

## ISSUE BRIEF

# The US-Danish Defense and Security Relationship: Keeping Up in a Changing World

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## Introduction

The global and European security environments have changed drastically in just a few years. The world is entering a new era of great power competition, which will play out alongside continued political instability and weakening states in key regions of the world. This has profound implications for the United States and its friends, allies, and partners including those in Europe. Bilateral US defense and security relationships must be examined and evolved in order to be relevant for a new era. One example of this is the US-Denmark defense and security relationship.

The US-Denmark defense and security relationship is both long-standing and remarkably deep, albeit perhaps not very well known or appreciated outside of narrow policy circles on both sides of the Atlantic. It has also proven flexible and capable of developing and adjusting with the changing security environment while taking into account the shifting security priorities of both Washington and Copenhagen. In the context of the radically changed security landscape in and around Europe, both in the north and the south, the US-Denmark relationship is once again on the cusp of evolution, which presents both challenges and opportunities for the two nations, inside and outside of the NATO context.

## The US-Denmark Defense and Security Relationship: From the Baltics to the Hindu Kush

Denmark's defense and security relationship with the United States has gone through a number of phases, which broadly mirror the security environment in Europe and globally. A brief summary follows to set the context for where the relationship can go next.

The Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and experts from Europe and North America to share insights, strengthen cooperation, and develop common approaches to key transatlantic security challenges.



A US Air Force F-15 Eagle breaks from a formation of Royal Danish Air Force and US fighters over Siauliai Air Base, a symbolic handover of the airspace as the Danes assume command. SIAULIAI AIR BASE, LITHUANIA January 08, 2018  
 Photo credit: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos\\_150515.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos_150515.htm?selectedLocale=en)

Denmark is a founding member of NATO and played a vital role on NATO's northern flank during the Cold War due to its geographical location, which made it both a NATO frontline state and in control of the vital outlet through the Danish straits from the Baltic Sea to the North Sea and beyond. As the Cold War receded, Denmark took on a proactive role in this region and beyond, which also led to new evolutions in the US-Denmark defense and security relationship.

In the 1990s, Denmark was an early supporter of the integration of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into the Euro-Atlantic community—the European Union (EU) and NATO in particular. In practical terms this resulted in, among other things, Danish support and assistance for Baltic defense reforms and modernization in order for the Baltic nations to be able to transition away from their Soviet legacy and prepare them for eventual NATO membership.<sup>1</sup> This work was done in close concert with the United States, which saw an opportunity to advance the vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace with the integration of the Baltic States into the transatlantic community.

Today the Baltic States are firmly integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures as full EU and NATO members, but this was far from a foregone conclusion as Denmark, the United States, and others began their work to help integrate the Baltic States into the European community in the 1990s. At that time, Russian forces and installations were still present in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and the Baltic States' future vis-à-vis Europe was uncertain. Indeed, it is an unsung success story of the transatlantic relationship in general, and US-

Danish, along with Baltic and Nordic, cooperation in particular.

As part of the United Nations and NATO, Denmark also worked closely with the United States and other allies to first manage and then end the civil wars that ravaged former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Danish forces served under UNPROFOR (the United Nations Protection Force), where they saw combat for the first time since World War II against Bosnian Serb units. After the Dayton Accords were signed in 1995 and the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia transitioned to NATO, Danish forces continued to serve in the region under US command. Later Danish F-16s joined the NATO air campaign against Serbia in 1999. Denmark also contributed ground forces to the peacekeeping force that was inserted into Kosovo after the end of the air campaign.

While common Danish and US efforts in the 1990s were focused on integration of Europe's east and crisis management in southeastern Europe, the relationship and common effort grew global in scale after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Denmark was an early contributor to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and later contributed forces to the expanded NATO mission ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) there. Denmark also joined Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and remained involved in Iraq with ground forces until 2007.

The US-Danish defense relationship in the decade following the September 11 attacks was dominated by intense operational cooperation that went beyond Iraq

<sup>1</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, Melissa Hention, Debra Roepke, and Daniel Whiteneck, *The Expansion of NATO into the Baltic Sea Region: Prague 2002 and Beyond*, Center for Strategic Studies, CNA Corporation, May, 2002, 25.



Royal Danish Army Sgt. 1st Class Martin, left, a primary shooting instructor, marks shot groups during a live-fire exercise at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq. October 26, 2015 Photo credit: <https://www.marines.mil/Photos/igphoto/2001311134/>

and Afghanistan. The Danish navy joined counter-piracy patrols off the Horn of Somalia, and the Danish air force flew among the first frequent combat sorties during Operation Active Endeavour over Libya in 2011. Denmark also played a leading role in the removal of chemical substances from Syria in 2014 and from Libya in 2016 by providing maritime assets for the operations.<sup>2</sup> In general, Danish contributions often came early and with no caveats. Danish contributions to coalition and allied operations were certainly noted in both Washington and Brussels and allowed Denmark opportunities to help shape the future of NATO and the transatlantic security relationship. NATO's comprehensive approach to stability and reconstruction operations is one example. This period also presented tough choices and challenges for Copenhagen as Denmark progressed into the era of expeditionary operations together with the United States and NATO. For example, Danish operations in southern Afghanistan were not without casualties, which, if compared to the overall number of soldiers deployed, ranked among the highest of any NATO nation.<sup>3</sup> Copenhagen also had to make tough choices about what capabilities to sustain and develop for expeditionary operations in a fiscally austere environment, and what platforms to give up to free up resources for capabilities development and

operations. During this period Denmark, for example, chose to give up its submarine force, in order to focus on more deployable naval assets.<sup>4</sup>

### The Emerging Security Environment and Denmark's Role

2014 turned out to be a watershed year for European security with the Russian annexation of Crimea. The Russian conflict with Ukraine, along with continued Russian assertiveness against the EU, NATO, and its neighbors has clearly established that Russia under Vladimir Putin is intent to alter the rules-based European security order in Russia's favor by using all elements of Russia's national power including armed force. In this context the Baltic Sea region and the wider Northern European neighborhood is a particular friction zone between NATO and Russia, as NATO's Baltic allies are, due to geography and their small size, particularly exposed to Russian aggression. The European and transatlantic security environment is further complicated by the turbulence around the Mediterranean rim. This has generated both massive refugee flows and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), with implications for both security across Europe and the future of the European project.

2 Danish Ministry of Defense, *The previous Danish effort in Syria (RECSYR)*, <http://www.fmn.dk/eng/allabout/Pages/The-previous-effort-in-Syria.aspx>.

3 Steve Coll, "Burden Sharing," *New Yorker*, March 11, 2010 (casualty rates as proportion of total population), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/steve-coll/burden-sharing>.

4 Timothy Choi, "In From the Cold: Danish Naval Transformation into the 21st Century," Presented to the International Political Science Association 24th World Congress, Poznan, Poland, July 23-28, 2016, [http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper\\_57797.pdf](http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper_57797.pdf).



Danish soldiers in a tank observe the front lines of the training area at Chinchilla, Spain during NATO exercise Trident Juncture 15. *Photo credit: <https://www.act.nato.int/trident-juncture-15>*

The growing competition between NATO and Russia about the future of the European security order, along with turbulence in the Middle East and North Africa, is likely to remain a feature of the global security landscape for some time to come. This has direct implications for Denmark and Danish defense and security policy. First, potential conflict is once again a real risk in Denmark's broader neighborhood, although Denmark is no longer a frontline state as NATO now also includes Poland and the Baltic States. However, while Denmark may no longer face a direct and immediate military threat, conflict in the broader region would have severe consequences for Denmark. As a small European state, Denmark is absolutely dependent on the European rules-based order, which is ultimately guaranteed by NATO and its Article 5. Second, while the era of intense and major expeditionary operations may be over it does not mean that Denmark can completely abandon readiness to take part in operations abroad due to the instability in the Middle East and Africa. Indeed, Denmark is a significant contributor to the counter-ISIS campaign, and recently deployed additional forces to Afghanistan as part of NATO's Resolute Support Mission. Furthermore, the current US administration wants to see a more pronounced role for NATO in counterterrorism efforts.<sup>5</sup>

NATO's posture in Northern Europe is already evolving in response to Russia's continued assertiveness and willingness to use force in Europe. It is based on a modest forward presence in the Baltic States and Poland with battalion-sized multinational enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) groups, put in place after NATO's Warsaw Summit in 2016. This is complemented with bolstered reinforcement arrangements including upgraded transportation infrastructure, pre-positioned equipment, and work to remove legal barriers to the free movement of allied military forces across European borders.<sup>6</sup> This effort is very much a work in progress and will likely take many more years until robust collective defense and deterrence in Northern Europe has been firmly established. Given its capabilities and geographic location, Denmark has an important role to play, both as a provider of ready forces and as a staging area for reinforcements to Europe's east. Denmark is already a contributor to the British-led eFP group in Estonia, and also led NATO's enhanced air policing mission over the Baltic States in early 2018.

## The Future of the US-Danish Defense and Security Relationship

5 Robin Emmott, "Facing Trump's demands, NATO to consider larger Iraq training mission," Reuters, Brussels, February 7, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-nato-iraq-exclusive/exclusive-facing-trumps-demands-nato-to-consider-larger-iraq-training-mission-idUSKBN1FR1BB>.

6 Daniel Cebul, "NATO needs EU to move 'chess pieces' across Europe," *Defense News*, Washington, June 14, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nato-priorities/2018/06/14/nato-needs-eu-to-move-chess-pieces-across-europe/>.



US Army Reserve and National Guard soldiers observe a medical evacuation procedure by a Danish medical team. This exchange involved US soldiers operating with their Danish military counterparts as part of the Military Reserve Exchange Program. *Photo Credit: Sgt. 1st Class Anthony L. Taylor*

Given the emerging security environment in Europe and globally, the US-Danish defense and security relationship finds itself in a new context and is in need to evolve further to be positioned to respond to the new challenges and advance commonly held interests. While there is work to be done, many of the building blocks to support this development are already in place.

The new Danish defense agreement, which sets out policy priorities and funding levels for Danish defense between 2018 and 2023, includes a 20 percent increase in Danish defense spending. This is a much-needed influx of resources for a military and defense establishment that has been heavily used over the last decade, and sends an important signal to Washington about burden-sharing. Danish defense spending was given an additional boost in early 2019, as a result of the continuing turbulent security environment, which will bring defense spending to 1.5% of GDP by 2023.<sup>7</sup> This was an extraordinary measure by the parties behind the defense agreement, and will provide additional resources for Danish defense. The agreement also reaffirms that NATO's defense investment pledge will be the basis for the next defense agreement thereby promising even further increases in defense

spending. In terms of capability improvements the defense agreement includes the establishment of a deployable combat brigade, investments in sea-based air defense as well as anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and efforts that will make it possible for Danish forces and infrastructure to support the reception of allied forces into Denmark and facilitate their flow forward to Eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> These elements are all highly relevant to the new security environment in and around the Baltic Sea region. In addition, Denmark recently made the decision to procure F-35s,<sup>9</sup> which opens up opportunities for close cooperation with not only the United States, but with other neighbors in Northern Europe, such as the United Kingdom (UK), Norway, the Netherlands, and Belgium—who are also recapitalizing their air power with fifth generation fighters.

Denmark's new Foreign and Security Policy Strategy, released in late 2018, also outlines a number of areas where the United States and Denmark share similar perspectives and goals. This includes the need to defend the international rules-based order against challenges from, among others, emerging and revanchist powers, harnessing emerging technologies for development, and responsible development in the Arctic.

7 Danish Ministry of Defense, Supplemental Agreement for the Danish Defense 2018-2023, January 2019, <https://fmn.dk/temaer/forsvarsforlig/Documents/danish-defence-agreement-2018-2023-SUPPLEMENTAL.pdf>.

8 Danish Ministry of Defense, Danish Defense Agreement 2018 - 2023, January, 2018, <http://www.fmn.dk/temaer/forsvarsforlig/Documents/danish-defence-agreement-2018-2023-pdf.pdf>.

9 Sydney J. Freedburg, Jr, "F-35 Wins Denmark Competition: Trounces Super Hornet, Eurofighter," *Breaking Defense*, May 12, 2016, <https://breakingdefense.com/2016/05/f-35-wins-denmark-competition-trounces-super-hornet-eurofighter/>.



A Danish F-16 Fighting Falcon flying over Siauliai Air Base , Lithuania Photo credit: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos\\_150515.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos_150515.htm?selectedLocale=en)

The United States is also increasingly engaged in Denmark's neighborhood, with rotational forces and participation in various exercises ranging from the Baltic States to Norway. The US European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), which has grown to over \$4 billion per year under the Trump administration, is also to a significant degree used to support a US presence, enhance infrastructure, and pre-position equipment in the broader Baltic Sea region. In addition to these practical measures, the US National Defense Strategy highlights the need to strengthen alliances, help build capabilities of allies and partners, and to take up operational patterns that are less predictable for an adversary.<sup>10</sup>

Considering the above developments in both Denmark and the US posture in Northern Europe, Copenhagen and Washington should consider the below ideas for further cooperation:

#### Baltic Sea-focused cooperation

Much of the initial response to the new insecurity in Northern Europe has been ground-focused, with NATO's eFP battalions, ground-centric exercises, and investments in ground systems across the region being a few examples. Denmark supports this focus through the development of a medium heavy brigade and together with Estonia and Latvia by establishing a Multinational Divisional Headquarters that will provide much needed command and control capacity for the

Northern Baltic region. The United States should consider linking up to this organization.

However, the air and maritime domains are important, too in order to provide effective collective defense and deterrence in the region. Many of the investments that are part of the new Danish defense agreement, such as sea-based air defense and anti-submarine warfare capabilities, contribute to filling key capabilities gaps in the Baltic Sea region. The United States could help the development of these capabilities along with exercises together with Danish and other regional naval forces. This would prove beneficial to US forces too, as they have only spent limited time in the confined and operationally challenging waters of the Baltic Sea.

Maritime cooperation could also be advanced by the staging of a US naval vessel, such as a Littoral Combat Ship, in a Danish port on a rotational basis. This ship could then move around the Baltic Sea region during its deployment to also train with other allies and partners.

#### Providing options for US staging and reinforcements

The deterrence and defense construct currently being built by both NATO and the United States for Northern Europe relies on quick and effective reinforcements. One way to bolster NATO's and the United States' ability to reinforce the region is to multiply the options available in terms of ports, airports, staging areas, and

<sup>10</sup> US Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, Washington, D.C., 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

other types of infrastructure. Denmark's location is in many ways ideal as a forward-staging area for allied forces flowing into the region; close enough to be operationally relevant, but outside of the range of Russian long-range strike systems in the Kaliningrad enclave and elsewhere. To support this, the United States should consider using funding from future iterations of EDI to expand and upgrade relevant infrastructure in Denmark.

### The North Atlantic and Arctic dimension

Along with the Baltic Sea region, the North Atlantic is reemerging as a strategic space that is vital for the reinforcement of Europe. NATO has begun to respond to this fact, with the recent announcement of a new Joint Force Command-Atlantic (to be headquartered in Norfolk, Virginia) and increasing calls within NATO about the need for a revised Alliance Maritime Strategy. The United States is increasingly active in this space too, with the reactivation of the US 2nd Fleet, and the rotational presence of maritime patrol aircraft in Iceland.

Denmark has a role to play in this space, too given its geographical location between the Baltic Sea and the outlets to the North Atlantic. Furthermore, The Kingdom of Denmark is a European Arctic nation by virtue of Greenland being a constituent part of the Kingdom. Geographically, Greenland is an extension of the North American continent and the Thule Air Base in Northern Greenland including the early warning radar and satellite tracking station plays a vital role in the US homeland defense.<sup>11</sup>

While having a shared interest in maintaining low tension in the region, Denmark has put more emphasis on the Arctic and somewhat increased its presence in the region. The United States has also indicated its interest in enhancing US military operational flexibility and situational awareness in the region. It has done so in a statement of intent on new defense investments in Greenland. The investments will be tied to the development of the airport infrastructure in Greenland. With these developments under way, Washington and Copenhagen should continue to explore appropriate roles for Denmark, in concert with the UK, Norway, Iceland, and Canada in the emerging new Alliance posture in the North Atlantic.

Beyond pure defense requirements, the North Atlantic is also evolving as a geopolitical space due to climate change which, along with its environmental impacts, opens up opportunities for resource extraction and new transportation routes. This is drawing the interest of global powers including China to the far North Atlantic, including to the territory of the Danish Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Washington and Copenhagen should make this development part of its ongoing dialogue, in order to explore how this impacts commonly held security interests.

### Further Developing NATO's Southern Agenda

NATO currently struggles with developing a coherent approach to the challenges to NATO's east and south, which are fundamentally very different in nature. NATO's northern and eastern members prioritize the challenge coming from Russia, while NATO's southern members are understandably more focused on the immediate threats and challenges around the Mediterranean's southern rim. In this context, Denmark brings a unique perspective as a northern NATO member that seeks to develop strategies, approaches, and capabilities to respond to both problem sets. There is thus an opportunity for intensified US-Danish dialogue on how to develop NATO's role in Europe's south, alongside the other allies.

### Conclusion

The US-Danish defense and security relationship has proven itself remarkably flexible and effective throughout the post-Cold War era. With Northern Europe as one of the focal points for the strategic competition between Russia and NATO, it is time for the bilateral relationship to develop further in order to strengthen collective defense and deterrence and to ensure that the link between Copenhagen and Washington remains strong. This effort will not be without its challenges, as it requires political will, resources, and creativity from both sides. The relationship is, however, more important than ever in this era of great power competition.

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<sup>11</sup> 821st Air base Group, Peterson Air Force Base, USAF.mil, <https://www.peterson.af.mil/Units/821st-Air-Base-Group/>.

<sup>12</sup> Aaron Mehta, "How a Potential Chinese Built Airport in Greenland Could Be Risky for a Vital US Air Force Base," *Defense News*, September 7, 2018.



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