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The Danish Navy from 1990 to 2014: From the Baltic to the High Seas

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the changes the Danish Navy has undergone since the end of the Cold War in 1989. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the clear and present danger against Denmark disappeared. This made it possible for the Danish government to change its foreign policy from a defensive one to one more active. One of the tools the government used in the new policy was the Danish military. In September 1990, the Danish corvette *Olfert Fischer* was dispatched to participate in the UN embargo against Iraq, and this successful mission was soon followed by other international missions, e.g. in the Adriatic against the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (1993-1996) and again in the Persian Gulf against Iraq in 2003. Meanwhile, the increasing tasks meant that a number of ships built during the Cold War and tailored for the defense of the Danish waters against the Warsaw Pact, were obsolete and scrapped. The Danish Navy today no longer employs mine layers, torpedo boats, or submarines. A new class of Flexible Support Ships and multipurpose frigates are instead showing the Danish flag far from Denmark -- from the Arctic to the shore of Somalia and beyond. This paper will describe the changes in the Danish Navy and try to explain the political decisions that lay behind the changes.

Few events in the recent history of Denmark have had a greater impact on Danish defense policy and practice than the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. With the fall of the Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1991, the military threat against Denmark, which for 50 years had locked the Danish Navy in a defensive strategy centered on the defense of the western part of the Baltic Sea, disappeared.

This paper is an examination of how this changed the Navy and its role in Danish foreign policy is. It is, in many respects, the story of a navy that has returned to its roots and gone back to the same tasks that it worked to solve when it was founded in

early 16th century. When the Berlin Wall fell, the Danish Navy was at the height of its combat power during the 20th century. It contained almost 50 ships, ranging from frigates¹ to submarines. The Danish Navy was a multi-faceted fleet, capable of meeting almost any threat against Denmark and NATO interests in the Baltic area. The Cold War navy was, however, built with one objective in mind: the defense of the western part of the Baltic from an attack from a numerical superior enemy in the form of the Warsaw Pact, or more precisely the Soviet, Polish, and East German navies. In 1989, the Danish Navy then had in its fleet a number of ships that were tailor-made for operations in the Baltic against an enemy that was no more.

The changing political landscape did not, however make the Danish Navy redundant. On the contrary, the Danish Navy has today become an important tool in the government's foreign policy "toolbox." This all began in August 1990 when the Danish Parliament decided to place the corvette *Olfert Fischer* at the disposal of the U.S.-led UN operation against Iraq after its occupation of Kuwait. It was the first time since 1864 that a Danish naval vessel was at war.

For the Navy the deployment of the *Olfert Fischer* was a huge challenge. Like most of the other Danish naval vessels at that time, the corvette was built for a short and violent war in the Baltic, but was now to be part of a multinational operation thousands of miles from home waters and the domestic support structure. But thanks to a great effort from all parts of the Danish fleet as well as the Norwegian Navy, which made the (frigate) Coast Guard vessel *Andenes* available as a support ship for *Olfert Fischer*, the corvette managed to carry out its duties. The 368 day deployment was so successful that it paved the way for the Navy's new role in Danish foreign and security policy.

During the following years the three Danish corvettes participated both in the yearly deployments with the NATO Standing Naval Force Atlantic (STANAVFORLANT), including the embargo against the warring parties in the civil war in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, where the three corvettes were deployed almost continuously from 1993 until 1996.

A Tool in the Toolbox

The local and global security environment after the fall of the Berlin Wall provided the Danish government and the Danish Armed Forces possibilities that they had not experienced since the early 1700s.

The elimination of the threat against Denmark did, however, change the basic conditions of Danish defense. During the Cold War, the defense policy had ensured Denmark's survival as a state. But after the end of the Cold War the armed forces increasingly became just another tool in the foreign and security "toolbox" of the Danish governments.

After the Cold War, Denmark had to reconsider how to restructure and employ its armed forces. All this was in a political framework where there, on the one hand, were seen new opportunities and demands set by new conflicts around the world, coupled

¹ Mothballed in 1988 and decommissioned in 1990.

with an increasing political appetite to employ an activist foreign and security policy - and on the other hand, where there also was a call to use the end of the Cold War as a peace dividend, and where the defense now had to compete for budget resources in line with the health sector, the country's schools, etc.

The defense policy thus became a political tool, a development which is highlighted by the fact that Denmark since 1990 has had three defense commissions, tasked with looking into how the Danish defense was to be organized to optimally suit the Danish politicians' use of it. The basic idea behind the activist foreign policy is that Denmark is affected by the globalized world around it, and if the Danish government wanted to maintain peace and stability in Europe, then it would be necessary to intervene in conflicts far from what during the Cold War was called Denmark's neighboring area. In terms of the Navy, there is also the aspect that about 10 percent of the world's merchant shipping tonnage is carried by Danish-flagged or Danish-owned ships and potential security problems such as piracy have a direct impact on the Danish economy, despite the fact that it takes place thousands of miles away.

A New and Much Smaller Navy

In 1995, the Danish Parliament allocated almost 11 billion Danish kroner to the annual defense budget. A significant part of it was earmarked to purchase new equipment, and it was the largest Danish military equipment investment since 1960. The Danish Army received the bulk of the money, but there was also money for new equipment for the navy and air force.

The Defense Agreement of 1995 marked the first major step away from Cold War defense and towards a more internationally-oriented Danish defense. In 1998, the first Defense Commission set up after the fall of the Berlin Wall concluded that "[t]he Commission believes that Denmark enjoys a geostrategic position with an almost unprecedented security. The Commission also believes that during the next 10 years no direct conventional military threat to Denmark's security will emerge."

This finding paved the way for the Defense Agreement for 2000-2004 (in Denmark almost all Defense Agreements are made for four-year periods). The Defense Agreement contained both funding for a number of new ships -- large units designed for global deployment -- and at the same time a large number of older units, not suitable for the new tasks, were scrapped. Since 2000, the Navy has decommissioned three corvettes, one ocean patrol vessel, ten fast attack craft, five submarines, two small oilers, six minelayers, 13 "FLEX" multi-purpose units, and ten cutters. Meanwhile, its personnel strength decreased from about 5,600 personnel in 1986 to approximately 4,000 today.

Central to the transformation of the Danish Navy is the so-called FLEX concept that was developed by the Danish Navy in the 1980es. At the end of the eighties, the Navy was to phase out 22 units, and it was clear that they could not get the funding for an equivalent number of new units. Faced with this situation, the Navy had to think "outside the box," and enterprising people got the idea that one could use a standard hull and superstructure, but with modular weapon systems that could quickly be replaced. Thereby, the units could quickly change roles -- for example, a unit of the Standard Flex-class could change from missile unit to mine hunter. By using this new

and innovative FLEX-system, just 14 new units could replace 22 units and the Navy - at least on paper -- maintained the same combat potential as before.

At the end of the 1990s, the Danish Navy was in the middle of a slow but fundamental change from a small defensive-oriented force, which after having had its eyes fixed on the Baltic for almost 50 years, now found itself employed in operations on the high seas far from home. But the Navy's inventory still did not include larger units tailored for the new role.

Fighting Alongside the United States

The slow pace with which the changes were implemented accelerated after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. The Danish government immediately chose to actively support the U.S. fight against terrorism, and among other items made Danish naval vessels available to the NATO operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean. Once again it was one of the three corvettes that was dispatched, but it was soon to be followed by first, one of the small Danish coastal submarines (which had to be equipped with an improved air-conditioning before it could operate in the warm waters of the Mediterranean), and soon afterwards by two units of the Standard Flex-type.

When U.S. President George W. Bush in 2003 decided to go to war with Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein, the Danish government under Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen again chose to join the "Coalition of the Willing." The Danish government wanted to demonstrate support for the war, and an easy way of doing it was to deploy the corvette *Olfert Fischer* and the submarine *Sølen*. Both units could, among other characteristics, by virtue of their ability to operate in shallow waters, offer the U.S.-led coalition a capacity that it did not otherwise have.

Most of what the two units did during the war is still classified, but leading U.S. politicians and military officials have expressed great satisfaction with the two Danish vessels and the tasks they executed during the war. The success was, however, not enough to dissuade the Danish government from disbanding the entire Danish submarine arm in 2004.

The Arctic is Melting

Since the early years of the 16th century, one of the tasks of the Danish Navy has been fisheries protection and showing the Danish flag in the areas around Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and until 1944, Iceland. The Navy currently has seven ocean patrol ships capable of operating around Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The Arctic area will be growing in importance in the coming years due to the melting of the ice from the man-made global warming. The Arctic is to become an increasingly important shipping route and along with the growth in tourism, it is obvious that the four large and three smaller ocean patrol vessels are too few for an area of such a vast size. However, so far only one new ship has been planned for Arctic operations.

A Force of Volunteers

Along with the decrease in the number of naval vessels, the Danish Naval Home Guard, a force of volunteers founded in 1951, has seen its role increase. The Naval Home Guard currently operates 30 modern vessels in Danish waters, and with the Navy's transition to international engagement, the Naval Home Guard has taken over a large part of the daily maritime surveillance, rescue service, and environmental monitoring in the Danish waters. The Naval Home Guard is mainly staffed by volunteer personnel who all approach the task with the professionalism that is needed to operate safely at sea.

A Return to the Old Days and Old Ways

In the 17th and 18th centuries, before the British seized the Danish fleet in 1807, the Danish Navy was a navy with a global reach. It operated not only in home waters, but showed the Danish flag in foreign places including the Caribbean, Greenland, Iceland, the Cape of Good Hope, the Mediterranean and -- albeit not that often -- the Far East.

Fighting pirates is therefore not a new task for the Danish Navy. During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Danish Navy successfully defeated a number of pirates operating in the Baltic, and in the 17th century the fleet was once again fighting pirates, this time in the Mediterranean Sea. Fighting pirates in the Gulf of Aden and in the Indian Ocean is more a return to an old and tested work than something new for the Danish Navy.

The Danish Navy of today is small but operates some of the most potent and long-range vessels ever seen in the Danish Navy. The international focus has, however, meant that the Navy does not have the ships -- mainly submarines -- to keep tab on current activities in the Baltic, and that might pose a problem in the future. The new Danish frigates can sail from Denmark to Singapore without refueling but with a total of only 14 combat units, Denmark will lack the units to maintain a constant presence in the Baltic, should that area again become an important area for Denmark -- which it might, given what has happened just the last few months.

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