

BRIEF

DENMARK'S CSDP U-TURN

EU DEFENCE AFTER UKRAINE
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Russia's war in Ukraine has prompted significant and surprising changes in the security policies of several northern European nations, most notably Finland and Sweden's decisions to apply for NATO membership and Germany's *Zeitenwende*. Denmark's June 2022 foreign policy U-turn, which removed its opt-out from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), was equally unexpected. While perhaps less consequential than the decisions of its Nordic neighbours, Denmark's move will bring greater strategic coherence to the Nordic-Baltic region and strengthen the identity of the EU as a political actor. Domestically, it will remove a deep contradiction in Danish foreign policy.

In a 1992 referendum, the Danish electorate rejected the Maastricht Treaty by a margin of just 46 000 votes.¹ The Danish government negotiated a compromise with its European partners allowing the Danes to ratify, in 1993, a modified treaty containing four 'opt-outs' – policy domains that would usually be within the competences of the EU but were reserved for the national level. Denmark thus declined to participate in EU policies related to justice and police, citizenship, the adoption of the euro (Denmark still uses the Danish krone), and security and defence.

The Danes have regarded European defence, often seen as a French-German project, with suspicion

The opt-out is not from EU defence as a whole and over the years, as the Union's defence dimension has grown, Denmark has interpreted it with varying degrees of flexibility. For example, Denmark can participate in the European Defence Fund as its legal basis is industrial policy and not the CSDP.² It has also continued to participate in the EU's Common Foreign and

Security Policy, taking part in civilian aspects of EU crisis management. However, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the government proposed that the opt-out should end, a proposal that was approved by 67 percent of voters on 1 June 2022.³

EUROSCEPTICISM AND
SUPER ATLANTICISM

The history of Denmark, formerly a major power in the Nordic-Baltic region, includes several episodes in which national territory has been lost. Following the Congress of Vienna, Denmark lost Norway to Sweden. In 1864, after its defeat in the Second Schleswig War, it lost the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein to Prussia. It remained neutral during the First World War, but in the Second World War it was invaded by Nazi Germany. This history has helped shape a distrust of larger European powers like Germany and France (even while Germany remains Denmark's most important ally in Europe). In modern times, the Danes have regarded European defence, often seen as a French-German project, with suspicion. Moreover, the Danes have sometimes thought of the CSDP as the beginning of a European army, and thus a threat to Danish military autonomy.⁴ More broadly, Denmark has not favoured the creation of strong political bonds between the European nations preferring, like the UK, to conceive of the EU as an economic organisation and a large market.

On the other hand, Denmark has looked very positively on cooperation with the US; indeed, its enthusiasm for this relationship has been characterised as 'super Atlanticism'.⁵ Denmark

not only diplomatically supported the war against Iraq in 2003 (as did most European allies) but participated with its own military until 2007.⁶ There is close Danish-US cooperation in Greenland (illustrated in the popular Netflix show 'Borgen') where the Thule airbase hosted strategic bombers during the Cold War and continues to host a US early warning radar. Strengthening this relationship is among the main goals of Danish foreign policy, and in March this year, a new US-Danish defence cooperation agreement was signed that might break decades of policy to allow foreign (US) troops and equipment to be stationed on Danish soil.⁷ Denmark, in common with most European states, regards the US as the main guarantor of the continent's security and fears that European defence could undermine the transatlantic bond.

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A FOREIGN POLICY CONTRADICTION

Euroscepticism and super Atlanticism were both clearly influential in the 1993 Danish decision to opt out of the CSDP. But according to Danish strategist Henrik Larsen, Denmark's non-participation in the CSDP created a contradiction in Danish foreign policy.⁸ In navigating foreign affairs, small states may broadly pursue strategies of influence or strategies of autonomy. Influence entails representation in as many international fora as possible – the UN, the EU, NATO and so on – and acting in these fora as well as bilaterally to influence the policies of larger states. But pursuing influence can also lead to loss of sovereignty, such as that related to competition or monetary policy that EU members cede to supranational institutions. Autonomy, on the other hand, entails preserving as much sovereignty as possible. Since World War II, Denmark has essentially pursued a strategy of influence, building close bonds with major players such as the US and working in international organisations. However, it has also tried to keep parts of its sovereignty untouched, for example by refusing to join the single currency and opting out of the CSDP. But this two-strand approach is self-contradictory: to be influential in the EU or in NATO requires the pooling of

sovereignty. Refusing to do so while pursuing a strategy of influence may be quite inefficient.

A 2020 Danish study made clear that in the context of European defence cooperation the defence opt-out “makes it difficult for Danish diplomats to influence specific political initiatives”. It also found that the adverse consequences (for Denmark) of the opt-out had grown as other EU Member States increased defence cooperation and were likely to grow further if current trends continued. Denmark was viewed as an unattractive cooperation partner and spent significant time and resources evaluating what new EU defence initiatives were included in the opt-out, rather than considering the substantive policy questions they raised.⁹ Denmark's reputation as an awkward partner grew when, following the UK's Brexit referendum, it became the Member State with the highest number of stand-alone arrangements.¹⁰

The opt-out has, indeed, undermined Denmark's credibility with partners, triggering several absurd situations. For example, Denmark participated militarily in NATO's peace support missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, IFOR and SFOR. But when, in 2004, this responsibility was transferred to EU command as operation EUFOR Althea, the Danish contingent had to withdraw. One year before, Denmark had faced a similar situation in the then former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia when NATO's Allied Harmony mission became EUFOR Concordia. Even so, the Danish government has been willing to be more involved in European defence, including by participating in European, if not EU, operations. For example, it was ready to send soldiers to Mali as part of task force Takuba, a multinational force of French, Estonian, Swedish, and Czech soldiers. This was legally possible as Takuba was a cooperative effort of like-minded European countries, not part of the CSDP.¹¹

The government may also have been motivated to abolish the opt-out by the increasing industrial opportunities offered by EU defence cooperation, in particular those related to the initiatives launched in the wave of enthusiasm that followed the publication of the 2016 EU Global Strategy.¹² While Denmark's defence industry sector is small, it includes some prominent corporations, especially in the aerospace and sensor domains (42% of Danish defence industry sales are in

aerospace) such as Weibel Scientific which builds high-technology radar, and the aerospace business Terma.¹³ The opt-out, however, prevented Denmark from participating in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), introduced by the Lisbon Treaty and implemented in 2017. PESCO now includes a raft of projects aimed at improving the capabilities of the European armed forces, several of which might be interesting for Danish industry.¹⁴

OPTING BACK IN

The war in Ukraine was a wake-up call, triggering concern in most European countries about military underinvestment. For the Danish government, it provided an opportunity to push for a change in the service of foreign policy efficiency that may not otherwise have been acceptable to its population.

The 'yes' campaign drew heavily on the shock of the war in Ukraine

The 'no' campaign was based on traditional arguments about sovereignty and the threat that EU defence is said to pose to NATO. Against this, the fact that Mette Frederiksen is known as perhaps the most anti-EU prime minister in Danish history may have helped to secure the end of the opt-out – she was able to convince the Danes that there was no concealed federalist plan behind the CSDP.¹⁵ The 'yes' campaign, however, drew heavily on the shock of the war in Ukraine.¹⁶ The referendum, launched on the basis of an agreement between most of the political parties, was called just two weeks after Russia's invasion. Welcoming the result, Mette Frederiksen underlined the connection with the war, stating, *"When there is war again on our Continent, then you cannot be neutral. Tonight, Denmark has sent a very, very important signal to Putin and to our allies."*¹⁷ The broad consensus that the war would have a fundamental impact on European (and Danish) security was also reflected in other clauses of the inter-party agreement that will see defence spending increase (to 2% of GDP by 2033) and efforts to remove Denmark's dependency on Russian gas.

Germany's *Zeitenwende* is also likely to have been influential – Denmark would no longer be able to hide behind Germany's reticence on defence.¹⁸ Further, European states, including Denmark,

have become less trustful of US willingness to ensure Europe's security, especially after the uncertainties raised by the Trump presidency about the usefulness of NATO. There is concern over the prospect of a return of Trump or the election of a similar 'MAGA' Republican in 2024. A recent survey shows that even the super Atlanticist Danes are less confident in the US, with just 10% thinking that the US will always protect Europe, according to a 2021 survey (15% in 2019).¹⁹

OUTCOMES

Alongside Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, Denmark's opting into the CDSP will bring a new coherence to the security architecture of the Baltic region – there will be a total overlap of NATO and EU membership, bringing important security benefits.²⁰ This new configuration may also encourage greater defence cooperation and interoperability, for example in the frameworks of PESCO and the Nordic EU Battlegroup (or whatever military formations may follow in the light of the recent Strategic Compass commitment to create a Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5 000 troops).²¹ Furthermore, Denmark's responsibilities towards the Faroe Islands and Greenland also make it a key player in the wider north and Arctic, regions likely to grow in prominence as global heating opens new transportation routes. Both NATO and the EU (if not the CSDP) have interests in these regions.

On the other hand, cooperation already exists between Denmark and the other Nordic countries (Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) through the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) and Denmark is already committed to Baltic and Nordic security through other frameworks, notably NATO, which remains the main security and defence actor in northern Europe (Danish soldiers regularly participate in NATO's enhanced forward presence in Estonia).²² The CSDP's contribution to regional security will almost certainly remain decidedly secondary. Beyond the implications for Denmark itself, the impact of Denmark joining the CSDP will thus be quite limited. In terms of practical activities, such as defence planning and capability building through exercising, Finland and Sweden's decisions to join NATO will have far greater impact in the region.

Furthermore, Danish investment in the CSDP will likely be at a low level. As Kenneth Waltz reminds us, foreign policy continuities often dominate over long time periods.²³ Denmark has never been an enthusiastically pro-European country. It entered the European Economic Community for economic opportunity rather than ideology. It has opt-outs from EU policies that referenda – on the euro in 2000 and justice and home affairs in 2015 – have been unable to remove.²⁴ Denmark will not become a driving force behind the CSDP, but it could become a more confident security policy actor in the EU. No longer the ‘awkward partner’, it has a chance to contribute

to the shaping of the CSDP and would most likely do so in directions close to those favoured by the three Baltic states, who broadly share Denmark’s scepticism about the EU’s defence dimension.

Above all, however, the decision of the Danish people is important in its symbology. That one of the most Eurosceptic countries should choose to deepen its ties with the EU institutions at a time when the EU is exercising greater geopolitical awareness shows potential adversaries the value that European nations attach to unity and coherence.

ENDNOTES

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