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“Nuuk and Cranny: Looking at the Arctic and Greenland’s Geostrategic Importance to U.S. Interests”

Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on this important topic. My name is Alex Gray, and I am currently a Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington. During President Trump’s first term in office, I served as Deputy Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of the White House National Security Council (NSC). Earlier, I had served as the first-ever Director for Oceania & Indo-Pacific Security at the NSC.

My comments today will focus on the strategic and military importance of Greenland to the United States. Beginning in 2018 and continuing to today, President Trump has brought critical public attention to the question of Greenland’s strategic significance in the Western Hemisphere and to American national security. But it is critical to acknowledge that while this topic has only recently gained widespread public attention, Greenland has long been a focal point for U.S. strategists looking to safeguard the periphery of the Hemisphere.

Before reviewing the history of U.S. interest in Greenland’s security and the threats that adversary influence or control of Greenland can pose to the U.S., I would like to make a general point about the ongoing dialogue concerning potential American acquisition of Greenland. First, I strongly support President Trump’s stated effort to bring Greenland closer to the United States. As I will preview in this testimony, the Administration has several excellent options to do just that.

Second, the current debate has unfortunately become centered on the Kingdom of Denmark, rather than on the people of Greenland themselves. Denmark is a key ally of the United States, both bilaterally and through NATO. Danish servicemen have fought and died alongside their American friends for decades, in World War II, Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. This debate must move beyond U.S.-Danish relations, because that is simply ancillary to the larger choice facing the United States. Washington and Copenhagen will continue a warm relationship regardless of the ultimate status of Greenland.

Put simply, and as embodied in Greenland’s own “Foreign, Security, and Defense Policy: 2024-2033”, the ultimate goal of Nuuk is to obtain independence from Denmark. When this will happen is subject to debate, including in Greenland and Denmark, but for American purposes it is vital that leaders in Washington take seriously what the Greenlanders are themselves telling us,

and what the last several decades of increasing Greenlandic self-governance and autonomy demonstrate.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cantwell, Members of the Committee, the question facing American policymakers comes down to the following: when Greenland inevitably obtains independence from Denmark, as their leaders tell us they will, who will be there to greet them on the other side? Will it be Russia and China, with their history of predatory behavior in small, developing states and unwillingness to respect such states' sovereignty? Or will it be the United States, with our commitment to sovereignty, the rule of law, respect for the environment, and for the rights and heritage of indigenous peoples? Now is the time to begin laying the groundwork for what arrangements can be put into place once Greenlandic independence is imminent.

History tells us just how critical this work is. At least since Secretary of State William Seward in 1867, American strategists of various political and ideological persuasions have seen Greenland as a key component of the holistic defense of the U.S. homeland, North America, and the Hemisphere more broadly from potential adversaries. At a little over 1,100 miles from the East Coast at its closest point and controlling vital sea routes between the U.S. and Europe, Greenland has always presented potential adversaries a tempting target for power projection into North America.

One of the rare, conscious American exceptions to the Monroe Doctrine of the last two centuries was the Wilson Administration's acquiescence to Denmark's extension of political and economic control over the whole of Greenland, in exchange for the purchase of the Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands) during World War I. This decision was later regretted by numerous U.S. strategists, including the visionary Army Air Corps General Billy Mitchell, who saw the potential threat of adversary air bases on Greenland as early as the 1920s.

By World War II, when Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany, the U.S. was faced with a possible German occupation of Greenland. The U.S. in turn occupied Greenland for the duration of the war, establishing a precedent of American military access to the island that continues today. The Truman Administration, in 1946, and the Eisenhower Administration, in 1955, put forward proposals for the acquisition of Greenland. While neither came to fruition, they illustrate the bipartisan understanding during the Cold War of the strategic necessity of the world's largest island. It has only been in the post-Cold War decades, and America's period of distraction in the Middle East and South Asia, that core, hemispheric interests like Greenland have been allowed to escape attention in Washington.

Greenland poses a number of potential security challenges for the United States, should it fall under the control or influence of an adversary power. The island's 27,000 miles of coastline are often relatively unmonitored, and Denmark has consistently failed to provide the military resources necessary to ensure surveillance of them. Over the past several decades, foreign vessels have repeatedly arrived in Greenlandic waters without proper authorization or in

violation of NATO protocols- or in the case of a Russian submarine, they were only detected by chance.

As during the Cold War, the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap remains an area of considerable strategic concern for the United States, serving as a principal passage for Russian (formerly Soviet) submarines to near the East Coast of the United States. Control of Greenland and its approaches is essential for the United States to fully cover the Gap, a motivating factor for the U.S. occupation of Greenland in the 1940s and for the continuing military presence there during the Cold War. Increased Russian submarine activity in the Arctic and closer to the U.S. in recent years has only heightened these longstanding concerns.

Greenland also has numerous air and space vulnerabilities for the United States. Its airspace, and visibility into it, is essential for broader North American security. Given Denmark's lack of investment in the military resources needed to uphold security near Greenland, the island's airspace is a subject of some concern, particularly given Russia's growing bomber presence in the Arctic.

And as is well known, the U.S. maintains Pituffik Space Base on Greenland. Given the increasing use of polar or sun-synchronous orbit for satellites in critical fields like communications and weather, and the concomitant need for ground tracking stations in the polar regions, maintaining such a site is essential. Unfortunately, it is one of only two such Arctic facilities available to the U.S. In the event of an unexpected event, or even if Greenlandic independence resulted in a loss of U.S. access to Pituffik, the lack of redundancy in such capabilities would be immensely harmful to U.S. interests.

China and Russia have demonstrated their interest in finding weak spots in the Arctic in recent years, while dramatically increasing their capabilities. Both countries are investing heavily in icebreakers, including nuclear-powered ones. China's preposterous declaration that it is a "near-Arctic power", along with the launch of its "Polar Silk Road" initiative, bespeak an intention to do in the Arctic what it has long practiced in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific: undermine the sovereignty of developing states at the expense of regional and global security. Indeed, from the Faroe Islands (another Danish possession) to Norwegian-administered Svalbard, Chinese and Russian malign activity in the High North is only growing and offering indications of the challenge facing the U.S. in securing our interests in an increasingly volatile Arctic.

Preventing a post-independence Greenland from going the way of other vulnerable, developing states who have succumbed to Chinese (or Russian) malign activity must be a top national security priority for the Administration and Congress. To that end, there are two options that would most effectively protect a post-independence Greenland from outside malign interference and uphold U.S. interests.

First, Greenland could agree to join the United States as one of our currently fourteen “insular areas,” which include jurisdictions as diverse as American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam. Each are administered and organized differently, per Congress, with differing levels of local control. I have argued that such an approach, which would formally link Greenland to the United States in perpetuity and solve permanently the security dilemma we are discussing, is the ideal solution. It would also offer numerous economic and other benefits to the Greenlanders, recognizing that the details of such a territory would be subject to detailed and difficult negotiations.

Second, the United States could offer an independent Greenland (or, for the time being, indicate our intent to offer a to-be-independent Greenland) a Compact of Free Association, or COFA. This concept is currently in place with the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau. As the Committee is aware, COFA signatory states are sovereign, independent countries; they are United Nations members with their own foreign policies and systems of governmental organization. What they share is a legal commitment by the United States to their defense; the grant of permanent military access to the United States; and the right of the United States to deny such access to any other power. Additionally, the U.S. provides the COFA signatory states certain financial support and development assistance.

While both options present challenges and opportunities, the point I seek to make is this: the United States is running out of time to develop a coherent strategic response to an independent Greenland. The security stakes are simply too high to allow Greenland to obtain independence without a plan in place for the U.S. to ensure our core strategic interests are assured. Fortunately, as stated above, such options exist and can be implemented given appropriate attention, focus, and will from the Administration and Congress.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cantwell, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and I look forward to your questions.