen over. If you had to wait five months for the ice to melt, the disaster would have spread horribly in a very, very vulnerable environment under circumstances that prevent vaporization. Manpower would be very far away, and no single country, neither Greenland nor Canada, would have the resources to remedy the situation on its own. You depend on the capacities that ensure search and rescue agreements and other oil spill agreements. There will be so many factors multiplying the negative consequences of such a disaster and making it much worse than the Gulf of Mexico spill. So that will undeniably be a horrific scenario, especially in an intermediate position between the current situation and Greenland one day having an oil-based economy. If the spill happens here in the middle [points to a map], then it'll destroy all the fishing and sealing along the west coast of Greenland and have serous consequences on the economy . That would be a problem of immense proportions.

BBJ: *Greenland has not benefited from the interference of NGO organizations in the past. The classic example is Greenpeace who, with the best of intentions, stepped in and problematized sealing. Greenland is still traumatized by the result of this intervention. Today, they have a quarter of a million sealskins they can't sell. How do the representatives of the Kingdom of Denmark handle that problem?*

KAH: First of all, it was the EU who proposed such a ban back then. Denmark intervened and negotiated the so-called "Inuit exemption": that Greenlandic seal products will be exempt. And when consumers and importers do not realize this, or do not dare buy them anyway, we help inform people about this. And finally, we are helping Greenland sell their skins on other markets, particularly in Asia where we have approached Japan and China and are currently making various efforts to increase their import of sealskins—with some success. We also engage with a number of NGOs, including Greenpeace. I think that Greenpeace owes Greenland a little goodwill, and they seem forthcoming. Let's see how it goes from here.

" Many things suggest that the countries actually do have an interest in doing this together, because there isn't any country that can really do it alone."