



Denmark's Limited Support for UN Peacekeeping is Here to Stay

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During the Cold War, Denmark was a staunch supporter of UN peacekeeping. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, Denmark gradually turned its back on peacekeeping. More recently, Denmark has given priority to NATO- and US-led operations. This shift was driven by a number of interweaving factors.

***Author's Note:** This post is based on a journal article which first appeared in [International Peacekeeping](#) in 2016.*

In its 2015 input to the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) chaired by Ramos-Horta, Denmark characterized itself as ‘a dedicated and engaged contributor to United Nations (UN) Peace Operations’. It also stated that ‘UN peace operation activities remain a central pillar of Denmark’s foreign and security policy’, and that Denmark since 1948 has provided more than 84,000 soldiers and staff members to more than 30 UN peacekeeping operations. The input to HIPPO did not mention that since 2001 Denmark has primarily made symbolic contributions of some 40-60 military observers, staff officers and advisors to UN operations, or that Denmark since 1995 has prioritized military operations led by other actors, notably the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States (US).

Two drivers have shaped Denmark’s evolving support for UN-led blue helmet peace operations since the beginning: a national interest in preserving Denmark’s security and welfare and an altruistic desire to do good. The mutually reinforcing interaction between interests and altruism meant that

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peacekeeping became internalized into Denmark's foreign policy identity. As a result, a third driver materialized by the late 1950s: an identity-driven urge to contribute to peacekeeping because it was the 'natural' thing, which constituted a source of national pride and made Danish policy makers feel good.

When these three drivers "clicked" and reinforced one another, support for UN peace operations was strong and internalized as a major component of Danish foreign policy. When they stopped doing that, support for UN peacekeeping fell dramatically. This is the situation now, and it seems unlikely to change in the near future.

Denmark's history of peacekeeping during and after the Cold War

Image credit: Danish Government.

Denmark began supporting UN peacekeeping during the Cold War because it allowed Danish decision makers to promote their interests and values at the same time. UN peacekeeping was regarded as good for national security because it lowered international tension and provided a way of supporting Denmark's key NATO allies without angering the Soviet Union. UN peacekeeping was also good for Danish values as it supported Denmark's vision of a rule-based international society characterized by peaceful conflict resolution. The successful peacekeeping operation launched in 1956 in order to defuse the Suez crisis strengthened Denmark's support for peacekeeping.

The praise earned for the participation in this mission made Danish decision-makers realize that UN peacekeeping also provided an effective way of enhancing Denmark's international prestige and influence. By the late 1950s peacekeeping had been internalized as part of Denmark's foreign policy

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identity. Danish governments now portrayed UN peacekeeping as something 'natural' that Denmark should be proud to support. In 1964, Danish Foreign Minister Per Haekkerup even stated that it was a 'duty' for small nations like Denmark to support UN peacekeeping. This was not mere rhetoric. A feeling that one could not turn down a UN request thus influenced the 1964-decision to provide 1,000 personnel for a new UN peacekeeping operation on Cyprus.

This mutually reinforcing interaction between interests, values and identity meant that Danish support for UN peacekeeping operations became routine. The absence of operational setbacks and casualties allowed this routine to produce a steady supply of Danish peacekeepers for the remainder of the Cold War. 34,100 Danish soldiers served on UN operations in the 1948-1989 period. Denmark had an average of 811 soldiers continuously deployed abroad and contributed eight percent of the total number of UN peacekeepers (419,100) during this period, making it one of the largest UN troop contributors per capita.

The operational difficulties that the UN encountered in the Balkans in the early 1990s broke this routine. They served as an external shock undermining Denmark's positive perception of UN peace operations. NATO's successful bombing campaign and subsequent takeover of the UN operation in Bosnia in 1995 made the UN less attractive from an interest perspective. Denmark had always used UN peacekeeping as a way supporting its great power allies in NATO, and when they chose to abandon the UN in favour of NATO, Denmark followed suit.

The strategic failure of the UN operation in Bosnia, culminating in the Srebrenica massacre, also gave rise to the perception in Denmark that UN peacekeeping was ill-suited for 'doing good' in the post-Cold War era. The

tactical success enjoyed by the Danish tank squadron in Bosnia in 1994 reinforced this perception. One engagement (Operation Hooligan Buster) made international headlines. On 29 April 1994, the Danish tanks successfully fought their way out of a Serb ambush firing their 105 mm canons 72 times. They also blew up an ammunition depot killing an estimated 150 Serb soldiers. This skirmish became a watershed. Denmark's great power allies showered Denmark with praise, and the Danish use of tanks influenced NATO's and UN approaches to 'robust peacekeeping'. The charismatic Danish tank commander, Lars R. Møller, became a national hero, and Danish decision makers became convinced that peacekeeping was best conducted with combat capable units; a perception subsequently reinforced by NATO's successful enforcement missions in the Balkans.

Operation Hooligan Buster set in motion a process that in the course of the next two decades transformed Denmark's foreign policy identity. The Danish peacekeeper, hailed for his ability to keep the peace without firing his weapon, was replaced by a new hero: the Danish warrior who made a difference on the battlefield. After Operation Hooligan Buster Danish politicians displayed far greater willingness to use force beyond self-defence. Denmark made large army contributions to NATO's enforcement operations in the Balkans, advocated military intervention in Albania as OSCE chairman in 1997, and allowed Danish fighter aircraft to conduct strike missions during NATO's Kosovo War in 1999. Public support for the Kosovo war was higher in Denmark than anywhere else, and a large majority favoured contributing to a land war in case the air campaign failed. The strong public support for the war took Danish decision makers by surprise. Danish Minister of Defence Hans Haekkerup interpreted it as 'a breakthrough in the history of Denmark' and as proof that the Danish foreign policy identity had changed.

Denmark and the War on Terror

The US-led war on terror launched in response to the September 11 attacks in 2001 reinforced the Danish preference for NATO- and US-led operations and the emerging warrior identity. Denmark provided forces for the US-led wars against the Taleban and Iraq as well as the subsequent stabilization missions. The lion's share of the approximately 20,000 Danish military personnel serving on international missions in the decade following 9/11 served in these two missions.

The Danish participation in the NATO and US missions in Afghanistan proved very costly. Denmark lost more soldiers in Afghanistan (43) than on all other international missions conducted by the Danish armed forces since World War Two, and a 20 billion DDK price tag (2001-2017) made it the most expensive international operation ever conducted by Denmark.

Surprisingly, the high costs and the less than satisfactory outcome of the Afghanistan war did not undermine domestic support for the mission. By 2011 when all 43 fatalities had occurred and it was clear that the mission would not succeed, 46% of the Danish population and a large majority in parliament continued to support it.

The predominant understandings of Danish interests, altruism and foreign policy identity explain why. The government narrative portrayed the war as being in Denmark's interest because it supported the United States and NATO and reduced the risk of terror attacks on Danish soil. The narrative also emphasized that the operation enhanced Denmark's standing and influence in NATO and in Washington. The mission was portrayed as the right thing to do in altruistic terms, because it helped the Afghan people and in particular the

Afghan women. Finally, the war reinforced the warrior ethos in the armed forces and their martial prowess, highlighted in a series of bestselling books, was a source of considerable national pride.

Conclusion

The current high level of Danish support for NATO- and US-led operations is driven by a mutually reinforcing combination of interest, altruism and identity that resembles the one that underpinned Denmark's strong support for UN peace operations during the Cold War. An interest in supporting Denmark's great power allies was an important driver then and now. A major Danish return to UN peace operations NATO has enhanced its military presence in Eastern Europe significantly since then, and it is currently asking Denmark to make a greater army commitment to deter Russia in Eastern Europe than it ever made in Afghanistan. This makes it impossible for Denmark to contribute to UN-led operations with anything but small personnel contributions officers and critical enables. In sum, all indications are that Denmark's military support for UN peacekeeping will remain at the low level that has characterized it since 2001.

Image credit: Danish Government.

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