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DIIS POLICY BRIEF APRIL 2020

U.S.-CHINA STRATEGIC RIVALRY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Security and Defense Policy Implications for Denmark

U.S.-China strategic rivalry is intensifying – and nowhere more so than in the Indo-Pacific. This is likely to result in new US requests to close allies like Denmark to increase their security and defense policy contributions to the region. French and British efforts to establish an independent European presence in the Indo-Pacific present Denmark with a way to accommodate US requests without being drawn directly into the US confrontation with China.

In June 2019, the US issued its Indo-Pacific Strategy, setting out how the Trump administration aims to confront China in the region. Echoing the 2017 US National Security Strategy (NSS), China was labeled a

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The importance of the Indo-Pacific region for Danish security and defense policy is likely to grow in the coming years. The focus and resources should therefore be directed towards strengthening Danish knowledge of and competences in the region.
- Several European states, led by France and the UK, are increasing their national and joint European security and defense profiles in the Indo-Pacific by launching new initiatives. Denmark should remain closely informed about these initiatives and be ready to engage with them.
- Regarding potential requests to the Danish Navy for contributions to the Indo-Pacific, Denmark should prioritize the French-led European naval diplomacy.

revisionist power for seeking to "reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations." The US strategy has been followed by US efforts to revive alliances and strategic partnerships in the region and increase its military presence and activities. In addition, growing US diplomatic attention has been directed towards countering Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) infrastructure projects from gaining ground in the region, as well as dissuading regional states from engaging in cooperation with Chinese high-technology companies, such as Huawei. These US efforts have been met with uncertainty and ambivalence by many US allies and strategic partners, who are struggling to figure out how the Trump administration's "America First" policy is influencing its strategy for the region. This ambivalence is not replicated in China, where the prevailing view is that the Trump administration is determined to preserve US dominance in the Indo-Pacific.

The Chinese have developed countermeasures to confront US schemes, varying from increasingly proactive efforts to criticize and delegitimize the US presence and behavior in the Indo-Pacific to the "carrot-and-stick" approach of trying to persuade and threaten regional states to be supportive of the Chinese position. Overall, Beijing appears more determined to expand its military reach and presence, for example, in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, gradually pushing the US military further away from China.

U.S.-China strategic rivalry is intensifying, and nowhere more so than in the Indo-Pacific, where East Asia in particular, with the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, is the central arena. The ongoing COVID 19-pandemic has only heightened tensions and mistrust further between Washington and Beijing.

Strategizing on the Indo-Pacific region in Denmark and Europe

In the most recent Danish Foreign and Security Policy Strategy for 2019-2020, there is no mention of the Indo-Pacific. Besides some overall observations on current pressures on the international order, the strategy avoids directly addressing how intensifying US-China strategic rivalry is affecting the conditions surrounding Danish security and defense policy. The strategy instead repeats the well-known mantra that the US continues to be Denmark's most important ally and security guarantor through NATO, while likewise reaffirming the priority of further developing Denmark's comprehensive strategic partnership with China.

> The ongoing COVID 19-pandemic has only heightened tensions and mistrust further between Washington and Beijing.

In a context of intensifying US-China strategic rivalry, Denmark's strategic ambiguity is no longer viable. The long-standing Danish engagement with China on a broad range of policy issues is coming under growing scrutiny and pressure, not least from Washington, forcing Copenhagen to approach China not narrowly as an attractive economic market, but as a great power, with all that entails. Efforts to develop a more comprehensive Danish strategic approach are in line with the 2019 EU Strategic Outlook, which treats China not only as a partner but also as an "economic competitor" and a "systemic rival." This has a range of security and defense policy implications for Denmark, especially in the Arctic and European contexts, but it also increases the importance of the Indo-Pacific region.

Denmark is not alone in not paying enough attention to security and defense policy matters in the Indo-Pacific. With the clear exception of France and the UK, European states and the EU as a whole still tend to view the region mostly through an economic, commercial and development lens stressing the importance of trade and connectivity. However, in light of the intensifying US-China strategic rivalry that is tormenting the region and the complex challenges

posed by China's rise, more requests are being made for Europe to assert a stronger security and defense policy position and even assume a role in the region.

France has made the Indo-Pacific a priority, and in May 2018 it issued a specific Indo-Pacific strategy, with the goal of France acting as an inclusive and stabilizing mediator in the region. France has strong national interests given its overseas territories and the millions of square kilometers of exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the region, where close to 5,000 French troops are also stationed permanently.

However, France is also a main proponent and key driver of stronger European involvement. It has therefore taken the lead in the gradual growth of European naval diplomacy, with the French Navy, often assisted by the British and other European navies, conducting freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea. However, whereas the US Navy routinely sails within twelve nautical miles of Chinese-occupied features when it conducts such operations, the French Navy refrains from doing so in order to avoid taking a clear position on the maritime territorial disputes and directly challenging China. The French objective is to uphold freedom of navigation and generally promote a rule-based order acknowledging the need to continue nurturing strategic dialogue and cooperation with China.

Engaging with naval diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific

It is important for Denmark to follow such strategic priorities and specific security and defense policy initiatives closely and prepare to engage with them. In 2017 Denmark deployed a frigate as part of a US carrier strike group for the first time, conducting operations in the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. In 2019 it also deployed a frigate as part of a French carrier group for the first time, conducting operations in the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas. Thus it is quite likely that in the near future the Danish government will be encouraged to contribute a Danish frigate to US-led or French-led navy operations in the Indo-Pacific as well. Both the US and the French are eager to get more allied states involved, and the US in particular is seeking to internationalize the South China Sea issue further.

In such case, careful strategic considerations are important. Contributing a Danish frigate to French-led navy operations in the Indo-Pacific that also involve other European states would not play into US-China strategic rivalry in the same direct way as contributing a Danish frigate to US-led navy operations, but rather support French and British efforts to establish an independent European security and defense presence in the region. Promoting the rule of law, cooperative security and security multilateralism are at the core of Europe's approach to international security. Consequently, a key question is whether European states such as Denmark share Washington's overarching goal of preserving US dominance in the region and acknowledge the ingenuity of the US confrontational approach in dealing with the challenges that an economically and militarily stronger China presents. While there are a lot of issues to disagree with China on, there is also a strong need to work with it in dealing with many global challenges, such as climate change, terrorism, global health (including epidemics such as the ongoing COVID 19 one), aid and development. Europe could play a crucial role in showing the way in how to compete and cooperate with China simultaneously.

Denmark is a close US ally with a strong record of contributing to US military operations and missions in recent decades, and it will be difficult to refuse a US request to contribute a Danish frigate to US-led navy operations in the Indo-Pacific. However, if the Danish government can point to its own involvement in French-led European naval diplomacy in the region, its refusal might go down better in Washington. In addition, it would be less provocative seen from Beijing. Clearly one Danish frigate cannot make a huge difference to the US military campaign in the Indo-Pacific. The issue for both the US and France is primarily to raise international attention and to be able to meet China with a broader international coalition. That is, even if Denmark increases its defense budget and strengthens its military presence and activities in the Arctic and Europe, the US is still likely to ask Denmark to "show the flag" and support the US in the Indo-Pacific as well.

Navigating US-China strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

Such strategic reflections on the potential contribution of a Danish frigate underline the growing need for broader strategic considerations in Copenhagen regarding Danish security and defense policy priorities in relation to finding ways to navigate US-China strategic rivalry. Leaning too much towards Brussels is difficult given Danish opt-outs from the EU on security and defense cooperation. Therefore, strengthening dialogues with individual European states such as France and the UK on specific security and defense policy initiatives further is more likely. This would be in line with the recent Danish decision to join a European naval task force in the Gulf that is coordinated with the US at the operational level, but has a specific European focus on de-escalation. This could also be the most viable strategic approach for Danish security and defense policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific. It would also link up with strengthened European strategic dialogue and cooperation with regional states such as Australia, India and Japan, which are also seeking ways to navigate US-China strategic rivalry. These regional states would welcome stronger European security and defense engagement in the region.

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