Denmark

Happy to Fight, Will Travel

Jakobsen, Peter Viggo; Rynning, Sten

Published in:
International Affairs

DOI:
10.1093/ia/iiz052

Publication date:
2019

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):

Go to publication entry in University of Southern Denmark's Research Portal

Terms of use
This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark. Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving. If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

• You may download this work for personal use only.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version.

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim. Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk
Denmark: happy to fight, will travel

STEN RYNNING AND PETER VIGGO JAKOBSEN

The territorial defence of Denmark begins along the stretch of land that, following a softly bent curve, connects Vilnius in Lithuania to Tartu in Estonia. This, at least, has been the underlying theme in Danish foreign policy since the Cold War, when Denmark was a front-line state directly threatened by a Warsaw Pact invasion. The independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 1991, along with the realignment of Poland, was a boon to Denmark, rolling back the former Soviet power and creating a buffer of like-minded states. The entry of the three Baltic states into NATO in 2004 as full allies crowned a decade’s worth of Danish diplomatic investment.¹

It is impossible to understand the Danish defence reforms of the past 30 years outside this geopolitical context. It was only with the defence agreement of 2004—covering the period 2005–2009—that Denmark did away with its in-place territorial defence organization to organize instead for expeditionary warfare. It was the more relaxed geopolitical context that enabled this reform and, in turn, Denmark’s substantial engagement in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which themselves resulted from the major shift in the strategic environment caused by the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the United States. Denmark, it turned out, was happy to both travel and fight for as long as its neighbourhood was secure. Today, with Russia reasserting itself and NATO commitments being questioned, Denmark’s willingness to travel and fight is for the most part focused on its own neighbourhood, and especially the Baltic area, to secure the alliance commitments that not so long ago seemed unchallenged.² To achieve this return to a conventional defence and deterrence posture, the government has decided to reverse the decline in defence budgets. Still, there is a bit of a paradox involved in Denmark’s position—aiming high in terms of

¹ Denmark was the first country to recognize the independence of all three states in 1991 (although Iceland beat Denmark to it in the case of Estonia); it then established a training and operational partnership with the Baltic militaries, and in 1999 helped establish the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, Estonia.

NATO standing but low on budgetary input. A 2018 defence agreement for the most part delays enhanced defence expenditure to 2022–2023, and this at a time when the force structure is at some points clearly stretched, indeed at its limits of capacity. In early 2019, Danish decision-makers responded to strong US pressure by upgrading the 2018 agreement. However, they did so by inflating the defence budget with ‘old’ money (by and large expenditure on military pensions imported from the regular state budget) and delayed the infusion of 1.5 billion kroner of ‘new’ money until, again, 2022–2023.

In this article, we trace three decades of Danish defence reform, the embrace of expeditionary warfare, and the peculiar nature of Danish military change, whereby the political level at times intervenes to demand major reform but consistently leaves the substance of reform to the military services. According to the literature on military change, the type of change (captured by the distinction between innovation and adaptation) results from two strategic drivers of change: threats from competitors and technological disruption. Small states with strong allied ties like Denmark tend not to innovate, but rather to emulate and adapt in the type of stop–go pattern we shall examine here, just as they tend to view the biggest threat to their security as the abandonment of allied ties. In consequence, as the alliance literature suggests, they must offer military niche capabilities that meet alliance demands.


The pace of military change for a country like Denmark can be explained, then, with reference to the political perception of its standing within its alliance relationships and the related political desire to gain as much security as possible for as little money as feasible. Moreover, in line with the literature’s general emphasis on civil–military relations as a key nexus for military change, we will examine the extent to which this nexus in the Danish case has worked to favour or hinder reform. We find that it has generally favoured reform, because as the political level has been attuned to visibility and standing in NATO, the military level has gained freedom of action to pursue reforms that could deliver on the NATO agenda while observing standards and norms shared in the Danish military community.

The keywords are thus alliance politics (fear of abandonment), resources (getting bigger bangs for fewer bucks), and service freedom of action (civil–military division of labour). Equipped with these concepts, below we interpret Denmark’s tentative or limited military reforms in the 1990s and then two waves of more ambitious reform beginning in 2001 and 2014, respectively. We begin with an overview of political ambitions and the key consequences of wanting to secure alliance commitments at the lowest cost possible. We then turn to the three services and their reform trajectories through the three post-Cold War decades.

**Danish defence**

---


Three strategic shocks have shaped the transformation of Danish defence since 1989: the end of the Cold War, 9/11, and the return of the Russian threat to Danish and NATO territory since 2014. Each of these shocks triggered new demands from NATO and the United States that Danish politicians asked the armed forces to find ways of meeting while at the same time cutting the defence budget (see table 1). In the 1990s, the response to NATO and US demands for rapid reaction forces that could be deployed ‘out of area’ for crisis response operations was to undertake limited reform. The number of Danish troops deployed abroad on international operations grew in the course of the 1990s, peaking in 1999 and 2000 when the army had contingents in Bosnia and Kosovo at the same time (see figure 1). Yet these numbers were generated by adjusting the territorial and conscript-based Cold War structure. Major reform did not occur until 2004, when the 2005–2009 defence agreement introduced a new organization geared entirely to expeditionary operations. This transformational agreement reflected operational lessons of the 1990s, political demands for lower defence spending and the new American demands for expeditionary combat contributions triggered by 9/11. The 2004 defence agreement reflected a strong political desire to cement a ‘special relationship’ with the United States, and a military interest in creating combat-capable units in all three services that were relevant for the 9/11 era and would therefore be resistant to further budget cuts. Yet the budgets continued to decline—until the Russians went on the warpath in Ukraine, and President Trump made NATO’s continued survival contingent upon greater allied defence spending. The defence agreement of 2018 (covering the years 2018–2023) responded to the new situation with a 20 per cent budgetary increase, including greater investments in equipment to meet NATO’s requirement that 20 per cent of the defence budget should go towards such investments. However, this agreement took the defence budget up to only 1.3 per cent of GDP by 2023; and so, with President Trump keeping up his pressure on those allies not clearly on track to be spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence by 2024, an amendment was made in

7 Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Jens Ringsmose, ‘Size and reputation—why the USA has valued its “special relationships” with Denmark and the UK differently since 9/11’, Journal of Transatlantic Studies 13: 2, 2015, pp. 135–53.
8 Ministry of Defence, Defence Agreement 2018–2023 (Copenhagen, 28 Jan. 2018), http://www.fmn.dk/eng/news/Pages/New-agreement-for-Danish-Defence-2018-2023.aspx. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 18 March 2019.)
January 2019 that will bring Denmark on a par with Germany at 1.5 per cent of GDP in 2024. The fear of alliance abandonment thus caused a further hike in defence expenditure, though even after this Denmark in 2024 will be nowhere near the level it was at in 2000.

Table 1: Overall trends in Danish defence numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defence budget (Kr bn)</td>
<td>16,14</td>
<td>19,35</td>
<td>24,96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence budget (% of GDP)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active troops</td>
<td>Total: 31,700</td>
<td>Total: 25,000</td>
<td>Total: 16,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of which</td>
<td>of which</td>
<td>of which</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>army: 19,400</td>
<td>19,400</td>
<td>12,850</td>
<td>8,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(including 9,900</td>
<td>(including 4,400</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conscripts)</td>
<td>conscripts)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>navy: 5,400</td>
<td>5,400</td>
<td>4,060 (500</td>
<td>joint: 3,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(900 conscripts)</td>
<td>conscripts)</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>air: 6,900</td>
<td>6,900</td>
<td>4,900 (125</td>
<td>longer listed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(700 conscripts)</td>
<td>conscripts)</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By contrast, the Danish capacity to deploy has increased since the end of the Cold War (though more detailed figures would show that it has been declining since the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan terminated in 2014). The years of engagement in the Balkans between 1991 and 2001 saw a total deployment of 12,489 troops, thus an average yearly deployment of 1,135 troops, which increased to a yearly average of 1,996 troops in the subsequent period, 2002–2015.

One of the big themes of defence transformation across the western world has been ‘jointness’—the idea of increased coordination and common planning among the three services. As a ‘big idea’ originating primarily in the United States and then making its way through NATO’s military community, it hit Denmark belatedly, and even then by and large as a type of rationalization.

Figure 1: Total number of Danish deployed personnel, 1992–2017

*Note:* Since most tours last six months, the number of personnel continuously deployed abroad is about half that indicated in the table.

whereby the forces can save money and still achieve impact. Unlike in the United States, where jointness is about taking combined arms warfare to new levels of sophistication, for Denmark it is about saving money and making optimal use of limited resources. Accordingly, the full infrastructure from officers’ training to weapons acquisition has been integrated, and service overlaps have by and large been eliminated. The army no longer has any helicopters, planes or ships—or even guard dogs (they used to belong to the air force and are now part of the Joint Services Command Support Capacity); the helicopters of the navy and air force now all belong to the same helicopter wing; the special operations forces of the army and navy have been placed under the aegis of a separate Special Operations Command (SOCOM); the Arctic command is joint; and so on.9

In recent years, Danish decision-makers have taken some small steps beyond the rationalized joint support structure in the direction of an enhanced capacity for joint operations, but these are strictly limited. In the overall scheme of things, NATO’s turn to ‘major joint operations’ to counter Russia, and new technologies such as the Joint Strike fighter (F-35) and C4ISR systems,10 continue to push all NATO allies in the direction of enhanced jointness, but Denmark is not thoroughly committed to this path. True, in April 2014 the Danish parliament established a joint operational command,11 in order to upgrade the joint capacity to conduct humanitarian (i.e. small) operations and engage in capacity-building (i.e. training of indigenous forces).12 But these reforms had much to do with cutting costs and dealing with the repercussions of the assertion of greater civilian oversight: the April 2014 deal weakened the chief of defence staff and necessitated a strengthening of operational command somewhere down the line. Moreover, in the course of 2018 some of the reforms were rolled back. The service staffs, which in 2014 were intended to be integrated into the joint command, have been reconstituted as service commands, and the overall joint command has once again become a framework ‘defence command’ dominated by army, sea, and air commands. The

9 Cyber defence is organized in a centre under the aegis of the Defence Intelligence Agency.
10 Command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.
11 Ministry of Defence, Organiseringen af ledelsen af forsvar og tillæg til aftale på forsvarsområdet 2013-2017 [Organization of the defence leadership and supplement to the defence agreement] (Copenhagen, 10 April 2014).
Arctic command remains formally joint but is in fact all navy, and while SOCOM is perhaps the most joint of them all, the level of integration between land and sea special operations forces in practice remains limited. In reality, therefore, Denmark has neither the size nor the political appetite for joint warfare. There is a distinct political willingness to deploy Danish forces in support of NATO missions, and to be visible in NATO more generally, but the political willingness to fund the effort is varying and, viewed in the overall context of the period from 1990 to 2019, declining. Thus it is fears of abandonment and rationalization driven by declining budgets that define the framework for service reform. There is no political demand for moving beyond service autonomy to joint warfare, and so military change must be traced inside the separate services and in the context of the abovementioned civil–military division of labour.

The army
The army began to reform in the 1990s because of the fundamental change in the strategic context caused by the end of the Cold War, which resulted in new NATO demands for rapid reaction forces driven by the need to tackle the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia. As is clear from figure 1, the army began to deploy an increased number of personnel to the UN and NATO operations in the course of the 1990s, but it only really transformed itself when the next strategic change occurred with the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. The combination of continued political pressure for defence cuts and an American demand for combat contributions resulted in the landmark 2004 defence agreement that asked the army to deliver the brunt of the new expeditionary capacity. The blueprint for reform was set by the demands of warfare in Afghanistan, which called for new and continuing adaptation. The situation changed abruptly with Russia’s resort to force in the Ukraine in 2014. In the light of these events, NATO reverted to its traditional deterrence and defence role; and the Danish army accordingly began to retool itself for the new alliance missions. In retrospect, we see that the army began the post-Cold War period as a parochial organization.

---

13 Ministry of Defence, Defence Agreement 2005–2009 (Copenhagen, 10 June 2004), http://www.fmn.dk/videnom/Pages/Tidligereforsvarsforlig.aspx. The headline goal was 2,000 troops for continuous deployment, of which the army had to deliver 1,500. The headline goal was never actually attained.
wedded to territorial defence. The political demand for deep reform in 2003–2004 changed matters, though the real drivers of army reform in the ensuing decade were Afghan warfare and NATO solidarity. With the drawdown in Afghanistan beginning in 2011–2012 the army gained a pause, but since 2014 the return to planning for conventional warfare has brought new demands for the army to demonstrate its relevance within NATO. It is on track to do so, but progress will be slow and hampered by resource constraints.

Through the 1990s the army was reluctant to give up its basis in conscription (conscripts made up about one-third of peacetime troops, that is, about 8,000 out of 24,000). The army had a division (the Danish Division) composed of brigades (three of these after 1995) but all of these high-end formations were based on conscripted regiments. To meet NATO’s requirement for out-of-area operational capacities, the army gained an expeditionary branch, the Danish International Brigade (DIB). However, the DIB was light, short on combat support, and largely made up of civilians on standby contracts (who made up 4,000 of the brigade’s 4,500 troops), and it reached its limits in Kosovo when a significant minority of the contracted personnel simply refused to go into uniform when summoned. For so long as it remained committed to conscripted defence and, by implication, an assumed stark distinction between peace and war, the army organization could not undertake major reform. The bulk of the army remained tied to territorial and collective defence, and it was only with Poland’s accession to the alliance that the multinational NATO corps of which the Danish army was a part gained a new size and form—the Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC-NE)—though it remained committed to collective defence missions. The DIB had been to Bosnia, and it had joined the

---

14 See Bertel Heurlin, *Riget, magten og militæret* [The realm, the power and the military] (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004), ch. 7.
15 If mobilized for war, that is, territorial defence, the army would swell to nearly 60,000 troops.
16 The DIB followed from a 1992 defence agreement. It was declared at full capacity in 1997.
17 In all, 59 of the 500 former conscripts on contract mobilized into the battalion refused to go. Persuasion and threats of legal action reduced the number to 29, and more than 200 volunteered to take their places. Still, the cumulative effect was to undermine the credibility of the DIB as a policy tool—especially given that the first Danish contribution to the Kosovo Force was to consist of an existing battalion of the Danish Life Regiment, as opposed to an improvised force. The DIB structure, in other words, was hollow.
British-led, multi-role Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) established in 1992; but within the Danish army as a whole it remained a sideshow. To break free of this mould, the Danish army needed fresh political impetus.

The tipping point was the US-led ‘war on terror’ provoked by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It kicked NATO into a wave of transformational efforts, and in October 2003 led the Danish Prime Minister (and later NATO Secretary-General) Anders Fogh Rasmussen to demand a doubling of Denmark’s expeditionary capacity. Key officers in the defence command had already, earlier in 2003, realized the impossibility of continuing to maintain an army focused on both territorial defence and expeditionary warfare, and had thus prepared recommendations for a capabilities-based (as opposed to Cold War-style threat-based) defence organization. This so-called capacity brief (K-notatet) projected a future of major reform, in contrast to the 1990s, and it became the roadmap of change once the Prime Minister had both endorsed that change and defined the level of its ambition.

The army thus entered upon the expeditionary era. Its main units were now two brigades, one of which would be standing (professional) and ready for rapid deployment, while the other would recruit contracted soldiers from a boiled-down conscription regime and train them for war.

Moreover, in addition to ‘combined’ warfare, the army adopted the ‘comprehensive approach’ to crisis management—which began in the Balkans and came of age in the provincial reconstruction teams of the Iraq and Afghan campaigns. In the course of the ‘war on terror’ the army ended up deploying up to 600 troops to Iraq and maintaining them there for three years, beginning in 2004, and then, beginning in 2006, deploying up to 800 troops to Helmand province in Afghanistan, maintaining them there until 2012.

In almost every respect, this expeditionary track record speaks highly of the army’s capacity for change. It discarded its conscription mindset and optimized its organization to deploy a large expeditionary force (relative to the overall army organization), and sustained that force in extreme

---


conditions and in spite of high casualties.\textsuperscript{21} It embraced new wars and went all-out to fight them.\textsuperscript{22} This was the outcome of strategic change, as mediated first by the political and military leadership and then by a service closely aligned with and cooperating with key allied partners. However, with the ‘return’ to Europe after Crimea, the army has been required to deliver on the political demand for visibility and credible NATO force options in a contested, force-on-force environment while struggling with worn-out equipment, stretched personnel resources, and a continued political preference for limiting defence expenditure.\textsuperscript{23}

The key challenge for the army is to shift from counter-insurgency (COIN) campaigning to major joint operations closer to home. COIN in effect made the deployable Danish battalion combat command (300–800 troops) heavy (for reasons of force protection), stationary (a theatre focus on holding ground) and cumbersome (with significant headquarters capacity to manage everything from translation, detention of suspects, data gathering and reporting to intelligence assessment and coordination with civilian agencies). The challenge now is to enable primarily heavier mechanized operations for regional deterrence at one end of the military spectrum and, in parallel, light infantry manoeuvre for quick reaction operations at the other end. Following the 2018 defence agreement, the army will thus revert to a brigade-focused organization within which the first brigade will comprise three standing battalion task forces (with support structures) that can be assembled either into tailored task forces or, if the Russia threat becomes acute, into a full-scale, deployable brigade

\textsuperscript{21} Denmark suffered 51 killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan, which as a ratio per capita was the highest in NATO.

\textsuperscript{22} This is not to say that the army embraced counter-insurgency (COIN) with ease as a type of war. The Danish army, like others, got pulled into combat operations the Taleban and struggled to deliver even on soft missions (such as governance and development support). For the Danish combat experience in Afghanistan, see Kim Hundevadt, \textit{I morgen angriber vi igen} [Tomorrow we shall attack again] (Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 2010); Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Peter Dahl Thruelsen, ‘Clear, hold, train: Denmark’s military operations in Helmand 2006–2010’, in Nanna Hvidt and Hans Mouritzen, eds, \textit{Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook 2011} (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2011), pp. 78–105.

\textsuperscript{23} The ambition is outlined in the 2018–2023 defence agreement. The overview that follows is based on cited sources as well as various background interviews with army officers from the Danish Division, the army command and other ranks in the army, as well as the Ministry of Defence.
(4,000 troops). The full mobilization of this brigade will require advance notice of 180 days. The army’s second brigade is reserved for the training of conscripts and preparation of a light infantry battalion that will be on fairly short notice (to be determined, but likely to be under 30 days). The decline of COIN operations and rise of (preparations for) full-spectrum warfare close to home requires not only a new culture of command but also a delicate balancing act between army stakeholders. COIN operations favoured highly decentralized decision-making: in this respect, COIN was a company commander’s war. The shift to full-spectrum warfare entails the privileging of higher-level (battalion or brigade) headquarters. Together, these headquarters must prioritize and train the capacity to interpret the effects-based nomenclature that descends from higher up in the chain of command and translate it into concrete tasks for company commanders. Two challenges follow. From the bottom up, it is one of educating the officer cadre in conventional warfare, given that most officers have gained their training and experience in COIN campaigns. This amounts to a considerable retooling of the army’s intellectual capital. From the top down, it is one of genuinely investing in brigade and especially battalion command, and resisting the temptation to push command further up the chain to the strategic level.24

The sustained engagement of the Danish army in Iraq and Afghanistan was possible only because the neat division of labour between brigades 1 and 2 laid down in the 2005–2009 defence agreement was wiped away. A sustained engagement at battalion level required the continuous training of ‘teams’ and thus the arrangement of the full army organization into six battalion cadres that could carry out this training. The brigade footprint—in fact a ‘first in, first out’ vision that accompanied transformation in the early days of 2002–2003—is now back in favour. The 2018–2023 defence agreement explicitly builds on it: one brigade is standing and ready; another trains and props up. There is not much sustainability in this design, which for a while caused some

24 The Danish army has less experience than, say, the British army in pushing effects-based thinking down the chain of command, as one Danish officer explained to the authors. Lars Møller, formerly a prominent serving officer, now retired, agrees, writing in his memoirs that a deficit in intelligence-gathering and management skills in particular accounts for Danish shortcomings in respect of effects-based planning and command: Lars Reinhardt Møller, *Tak for turen* [Thanks for the ride] (Copenhagen: Lindhardt & Ringhof, e-book, 2014), pp. 923–4. The joint command reform of 2014 (see above) has reinforced political control at the strategic level of command and could become a source of strategic interference in brigade-level command.
The political priority now is to have one major shot in the barrel, namely the first brigade—in line with NATO requirements for complete and autonomous force contributions to regional defence and deterrence. Denmark does maintain a capacity for sustained army engagement in the form of battalion-sized task forces, whereby the units of the second brigade could be mobilized as follow-on forces to the three battalions of the first brigade. This option is built into the force structure, but it almost defies credibility in so far as it requires exceptional political foresight: the second brigade must be mobilized in parallel to the first brigade battalions, thus 18 months out. What all this amounts to is an army tasked with carrying out a transformative agenda while coping with major uncertainties in terms of culture and political emphasis. To these challenges one must add the quality of equipment: the army must acquire enough high-quality gear for brigade-sized operations, including enhancing its firepower (with CESAR artillery and Leopard 2 battle tanks, in particular). Worryingly, in today’s limited force, the army is struggling to maintain just 30 per cent of its current stock of battle tanks in readiness, which is below expectations and a barrier to proper training and education. Meanwhile, recruitment and retention challenges related to urbanization (army units tend to be located in the countryside), a competitive job market and chronic overtime work requirements within the force persist, and unexpectedly large numbers of junior officers, especially lance corporals and sergeants, have left the armed forces. In this context it is comforting to know that since 2001 the army has a track record of successfully pursuing major

25 When the 2014 agreement was in preparation the army chief, Gen. Rokos, protested at what he saw as political neglect of a major lesson of recent campaigns, namely the need for a sustainable expeditionary force. Vigorous debate followed; the end result for Gen. Rokos was a new posting in mid-2013 to MNC-NE in Poland, which was widely interpreted as a political slap-down.


28 See the report of the officers’ union, Hovedorganisationen af Officerer, *Forsvarsforlig i et officerperspektiv* [The defence agreement from the perspective of the officer] (Copenhagen, Sept 2017); also Camilla Schou Broholm and Cordelia Weber, ‘Danske soldater har fået nok’ [Danish soldiers have had enough], *BT*, 9 April 2017; Jesper Kongstad, ‘Forsvaret mangler 1000 mand’ [The Armed Forces are 1000 personnel short], *Jyllands-Posten*, 9 Sept. 2018.
change. The significant factor is the political context, which in the 1990s—on account of the uncertainty surrounding the Baltic—was ambiguous in respect of major reform, enabling the army to stick to its Cold War way of doing things. An inability to deliver force options for Kosovo, combined with NATO expectations for added expeditionary capacity, a domestic political desire to cut costs, and then from 2001 an American demand for contributions to a global counter-terrorist campaign, drove the political leadership and the army in the same direction of major change. The army sustained change through the war in Afghanistan, and today it is adapting to a force-on-force environment closer to home. However, at the political level there is once more ambiguity about how much the country is willing to pay for NATO solidarity. President Trump is recognized as posing a risk of abandonment, and so Denmark is increasing its defence budget; but the situation for the army is still one of high ambition and resource constraint, the cumulative effect of which could be detrimental to the army’s ability to undertake another round of major change as in the 2000s.

The navy
Well, Gentlemen, I have listened to the navy proposal and I intend to recommend to the minister of defence that he present a bill to parliament proposing the deployment of a corvette to the Persian Gulf. I would like to point out that if this fails, so be it; but it will then be several years before the navy again will be allowed to try its hand at operations far away from home. Should it succeed, however, we will have shown a new way to conduct Danish foreign policy.

Michael Christiansen, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence 1990.

As has been the case with the other two services, the navy’s transformation has been driven first and foremost by the same three major shifts in the strategic context – the end of the Cold War, 9/11 and the Crimea. Likewise, the shape and direction of the navy’s transformation have been shaped by the interplay of the constant political pressure to save money and do more with less, American and NATO demands, operational lessons, and the need to replace worn-out ships with new ones.

The end of the Cold War effectively pulled the rug from under the navy, creating a need for a new core mission. During the Cold War the principal mission was to deny the Soviet and Warsaw Pact

fleet in the Baltic Sea access to the North Sea through the Danish straits. Accordingly, the navy was made up of smaller ships and submarines designed to operate close to home in the shallow and confined waters of the Baltic Sea. Expected survival time for most surface ships in the event of major war with the Soviet Union was counted in hours, not days. This environment of overwhelming threat created an aversion to ‘large’ ships such as corvettes and frigates within the Social Democratic Party and Social Liberal Party, two centre-left parties whose support was necessary in order to maintain the broad support in parliament for Danish defence and security policy. Small was beautiful: it was cheap in terms of treasure and manpower and non-provocative vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Moreover, the 1982 Falklands War demonstrated the vulnerability of large ships to air and missile attack, and this lesson became the chief argument for scrapping the navy’s two frigates and not replacing them with new ones in 1988. The navy was therefore ill-prepared and ill-equipped when the Danish government unexpectedly decided to send a corvette to the Persian Gulf in August 1990 in order to participate in the UN naval embargo imposed in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Three years earlier the (Conservative) Danish Prime Minister Poul Schlüter had refused to send warships to the Gulf to protect Danish merchant ships from attacks during the so-called ‘tanker war’, arguing that the navy lacked the capacity to undertake such a mission. Deploying a corvette was indeed a formidable challenge for the navy. It required a week’s work round the clock to equip and rebuild the vessel for the mission, and its crew was trained to use a new anti-air defence system en route to the Gulf. The ship was accompanied by

---

30 The Danish navy also maintained a constant presence in the Arctic patrolling the waters around Greenland, but this was a sideshow to the main effort.


32 The chief of the navy supported the call for the mission in the media and drew up a plan for the deployment, but the government used a report from the naval materiel command, stating that the corvettes were not designed for operations in tropical waters, to defeat it. See Nørby et al., *Fra Kold Krig til internationale engagement* [From Cold War to international engagement], p. 153. In 1999 a NATO request for a submarine to support the Kosovo operation in the Adriatic was turned down for the same reason. The submarine deployed in the Persian Gulf in support of the US-led attack on Iraq had new air-conditioning and satellite communications installed prior to its deployment.
a Norwegian supply ship carrying 25,000 spare parts and the logistical support organization had to be built from scratch.\textsuperscript{33} The operation was successful and quickly followed by participation in NATO operations enforcing the UN naval embargo imposed against Yugoslavia in the Adriatic Sea from 1993 to 1996.\textsuperscript{34}

The increased navy involvement in international operations led to an accumulation of ‘lessons learned’ reports identifying a need for bigger ships with longer endurance, helicopters, air-conditioning for operations in tropical waters, oceangoing capability and greater interoperability with NATO partners.\textsuperscript{35} The navy leadership used these reports to recommend the building of the larger ships it had coveted since the ‘traumatic’ scrapping of its frigates. This service interest fitted hand in glove with the new American and NATO demands for contributions to out-of-area operations. The Danish Defence Commission of 1997 predicted in its white paper published the following year that the navy’s involvement in international operations would grow and be prioritized further. It therefore, in line with the navy’s own service interests, recommended the creation of a ‘blue sea’ navy with fewer but considerably larger and more flexible ships with greater endurance and armaments capable of undertaking a broad range of missions.\textsuperscript{36} This translated into a recommendation for replacing four minelayers, ten fast-attack crafts and three corvettes with two command/combat support ships and two patrol ships/frigates—6,300- and 6,600-tonne displacement respectively, and so more than twice the size of the 2,700-tonne displacement frigates scrapped in 1988.\textsuperscript{37} The white paper also recommended that the navy’s ageing submarines be

\textsuperscript{33} Nørby et al., \textit{Fra Kold Krig til internationale engagement} [From Cold War to international engagement], p. 153.


\textsuperscript{36} Defence Commission of 1997, \textit{Fremtidens forsvar} [The defence of the future], p. 44.

\textsuperscript{37} The classification of these ships as command support ships and patrol ships (not combat support ship and frigates, as they would later be labelled to facilitate international comparison with other navies), was a deliberate attempt to make them appear more defensive and hence acceptable to Jørgen Estrup, at that time parliamentary defence spokesman for the Social Liberal Party.
replaced by new ones. Finally, it recommended the establishment of a task force to manage the navy’s growing involvement in international operations.

Most political parties accepted the need for bigger ships, the establishment of the new international task force and an increased navy involvement in international operations, but the Social Liberal Party was sceptical. It saw no need for restructuring and resourcing all three services for international operations. In its view, the large-scale army reform to this end was sufficient, and it wanted the submarines scrapped now that the Soviet threat had disappeared. As a result of this disagreement, the future composition of the navy became a topic of heated political debate over the next five years, at a time when political decisions related to the replacement of more than half of the navy’s combat-capable units had to be made. In the course of the next two defence agreements (2000–2004 and 2005–2009), the navy leadership kept pushing for the implementation of the white paper’s recommendations, both in the public debate and in its recommendations to the defence command and the Ministry of Defence. In the end, a political compromise emerged in which the recommendations of the white paper were adopted—with one major exception: the submarines were given up. This concession to the Social Democratic Party and the Social Liberal Party proved necessary in order to obtain broad support for the 2005–2009 defence agreement. While the loss of the submarines was traumatic for (part of) the navy, the minister of defence Søren Gade (of the centre-right Liberal Party), advised by the navy representatives in the defence command, managed in their place to acquire an additional frigate, bringing the total to three—one up from the two initially recommended in the white paper.

The 2005–2009 defence agreement completed the navy’s transformation of the Cold War brown-water navy to the contemporary blue-water force. The focus since then has been on realizing its expeditionary potential—manning and equipping the ships, training crews and employing the vessels in various international operations, while streamlining the organization and saving money at the same time. Between 2008 and 2015, the navy was continuously involved in operations off the


Horn of Africa to combat piracy, and it led the maritime operations removing chemical weapons from Syria (2013–2014) and Libya (2016).

The current defence agreement (2018–2023) continues this process, procuring long-awaited area air defence missiles for the frigates as well as anti-submarine equipment.\footnote{Ministry of Defence, \textit{Defence Agreement 2018–2023}.} The rise of the Russian threat since 2014 has shifted the operational focus closer to home. The Baltic Sea and the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) gap have reappeared on NATO’s and hence the Danish navy’s radar screen, prompting the latter to adjust its training and operational patterns. Nonetheless, the navy retains its ambition to support Denmark’s NATO partners globally. A Danish frigate completed the first ever cooperative deployment with a US carrier group in 2017, another was carried out with a French carrier group in 2019 and a third is scheduled with the US navy for 2020.\footnote{Author’s interview with Danish naval officer, Gniben, 5 Sept. 2018.} The navy’s ability to realize these ambitions hinge on its ability to recruit and retain qualified personnel, however. Lack of personnel rendered the navy incapable of meeting its own training and operational standards in 2016–2017,\footnote{Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee, \textit{Forsvarets forudsætninger for at løse sine opgaver} [The Danish military's prerequisites for solving its tasks].} and it is an open question whether the navy will succeed in recruiting and retaining the personnel required to operate its ships at full capacity.

\textbf{The air force}

The Royal Danish Air Force is ‘no longer a garrison air force … Expeditionary operations are our raison d'être; if you cannot cope with that, you don't belong in the service’.

Major- General Leif Simonsen, Commander Tactical Air Command Denmark, 2002\footnote{Quoted in \textit{Jane’s Defence Weekly}, 12 Dec. 2002.}

While the air force’s transformation has been driven primarily by the same contextual factors as that of the army and navy, the process has been smoother than for the navy because political decision-makers never questioned the need for combat aircraft. It made life easy for the air force that their F-16s could be used for both national air policing and international operations. Unlike the navy, which had to invest in bigger ships, the air force merely had to keep its F-16s updated with the software and (smart) weapons necessary to make them interoperable with those of key NATO partners and
capable of performing the missions required of them. Historical circumstances and political resistance prevented the air force from getting involved in ‘hot’ international operations until 1999. In 1994, it was not allowed to help NATO to impose a no-fly zone over Bosnia. The air force was ready and able to deploy twelve F-16s and 100 personnel to southern Italy, but the Danish government turned down NATO’s request because Denmark was already making the largest per capita contributions to operations in the Balkans.44

Prior to 1999, then, the air force’s contribution to NATO operations was confined to air crews for NATO AWACS planes participating in the Balkan operations, pilots serving as forward air controllers in support of the army operation in Bosnia, and transport planes for humanitarian operations such as that conducted in Rwanda in 1994.45 The 1999 participation in NATO’s Operation Allied Force with eight F-16s was therefore the air force’s first international experience with manned aircraft in a hostile environment. It also marked its first ever use of force when laser-guided bombs were dropped on a variety of fixed Serbian targets towards the end of the campaign.46 The F-16s participating in Allied Force came from a squadron of twelve F-16s, which since 1996 had been ready for deployment as part of NATO’s new rapid reaction force. The defence white paper published in November 1998 as the Kosovo crisis unfolded recommended a further strengthening of the air force’s contribution to NATO’s rapid reaction forces through the establishment of a permanent staff focusing on international operations at the alliance’s Tactical Air Command. These recommendations were followed without much political discussion in the ensuing years, culminating in the reorganization of the air force into five wings as a result of the 2005–2009

46 Peter Viggo Jakobsen, ‘Denmark at war: turning point or business as usual?’, in Bertel Heurlin and Hans Mouritzen, eds, Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook 2000 (Copenhagen: Danish Institute of International Affairs, 2000), pp. 61–85.
defence agreement. The F-16s were made available to NATO’s rapid reaction forces for both defensive and offensive operations, and the logistical support system was improved. The two interacting factors driving this process were the political pressure for savings, leading to continuous reductions in the numbers of installations, staff and active aircraft, and operational pressures and lessons learned from NATO operations.

The air force’s transport squadron got its baptism of fire as a direct result of 9/11. In December 2001 one of its Hercules transport planes flew Danish special forces into the war zone in Afghanistan. The mission served as an eye-opener for the squadron, which had not previously operated in a hostile environment and as a consequence had embarked on the mission with a peacetime mindset, not knowing what to expect or to bring, and with inadequate liaison with the US forces operating in Afghanistan.47

The air force went to Afghanistan again the following year when six F-16s participated in Operation Enduring Freedom as part of a tri-national air wing of Danish, Dutch and Norwegian F-16s. This deployment was the product of enhanced cooperation between the European states in possession of F-16s, initiated after the Kosovo campaign in order to improve their capacity to make joint contributions to international operations, and was inspired by the joint contribution made to the Kosovo campaign by Belgium and the Netherlands.48 The lessons learned during this operation formed the basis for the establishment of the European Expeditionary Air Wing (EEAW) in 2004. The EEAW enables the participating countries (Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal) to man and run a force of up to 30 aircraft, and in cooperation with other countries to run an entire air base including support functions. The EEAW has since been used as a basis for making joint contributions available to NATO’s Response Force and for coordinating contributions to the Baltic Air Policing Mission that NATO has undertaken since 2004. The Danish air force was involved from the start and has made F-16s available for it on a regular basis.

The 2005–2009 defence agreement strengthened the international role of the air force further, resulting in a complete reorganization of its structure. Again, the principal driver was the political desire to make the armed forces simultaneously more affordable and more deployable in order to

meet US and NATO demands. While the number of F-16s available for international operations as part of NATO’s reaction forces was maintained at 16, the numbers of transport aircraft and helicopters, both light (Fennec) and medium (EH-101), were increased. The heightened international ambitions were underpinned by decisions, made in the previous defence agreement, to procure four C-130J Hercules transport planes to replace three old C-130H models and 14 EH-101 helicopters in place of eight Sikorsky S-61 search-and-rescue helicopters. The additional six EH-101s were intended as a new tactical lift capacity for the army.

These reforms reflected the air force’s organizational interest in building its future force around its three combat-capable manned platforms: combat aircraft, transport planes and transport helicopters. As noted above, the air force was reorganized into five wings performing both domestic and international tasks: a fighter wing (F-16s), an air transport wing (Hercules and Challenger), a helicopter wing (Fennec, EH-101 and Lynx ship-based), an air command wing (long-range and air surveillance radars) and a combat support wing (communications, medical support, and aerial port service).

The three defence agreements that followed kept this wing-based organization in place with some adjustments, while continuing the same trajectory towards a smaller force engaged in continuous expeditionary operations. These agreements saw the procurement of nine ship-based helicopters (MH-60R Seahawks) to replace eight Lynx by the end of 2018 and 22 JSF-35s to replace 30 F-16s by 2027. The 2018–2023 defence agreement equipped the Seahawks with sonars and torpedoes to counter the growing submarine threat from Russia, and added two additional crews in order to increase the operational capacity of the Hercules transport planes.

The expeditionary tempo remained high in the 2011–2018 period. The F-16s saw combat over Libya (2011), Iraq (2014–15) and Iraq/Syria (2016), and continued to contribute regularly to NATO air policing over the Baltic countries and Iceland. The Hercules transport planes have also been busy. They have been deployed to Mali (2013, 2014 and 2017), the Central African Republic (2014), Iraq (2014) and Iraq/Syria (2016 and 2018–19). The EH-101 helicopters have been on only one deployment, in Afghanistan (2014). Persistent technical problems have prevented them from fulfilling their intended role as transport for the army, and their future in the air force is now

49 A total of 27 JSF-35s were bought, but five will remain in the United States for training.

uncertain. They may be scrapped and replaced by other helicopters if their performance cannot be improved.  

Paradoxically, the procurement of the JSF-35 puts a question mark over the air force’s expeditionary future. The air force has already announced that it will be incapable of providing combat aircraft for international operations in 2022–2024 and will have only a limited capacity to do so in 2025–2026 while it makes the transition to the JSF-35. From 2027, the air force should have the same international capacity as it does today, with four JSF-35s plus a reserve aircraft available at short notice for operations lasting up to twelve months every three years.  

The air force has formerly met this requirement with a pool of 44 F-16s, of which 30 were kept operational. From 2027, the air force will have only 22 aircraft for both national and international operations and training. This does not leave a wide margin for technical problems, and some Danish air force officers doubt whether the air force will be capable of carrying out both national and international operations at the expected level with this number of aircraft. Another factor adding to the uncertainty is the personnel situation. Like the other two services, the air force is struggling to recruit and retain the personnel required—not least the mechanics—to keep its platforms in the air. Addressing this challenge successfully is a prerequisite for maintaining operations at the current level.

**Conclusion**

Over the past 30 years Denmark has become both a capable and a willing expeditionary ally. To an extent, the embrace of change has been continuous, beginning with some trepidation in the Balkans but then growing with enhanced confidence and culminating, from an operational perspective, in 2011, when the army was heavily engaged in Helmand’s green zone, the navy patrolled the waters off Somalia, and the air force played a key role in the NATO bombing mission over Libya.

---


53 Authors’ off-the-record interviews with several air force officers.
dropping 11 per cent of the NATO total (923 smart munitions).\(^5^4\) Change has continued beyond 2011, of course, and especially in reaction to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine beginning in 2014, which has set off a renewed engagement with force-on-force planning and reform in the services. Overall, the pattern has been a tepid start in the 1990s, an accelerated pace of change after 2001, a brief moment of pause in 2012–2013 and then a new round of reforms beginning in 2014.

Throughout this period, Danish defence has not sought military innovation. Rather, the political focus has been on maintaining NATO as a collective defence guarantee, and the services have been in charge of delivering force options fit for purpose. On the political level, resources allocated for military reform have not been generous—quite the contrary, indeed—but for as long as the services managed to reform within a diminishing budgetary framework and still delivered politically useful NATO options, civil–military relations were smooth and defence reforms were on track.

Some nuance is in order. The transformation from an in-place territorial defence force to a deployable and sustainable force did not happen smoothly. In particular, the 2005–2009 defence agreement, negotiated during 2003 and 2004, stands out as a turning-point of sorts. It was at this point that the army scrapped its concept of conscripted mobilization and committed itself fully to deployable capacities; the navy became a blue-water navy, as reflected in the decision to build two combat support ships and three frigates and to let go of the submarine force; and the air force fully focused its organization on specialized and deployable ‘wings’. The story is one of how the cumulative pressure from limited reform within constrained budgets, alongside growing NATO demands for out-of-area engagement, eventually sparked the political demand in Denmark for big change.

The pattern in Denmark whereby the politicians to a large extent delegate military reform to the individual services, as opposed to requiring them to come together in distinctively changed—joint—ways of operating, has meant that each of the services has had to navigate the tension between continuity and change in its own way. For the army, the 1990s offered an opportunity for continuity, as the ‘big army’—the conscripted army for collective defence—was in line with political interests. This coincidence of interests ran out around 2001, though conscription continued as a vehicle for recruitment for expeditionary operations. The expeditionary army represented

change, and though for a while it seemed that the high-end warrior ethos of brigade warfare was to prevail, it was in fact the company commander’s and the infantry’s army that prevailed in Afghanistan. Today, with the return to force-on-force planning, the army is navigating a shift back to brigade warfare. For the navy, there was a greater degree of civil–military tension early on, in so far as the force maintained an organizational liking for big ships to which the political centre-left was opposed. Operational lessons through the 1990s allowed the navy to promote its interests, however, and these began to come into alignment with political interests around the turn of the century. The navy suffered to some extent in letting go of its submarine arm, but today there are no major controversies related to its big-platform, blue-water emphasis, though this is being adapted for defence and deterrence against Russia. For the air force, the early civil–military relationship was similar to that of the navy, except that the air force’s out-of-area capacity was greater from the outset. Political interests took precedence, however, and the air force’s expeditionary turn happened more abruptly—with the Kosovo air war of 1999 and then from 2001 in Afghanistan. The political utility of a deployable and active air force was so strongly apparent that from this point it was a question of optimizing organization and capacities in a context of declining resources. More recently, with the planned shift to the JSF-35, the air force is experiencing the same crunch of high ambitions and limited resources as the other services, which today appears to be the defining source of disruption in the Danish turn to a defence posture based on planning for force-on-force warfare.

The political driver of Danish defence reform has throughout the period been this same paradoxical combination of priorities: high standing in NATO and low budgets. For the services it creates a challenging and at times disruptive planning framework: whenever the tension between ambition and resources becomes politically unsustainable, the services have been asked to change track. However, the one constant that this framework does offer is NATO as a source of military ideas, plans and policies, and of partners to learn from and to emulate. The navy is thus embedded in NATO’s Standing Maritime Groups—one of the few forces permanently available to the Alliance; the air force has become integrated into the EEAW; and the army’s engagement in ISAF and the NATO Response Force has served as the transformation engine that the people behind the DIB—the expeditionary branch—foresaw throughout the 1990s. The navy and the air force know which major platforms they will command in the future, whereas the army—as is typical, given the complexity of land warfare—is a composite force whose character is perhaps more dynamic. Yet for all three services it remains a given that they must operate in a NATO environment and that for
the foreseeable future collective defence tasks in the Baltic and in Europe more widely, and also in the Arctic, will be at front and centre of their planning. The rub remains the politically driven tension between commitments to NATO on the one hand and limited budgets on the other. The Danish defence budget is rising, modestly, and there are a lot of demands for these added resources—old platforms in need of repair, new platforms to be purchased, personnel who must be catered to for retention purposes, and work conditions that must be bettered for recruitment purposes. President Trump, and the associated fear of alliance abandonment, more than threats from Russia, seem to be driving this political impulse to reverse the budget decline. For the services, paradoxically, it means that the most prosperous conditions for reform are when the Danish house is (slightly) on fire. Were political comfort to return, so would service hardship.