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# Liberal idealism or bandwagoning with power: Exploring Danish foreign policy after the Cold War

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## Introduction

Denmark is a country with an active military engagement inside and outside Europe and one of the most continuous supporters of American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. This is a seemingly marked change with the Danish position during the last stages of the Cold War. Only two decades ago Denmark was country with a typical 'Nordic' foreign policy profile underlining the importance of peaceful conflict solution, international law and the United Nations.

This paper explores Danish post-Cold War foreign policy by telling two different stories. The first story is told in the language of liberal internationalism. This is the story of Denmark fighting abroad to promote the liberal values and rights enjoyed by its citizens at home. It is often told by the Danish government. The second story is told in the language of power politics. It explains how

Denmark, a small state in international relations, has adapted to the unipolar world order by bandwagoning with the dominant superpower, the United States. This is the story often told by the Danish political opposition.

The two stories are not treated as competing in the sense that one must in the end be the most convincing one and win over the other. Instead they are treated as different logics allowing us to uncover different certain aspects of Danish foreign policy (cf. Donnelly 2000: 76). Thus, rather than treating the theories in the conventional way as gladiators fighting against each other till death, I use the theories as 'different coloured lenses: if you put one of them in front of your eyes, you will see things differently. Some aspects of the world will look the same in some lenses, for example shapes, but many other features, such as light and shade of colour, will look very different, so different in fact that they seem to show alternative worlds' (Smith 2007: 11).

## A (Very) Brief History of Danish Foreign Policy

Denmark has had an independent foreign policy for at least 1000 years, and even though the exact meaning of 'Denmark' has varied over the years both in its geographical, political and national composition, there are also strong traits of continuity: most importantly the king, from the 1848 in effect the government, has continued as the key foreign policy decision maker, and for most of Danish foreign policy history held responsible by some kind of assembly representing the people or at least a part of it (Petersen 2005: 44-45).

Danish grand strategy has strong traits of continuity as well. Most importantly, neutrality was the most important characteristic of Danish foreign policy from the end of the Great Northern War in 1720 until the end of the Second World War in 1945, and even after the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 and accession to the EU in 1973, Denmark's 'neutralist tendencies' continued inside the institutions (Holbraad 1991). Many of these tendencies were conveyed in policies formulated in cooperation with other Nordic countries, often with Sweden as a *primo inter pares*. Arguing the existence of a particular 'Nordic balance', these states found that not only did they have a right to deviate from the positions of both the United States and the Soviet Union, doing so would maintain a delicate balance between East and West in the Nordic region help keeping it an area of low tension.

In general, Danish foreign policy during the Cold War was pragmatic and reactive. Denmark was a member of NATO since 1949 and the EU since 1973, but did not play a significant role in shaping the policy in either of these organisations and membership was seen more as a necessary evil for protecting security (NATO) and trade (EU) interests than an opportunity for shaping international relations. This reactive pattern was characteristic even in regard to the 'progressive' Nordic foreign policy agenda, where Denmark was largely a follower of the Swedish lead (Mouritzen 1995). Even in Nordic high profile areas such as human rights and solidarity with the third world, Denmark played it safe. The country took care only to cooperate with countries in the Third World that would not upset the United States and while voicing its general support of human rights, various Danish governments were reluctant to condemn specific human rights abuses (Holm 2002: 24-25).

By the end of the Cold War Denmark changed its foreign policy radically from passive and reactive neutralism to so-called 'active internationalism' pursuing four main goals: furthering common security, ensuring democracy and human rights, creating global economic and social development and ensuring an ecologically sustainable development (Holm 2002). This policy was 'international' in the sense that it advocated 'a global perspective on the pursuit of the classical foreign policy goals of 'security, welfare and ideas' in an international system based on cooperation and multilateralism, and 'active' in the sense that it involved clearly spelling out and continuously pursuing the country's own foreign policy goals, even in the face of external opposition, which may lead to costs avoided by a more passive policy (Holm 2002). In the following decade, active internationalism was pursued both in the close vicinity of Denmark, most notably in the Baltic Sea Region, in the European region more broadly and at the global level.[1]

After the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, there was a consensus among Danish foreign policy makers that the security order of Denmark and its allies had been challenged. Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen summed up this consensus in his opening address to The Danish Parliament after the summer recess by stating that the terrorist attacks were attacks on everything that Danish society stands for - individual liberty, collective security and democracy - and that Denmark would stand by the United States and its NATO allies (Rasmussen 2001).

[1] For a more detailed acoount, see Holm (2002).

Despite this consensus, the official Danish foreign policy priorities were only modestly adjusted as a consequence of the terrorist attacks: the fight against terror and the spread of weapons of mass destruction were now explicitly mentioned specific foreign policy priorities in the new foreign policy agenda published by the Danish government in 2003. The mentioning was relatively brief and the tools were the conventional foreign policy means of Denmark and other small states: international institutions. The European Union was seen as the central forum for fighting terrorism (in close cooperation with the UN and the United States) and the United Nations was as the key instrument in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons (Danish Government 2003: 20-21). In 2004 this was followed up by a government report on terrorism underlining the continued importance of the UN, EU and NATO (Danish Government, 2004), and in 2006 following the so-called Muhammad crisis, official foreign policy was revised again, but the basic priorities continued.

However, the minor adjustments of official priorities seem to hide more profound changes at the practical level, in particular when Denmark's traditional role as a country with a typical 'Nordic' foreign policy profile underlining the importance of peaceful conflict solution, international law and the United Nations is taken into account. Denmark was a co-signatory of the letter of eight in January 2003 supporting the American position on Iraq and effectively undermining the prospects for any common EU position on the issue, and subsequently joined the American-led coalition in Iraq despite the lack of authorization from the UN Security Council. Moreover, the Danish government continued to support the invasion of Iraq and the ensuing efforts by the United States to fight the Iraqi insurgents and only pulled out its troops in August 2007. Even though human rights concerns have been central to Danish foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, the government's critique of the US policy of keeping prisoners at the US military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, has been relatively mild and low-key. In sum, these actions all seem to point to a more important shift in Danish foreign policy in the wake of 9/11 than indicated by official priorities.

## Looking through the liberal lens: Danish Foreign Policy as a promotion of individual liberty, democracy and collective security

Like in most other Western countries in the post-Cold War era Danish foreign policy is formulated in a language consistent with a liberal understanding of international relations. The importance of

national interests and power politics are downplayed in favour of democracy, human rights and a rules-based international society.

What do we see, when we look at Danish foreign policy through the liberal lens? The most fundamental assumption of the liberal perspective on international relations is that human beings are rational actors with the primary goal of maximizing their own happiness. This is an optimist view of human and international relations pointing to no unavoidable conflicts of interest. Cooperation is possible as long as it leads to gains for all of the participants and in the long term the quality of international relations may even be transformed as rational actors gradually realize that their true interests are not in conflict.

Liberals take their point of departure in the assumption that the most fundamental actors in international politics are not states but individuals and groups (Moravcsik 1997: 516). Thus, '[p]olitical action is embedded in domestic and transnational civil society […] individuals and groups are assumed to act rationally in pursuit of material and ideal welfare' (Moravcsik 1997: 517). Individuals and groups are primarily represented by states in international relations. The state represents the dominant coalition of individuals and groups in society. Sometimes these groups equal a large majority of the population; at other times they may represent only a small fraction of society, which has successfully captured the state's foreign policy to pursue their own material and/or ideational goals. In general classical liberals expect ideas to influence foreign policy and therefore also the patterns of cooperation and conflict. Liberal states are expected to be different than other states, because foreign policy decision makers are restrained by liberal norms and institutions and the reluctance of the citizens, who elect them to bear the costs of war and because liberal states are better able to settle conflicts through durable agreements (Lipson 2003; cf. Doyle 1997: 211). The foreign policy preferences of the state are a function of the political compromises and bargains between individuals and groups in domestic society. For this reason 'states do not automatically maximize fixed, homogenous conceptions of security, sovereign, or wealth per se […]' (Moravcsik 1997: 519).

State preferences are realized under the 'varying constraints imposed by the preferences of *other states*' i.e. policy interdependence. 'Policy interdependence is defined here as the set of costs and

benefits created for foreign societies when dominant social groups in a society seek to realize their preferences' (Moravcsik 1997: 520).

States pursue their domestic preferences by diplomatic, institutional and military means. Diplomatic means are the least costly of the three. In contrast to traditional 'realist' diplomacy focusing on the official state representatives, liberal diplomatic strategy includes relations with the civil society of other states (cf. Moravcsik 1995). In the Baltic Sea Region, Denmark was one of the earliest supporters of Baltic independence when the Danish parliament unanimously decided to support Baltic independence in 1990, and in 1991 Denmark defied Soviet protests and re-established normal diplomatic relations with the three Baltic countries. In the following years Denmark continued its assistance by supporting the development of civil society, re-structuring of the economy and modernizing Baltic defence, in particular in regard to the creation of a Baltic military academy and a Baltic peacekeeping battalion. In this multifaceted strategy, relations with Baltic civil society played a special role, in particular in the early phase (cf. Mouritzen 2006: 134).

Institutionalisation is a second liberal strategy. Wallander, Haftendorn and Keohane argue that '[m]ost simply institutions may affect a state's strategies by changing the options available and altering their costs and benefits' (Wallander, Haftendorn and Keohane 1999: 9). This depends most fundamentally on the relative costs of potential alternative strategies and the functional effectiveness of institutions (Wallander 2000: 707). Relative costs as well as institutional effectiveness are intrinsically linked to the degree of interdependence of security among potential coalition partners. As noted by Kay, '[n]eoliberal institutionalism suggests that NATO can lower the transaction costs of forming coalitions for acting in crises when its members' interests are challenged. In this 'Cooperative security' perspective, the security of one state is viewed as intrinsically linked to, and dependent on, the security of others. This interdependence of security thus make cooperation easier' (Kay 1998: 9).

Liberal observers of Danish foreign policy will find plenty of evidence of institutionalisation as an important Danish foreign policy strategy. In general, Danish governments have continued to support a rule-based highly institutionalised international environment. A 'cooperative security' stressing security interdependence has been voiced continuously, most forcefully in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and after the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. At the

European level, Denmark played an active role in the enlargement of the two most important regional institutions, the EU and NATO. In particular in regard to the EU, Denmark (and Sweden) played an important role in the decision to open enlargement negotiations with 10 countries instead of a smaller group. Denmark also worked actively to make the final enlargement negotiations a success during the Danish EU presidency in the last half of 2002. At the global level, Denmark has continued to support the United Nations and even served in the Security Council.

Promoting liberal values with military means is problematic for at least two reasons: it is often difficult to distinguish between promoting the good life and cultural imperialism and even when policy makers have good intentions, it might still result in evil (Vasquez 2005: 311-312). Still, war is not inconsistent with a liberal perspective on international relations, but '[h]umanitarian armed intervention and wars for democracy must do more than just assert their "moral intention" and good motives. They must show that war is necessary for the Good and that no great harm, let alone a great evil, will come out of the war' (Vasquez 2005: 314). In fact Danish foreign policy makers have often gone further than that arguing that war has been a moral necessity and that it has helped to produce both freedom and democracy.

Promoting liberal values with military means have typically been done in cooperation with the United States. For the liberal, this is because Denmark and the United States are both strong supporters of promoting liberal values internationally, and they find evidence of this support in official foreign policy priorities. Both major American political parties are strong supporters of promoting liberal values internationally and like the two major Danish political parties, they would agree with former (social democratic) Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen that individual liberty and democracy are core values to be protected (and promoted). Even though the Americans, in particular the Republican Party, are traditionally more reluctant towards collective security, the United States continues as the most important supporter of the United Nations. Promoting liberal values plays an important role in American foreign and security policy. Likewise, the current Danish foreign policy is formulated not as a return to power politics but as an explicit idealist anti-thesis to pragmatist power politics. As argued by the Danish prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, he sees the military action by the coalition of the willing in Iraq as a natural modern implementation of Wilsonianism: 'When people are granted the real freedom of choice', he noted in a speech shortly after the invasion in Spring 2003, 'they choose democracy over every other form of

government'. The military action in Iraq was intended to give Iraqis that freedom of choice (Rasmussen, 2003). This idealism is contrasted to the past foreign policy of Denmark, which is seen as pragmatist and opportunistic in the Second World War, when the Danish government decided not to fight against German occupation and in the Cold War, when Denmark was in some ways a reserved member of NATO as well as to the present 'forces of darkness', who 'try to block the road towards democracy, with all means. Because they fear freedom, enlightenment and democracy' (Rasmussen 2006). Like Nordic idealism during the Cold War, this is very much formulated as a position of moral superiority (cf. Wæver 1992).

Military action in Kosovo and Afghanistan were directly linked to the violation of fundamental liberal values. In Kosovo, a growing humanitarian catastrophe triggered the response by NATO. As argued by Tony Blair, '[t]his is a just war, based not on any territorial ambitions but on values' (quoted in Kay 2004: 262). In Afghanistan, the anti-liberal regime of the Taliban oppressed fundamental rights such as free speech and property rights and banned women from taking jobs and pursuing and education. In Iraq, multiple arguments for invasion were used by the American government and its supporters. Some of these were closely linked to international security (the risk of Iraq producing weapons of mass destruction and the country's alleged link to Al Qaeda), but the Danish government expressed a continuous commitment to arguments underlining that Iraq had violated UN resolutions and that war was legitimate and consistent with a rule-based institutionalised international society.

Danish policy makers seems to view military and institutional activism as basically two sides of the same coin, because they both serve as means to the same liberal ends: a stable, rule-governed and highly institutionalised international environment based on democracy and individual liberty. Thus, as noted by one analyst, 'on the aggregate level of integration as defined as the nexus between the EU and NATO' (Rasmussen, 2005: 78), 'the use of military force [was perceived] as the continuation of European integration with other means' (ibid., 2005: 77). Whereas the interventions in the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s may be characterised like this, military operations far from the European continent are difficult to justify in this way. However, it can be argued that they are consistent with the liberal aim of promoting international rules and norms of behaviour. This was in fact the argument of the Danish government in the weeks preceding the American invasion of Iraq, when the foreign minister stressed the important of keeping policy towards Iraq on the 'UN-track',

i.e. actions should be approved by the international community. When the US invaded Iraq without the approval of the UN Security Council, the Danish government argued that the war was actually an enforcement of earlier UN resolutions. In addition, the government compared the situation to NATO's Kosovo action in 1999, when Denmark participated despite the lack of UN Security Council approval, because it considered the defence of human rights more important. Even though international lawyers might find these arguments highly problematic (cf. Knudsen, 2004), they show – in combination with Denmark's continued active participation in the EU and UN – that the traditional institutional priorities have not been abandoned and that military action and cooperation and integration may be seen as two sides of the same coin outside Europe as well.

Looking through the liberal lens, the effects of the end of the Cold War and 9/11 were not to change the foreign policy goals of Denmark, but to change the opportunities Denmark had to propagate these goals internationally. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of communist Soviet Union created ideal opportunities for pursuing a liberal agenda internationally. 9/11 identified an anti-liberal challenge, which created new opportunities and necessities for action.

## Looking through the realist lens: Danish Foreign Policy as an adaptation to the unipolar world order

Realists are generally skeptic of liberal perspectives on international relations, which they tend to see as political correct – and dangerous - masking of national interests and power politics. Thus, Hans Morgenthau warns explicitly against liberalism as guide to foreign policy, because he sees it not as a tool for understanding but instead as a foreign policy ideology overemphasizing rationality and overambitious in its belief that a genuine transformation of international relations is possible (Morgenthau 1966). And John Mearsheimer finds that even though 'public discourse about foreign policy in the United States is usually couched in the language of liberalism […] Behind closed doors […] the elites who make national security policy speak mostly the language of power, not that of principle …' (Mearsheimer 2001: 25).

The most fundamental assumption of the realist perspective on international relations is that the international system is anarchic and that 'in anarchy there is no overarching authority to prevent others from using violence, or the threat of violence, to dominate or even destroy them' (Grieco

1990: 38). Because of anarchy, international relations tend to be dominated by power politics. Every state ultimately depends on itself to take care of its own security. With no overarching authority to prevent states from taking advantage of each other and no certainty on the future intentions of other states, states worry about their relative power vis-a-vis other states and tend to base their foreign policy on power calculations rather than ideational factors. Simply put, they cannot afford to base their foreign policy on ideology or culture, because this would put their survival at risk in a world where power is the ultimate determinant of success and failure.

Looking at Danish foreign policy through the (structural) realist lens, we see a world of power and security concerns contingent upon an anarchic international structure dominated by the great powers. This is the case both before and after the end of the Cold War. Thus, there is a strong element of continuity in the conditions for Danish foreign policy making. In this world, states maximize their chances of security and survival primarily by strategies of balancing and bandwagoning. The patterns of balancing and bandwagoning are influenced mainly by the number of great powers in the system, i.e. the number of states who score significantly higher than other states across a wide range of capabilities. Thus, '[s]tates are not placed in the top rank because they excel in one way or another. Their rank depends on how they score on *all* of the following items: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence' (Waltz 1979: 131). In bipolar and multipolar systems states tend to balance. As argued by, Kenneth Waltz, the states that are not great powers 'if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger side that threatens them. On the weaker side, they are both more appreciated and safer, provided, of course, that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking' (Waltz 1979: 127).

In a unipolar system this dynamic is inhibited by two factors. First, the overwhelming strength of the unipole makes balancing almost impossible: the chances of success are too limited for security seeking states to dare to challenge the overwhelming strength of the unipole (Wohlforth 1999). Second, when facing symmetrical challenges, i.e. challenges emanating from states of comparable strength (not the unipole), states a left with 'a single option': they have no great power alternatives to the superpower (Hansen 2000: 64-65). Thus, whereas states tend to balance in bi- and multipolar systems, the structural realist logic leads us to expect them to bandwagon in a unipolar system such as the present one.

To realists, it is no surprise that Danish foreign policy changed as a consequence of the end of the Cold War. According to this perspective, the Cold War was not an ideological struggle between liberalism and communism but a struggle between two superpowers in a bipolar world. The bipolar power struggle overlayed security dynamics in Europe (Buzan et al. 1991) and restrained Danish action space. Thus, Mouritzen argues that '[a]s a small frontline state, Denmark placed high priority on détente in its salient environment throughout the period' (Mouritzen 2006: 133). This helps to explain the reactive pragmatism of Danish foreign policy in the Cold War era, and also why Denmark often acted in concert with its Nordic neighbours, which had geo-strategic positions close to Denmark's.

The shift from unipolarity to bipolarity changed the external power conditions for Denmark and therefore also Danish foreign policy in at least two ways. First, the external restraints on Danish action space were relaxed. Denmark could now pursue its foreign policy goals with less fear of the direct security implications. This also allowed for an expansion of both the issues that Denmark could focus on and the geographical scope of Danish foreign policy. Second, the unipolar world order created strong incentives for Denmark to bandwagon with the unipole. The costs of balancing made it almost impossible to balance, and Denmark the unipole had shared interests in stability in the Euro-Atlantic area and in checking the power of continental European powers, Germany and France. 9/11 did not change the polarity of the system, but it did illuminate its characteristics and thereby accentuated its consequences. To paraphrase one realist's analysis of international relations in general, for Danish security policy, the effect of 9/11 'was more like a bolt of lightning that illuminated the essential contours […] than like an earthquake that reconfigured it. It dramatized, but did not shape, some profound transformations […] in the making for at least a decade' (Joffe, 2002: 17). The change of Danish foreign policy had been in the making since the end of the Cold War, but the events of 9/11 and after has shown its significance and highlighted its prospects and potential pitfalls.

Looking through the realist lens Danish activism in the Baltic Sea area and the strong Danish engagement in the enlargement of the EU and NATO are seen as furthering American interests at the sub-regional and regional levels in Europe, not as a result of liberal internationalism. Rather than emphasizing Danish support for Baltic civil society, realists would stress how Denmark defied

the Soviet Union to support Baltic independence and re-establishing normal diplomatic relations, and how Denmark helped to re-build Baltic capabilities by aiding a re-structuring of the economy and the modernization of Baltic defence. And instead of seeing support of institutional enlargement as a commitment to a liberal rule-based international society, realists would interpret this as helping the expansion of American interests in Europe by expanding Western power and by including more US-friendly states in Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Likewise, at the global level, introducing a military element in the traditionally highly profiled Danish foreign aid policy and punishing states violating human rights largely followed American preferences. In contrast to during the Cold War, Denmark now understood the use of military instruments as legitimate means to obtain foreign policy goals and actively participated in international operations to create and keep peace inside and outside Europe. The importance of the US positions for military operations in Danish foreign policy was underlined in 1999 when Denmark participated in NATO's US-led Kosovo mission without a UN mandate and even stronger in the Danish participation in the Iraq war.

## Conclusion

This paper has told two different stories of Danish foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. The fist story was liberal. It explained Danish foreign policy as an expression of liberal values pursued through diplomatic, institutional and military strategies. The second story was realist. It explained Danish foreign policy as an adaptation to power politics in a unipolar world order through a strategy of bandwagoning.

The theories were used as different coloured lenses which allowed us to see Danish foreign policy in two different ways. What was perhaps most striking was that both of them allowed us to identify strong traits of continuity throughout the post-Cold War period. In the liberal story Denmark continuously pursued a liberal agenda internationally whereas in the realist story Denmark continuously adapted its policy to external power conditions.

The liberal and realist stories of Danish foreign policy point to two different challenges facing the current policy. To the liberal, the most important challenge to Danish foreign policy is to pursue a

liberal policy which is effective without at the same time violating basic liberal rights. Diplomatic and institutional strategies are ‘safe’ in the sense that they rarely risk violating basic liberal rights, but they also risk being ineffective, when they are needed the most. Thus, Andrew Moravcsik writes of a ‘tyranny paradox’: ‘Human rights enforcement is most costly and least effective when directed against the worst human rights offenders’ (Moravcsik 1995: 180). An alternative strategy is war, but as exemplified by the Iraq conflict, one result of war might be the liberal warriors violating some of the rights they are fighting to propagate. Denmark, normally a strong supporter of human rights in the post-Cold War era, has been remarkably vague in its critique of US human rights violations related to the Iraq war. To the realist, the most important challenge to Danish foreign policy is the asymmetric relationship with the unipole, which may provide benefits in the form of security and stability, but also reinforces Danish dependence on the United States. To the policy maker, both of these challenges are very real as both values and power and the occasional clash between the two continue to influence Danish foreign policy.

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