



Denmark's Foreign and Security Policy: Perfecting the Balance Between an Atlantic, Nordic, and European Outlook



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Introduction

Denmark is arguably the Nordic country that since the mid-twentieth century has been best able to maintain an influential position in a number of politico–security orders. As a small country, it has a truly international outlook grounded in its geographical position between the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea. At the same time, Denmark shares a cultural affinity with its Nordic neighbours, while in terms of economic development it is dependent on access to the European internal market – the destination of most of Denmark’s exports. Since the end of the Second World War, Denmark’s foreign policy has been characterized by an active presence in these regional orders, balancing external threats and opportunities. Seeing itself as a small country with limited means, Denmark has been remarkably successful in carving out a place for itself in the North Atlantic security order through close bilateral relationships with the USA and the European Union (EU) and, to a lesser extent, in the framework of Nordic cooperation. To this end, Danish foreign policy is both independently minded and strategic while relying on regional orders for security, economic integration, and realizing material interests. This balancing act gives rise to a certain role dissonance, as witnessed in the current shift towards the EU as a source of prosperity and provider of security after a long period of half-hearted participation in European integration, or when it worries about political developments in the USA while seeking the strongest possible strategic alignment with the Americans, or, again, when it touts its strong Nordic affinity but

shies away from Nordic strategic cooperation.

The ongoing shift in the international system is of great concern to the Danish foreign policy elite. Anders Samuelsen, foreign minister from 2016 to 2019, warned that the international rules-based order is retreating to the detriment of small states, which must step up to defend the norms and values of the liberal order and multilateralism as the primary mode of international interaction. In the last ten years, Danish foreign policy has therefore displayed both continuity and change against a background of increasingly acute security threats in the vicinity, especially from Russia, an increasingly volatile American ally, and growing economic coercion from China. In view of these developments, Denmark has opted to secure Danish interests through a more versatile strategy of engagement (Taksø-Jensen, 2016). In 2019, Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod launched a value-based Danish foreign policy based on the promotion of liberal values and democracy to be pursued in the EU, the UN, and later with the Biden administration, elected in 2020 (Kofod, 2021; Regeringen, 2022). Recently, against the backdrop of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Danish government announced to the surprise of many pundits that a referendum on Denmark’s opt-out from the military dimensions of the EU’s foreign and security policy will be held in June 2023.



Security policy: a core ally in NATO under the leadership of the USA

A constant in Danish foreign and security policy since the end of the Second World War has been membership in the North Atlantic security order under American leadership. The protection offered by NATO's security guarantee has never really been questioned domestically, apart from far-left opposition in the 1970s and 1980s, and no other security alliance has been seriously contemplated since Denmark joined NATO in 1949. Today, Denmark's participation in other international and regional organizations is still secondary to the importance it attaches to NATO and close bilateral relations with the USA.

As the international situation has changed and new threats and challenges have emerged, Denmark has adjusted its security policy and involvement in NATO. In the post-Cold War period, Denmark adopted an internationalist stance on security by aligning with the new strategic thinking regarding transnational threats, humanitarian intervention, and non-traditional warfare. Its previous cautious attitude to active war efforts changed with the wars in the former Yugoslavia, more precisely, in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1994 and Kosovo in 1998–1999, and even more so with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to which the Danish armed forces contributed substantial numbers of soldiers and substantial military resources. The decisions to participate in these wars, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq, were contested in the Danish parliament, particularly as there were no imminent threats to Danish

interests and because the UN Security Council did not authorize the military interventions. A parliamentary investigation of the decisions to go to war in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq concluded that what tipped the balance towards war was an eagerness to prove Denmark's loyalty to the USA through a kind of 'super-Atlanticism' (Mouritzen, 2007). Particularly when it comes to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, this near blind loyalty arguably went so far that the centre-right government manifested a sort of 'group think' in finding reasons to go to war, developing a practice of briefing parliament so late in the process that there was no going back (Mariager & Wivel, 2019).

The experience of the Trump administration and its hostility towards NATO's security guarantees, along with the unexpected, and unwelcome, offer to buy Greenland, put this super-Atlanticism in perspective, jolting the Danish foreign policy establishment and leading it to question the wisdom of investing so much in the bilateral relationship with the USA. The foreign policy of the Trump administration unsettled Denmark's stance on some important issues of principle, primarily its reliance on and support of a rules-based international order and multilateralism (Lewander et al., 2021). The election of Joe Biden as American president in late 2020 assuaged some of the worst fears of the Danish foreign policy elite but did not prevent a shift in Danish foreign and security policy, also influenced by the belligerent attitude of Russia and by a change in the broader understanding of Denmark's interests abroad. Consequently, it became less oriented towards out-of-area



operations and more geared towards territorial defence, cyber security, and securing economic and value-based interests. Moreover, President Biden's sudden decision to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 without prior consultation with NATO allies, including Denmark, underscored the precarious nature of trust in the bilateral relationship. Nonetheless, Denmark's role conception as a 'core ally in NATO' and the designation of the USA as its most important security partner, both regionally and internationally, have not changed (Bramsen, 2021: 38), and a defence cooperation agreement with the USA was sought in 2022. All the same, security in the Baltic region and the North Atlantic has now moved to the top of the foreign policy agenda for Denmark.

In the midst of great power rivalry: Denmark and the Arctic

Climate change and melting Arctic ice have put Denmark in a new, potentially challenging position in the emerging great power rivalry over the new maritime routes that have opened up in the Arctic. Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland and the Faroe Islands has made it one of the most important players in the Arctic Council, as it is ultimately responsible for the two island communities' foreign and security policy. Denmark sees itself as a great power in the Arctic, centrally placed enough to plead with other NATO allies to pay more attention to the security challenges in the Arctic region (Taksø-Jensen, 2016; Bramsen, 2020).

Despite striving for a governance of the Arctic centred on fighting climate change and improving the wellbeing of the region's communities, geostrategic tensions involving Russia, the USA, and China have recently come to dominate the region. All these parties have an eye on dominating the maritime routes and exploiting the natural resources in the region.

In the summer of 2021, NATO mentioned the North Atlantic Arctic region as an area of concern for the first time since 2009, prompted not least by the intensified military activity of Russia (DIIA, 2022). With the growing security challenges in the High North, there is debate in Denmark on whether NATO should take on part of the increasingly burdensome task of ensuring North Atlantic security, or whether Denmark ought to shoulder the task of policing and surveilling this vast area by itself to de-escalate any potential great power tensions. For the moment, Denmark seems to be vacillating between the two approaches, not least because of sensitivity towards the Greenlanders themselves, who would like to stake out the future of their territory. Denmark is keen, however, to ensure the presence of the USA as a security guarantor in the Arctic through the multilateral framework of NATO. The US Air Force has been present at Greenland's Thule Air Base since the 1950s, and the conditions for continued American use of the airbase have been the subject of tough negotiations, not least because Denmark must balance US military interests against respect for the wishes of the Greenlanders themselves. Former President Trump's offer to buy Greenland from Denmark in 2018 again brought home the vulnerability of



small allies in the trilateral great power rivalry in the Arctic and put the Danish Social Democratic government in an embarrassing position (Haugevik et al., 2022). Denmark has clear strategic interests in balancing the ambitions of great powers in the Arctic, in persuading NATO to include the Arctic in its security guarantees, and in counting Denmark's military presence in the Arctic towards its overall NATO contribution. Denmark ultimately seeks to maintain a stable security environment in the High North, not least for the security of Greenland (DIIS, 2022).

Handling the onslaught on the rules-based international system: moving closer to the EU

The necessity to uphold norms and values in the international system has been a constant theme of Danish foreign policy for the last two decades. The definition of what this struggle entails has shifted over the period. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 in the USA, the emphasis lay on defending democracy, freedom, and human rights. Denmark followed the discursive rhetoric of the Bush administration and justified its participation in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq using the language of normative internationalism and the need for humanitarian interventions in failed states ruled by authoritarian regimes or riddled with terrorist groups (Mariager & Wivel, 2019).

With the rise of China and the blatant aggressiveness of Russia, the normative values rhetoric has shifted to the necessity to defend the American-led international order, as the USA is still seen as the

immutable guarantor of security and liberal values. Nonetheless, since the Trump administration's disparagement of international rules, unabashed breaches of international agreements, and threats to commitments made within the auspices of NATO, WTO, WHO, and other international organizations, there has been a marked shift in the Danish approach to the normative dimension of foreign policy. It is now couched in terms of defending the rules-based international order, including multilateralism and the role of international organizations in upholding specific policy regimes. The onslaught on the liberal world order is seen less in terms of fighting transnational terrorism and securing failed states, and more in the sense of defending the rules and principles of the international order against the revisionist great powers – China and Russia. Moreover, the challenges to be addressed are complex and multifaceted, including mass migration, climate change, and increasingly diverse security threats such as cyber warfare, economic coercion, and societal destabilization efforts (Regeringen, 2018).

In this complex international context, Danish governments have shifted their attention to the EU as a venue where a broad range of issues can be addressed (SIEPS, 2021). This concerns not only the geopolitical challenge posed by China but also security risks in the European neighbourhood, managing mass migration to Europe, sustaining international trade and inter-regional economic cooperation, and even promoting the global governance of issues such as climate change and sustainable economic development. Denmark sees the need for 'a stronger EU



that uses its economic and political leeway' to work towards reformed and revitalized multilateral cooperation and a strong voice in defence of democracy and human rights (Kofod, 2021: 19).

Denmark's new emphasis of the EU's role not only in economic matters but also in terms of security and the all-important defence of the international rules-based system is remarkable from the perspective of its traditional quite sceptical stance towards the EU. In particular, the view of the EU as an important actor in an increasingly geopolitical international system and as having a stake in the security and stability of the wider European architecture amounts to a radical foreign policy shift. This is not least because in order to be an influential voice in the EU when setting priorities and deciding on concrete measures in the security area, Danish governments must find a way around Denmark's opt-out from the military and security aspects of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Thus far, the sitting Social Democratic government has refrained from joining the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), opting instead for active participation in the European defence fund (SIEPS, 2021). However, with the announcement of a referendum in June 2023 on Denmark's opt-out from the military dimension of the CFSP, the shift towards a more central position within the EU may be realised.

Denmark has supported the EU's global sanctions regime as well as the decision to impose sanctions on Belarus and China for breaches of human rights. It has also

supported the establishment of European strategic autonomy, opting for a broad definition including diplomatic, civilian, technological, and economic dimensions (SIEPS, 2021: 25). Overall, in comparison with previous decades of Danish doubt regarding the deepening of the strategic capabilities of the EU, Denmark's support, even promotion, of an autonomous and broad-ranging European foreign and security policy capacity amounts to a shift in policy stance and a new role for Denmark within the European security architecture in which the EU is accorded a more prominent place.

Nordic cooperation: cultural affinity to what end?

The Nordic dimension has always been important in Danish strategic thinking, but more as a way to anchor its normatively oriented foreign policy than as a security and defence alliance (Haugevik et al., 2022). The reasons for the initial decision to join NATO rather than the Scandinavian defence alliance, which was also under discussion in the aftermath of the Second World War, have remained valid until recently. This can be seen, for instance, in the Danish foreign and security strategy of 2019–2020, in which Nordic cooperation was not mentioned once (Regeringen, 2018). Denmark, with its exposure to the North Atlantic through its sovereignty over Greenland and the Faroe Islands, has a geographical outlook differing from those of Sweden and Finland, whose threat assessments centre on the Baltic Sea and the eastern border with Russia. Also, Denmark's focus on the USA as its key strategic partner is not shared to the same



extent by Sweden and Finland, whether in strategic or ideological terms. These different strategic outlooks were particularly pronounced during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and influenced the views on Nordic cooperation from the Danish perspective. At the same time, Denmark has emphasized Nordic cooperation and identity from a normative perspective in two ways: first, as a way to promote a normative foreign policy anchored in a quest for typical Nordic norms and values such as democracy, human rights, and social equity; second, as a way to promote international cooperation in achieving certain global public goods, often linked to specific goals, such as sustainable development (e.g., Agenda 2030), the fight against climate change (e.g., the UNCCC framework), and human security. Denmark used its presidency of the Nordic Council in 2015 to promote the Nordic 'brand' (Bailes, 2016).

Denmark appears to have changed its approach to Nordic cooperation in recent years. The current geopolitical shift has contributed to this change in two specific ways. First, Denmark's super-Atlanticism seems to have abated since the experience of the Trump presidency in 2017–2021 in favour of multilateral cooperation, for instance, in the UN (Hjort Frederiksen, 2019). The Biden administration's sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan reinforced the conviction that it would strengthen Denmark's strategic position to operate within several organizations and networks. Second, the security situation underwent a marked shift in northern Europe starting in the mid-2010s with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of

Ukraine in 2022, which were preceded by heightened security threats stemming from conventional and non-conventional intimidations and incursions on the part of Russia in the Baltic states and the wider Baltic Sea region (Kofod, 2021). As a result, Denmark has signalled its willingness to take an increasingly active role in the Nordic defence cooperation, NORDEF, by initiating a security of supply facility and a crisis consultation mechanism (Bramsen, 2021). In comparison with Finland, Sweden, and, to a lesser extent, Norway, Denmark remains wedded to bilateral defence collaboration with the USA and is a core ally in NATO, stances not immediately compatible with strong Nordic defence cooperation.

Conclusions

This account of Denmark's foreign and security policy highlights changes in Denmark's understanding of its international roles in the most recent decade. In this period, Danish foreign policy shows evidence of both remarkable change and striking continuity. The ongoing geopolitical shift in the international system has been internalized by the Danish foreign policy elite, which has consequently overseen a reorientation of strategic priorities in the direction of an emphasis on physical, societal, and digital security. Russia's intent to redraw the European security architecture through the war in Ukraine has led to a refocusing on territorial defence and cyber security, while China's recourse to economic coercion has heightened the necessity to counter punitive statecraft in order to preserve the competitiveness of Danish industry. Russia's



and China's revisionist goal to redraw the international order has led to a clear focus on defending the rules-based international system and a willingness to conduct a value-based foreign policy.

Regarding its main allies, Denmark has not revised its long-standing security alliance with the USA, either bilaterally or within NATO, which provides it with strategic clout to stand up to aggressive major powers in the North Atlantic and in the Baltic Sea region. With the war in Ukraine, the traditional Danish tendency to reserve security matters for NATO and economic matters for the EU has dissipated. Also, cooperation with Denmark's Nordic neighbours has been stepped up in specific areas, mostly tied to the Arctic (Norway) and the Baltic Sea region (Sweden and Finland). In this regard, there is a marked inconsistency in Danish security policy in terms of strategic focus, as the attachment to the USA remains very solid despite growing anxiety about the state of American political culture. Finally, a significant shift has occurred in Danish thinking regarding the EU. There is consensus among the political elite in Denmark that the EU has become an important foreign policy player in all areas, even military defence. In addition, as the scope of foreign and security policy has widened considerably at the same time as the geopolitical shift has ushered in an era when international finance, trade, and investment have become tools of statecraft

in the hands of rising powers, especially China, the role of the EU has become significant. Moreover, because of the internal political instability of the USA, the Danish foreign policy elite has concluded that it is the EU that will lead the defence of the rules-based international system. Denmark is therefore pledging to support the strengthening of the EU's capabilities in the fight against economic coercion, cyber warfare, and non-military aspects of security, and has recently opened the possibility of abandoning its opt-out from the military dimensions of the CFSP. The war in Ukraine made the obvious role dissonance between claiming to want to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy while not addressing the inconsistency of opting-out from the military aspects of the CFSP too difficult for the government to uphold. The future will tell whether the government can bring the Danish population with it in the referendum to abolish the opt-out from the CFSP, or whether decades of (ever-milder) Euroscepticism have coloured the public view of the EU to the point that it is nearly impossible to convince the citizens that the opt-out is no longer in Denmark's interest. In any case, the sitting government and those to come will need to find a way to integrate a stronger European dimension in the Danish self-understanding and to reconcile it with Denmark's self-imposed super-Atlanticism and great power status in the Arctic.



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