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Danish Foreign Policy Review 2026

DIIS · DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Danish Foreign Policy Review 2026

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Contents

Preface 4

Chapter 1
Abstracts in English and Danish 7

Chapter 2
Ministerial article 13

2025: A Challenged Diplomatic Super Year 14
Minister for Foreign Affairs Lars Løkke Rasmussen

Chapter 3
Scholarly articles 21
21

Military activism in pursuit of security and status – why Denmark became a frontrunner on Ukraine after the Russian invasion 22
Peter Viggo Jakobsen

The Greenland crisis: an analysis of Donald Trump's attempts to take Greenland 52
Mikkel Runge Olesen

Denmark's agency in the 2025 UNSC: a small state's exercise of 'voice' and 'loyalty' 86
Bjarke Zinck Winther

Translating the 'whole-of-society' approach: towards a Danish framework for societal resilience 116
Rasmus Dahlberg and Asbjørn Gjengedal Madsen

Chapter 4
Selected bibliography 153

Preface

We are pleased to present the 2026 edition of the Danish Foreign Policy Review (DFPR). This annual publication covers key topics concerning Danish foreign, security and development policy. In addition to a contribution by the Danish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the 2026 DFPR includes four peer-reviewed, scholarly articles written by experts in their fields.

Every year the DFPR aims to contribute rigorous and insightful academic articles that focus on central foreign policy issues and tendencies of the past year, with a special emphasis on Denmark and Danish foreign policy. Indeed, 2025 was in many respects an extraordinary year in Danish foreign policymaking. With the four scholarly articles selected for this volume, we seek to unfold some of the themes that have characterised this exceptional year in Danish foreign policy. We have chosen articles that examine some of the most pressing recent developments in international affairs from the perspective of Denmark, including immediate security threats and an unstable global order. The abstracts of the articles can be found at the beginning of the volume in both English and Danish.

In the first article, 'Military activism in pursuit of security and status – why Denmark became a frontrunner on Ukraine after the Russian invasion', Associate Professor at the Royal Danish Defence College Peter Viggo Jakobsen, analyses Denmark's reasons for positioning itself as a prominent Ukraine donor and supporter. Countering a period of low Danish status in NATO, high spending in support of Ukraine actively improved Denmark's standing in the Alliance, and these donations also constitute the most effective form of enhancing Danish and European security.

In the review's second contribution, 'The Greenland crisis: an analysis of Donald Trump's attempts to take Greenland', DIIS Senior Researcher Mikkel Runge Olesen explores one of the most extraordinary emergencies in Danish diplomatic history. US president Donald Trump's decision to use threats of economic coercion and invasion to pressure the Kingdom of Denmark to

relinquish control of Greenland to the United States led to an unprecedented clash with Denmark's most important ally. In the article, Olesen locates the crisis within a history of the relations between the US and the Kingdom of Denmark, while also delivering an analysis of the main strategies and challenges it produced, including an exploration of possible motives for Trump's actions.

In the third article, the discussion of Danish security matters moves to the multilateral stage. In the context of Denmark's 2025–2026 United Nations Security Council membership, External Lecturer at Aalborg University Bjarke Zinck Winther's article, 'Denmark's Agency in the 2025 UNSC: a small state's exercise of "voice" and "loyalty"', delivers an analysis of how Danish agency is shaped as a balance between principled advocacy and reliance on alliance relationships. Through an analysis of Denmark's diplomatic positioning during 2025 the article showcases how Denmark managed this balance in an increasingly polarised Security Council.

From climate change to hybrid warfare, Denmark also faces growing uncertainty from new types of security risk, which have made societal security and resilience increasingly relevant. Associate Professor at Roskilde University Rasmus Dahlberg and Research Assistant at Roskilde University Asbjørn Gjengedal Madsen examine this in their article 'Translating the "whole-of-society" approach: towards a Danish framework for societal resilience'. The article assesses the relevance and applicability of a 'whole-of-society approach' in a Danish context and contributes to a strategic policy framework that can enhance preparedness and resilience.

Finally, we present a selected bibliography of 2025 publications on Danish foreign, security and development policy, which can guide further reading on topics related to Danish foreign policy. The 2026 volume of the DFPR was edited by Head of Foreign Policy & Diplomacy at DIIS, Cecilie Felicia Stokholm Banke, Senior Researcher Jessica Larsen and Senior Researcher Mikkel Runge Olesen, assisted by Andreas Wittschieben. Jessica Lerche copy-edited the review.

Chapter 1

Abstracts in English and Danish

This chapter includes abstracts of the scholarly articles in English and Danish

Military activism in pursuit of security and status – why Denmark became a frontrunner on Ukraine after the Russian invasion

Peter Viggo Jakobsen

Denmark positioned itself as the largest global Ukraine donor measured as percentage of GDP during 2022–2026 in order to restore its battered status in NATO and enhance its own security. Denmark had used disproportionate force contributions to international operations very successfully to create frontrunner status in NATO and Washington and contribute to international security in the 1990–2014 period. However, unwilling to spend more on defence and meet NATO's new capability goals designed to counter the rising Russian threat, after 2014 Denmark lost its high status in the Alliance. This made it an obvious choice to use Ukraine donations in the same way as force contributions to restore Denmark's standing in the Alliance and improve its national security. Denmark can be expected to maintain its high level of support in the years to come because it is the most effective way to enhance Danish and European security in a world where American support in the event of a Russian attack on NATO no longer can be taken for granted.

Danmark positionerede sig som Ukraines største donor målt i procent af BNP i 2022 til 2026 for at genoprette sin ramponerede status i NATO og forbedre sin egen sikkerhed. Danmark brugte uforholdsmæssigt store styrkebidrag til internationale operationer til at opnå status som frontløber i NATO og Washington i perioden fra 1990 til 2014. Danmark mistede imidlertid sin høje status i NATO efter 2014 på grund af sin manglende vilje til at bruge flere penge på forsvaret og leve op til NATO's nye styrkemål, der er designet til at imødegå den voksende trussel fra Rusland. Det gjorde det naturligt at anvende Ukraine-bidrag på samme måde, som man tidligere havde anvendt styrkebidrag, til at genoprette Danmarks status i NATO og forbedre den nationale sikkerhed. Danmark kan forventes at opretholde den høje støtte til Ukraine i de kommende år, fordi det er den mest effektive måde at forbedre dansk og europæisk sikkerhed i en verden, hvor amerikansk støtte i tilfælde af et russisk angreb på NATO ikke længere kan tages for givet.

The Greenland crisis: an analysis of Donald Trump's attempts to take Greenland

Mikkel Runge Olesen

The Greenland crisis stands out as one of the most extraordinary in Danish diplomatic history. Triggered by US president Donald Trump's demand for Greenland, it put immense pressure on both Greenland and Denmark as they were faced with threats of both economic coercion and even invasion at the hands of their most important ally. The Kingdom has sought to placate the US with new investments in Arctic security, while simultaneously building up European support against Trump, all the while in disbelief over why the US president had chosen this confrontation. This article establishes the history of relations between the US and the Kingdom of Denmark concerning Greenland. It then analyses the main strategies and challenges for each side in the Greenland crisis as it has unfolded up until January 2026, and it explores three arguments for Trump's actions: security, economics and prestige.

Grønlandskrisen indtager sin plads som en af de mest usædvanlige kriser i Danmarkshistorien. Den blev udløst af den amerikanske præsident Donald Trumps forsøg på at tage besiddelse af Grønland og har sat både Grønland og Danmark under ekstremt pres. USA, Kongeriget Danmarks suverænt vigtigste allierede, har truet landet med både økonomisk tvang og militær invasion. Kongeriget Danmark har på én gang forsøgt at komme USA i møde gennem investeringer i arktisk sikkerhed og samtidig forsøgt at samle europæisk opbakning imod Trump. Denne artikel beskriver den historiske udvikling i forholdet mellem USA og Kongeriget Danmark, hvad angår Grønland. Den analyserer de strategier og udfordringer, der har præget USA og Kongeriget Danmark i deres respektive tilgange til krisen, og undersøger tre typer af argumenter for Trumps handlinger: Sikkerhed, økonomi og prestige.

Denmark's agency in the 2025 UNSC: a small state's exercise of 'voice' and 'loyalty'

Bjarke Zinck Winther

Denmark's 2025–26 UNSC membership provides insight into small-state agency within contemporary geopolitics. Denmark entered the Council with ambitions of acting as a norm entrepreneur and advancing thematic priorities related to international humanitarian law, women, peace and security, and climate security. However, the Council's institutional structure, most notably the veto prerogative of the permanent members, limits what elected members can achieve when such normative ambitions intersect with highly politicised conflicts such as Gaza and Ukraine. Danish agency unfolded within a persistent tension between principled advocacy and reliance on close alliance relationships, above all with the United States. Rather than treating this tension as a weakness, this article conceptualises it as a constitutive feature of Danish diplomacy. Using Albert O. Hirschman's framework of 'exit', 'voice' and 'loyalty', the article locates Danish agency in the interaction between selective voice and calibrated loyalty. Based on voting behaviour and statements, the article analyses diplomatic positioning during 2025 and shows how Denmark remained a credible advocate of international norms and a reliable ally in an increasingly polarised Security Council.

Danmarks medlemskab af FN's Sikkerhedsråd i 2025-26 giver indsigt i småstaters ageren i nutidig geopolitik. Danmark indtrådte i rådet med ambitioner om at agere som normentreprenør og fremme tematiske prioriteter relateret til international humanitær ret, kvinder, fred og sikkerhed samt klimasikkerhed. Rådets institutionelle struktur, særligt de permanente medlemmers vetoret, begrænser imidlertid, hvad de valgte medlemmer kan opnå, når sådanne normative ambitioner møder stærkt politiserede konflikter som Gaza og Ukraine. Dansk handlekraft udfoldede sig inden for en vedvarende spænding mellem principbaseret fortalervirksomhed og afhængighed af tætte alliancer, først og fremmest med USA. Frem for at betragte denne spænding som en svaghed konceptualiserer denne artikel den som et konstituerende træk ved dansk diplomati. Med udgangspunkt i Albert O. Hirschmans "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" placerer artiklen dansk ageren i samspillet mellem selektiv brug af voice og kalibreret loyalty. På baggrund af stemmeadfærd og officielle udtalelser analyserer artiklen Danmarks diplomatiske positionering i 2025 og viser, hvordan Danmark forblev en troværdig fortaler for internationale normer og en pålidelig allieret i et stadigt mere polariseret Sikkerhedsråd.

Translating the 'whole-of-society' approach: towards a Danish framework for societal resilience

Rasmus Dahlberg and Asbjørn Gjengedal Madsen

Confronted with escalating risks stemming from climate change, complex technological interdependencies and hybrid threats below the threshold of armed conflict, Denmark is reorganising its approach to national security and societal resilience. Recent initiatives – including military rearmament, new preparedness legislation, the establishment of a Ministry for Societal Security and Resilience, and, most recently, a novel policy concept for 'Total Preparedness – represent important steps in this direction. Yet these developments remain fragmented in the absence of a comprehensive policy framework. Both the European Union and NATO employ a 'whole-of-society' approach to integrate public, private and civil society capabilities in the pursuit of societal security. This article delineates the notion of a 'whole-of-society approach' within European and Nordic preparedness policy contexts, assesses its relevance and applicability to Denmark, and proposes a translation tailored to the Danish context. The article contributes a strategic framework to guide policymakers and practitioners as they seek to enhance Denmark's societal resilience.

I lyset af tiltagende risici fra klimaforandringer, komplekse teknologiske afhængigheder og hybride trusler er Danmark i færd med at omorganisere sin tilgang til national sikkerhed og samfundssikkerhed. Nylige initiativer – heriblandt militær oprustning, ny beredskabslovgivning, etableringen af Ministeriet for Beredskab og Samfundssikkerhed og senest præsentationen af et totalberedskabskoncept i februar 2026 – udgør betydelige skridt i denne proces. Disse tiltag understøttes dog endnu ikke af et omfattende politisk rammeværk og fremstår derfor fragmenterede. Både EU og NATO anvender en "whole-of-society"-tilgang for at integrere befolkningens, private aktørers og civilsamfundets kapaciteter i arbejdet med samfundssikkerhed. Denne artikel sammenfatter idéen om en "whole-of-society"-tilgang ud fra EU's, NATO's og skandinaviske "policy"-tilgange. På baggrund heraf vurderer vi tilgangens relevans for den danske kontekst og kommer med forslag til, hvordan idéen om "whole-of-society"-tilgang kan anvendes i Danmark. Artiklen bidrager med en strategisk ramme, som kan guide praktikere og embedsfolk i arbejdet med at øge det danske samfunds resiliens.

Chapter 2

Ministerial article

2025: A Challenged Diplomatic Super Year

Minister for Foreign Affairs Lars Løkke Rasmussen

In 2025 we entered the so-called 'Diplomatic Super Year'. We took up our seat as an elected member of the United Nations Security Council, took over the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2025, and we chaired the NB8 format of cooperation among Nordic and Baltic states. In addition, the Kingdom of Denmark took over the reins of the Arctic Council for a two-year period. These are all important international platforms for a small state that considers itself a strong proponent of multilateralism and an international system based on rules-based cooperation.

However, 2025 was also an immensely transformative year for Denmark, Europe and globally, marked by significant US foreign policy change under the Trump 2.0 administration. President Trump's return to the Oval Office marked a shift in foreign policy towards unilateralism, tariffs as a foreign policy tool, strained NATO ties, and a strong US focus on Western Hemisphere dominance. This development has had massive ramifications for Europe and for the world. The Trump administration challenged European allies on defence spending, focused on transactional bilateral deals over alliances, and it demonstrated that it is ready to leverage economic and technological strength as instruments of power, also against allies.

President Trump's intent to acquire Greenland also brought immense challenges to the longstanding relationship between the Kingdom of Denmark and the United States. From the beginning, the Kingdom of Denmark made it clear that Greenland and Denmark were open to stronger security cooperation with the US, but also that it should be based on respect for the fundamental principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the right to self-determination. Allies and partners stood by Greenland and Denmark throughout 2025 and into 2026.

At the time of writing we are working on two main tracks: firstly, at NATO where Allies are discussing how to strengthen Arctic security through collective efforts and, secondly, through high-levels talks between Denmark, Greenland

and the US on addressing US security concerns without violating the red lines of the Kingdom.

Euro-Atlantic relations were also increasingly strained, among others by Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025. In his speech Vance criticised what he saw as Europe's retreat from values shared with the US – a view that was further expanded in the National Security Strategy, which promised to cultivate resistance to the current trajectory within Europe. I disagree with those messages. Denmark and Europe have no interest in a more confrontational relationship with the US. The US remains the ultimate guarantor of NATO's and Europe's security, and we share deep historical and cultural bonds.

A further challenge to Europe came with the American tariffs announced on 2 April 2025, which increased the likelihood of a mutually devastating trade war. Much effort went into avoiding that scenario and keeping close transatlantic cooperation stable, not least through constructive EU outreach efforts coupled with a readiness to respond firmly and proportionally if necessary. The EU reached an agreement with the US on tariffs and hopefully we can build on that. Nonetheless, there is no denying that international trade is undergoing fundamental realignment. The risk of further tariffs and instability in the transatlantic trading relationship and the international trading system remains.

Under these circumstances we have sought to expand trade relationships between the EU and partners in other parts of the world. The EU is well-positioned to expand its already vast network of trade agreements and economic partnerships across multiple regions like Latin America, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East and Africa. This agenda picked up speed during 2025 and particularly during the Danish EU Presidency. We worked to further agreements with other important partners, including Indonesia, India, and Mercosur. At the end of December 2025, the EU–Mercosur trade agreement was brought to the finishing line and other agreements, including with India, are set to be completed in 2026. These efforts must continue. We need to ensure more, not less, trade between our continent and others.

In Europe there is now widespread acknowledgement of the need for a stronger and more capable Europe to stand up for our interests and security into the future. In light of the changed security environment, Europe has been stepping

up in terms of burden sharing in NATO and European defence spending is increasing. President Trump on several occasions, including in March 2025, called into question the American security commitment to Europe if NATO Allies did not raise their defence spending.

At the NATO Hague Summit in June 2025 an agreement was reached. NATO Allies committed to investing 5% of GDP annually in security and defence with at least 3.5% to be invested in core defence requirements and 1.5% on defence- and security-related spending by 2035. Denmark has been among the first to act on this commitment, as we will reach 3.5% of GDP in defence spending by 2026 and then permanently again from 2030 and onwards. This will be five years ahead of the 2035 deadline. We lead by example.

2025 continued be marked by Russia's illegal full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine and Russia's hostility towards Europe. While Ukraine showed willingness to engage in constructive peace negotiations, Russia continued to pay lip service to negotiations, escalating its brutal attacks on Ukraine, including on civilians and civilian infrastructure, and increasing its use of hybrid attacks against Europe. In 2025 we saw several instances of Russian violations of NATO airspace, including by drones, as well as cyberattacks and sabotage. There is no threat of a conventional military attack against the Kingdom of Denmark at present. However, we remain cognisant of the prospect of an increased Russian military threat to NATO, as Russia seeks to strengthen its military power.

During the Danish EU Presidency in the second half of the year we shepherded through two major EU sanctions packages against Russia and the EU agreed to phase out Russian oil and gas by 2026–27. Russia's economy has been under increasing strain, not least due to sanctions. The federal budget deficit was -2.6% in 2025, which was more than initially expected. At the same time, regional budget deficits increased, GDP growth slowed, and consumer prices rose. A cause for concern has been Russia's so-called 'shadow fleet', which aims to evade our sanctions and fuel Russia's war economy. In addition, the shadow fleet presents international risks to the environment, maritime safety, and security. In view of this, the EU, under the Danish EU Presidency, imposed sanctions on more than 250 ships. That has brought the total number of EU-sanctioned ships to around 600. Besides sanctions, and in close coordination with allies, we have applied a holistic approach to the shadow fleet using tools

such as flag state outreach, capacity building, environmental protection, and more vessel control.

Meanwhile, Europe and the EU remained steadfast in our support for Ukraine. The support provided by the EU and its Member States amounts to EUR 194.9 billion from the beginning of Russia's war of aggression up until early 2026. Furthermore, just before the end of 2025, the EU reached political agreement on a EUR 90 billion loan to Ukraine for the next two years. 2025 was also the year where Europe became the primary provider of military support to Ukraine. In 2025, Europe provided 93% of all new military donations to Ukraine, according to data from the Kiel Institute. European military donations totalled EUR 33.4 billion in 2025. Continued support for Ukraine and pressure on Russia were also at the top of our agenda as we chaired the NB8 format in 2025. Denmark itself has allocated approximately EUR 9.7 billion in total military support for Ukraine since 2022. That has made us the largest provider of military support per capita and relative to GDP as well as the fourth-largest provider in absolute numbers.

European defence and security became another primary focal point on the agenda in 2025. During our EU Presidency we took important steps to strengthen European defence readiness to realise the ambition of a Europe able to defend itself by 2030 at the latest. That remains a credible contribution to transatlantic security and a key priority for Denmark and Europe. We reached an agreement on the European Defence Industry Programme, thus enabling financial support to Europe's rearmament and defence industrial base. In addition, we facilitated the mobilisation of EU Member States in capability coalitions to begin work on delivering defence capabilities in Europe to cover critical gaps such as air and missile defence, drones, and quantum technology. These are key steps towards ensuring a stronger Europe, capable of defending its own interests.

In the grand picture, it is also key to further strengthen the ties between Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans and the EU to ensure stability in the EU's own neighbourhood. Otherwise, we risk ceding ground to more malevolent actors. Despite a difficult context, we were able to promote this agenda during our EU Presidency, facilitating more gradual integration and coming up with a new approach to ensuring that particularly Ukraine will get the necessary guidance to undertake reforms that will bring the country closer to EU accession.

Continued tensions and instability in the Middle East were another significant challenge throughout 2025. That is particularly true of the human suffering in Gaza as well as the deeply concerning situation in the West Bank. The humanitarian situation remained catastrophic throughout 2025 with the entire population of Gaza in need of humanitarian aid. Denmark provided EUR 148.5 million in 2023–25 to alleviate the humanitarian situation in Palestine.

In November 2025 the UN Security Council, including Denmark, voted to adopt resolution 2803 that endorsed the US 'Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict' and welcomed the establishment of the Board of Peace. Despite challenges, the ceasefire continues to hold. Now it is key to continue to push for full implementation. As Israel's largest trading partner and the largest donor to the Palestinians, the EU has continuously tried to push forward for a lasting solution while keeping the aim of a two-state solution alive. On more than one occasion, however, it proved difficult for EU Member States to find common ground on specific action. Throughout 2025 it remained a Danish priority for the EU to have greater impact and to ensure that the EU was a 'player', not just a 'payer'.

In 2025 I visited both Israel and Palestine three times. I underlined the importance of allowing safe, sustained and unhindered humanitarian access in Gaza. I also expressed our deep concern regarding illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and associated violence, undermining the two-state solution. In September, Denmark managed to gather 26 countries and the EU to call on Israel to reopen the medical corridor from Gaza to the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Denmark also continued to support UNRWA, the agency's internal reform process, and its vital role in Palestine and the region, and we called for the continued operation of INGOs and for the adherence to international law, including international humanitarian law.

Regional instability increased when Iran and Israel – the latter with American support – fought a brief war in June involving strikes on Iranian nuclear sites. In 2025 the Houthis launched new strikes against Israel and continued to disrupt maritime security in the Red Sea. In Syria, following the fall of the Assad regime, the situation remained fragile, but also offered hope. The EU and Denmark chose to work to foster an inclusive, Syrian-led transition, respectful of minority rights while supporting economic recovery and approaching the transition government in the spirit of pragmatic idealism.

Through our seat in the UN Security Council, Denmark stood up to defend a world in which might should not make right. Eighty years on, the fundamental principles of the UN Charter – national sovereignty, territorial integrity and the right to self-determination – remain essential for peace and security. Under the prevailing difficult international circumstances, smaller-scale regional cooperation can be a force multiplier and a useful, more agile complement to larger systems, including the EU and the UN. We saw this with the cooperation in the group of eight Nordic-Baltic countries, NB8, which we chaired in 2025. Between us, we share a similar outlook on the world and deep historical ties. When we stand together, we speak louder, and stand a better chance of ensuring that our perspectives are taken into account.

In order to build further alliances and strengthen our international partnerships Denmark moved forward with opening new embassies in Senegal, Rwanda, Tunisia, Albania and Argentina. We continued to implement our 'Africa's Century' strategy from 2024 to promote equal partnerships through enhanced engagement. Africa's geopolitical relevance has never been greater, and Europe must be the preferred partner for Africa. As neighbours, we must listen more and we must make better offers. In this spirit Denmark has actively strengthened the partnership between the EU and the AU and we have promoted African voices through our seat on the Security Council. We have also worked to put the often overlooked or forgotten crises of the world on the agenda, including Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). During the Danish EU Presidency, negotiations on the EU's new external instrument, Global Europe, began. This instrument aims at strengthening the EU's position on the global stage through a more geopolitically-minded and impactful approach to international partnerships, EU enlargement, and to diplomacy.

Finally, we launched our new Strategy for Development Cooperation in 2025. I am proud that we remain one of the few countries globally that deliver on the UN target of spending 0.7% of GNI on development assistance – a target that we have met for more than 45 years in a row. Development cooperation is an investment in our own security and economy, both in the short and the long term. But many of our partners request more than traditional development cooperation. Therefore, Denmark continues to work to be a frontrunner in the mobilisation of sustainable trade and investment. Development cooperation and economic diplomacy are two key areas for promoting Danish interests that must increasingly work in tandem.

2025 was a tumultuous and difficult year in many respects. But it was also a year where Denmark and Europe delivered on our priorities, chiefly among them continued support for Ukraine, where Europe has now assumed the mantle from the US. Rome was not built in a day and neither will our preparedness for the world of tomorrow be. But it is now clearer than ever that Europe, and in particular the EU, is key to safeguarding Danish interests and prosperity – in the future as well as now. In an increasingly unstable world, marked by conflict and great power competition there is no alternative to a stronger and more independent Europe if we are to safeguard the interests of Denmark and of our continent. We have identified our weaknesses and shortcomings. Momentum has picked up in Europe in terms of taking greater responsibility for our own security, with regard to strengthening our competitiveness, and in diversifying our international partnerships, including on trade, investment and supply chains. 'Never let a good crisis go to waste', as a famous statesman supposedly said when the current multilateral system was created after World War II. Now is the time to push forward and seize the opportunities that also arise from a changing international system in order to ensure that Europe gets a say in the world of tomorrow.

Chapter 3

Scholarly articles

Military activism in pursuit of security and status – why Denmark became a frontrunner on Ukraine after the Russian invasion

Peter Viggo Jakobsen[1]

> Some have asked whether Denmark should necessarily be placed so high on the list of [Ukraine] donors? Is this our role and responsibility, when we are such a small country? And here is my answer: yes we should. Because, as a small country, we can identify with the threat from a superpower. I also believe that the Danish position in relation to the war in Ukraine is a natural extension of the activist foreign policy that Denmark has pursued for the past 20 years. Because Denmark stands up when an international security crisis arises. And Denmark's efforts both before, during (and after) the invasion of Ukraine are in many ways the latest chapter in that story.
>
> Danish Minister of Defence Troels Lund Poulsen
> (Statsministeriet, 2024a, author's translation)

Just three days into the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 Denmark began to deliver weapons (Jenvall, 2022), and became a leading Ukraine donor, hosting donor conferences, donating major weapons systems such as Harpoon coastal defence missiles, CAESAR self-propelled howitzers, Leopard 1 main battle tanks and F-16 fighter jets. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen quickly positioned Denmark as a self-declared 'frontrunner' with an ambition to inspire other countries, including the United States, to do more to support Ukraine (Robinson, 2024; Statsministeriet, 2023a). In the spring of 2023 the Danish Government put pressure on the Biden administration to allow the delivery of F-16 fighter jets and to approve Ukraine's use of American-produced weapons systems against targets inside Russia (Anonymous interview with Danish diplomat, June 2023). Unlike the United States and Belgium, the Danish Government had no qualms about Ukraine using F-16s donated by Denmark to strike targets inside Russia (Ritzau, 2024; Shah, 2024). In 2024 Prime

Minister Frederiksen called upon Ukraine's allies to do away with all 'red lines' constraining Ukraine's ability to defend itself (Krychkovska, 2024).

Denmark was the first country to support the Ukrainian defence industry directly through the so-called 'Danish model', which finances weapons procurement and development inside Ukraine. Since then, at least ten countries, including Britain, Germany, France, Italy and Poland, have taken inspiration from this model and set up similar initiatives (Rynning, 2025, p. 65; Trebesch & Nishikawa, 2026, p. 3). Additionally, Denmark was the first country to allow Ukrainian firms to produce weapons on its soil (Ruitenberg, 2025). Moreover, Danish instructors have trained Ukrainian F-16 pilots and other types of personnel in Denmark as well as providing personnel to Operation INTERFLEX, training Ukrainian soldiers in the United Kingdom, and to the EU's EUMAM Ukraine mission training Ukrainian soldiers outside of Ukraine.

By early 2026 Denmark was Ukraine's largest donor measured in proportion of GDP and fourth-largest when measured as bilateral total military support (Kiel Institute, 2026). As of 24 February 2026 Denmark had donated EUR 10.8 billion in bilateral assistance to Ukraine, of which EUR 1.1 billion was humanitarian assistance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2026a). At the request of Ukrainian President Zelensky, Denmark took the lead in supporting the reconstruction of the city and region of Mykolaiv where 60% of Denmark's civilian support to Ukraine has been invested, in order to make Mykolaiv a model for future reconstruction efforts across the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2026b). Denmark wants to be frontrunner with respect to both civilian and military assistance.

The high level of Danish support is puzzling from most theoretical perspectives, and the existing studies analysing EU and NATO member state support for Ukraine cannot explain it. Their general finding is that Denmark provides far more support than their explanatory frameworks and models predict (Haesebrouck, 2024; Kirkegaard, 2026, p. 11; Lanoszka & Becker, 2023; Massie & Tallová, 2025a and 2025b; Nissen, Holsting & Overgaard 2025; Olesen & Schmidt, 2024, p. 330) or consider wise for a small state in a threatening geopolitical environment (Mouritzen, 2024; Pedersen, 2025, p. 164). The existing explanations focus primarily on external and material factors. This suggests a need to complement them with domestic and non-material factors to provide a better explanation. The Danish Defence Minister Poulsen provides

a necessary piece of the puzzle in his quote at the start of this article: the high level of Ukraine support is indeed a 'natural extension of the activist foreign policy that Denmark has pursued for the past 20 years'. It is 'natural' because it represents a logical continuation of the military activism that was constructed and practiced after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the minister's opening quote does not tell us the full story. He does not help us to understand why Denmark provides far more support measured in proportion of GDP than other small countries such as Finland. Finland should find it much easier to identify with Ukraine than Denmark, since it was attacked by Russia in a similar manner in 1939.

This article argues that Denmark's high level of Ukraine support can be explained by fear of Russian aggression and American abandonment, as well as by a strong desire to reestablish and subsequently maintain Denmark's status in the eyes of its NATO Allies. In the 1990s Denmark exploited the opportunity created by the end of the Cold War to devise an effective military strategy enabling it to achieve status and contribute to international security while spending less on defence. 'Military activism' in the form of disproportionate troop contributions to, first, UN-led and subsequently NATO- and US-led operations was the principal way employed by this strategy. Denmark became the largest troop contributor to the UN and NATO operations in the Balkans measured per capita, and its willingness to make contributions to operations involving a high risk of combat made it a frontrunner in the eyes of its NATO partners and, notably, the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Danish decision-makers became addicted to this frontrunner status, and it became an objective in its own right in Danish defence policy to maintain it, and garner invitations to the White House (Jakobsen & Møller, 2012; Jakobsen, Ringsmose & Saxi, 2017).

This successful 'troops-for-security-and-status' strategy collapsed when the United States and NATO began to demand cash, capabilities and contributions to deter Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Danish politicians did not want to spend more on defence and its armed forces, tailormade for expeditionary operations, were ill-suited for the new territorial defence tasks demanded by NATO and the United States. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 Denmark had free-rider status in NATO and its security declined. This called for a change of strategy and Ukraine donations became an effective

way out of this predicament as they enabled Denmark to restore its frontrunner position in NATO and enhance its security.

The article makes this argument in six steps. Step one reviews the existing literature, highlighting its failure to fully explain Denmark's high level of Ukraine support. Step two conceptualises and operationalises military activism as a military strategy. Step three shows how Denmark devised and employed military activism successfully to achieve status and contribute to security after the end of the Cold War. Step four details the collapse of this strategy after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its negative impact on Danish status and security. Step five shows how Ukraine donations enabled Denmark to restore its frontrunner status in NATO and enhance its security. Step six sums up the main findings and discusses their implications for Denmark's future Ukraine policy.

Existing studies struggle to explain the high level of Danish Ukraine support

The existing large-N studies seeking to explain the variation in EU and NATO member state support to Ukraine cannot explain the Danish case. Lanoszka and Becker (2023) analysing the variation in NATO member state military assistance to Ukraine in 2014–2022 find that the best predictor of Ukraine military assistance is the share of GDP allocated to military operations, maintenance and infrastructure. This is a really poor predictor of Danish Ukraine support, because Danish defence spending was low in the 2014–2022 period, ranging from 1.15% to 1.36% of GDP (NATO, 2025a, p. 9).

Haesebrouck (2024) finds that the level of threat from Russia (geographical distance from Russia), past military investments (GDP percentage) and public opinion (Eurobarometer polls) best explain European Union (EU) member state bilateral support to Ukraine in the February 2022–July 2023 period. While Denmark is relatively close to Russia and public support for military Ukraine assistance is high, its low defence spending means that these factors fail to explain the Danish aid level. While Haesebrouck's integrated model incorporating additional explanatory factors allows one to construct a causal path explaining why Denmark's Ukraine support is high (Threat → private

incentive → low budget constraints → public support → high Ukraine support) (Haesebrouck, 2024, p. 6), his model cannot explain why Denmark provided far more support than a comparable EU country like Sweden.

Massie and Tallová (2025a) study the Ukraine support provided by NATO members as well as Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea in 2022. Their study also fails to explain the Danish case adequately. None of their four causal paths leading to high Ukraine support fit Denmark. Three of them include high defence spending, which does not apply to Denmark. The fourth path explains Ukraine support with reference to four factors: economic incentives, geographic proximity, government ideology, and low executive autonomy. Using the coding of these factors employed in their study, it is impossible to explain the difference between the aid levels provided by Denmark and Sweden as their scores are very similar except for economic incentives, which are much higher for Sweden than Denmark (Massie & Tallová, 2025a, pp. 13, 25).

In another study of Western support for Ukraine, Massie and Tallová (2025b) extend the period studied to June 2024 and employ a different quantitative method. This study tests ten independent explanatory factors against the empirical data using multivariate regression analysis. Yet it fails to explain why Denmark has become Ukraine's number one supporter, and why the bilateral Western aid levels differ so much and change over time. Their key finding is that the relative importance of their explanatory factors changes after the first year of the war, and they conclude that 'most theories fail to adequately explain the variability in commitment levels amongst Western allies across time' (Massie & Tallová, 2025b, p. 941).

Kirkegaard (2026) keeps it much simpler. His study of EU member state support for Ukraine covering January 2022–October 2025 shows that a regression analysis of geographical proximity and national debt/deficit levels explains 60% of the variance in bilateral military aid provided to Ukraine by EU member states. Yet he is also unable to explain the Danish case, as 'Denmark and Estonia significantly exceeded their predicted level of support for Ukraine' (Kirkegaard, 2026, p. 11).

Nissen, Holsting and Overgaard (2025) adopt the same approach as Kirkegaard in their study of EU member state support covering February 2022–2024. Instead of looking at all potential explanatory factors, they focus on the ones

that explain the most. Like Kirkegaard, they emphasise the importance of geographical proximity (distance between the national capital and Moscow) and national debt/deficit, but they also point to perceived threats, foreign policy identity/strategic culture and the influence of right-wing populist parties. As a result, their analysis suggests that Danish Ukraine policy can be explained by as threat-driven and facilitated by a strong economy, the absence of strong right-wing populist parties and high public support. Yet most of these factors also apply in Finland, Norway and Sweden, so the only factor that can explain why Denmark provides far more assistance than these countries is the foreign policy identity, and more specifically: the 'tradition of taking the lead in military conflicts' (Nissen, Holsting & Overgaard, 2025, p. 16). Nissen, Holsting and Overgaard do not elaborate on the role played by foreign policy identity, as their objective is to provide an overview of all EU member states and highlight the large variation in the national levels of support, but their analysis suggests that the key to the explanation of the Danish case lies in the tradition of military activism.

Olesen and Schmidt (2024) make the same suggestion in their qualitative analysis of Danish defence policy covering 2022–24. They argue that the level of Ukraine support is surprisingly high, but that the increase is a logical continuation of Denmark's tradition of military activism. The high level of support can, in their view, be explained by the mutually reinforcing interaction of five explanatory factors: (1) an increased sense of threat – the risk that Russia would attack other European countries if it won in Ukraine; (2) a sense of moral obligation; (3) strong public support; (4) the need to address NATO and US criticism for spending too little on defence; and (5) the desire to remain in good standing in Washington. Yet they do not pursue it further as their focus is Danish defence policy rather than the support for Ukraine, and they do not explain what they mean by military activism.

The tradition for military activism, the sense of moral obligation and the high level of public support are also highlighted by Mathiasen (2025), who interprets the strong support for Ukraine as identity-driven, and as a continuation of the Danish military activism that has characterised Danish defence and security policy since the end of the Cold War. Mathiasen argues that Danish decision-makers and practitioners have constructed an identity of Denmark as a frontrunner that 'punches above its weight' in the field of defence, in particular in situations where other nations are hesitant. This frontrunner identity is

emphasised in Defence Minister Poulsen's opening quote explaining why Denmark should give more support to Ukraine than others.

In sum, the existing studies reviewed here do a good job of identifying the puzzle pieces necessary to explain why Denmark became the top donor to Ukraine. But they are not very good at putting the pieces together and specifying their relative importance and interaction. The next section will use military strategy as an organising framework for doing that.

Military activism conceptualised as military strategy

The activist tradition highlighted by Defence Minister Poulsen and the Danish scholars who have sought to explain Denmark's high level of Ukraine support, is a military strategy that Danish decision-makers have employed since the end of the Cold War to achieve status and contribute to international security. Military strategy is usually understood as the challenge of connecting ends (what you want to achieve) with means (the resources employed to achieve it) in ways (how you employ your resources) that allow you to get what you want as quickly and as cheaply as possible in an acceptable manner (Jakobsen, 2022).

This framework is useful for connecting and assessing the relative importance of the explanatory factors identified in the explanations reviewed above. It will be used to demonstrate how Danish decision-makers have formulated and adjusted their military activism strategies in response to changes in threats and allied and US demands since the end of the Cold War, and how the Danish Ukraine support is a 'natural extension' of the military activism pursued by Danish governments since 1990, as Defence Minister Poulsen states in the opening quote of this article.[2]

The period of analysis (1990-) consists of four separate cases, each marked by a major change in external threats and allied demands triggering a change in the form of Danish military activism. Period one (1990–2014) is characterised by the absence of a Russian threat to Danish territory and allied and US demands for force contributions to expeditionary operations. Period two (2014–2021) is characterised by a rising Russian threat and new allied so-called triple C burden-sharing demands in the form of: *Cash* (2% of GDP

defence spending), *Capabilities* for deterring Russia and *Contributions* to allied operations. Period three (2022–2024) is characterised by a major increase in the threat posed by Russia and increased allied pressure for triple C burden-sharing and Ukraine donations. Period four is marked by Donald Trump's return to power resulting in US demands for burden-shifting: 5% of GDP defence spending, greater European responsibility for defending Europe, and repeated US threats to abandon Ukraine and NATO compounding the Russian threat to Denmark and European NATO.

To enable a structured and focused comparison of the four cases (George & Bennett, 2005), each period will be analysed through the same four analytical questions:

1) What threats or opportunities and allied demands were Danish decision-makers reacting to?
2) What ways and means did Danish decision-makers employ?
3) What ends did Danish decision-makers want to achieve, judging from their statements, actions and memoirs?
4) What did Danish decision-makers take for granted (assumptions) and base their military activism on?

Military activism transforms Denmark from NATO free-rider to frontrunner 1990–2014

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact constituted a massive improvement of Danish security. The direct military threat to Denmark's territory disappeared, and the new security environment gave rise to new demands and expectations from NATO and the United States.

Denmark had a bad standing in NATO when the Cold War ended. In 1980, frustration over the poor state of Denmark's armed forces and its low military spending led the Belgian Foreign Minister Henri Simonet to coin the term 'Denmarkisation' to describe a country wanting NATO protection without being willing to pay for it. Danish–NATO relations deteriorated further still when Denmark inserted 22 footnotes into official NATO communiqués in 1982–86 criticising the deployment of new, intermediate range nuclear missiles in Europe (Jakobsen, 2021, pp. 88–90).

Danish Foreign Minister Uffe Ellemann-Jensen (Liberal Party, 1982–1993) was adamantly opposed to the footnote policy, which was imposed on the Government by a majority in Parliament. He consequently made it a priority to improve Danish standing in NATO and in Washington, and the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait in 1990 gave him an opportunity to do so. The United States mobilised a large coalition of countries to counter the Iraqi aggression and succeeded in obtaining Soviet support in the United Nations Security Council for launching a UN maritime embargo of Iraq. Ellemann-Jensen made clear in his memoirs that he wanted to contribute to the embargo to show the United States that Denmark was a loyal ally, and Hans Hækkerup, then defence spokesman for the Social Democratic Party, shared his ambition. Together they were instrumental in mobilising the parliamentary support required to dispatch the corvette Olfert Fischer to the Persian Gulf (Jakobsen, 2006, p. 93). The deployment went well and was praised by the United States, and this success paved the way for new deployments when the outbreak of civil war in former Yugoslavia triggered new requests for force contributions from NATO Allies and the United States. Denmark quickly positioned itself as a frontrunner on Yugoslavia by making relatively larger force and humanitarian contributions than most other nations. Prime Minister Poul Schlüter (Conservative Party, 1982–1993) explained to the Danish public in his New Year speech on 1 January 1993 that Denmark took the lead to show loyalty and solidarity to NATO and to help the UN to enhance international security (Schlüter, 1993).

This frontrunner policy proved a remarkably effective way to generate status. Denmark caught the world's attention by sending main battle tanks to the UN operation in Bosnia. No nation had ever sent tanks to a UN peace operation before, and the deployment boosted Denmark's status in NATO tremendously. On 29 April 1994 the Danish tank squadron was ambushed by Bosnian Serb forces. The Danish tanks defeated the attacking forces firing 72 shells, and the skirmish made frontpages across the Western world because it was hailed as evidence that the UN, at long last, was fighting back against the Serb aggressors. Photos of the Danish tanks were put up on the walls in the Pentagon, and it was to Denmark that the UN and NATO, the United States and the UK turned for inspiration when they began to develop new doctrines for military operations aimed at enforcing rather than keeping peace (Jakobsen, 2006, p. 2). All this positive attention convinced Danish decision-makers that 'military activism' was an effective way to enhance Denmark's status and

to contribute to international peace and security. The Balkan deployments gave rise to the guideline that has governed Danish military activism up to the present: that Denmark should strive to make the largest force contribution measured per capita to multinational military operations led by NATO Allies. Denmark achieved this in the Balkans in 1994. It had soldiers in Croatia, Macedonia and Bosnia and warships in the Adriatic Sea. In quantitative terms, the average number for the 1990s was 1,940 soldiers, and the record was set in 1999, when 2,323 soldiers were deployed at one time. During the 1990s all three branches and the special forces became involved in international operations (Jakobsen, 2015).

Even though the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 marked a significant change in Denmark's external environment, they did not much change the Danish military activism strategy. The military threat to Danish territory remained zero, and the United States and NATO continued to request contributions for expeditionary operations. Denmark consequently continued to meet these requests, striving to make the largest force contribution per capita. Anders Fogh Rasmussen (The Liberal Party 2001–2009) had become prime minister when the decision to send forces to Afghanistan in 2001 was made. He entered office with an ambition to use 'active participation in international military operations in order to give Denmark a stronger position on the international scene than its size warranted' (Jakobsen, Ringsmose & Saxi, 2017, p. 265).

The Fogh Rasmussen government therefore continued the military activism, contributing to the US-led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and established a very close relationship to the Bush administration. Fogh Rasmussen's support for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was controversial in Denmark, and the decision to contribute forces was only passed with a slim 11 vote majority in Parliament. But it gave Denmark a high status in Washington because only five allies supported the war. The Fogh Rasmussen government also made sure that Denmark stood out from other allies in Afghanistan by making its forces available to the United States and NATO without caveats, and by volunteering for tasks that few other allies were willing to take on. Thus, Denmark was one of only six NATO members deploying combat troops to southern Afghanistan in 2006, and Denmark suffered the highest number of fatalities (44) among the contributing NATO members measured per capita.

The same approach was employed by subsequent governments. Denmark was one of only eight NATO Allies dropping bombs over Libya in 2011 (Danish F-16s dropped 11% of the NATO total), and one of only six NATO members dropping bombs over Iraq in 2014–15 as part of the US-led air campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Jakobsen, Ringsmose & Saxi, 2017).

It is clear from many government statements, as well as from the standards of success employed to evaluate Danish force contributions, that the primary objective was to maintain Denmark's frontrunner status in NATO and the United States. The stated objective was never to win or make a military difference on the ground. Rather, it was to impress NATO allies and especially the United States. Praise from NATO and the US was the measure of success that mattered the most for Danish decision-makers and government officials. Thus, invitations to the White House and US presidential visits became the golden standard, and measured in this way Danish status-seeking was very successful. Danish prime ministers became regular visitors to the White House and all serving US presidents visited Denmark in the 1997–2016 period (Jakobsen, 2021, p. 92).

Security mattered too, of course. But since there was no military threat to Danish national territory, security was understood as promoting international peace and security, and keeping the United States happy so that Denmark could rely on its protection if it ever became necessary again. Ellemann-Jensen regarded status and prestige as a bank account. By putting status into the Danish bank account in Washington, Ellemann-Jensen and other Danish decision-makers expected to be able to call in favours at a later date if necessary. While Trump proved these expectations wrong when he became US president, several Danish decision-makers justified Danish military activism in this way in the 1990–2014 period (Jakobsen, Saxi & Ringsmose, 2017).

To generate the forces required to continue to make the largest force contributions per capita, Denmark replaced its territorial defence force with a smaller expeditionary one. This enabled Denmark to establish and maintain a frontrunner reputation in NATO and the United States while cutting defence spending at the same time. Thus, Denmark maintained a capacity to sustain some 2,000 personnel abroad while cutting defence spending from 1.5% of GDP in 2001 to 1.2% 2014 (Jakobsen & Rynning, 2019, pp. 880–881; NATO, 2025b).

The military activism strategy devised and maintained in this period is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Danish military activism strategy 1990–2014

External changes	- End of Cold War removes military threat to Danish territory - Allied requests for force contributions outside of NATO territory
Ends	- Status: troop contributor frontrunner status established and maintained in NATO and Washington - Security: support international peace and security and maintain US security guarantee in NATO
Ways	- Disproportionate force contributions to military operations involving use of force beyond self-defence backed by large majorities in Parliament - Transformation of large territorial defence force to small expeditionary force
Means	- Disproportionate force contributions measured per capita to dangerous warfighting operations backed by large majorities in Parliament - Declining defence spending
Assumption	Danish security rests on the US security guarantee in NATO

The rise of Russia plus capacity and frontrunner problems 2014–2021

The external changes in the Danish strategic environment caused by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Eastern Ukraine threw the Danish military activism strategy off balance. The Russian aggression in Ukraine increased the threat to Danish national security and it induced NATO to introduce a new triple C approach to burden-sharing consisting of *Cash* (2% of GDP defence spending), *Capabilities* (forces capable of deterring and defending against Russia) and *Contributions* (to NATO operations). Although Denmark paid lip service to NATO's Wales Summit decision in 2014 to 'move towards' spending 2% of GDP on defence by 2024, it cut its defence budget by 15% and reduced the operational capacity of the armed forces in the four years that followed. This not only prevented Denmark from adjusting its military capabilities to the new threat environment, but it also reduced the capacity to make force contributions to NATO's operations. This became visible in 2015 when a military trade union wrote open letters to the prime minister

and all members of the defence committee in Parliament urging them not to extend the F-16 contribution to the US-led mission against ISIL, because their members were worn out (Ritzau, 2015a & 2015b). Their wish was granted and Denmark terminated its F-16 contribution to the operation.

The 2018–2023 defence agreement only pledged to bring Danish defence spending to 1.3% of GDP by 2024 – well short of the 2% target that Denmark had signed up to in 2014 (Forsvarsministeriet, 2018). The presentation of the defence agreement was accompanied by a strategic communications campaign intended to convince the other NATO Allies that Denmark was contributing more than its fair share without spending 2%. The message conveyed in the campaign was that it would be unfair to demand 2% of GDP of Denmark, because it was in the top five of the Alliance when defence spending was measured per capita, and because Denmark got more output from its spending in terms of equipment and force contributions than most other members. Unsurprisingly, the other allies did not buy it, and the Trump administration criticised Denmark heavily for not meeting the 2% spending target. This induced the Danish Government to increase the level of spending to 1.5%, but this was still far from sufficient to meet the capability goals given to Denmark by NATO.

The Danish failure to meet the new burden-sharing demands resulted in a loss of status in NATO and in Washington. Danish governments continued to claim in their public statements that Denmark was a 'core member' of the Alliance, doing more than its fair share, but this view was no longer shared by the other NATO members. As a result, the gap between the Danish status aspirations and its actual status in the Alliance continued to grow. Instead of being perceived as a frontrunner, Denmark was seen as a country punching below its weight (Jakobsen, 2021).

Thus, NATO's 2020 capability review concluded that Denmark was free-riding, and that other allies would be forced 'to pick up part of Denmark's fair share of the Alliance burden' in the event of a military confrontation with Russia (NATO, 2020, p. 6).

The unwillingness to meet the 2% spending target and build a force capable of deterring and defending against the Russian threat reflected the fact that Danish defence strategy was based on the assumption that the United States

would stay engaged in NATO and assist allies in the event of a Russian attack. This assumption meant that Russia was not seen as a direct military threat to the Alliance and Denmark. Hence the lack of urgency to meet Denmark's capability targets.

Table 2 sums up the imbalance in the Danish military activism strategy caused by the rising Russian threat and NATO's new burden-sharing demands.

Table 2. Danish military activism strategy 2014–2021

External changes	- Increased threat to Danish national security caused by the Russian aggression in Ukraine - New NATO triple C burden-sharing demands
Ends	- Status: growing gap between the desired frontrunner status in NATO and Washington, and the actual status as a free-rider unwilling to spend on defence and meet its capability goals Security: support international peace and security and maintain US security guarantee in NATO
Ways	- Disproportionate force contributions measured per capita to dangerous warfighting operations backed by large majorities in Parliament
Means	- Disproportionate force contributions measured per capita - Defence spending well below NATO 2% GDP target
Assumption	Danish security rests on the US security guarantee in NATO

Rescued by Putin: high Ukraine support restores Denmark's frontrunner status

The external shock presented by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 increased the threat to Denmark, but it also presented Danish decision-makers with an opportunity to improve Denmark's battered standing in NATO. They seized it immediately, resorting to the principal way employed in military activism: force contributions. All available forces were put at NATO's disposal:

- A frigate contribution including helicopter with a total crew of up to approximately 150.
- A transport flight contribution of up to approximately 50 soldiers.
- Up to 20 F-16 fighter jets with up to approximately 250 personnel to enforce sovereignty in the airspace over NATO territory.

– Personnel contributions to NATO Headquarters and NATO-operated control, warning and communication units, as well as to NATO's air force structure (Forsvarsministeriet, 2022a).

On 21 April Denmark topped these contributions by announcing a decision to send a combat battalion group of up to 1,000 soldiers to Latvia. According to the defence minister at the time, Morten Bødskov, this deployment made Denmark 'one of the largest contributors of soldiers to NATO's presence in the Baltic countries' (Forsvarsministeriet, 2022b). Thus, Bødskov tried to enhance Denmark's status in the eyes of the other allies by relying on the same method as all other Danish governments since 1990.

The limited operational capacities of the armed forces made it impossible to sustain these contributions for long, however. Fortunately for Danish decision-makers, the United States established a coalition of the willing to help Ukraine. This presented an opportunity to improve Denmark's status by providing military assistance to Ukraine. The fit with the existing military activism strategy was almost perfect; all that was required was a shift from force contributions to donations writ large to help Ukraine in its war of survival against Russia. Denmark seized the opportunity without hesitation. Defence Minister Bødskov used the first donor meeting at the Ramstein airbase on 26 April to make clear that Denmark was standing 'shoulder to shoulder with allies and partners in support of Ukraine', and that it already had 'been very active with a wide range of donations, including weapons' (Forsvarsministeriet, 2022c). Initially, Denmark positioned itself as a top Ukraine donor measured per capita and it worked: Denmark received praise from NATO and an invitation to the White House for Prime Minister Frederiksen from US President Biden. In September 2022 US Secretary of Defense Austin praised his Danish counterpart in the Pentagon for Denmark's 'innovative leadership' on Ukraine and for its force contributions to the NATO mission in the Baltics (Jakobsen, 2023).

Yet, Denmark's efforts to restore its frontrunner status in NATO were still hampered by its unwillingness to spend on defence. Although a new defence agreement adopted in response to the invasion was hailed as major strengthening of Danish defence, spending would not reach 2% until 2033. Denmark, in other words, reacted to the invasion by pushing the spending mark that it had pledged to 'work towards' achieving by 2024, eleven years further into the future. The underlying assumption that had guided Danish

defence policy since 1949 remained intact. Danish decision-makers still took it for granted that Russia would not dare attack NATO and Denmark as long as the United States remained in NATO.

The other NATO members were not impressed. A Nordic prime minister remarked quite humorously to me during a dinner in May 2022: 'When I read the agreement, I thought it was a typing error. I thought that it was supposed to say 2023 and not 2033'. The NATO capability review presented to Denmark in October 2022 criticised Denmark's failure to meet several capability goals so harshly that the Government, for the first time ever, decided to classify it (Ritzau, 2023). Although the decision was made with reference to the Russian threat, it is hard not to believe that the real reason was the abyss between the Government's core member narrative and the free-rider verdict of NATO.

To counter this criticism, the Danish Government began to include its Ukraine donations in its defence spending (Forsvarsministeriet, 2023). While this enabled Denmark to reach the 2% of GDP spending mark in 2023 (NATO, 2025a), this did not stop other NATO members and the chair of NATO's military committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, from continuing to criticise Denmark for not spending enough on its own defence to meet its NATO capability goals (Jakobsen, 2024). Higher capability goals and harsh NATO criticism triggered a change of heart in the spring of 2024, when Prime Minister Frederiksen announced that Denmark would spend 2% on its own defence to reach the new Danish capability goals for 2025 (Statsministeriet, 2024c).

While the restoration of Denmark's lost frontrunner status in NATO and Washington was an important end driving Denmark's Ukraine activism, national security mattered as well. The invasion of Ukraine increased the Russian threat to NATO and Denmark to its highest level since the end of the Cold War. Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen's repeated statements that Russia could not be allowed to win, and that a Russian victory in Ukraine would increase the risk of an attack on NATO underlined this new concern. They suggest that the high level of Danish Ukraine support also was driven by fear of Russia. The invasion of Ukraine thus created a new context where military activism, for the first time, served to enhance Danish status and Danish territorial security simultaneously. This said, the lack of urgency with respect to rebuilding the Danish armed forces suggests that status in NATO and the United States continued to be regarded as more important than security by Danish politicians.

The EU became an important arena for pursuing status and security for the Danish Government after 2022 as well, because the Danish EU opt-out on defence was removed in a referendum on 1 June 2022, when 67% of the population voted in favour of abolishing it, accepting the argument made by a majority of the parties in Parliament that Europe now needed to unite against the Russian threat (Pedersen et al., 2023). This enabled the Danish Government to change its status from outsider to frontrunner on EU defence issues, and it took the lead with respect to coordinating EU support to Ukraine and pushing for the toughest possible sanctions on Russia, even in areas that hurt Danish firms (Olsen, 2023).

The existing attempts to explain the high level of Danish Ukraine support in 2022–2024 reviewed in the first part of this article emphasised the substantial public support as a key explanatory factor. Danish public support is high, indeed. Since the invasion, Eurobarometer polls have consistently showed that an overwhelming majority of the Danish population favour providing financial (+90+%) and military (+80%) support to Ukraine (Nieczypor, Szymański & Tarociński, 2025, p. 3). The extensive public support is underpinned by a strong anti-Russian sentiment. The Danish population was the most anti-Russian in Europe except for Ukraine in 2025 with 75% viewing Russia as 'an enemy they are in conflict with'. The percentage in Ukraine was 95% (Schacke-Barfoed & Michelsen, 2025). In March 2025, 65% of the population supported Danish participation in a possible European security force in Ukraine (Nissen and Holsting, 2025).

Yet public opinion may not have the causal weight that the large N quantitative studies assign it. The high level of public support may well be an effect of the high level of political support rather than a cause of it. All parties in Parliament had supported Denmark's frontrunner position up until December 2024, when the Danish People's Party began to question it (Tørnqvist, & Bøttcher, 2024). Yet it remained in a minority of one and no other political party was campaigning in favour of lower Ukraine assistance in the 2026 Danish general election held on 24 March.

The high level of political support has played an important role in creating the strong public support that Danish military activism has enjoyed since the early 1990s. Political support was key to creating and sustaining the high level of

public support for the force contribution to Afghanistan when the situation deteriorated and Denmark began to suffer casualties (Jakobsen & Ringsmose, 2014). That the public takes its cue from the political level rather than vice versa is also clear from Iraq. The Iraqi case is illustrative, because Danish politicians disagreed on two of the force contributions made: the contribution to the US invasion in March 2003 and the last extension of the Danish contribution to the stabilisation operation in July 2006. These are the only two contributions not to have been passed by broad majorities in Parliament since 1990, and public support was split accordingly (polls only showed 35–46% support). By contrast 77% supported the Danish contribution to the stabilisation operation in Iraq in October 2003 (Jakobsen, 2009, p. 9).

This is most likely also the case with respect to Ukraine. The level of support is likely to fall if more parties than the Danish People's Party begin to argue that Denmark has given more than its fair share, and that other countries now need to step up.

The other explanatory factor emphasised by the large N explanations is the strong Danish economy. It is obviously a facilitating factor, and it is important to note that Danish politicians have never been forced to lend money or cut social welfare in order to pay for their military activism. Danish military activism was financed by cutting the defence budget from 1990 until 2018. While the defence budget was increased temporarily on occasion during this period, defence spending declined from 2% of GDP in 1990 to 1.21% in 2018 (NATO, 2025b). This made it possible to finance military activism without making cuts elsewhere. As a consequence, the Danish population has never been forced to make any visible sacrifices to sustain it. This also applies to the Ukraine activism, because a strong Danish economy has enabled Danish politicians to finance it without borrowing, raising taxes or cutting social welfare in the near term. Denmark had the highest surplus of public finances in the EU in 2019–2024 (4.5% of GDP in 2024), and one of the lowest gross public debts (31.1% of GDP in 2024) (Danmarks Statistik, 2025).

Table 3 summarises the military activism strategy in 2022–24.

Table 3. Danish military activism strategy 2022–2024

External changes	- Increased threat to Danish national security caused by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine - Increased NATO and US pressure on Denmark to meet NATO triple C burden-sharing demands and higher capability goals
Ends	- Security: maintain US security guarantee in NATO and deny Russia victory in Ukraine - Status: restore Danish frontrunner status in NATO, Washington and EU
Ways	- Disproportionate force contributions measured per capita to NATO deterrence operations backed by large majority in Parliament - Top donor to Ukraine in both absolute and relative terms backed by all parties in in Parliament - Meeting NATO's 2% of GDP spending target on defence - Support for toughest possible EU sanctions against Russia and EU support for Ukraine
Means	- Force contributions - Defence spending - Ukraine donations - Russia sanctions
Assumption	Danish security rests on the US security guarantee in NATO

The Trump revolution: military activism becomes the best way to protect Danish territorial security 2025–2026

Trump's return to the White House upended the assumption that Danish defence policy has been based upon since joining NATO in 1949. On 7 January 2025 Trump shocked Copenhagen by threatening to use force to take control of Greenland (Doyle & Hillyard, 2025). The response from the Danish Military Intelligence Service a month later was chilling. It published a threat assessment suggesting that it would only take Russia five years to get ready for a Ukraine-style war against NATO, once the Ukraine War ended. The scenario was based on the assumption that 'the US did not become involved' (Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, 2025). This was the first time ever that the Danish Military Intelligence Service had published a threat assessment saying that the US security guarantee in NATO could no longer be taken for granted.

The political response came a week later when Prime Minister Frederiksen told the Danish Chief of Defence to 'buy, buy, buy' at a press conference. She tasked him to spend an extra DKK 50 billion (USD ~7 billion) on weapons in

2025–26 on top of the approximately DKK 50 billion already allocated (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025; Forsvarsministeriet, 2026). The simultaneous risk of Russian aggression and US abandonment had created a sense of urgency that had hitherto been absent in Copenhagen.

Trump continued to fuel the fear of abandonment, and even aggression, in Copenhagen in the course of the spring by terminating US economic support to Ukraine and making repeated threats to take control of Greenland, abandon NATO and impose peace on Ukraine on Russian terms without consulting Ukraine and its European NATO allies (Jakobsen & Götz, 2026).

The new external context created by Trump made Danish military Ukraine activism more important than ever. The increased risk of US abandonment and large-scale Russian aggression increased the Russian threat to Danish territory. It became imperative to buy more time to rebuild the combat power of the Danish armed forces, and the most effective way to do that was to keep Ukraine in the fight and deny Russia victory. It also became imperative to appease Trump and prevent him from taking aggressive action against Greenland. Denmark's Ukraine support was useful in both regards, as Trump wanted Europe to take greater responsibility in Ukraine. Trump's Greenland threats and his demands for burden-shifting thus made Denmark's Ukraine support crucial for Danish territorial security as well.

Trump's return to power not only increased Denmark's incentive to maintain its frontrunner role in Ukraine, it also led Denmark to become a frontrunner on NATO defence spending for the first time since joining the Alliance. In 2014 Denmark watered down the 2% of GDP spending pledge by inserting the wording, 'aim to move towards the 2%', in the Wales Summit Declaration. In 2025, the Danish Government supported Trump's call for a new 5% defence target in the run-up to the NATO summit in the Hague. Prime Minister Frederiksen even pushed for a 2030 deadline for meeting the 3.5% target on defence spending (the remaining 1.5% is devoted to investment in dual-use infrastructure) instead of the 2035 deadline that was agreed at the summit. She subsequently made clear that this was the Danish ambition, and in February 2026 the Government announced that Danish defence spending and support for Ukraine would reach 3.5% by the end of the year (Poulsen, 2026). Yet it is important to understand that Denmark did not become a frontrunner on defence spending in order to get an invitation to the White House, but to enhance Denmark and Europe's capacity to deter and defend against Russia with limited or no US support.

The focus on national security was also visible in Denmark's presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2025. Supporting Ukraine and strengthening Europe's defence capabilities was the number one priority (Nissen & Holsting, 2025).

Thus, the return of Trump not only made supporting Ukraine more important for addressing the threat from Russia, it also made it key with respect to meeting NATO's burden-sharing goals and demonstrating to the Trump administration and the other EU and NATO members that Denmark was a good ally. The end sought in Washington in terms of status had changed, however. Whereas the principal end of Danish military activism until 2025 had been to obtain invitations to the White House, the focus had now shifted to the other EU and NATO allies that Denmark needed support from in the event that Trump abandoned Ukraine and NATO and took offensive action against Greenland. Plan A in Copenhagen was still to keep the US in NATO and appease Trump by acting as a frontrunner on Ukraine and NATO burden-shifting. But Plan B was to obtain help from EU and the other NATO Allies in case that did not work.

The military activism strategy pursued after the return of Trump is summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Danish military activism strategy 2025–2026

External changes	- Increased Russian threat to NATO and Denmark - Increased threat of US abandonment of Ukraine and NATO, and of US takeover of Greenland - New NATO burden-shifting demands: 5% of GDP defence spending and higher capability goals
Ends	- Security: help Ukraine deny Russia victory and build a European capacity to deter Russia with limited or no US support - Status: frontrunner status on Ukraine and defence spending in EU and NATO
Ways	- Disproportionate Ukraine contributions backed by large majority in Parliament - Meeting NATO defence spending targets, capability goals and requests for troop contributions - Support for toughest possible EU sanctions against Russia and EU support for Ukraine
Means	- Force contributions to NATO - Defence spending - Ukraine donations - Russia sanctions
Assumptions	- The US security guarantee in NATO can no longer be taken for granted - European NATO and EU must be able to deter and defend against Russia with limited or no US support

Conclusion and future implications

The purpose of this article has been to explain why Denmark became the top donor in Ukraine, providing far more support than the quantitative models employed in the existing analyses predict. The explanation provided is that Denmark became the top donor because it wanted to restore its frontrunner status in NATO and with the United States, and to enhance its national security at the same time. Giving more assistance to Ukraine than others in pursuit of status and security was a 'natural' choice for Danish decision-makers, as Defence Minister Poulsen points out in the opening quote of this article. This was because Denmark had used troop contributions in the exact same way to change its status in NATO and Washington from free-rider to frontrunner after the end of the Cold War. This strategy became known as military activism, and the article has shown how Danish governments established and maintained frontrunner status in NATO and the United States in 1990–2014 by making the largest force contributions measured per capita to operations led by NATO allies and the United States.

The strategy collapsed in 2014 when NATO and the United States changed their burden-sharing demands in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea. Danish politicians were unwilling to meet NATO's new demands, and Denmark had lost its frontrunner status when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. The Russian invasion presented an opportunity to restore this status by helping Ukraine, and the Danish Government positioned Denmark as a top donor measured in proportion of GDP. Prior to President Trump's return to the White House, Danish Ukraine support was primarily aimed at restoring Denmark's status in NATO and Washington. Until then, Russia was not perceived as a military threat to Denmark and NATO, because the US security guarantee was taken for granted. This changed when Trump entered office. Trump not only threatened to take Greenland by force, he also reduced US support for Ukraine and threatened to abandon Ukraine and NATO thereby amplifying the Russian threat to NATO and Denmark. This made Ukraine support the most effective way for Denmark to counter the increased threat of Russian aggression as well as the increased threat of American abandonment of NATO.

The importance of helping Ukraine was underlined by the Greenland crisis of January 2026. Fear that Trump, buoyed by the successful military operation against Venezuela, might target Greenland next, prompted the Danish

Government to deploy military forces to Greenland tasked to blow up the runways in Nuuk and Kangerlussuaq and resist in the event of a US attack (Lukiv, 2026). Against this background it is very hard to see Denmark reducing its level of support to Ukraine in the years to come. This would certainly be ill-advised, as maintaining Denmark's top donor position is the best way to enhance Denmark's own security. This is the case for four reasons: 1) It helps to deny Russia victory in Ukraine buying Denmark and the European EU and NATO allies time to build the combat power required to deter Russia with limited or no US support; 2) It reduces the risk of US abandonment and aggression by demonstrating that Denmark is a good ally, taking greater responsibility for European security; 3) It may continue to inspire other allies to follow the Danish example and increase their support to Ukraine as well; and 4) It makes it easier for Denmark to maintain EU and European NATO support for balancing Trump if he tries to coerce Denmark to give up Greenland again.

Notes

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2 Denmark has used force contributions to international operations as a foreign policy tool since the 1920s, so military activism did not start in 1990. For this activism see Jakobsen 2006 and 2015.

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The Greenland crisis: an analysis of Donald Trump's attempts to take Greenland

Mikkel Runge Olesen[1]

Introduction

The date is 7 January 2025. US President-elect Donald J. Trump is hosting a press conference in Mar-a-Lago, Florida. The topics for the conference are manifold, and include Donald Trump's renewed interest in acquiring Greenland. A journalist asks if the President-elect would rule out using military force or economic coercion in the case of Greenland or the Panama Canal. The President-elect answers merely, 'I can't assure you on either of those two.' (WFAA, 2025).

That message hit hard in Copenhagen. The US, by far Denmark's most important ally, had just threatened Denmark and Greenland, albeit indirectly, with military action. In the year that followed that military threat would linger, ever-present in the background, as the Greenland question fell in and out of the political spotlight, until Donald Trump finally took such threats off the table at his speech in Davos on 21 January 2026: 'people thought I would use force. But I don't have to use force. I don't want to use force. I won't use force' (World Economic Forum, 2026). The following day a meeting between Donald Trump and NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte resulted in what Trump called 'a concept of a deal' (Breuninger et al., 2026). The US would now be satisfied with 'total access' to Greenland, not to control the island in its entirety, possibly signalling that a compromise was within sight (Chambers, 2026).

This article seeks to understand one of the most extraordinary foreign policy crises in Danish diplomatic history. How did the Greenland crisis unfold? How should we understand Trump's January 2026 Davos decision to retreat from his maximalist demands regarding Greenland? Finally, how do we make sense of Trump's stated reasons for taking Greenland in the first place?

The article takes four steps. First, it presents the historical US presence in Greenland before 2024. Second, the article establishes the main strategies and constraints for both the Kingdom of Denmark and the US in dealing with the crisis. Third, taking inspiration from classical realists and diplomatic historians emphasising the importance of studying the development of chains of events (e.g. Morgenthau, 1948; Gaddis, 2002; Leffler, 2007), it presents a chronological analysis of how the US and the Kingdom of Denmark each pursued conflicting strategies for Greenland between December 2024 and January 2026. Lastly, the article discusses three main types of official and semi-official explanations of why the Trump administration said it needed Greenland. The results are then discussed in the conclusion.

The US in Greenland and in the Arctic before 2024: a short history

Throughout the 19th century the idea of the US buying Greenland occasionally surfaced, but nothing came of it, and in 1916 the US even confirmed Danish ownership of Greenland as part of its purchase of the Danish West Indies in 1917 – now the US Virgin Islands (Olesen, 2025). US involvement in Greenland therefore first started during the Second World War. In April 1941 Henrik Kauffmann, the Danish ambassador to the US, offered the US base rights in Greenland for the duration of the war against the wishes of the Danish Government, by then occupied by Nazi Germany (Lidegaard, 1996). In 1949 Denmark joined NATO, and in 1951 the Kauffmann Agreement was replaced by a new defence agreement between the US and Denmark that granted extensive base rights to the US, but also, once again, confirmed Danish sovereignty over Greenland (The US and Denmark, 1951; Petersen, 1998).

While the legal language of treaties and agreements is important, it is also important to take stock of how Denmark, and later also Greenland, implemented the 1951 agreement in practice. US security requests in Greenland were generally seen in a very positive light. This de facto 'free hand' in Greenland was much appreciated by the US, giving rise to the idea of a 'Greenland card' in US–Danish relations whereby the US presence in Greenland generated US goodwill towards the Kingdom of Denmark as a whole (Henriksen & Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017). As such, the US generally took care of its own security

interests in Greenland during the Cold War, opening and closing bases according to changes in the overall geopolitical environment and also to shifts in technology. By the end of the Cold War US interest in Greenland primarily came down to establishing early warning systems for missile defence, maintaining defence against air incursions over the North American continent, and the tracking of Soviet submarines (Archer, 1988; Taagholt & Hansen, 2001).

The end of the Cold War saw a marked drop in the geopolitical importance of the Arctic in general and of Greenland in particular. If the US and Russia were no longer on hostile terms, the Arctic as an arena for missiles, planes and submarines to transit mattered much less to both powers. This led the US to close bases in Greenland, including the Greenlandic part of the so-called DEW line, a string of radar stations meant to guard against Soviet/Russian bomber planes passing over Greenland on their way to the US (Archer, 2003; Taagholt & Hansen, 2001). By 2004 the primary US interest in Greenland was missile defence. Towards that end, the US began upgrading the radar in Thule, its sole remaining base in Greenland. As Greenland had by then achieved home rule, the original defence agreement of 1951 was updated to bring in Greenland as a full signatory to the agreement (The US, Denmark and Greenland, 2004; Kristensen, 2004).

The end of the Cold War also fundamentally changed the security dynamics of the Arctic region. As the region lost geopolitical importance, new opportunities arose for Arctic cooperation. This gave rise to the idea of 'Arctic exceptionalism', the idea that the Arctic had become a low-tension region, where conflict was unlikely (Olesen, 2020). The US, for its part, also bought into the idea (White House, 2013), though US nuclear armed submarines never abandoned the Arctic Ocean as a key theatre of operations, and Thule remained an essential piece of the US missile shield (Barnes, 2014; Huebert, 2019). Arctic exceptionalism was not to last, however.

While Arctic exceptionalism had been challenged before, most notably in the second half of the 2000's, it initially survived intact (see Olesen 2020 for a review of the early debates). The first significant cracks leading to the present breakdown came with the Russian annexation of Crimea and hybrid warfare in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, which were answered with Western sanctions, including some in the Arctic. In the years that followed Russia increased its conventional military presence in the Russian Arctic. Furthermore, China – not an Arctic

nation – began to show an increased interest in the region (Olesen et al., 2020, pp. 6–12). All of this culminated in 2018–2019, when the US decisively changed its approach to the Arctic. This became most visible in May 2019 when Trump's Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, announced to the world, just before attending a meeting of the Arctic Council, that the US now saw the Arctic as an 'arena for power and for competition' (US Department of State, 2019). The impact of this on US strategic objectives for Greenland would swiftly follow.

Donald Trump's desires for Greenland became known during the first Trump presidency. The initial background for the story was a planned state visit to Denmark by Donald Trump set for early September 2019. A little more than a month before the visit, however, Donald Trump suddenly announced on Twitter that a key purpose of his trip would be to seek to buy Greenland. The move caught both Greenland and Denmark by surprise. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, who happened to be in Greenland for a visit at the time, responded immediately to the suggestion in the Danish media by labelling it 'absurd' (Kielgast, 2019). The crisis briefly escalated as Donald Trump took offence at the Danish rejection and the use of the word 'absurd' and started criticising Danish defence spending (Trump, 2019). This set off a hectic diplomatic process to set up a phone call between Donald Trump and Mette Frederiksen. After the phone call Donald Trump called the crisis off, saying Mette Frederiksen was a 'wonderful woman' (Nielsen, 2023/2024; Schaart, 2019), which ended the crisis then. But it is also possible that Trump's domestic problems during the final year of his first term, including his first impeachment trial, restrained him from pursuing Greenland further (Cortellessa, 2026). Later that year Mette Frederiksen pledged DKK 1.5 billion for the so-called Arctic Capability Package meant to strengthen situational awareness in the Arctic, a key US concern (Olesen et al., 2020).

Greenland and the Arctic continued to hold a privileged position in Danish security policy during the Biden administration. The 2023 Danish Foreign and Security Strategy specified the Arctic as one out of three areas of focus for Denmark, stressing the need to 'ensure improved surveillance' in the region (Regeringen, 2023, p. 13). However, the process surrounding the implementation of the package ran into trouble. In 2023, for example, the Danish Defence had to cancel the purchase of new drones due to higher than expected costs (Krog, 2023; Mortensen, 2025). The result was that by 2025 only a small fraction of the package had been spent (Just & Nielsen, 2025).

Within Trump's political circles the desire for Greenland had never been completely abandoned. On 22 October 2024, an article in *National Interests* by former Trump officials made an argument for Greenland joining the US in free association (Arha et al., 2024). Just two weeks later, on 5 November 2024, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States of America for a second term. He did not waste time, and on 22 December 2024, even before he entered office, he announced on Truth Social that: 'For purposes of national security and freedom throughout the world, the United States of America feels that the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity' (Trump, 2024).

The US and the Kingdom of Denmark in the Greenland crisis: strategies and constraints

The Greenland crisis moved the foreign policy establishments of both the US and the Kingdom of Denmark into unfamiliar territory. Taking Trump's rhetoric at face value, the US diplomacy and armed forces now had to pursue a policy of 'land grab' towards a treaty ally. The Kingdom of Denmark had to simultaneously reject US advances, and above all avoid an invasion, while at the same time try to preserve its vital alliance with the US, all whilst coming to terms with the fact that 25 years of 'super Atlanticist' Danish foreign policy (see Mouritzen 2007), centred around the idea of positioning Denmark as close as possible to the US superpower, had fundamentally failed.

The US: The challenge of trying to win hearts and minds while threatening with military invasion

The articulated goal of the US administration throughout the crisis has been pretty clear: to gain control of Greenland. Compared to 2019, Trump faced much less internal opposition in his cabinet to the idea than he did during his first presidency (Bose et al., 2026). However, the Trump administration still had the significant problem that the US foreign policy strategy for acquiring Greenland lacked domestic support. Trump's plans for Greenland were inherently unpopular in the American population, especially the idea of launching a military invasion against a small NATO ally, to the extent that even Republican members of congress were sceptical, some openly disavowing the plans and others dismissing the military threats as mere negotiation tactics (Quinnipiac, 2026; Bolten, 2026; Downs, 2026a).

During the first Trump administration the strategy was primarily anchored in the attempt to buy Greenland from Denmark. During the second Trump administration, the attempt at a purchase was less pronounced in favour of two other strategies, which the US pursued simultaneously, at least from 7 January 2025 (the Mar-a-Lago speech) to 21 January 2026 (the Davos speech):

a The US could try to convince the Greenlanders to voluntarily choose the US over Denmark. Indeed, given the 2009 law of Greenlandic self-rule, which clearly stipulated that any decision for independence from Denmark lay with the Greenlandic people (Selvstyreloven, 2009), there would be very little that the Danish Government could or would do, if the US managed to convince Greenland to leave the Kingdom of Denmark of its own free will.

b The US could try to use economic and military threats to force through the issue, up to and including launching a military invasion of Greenland (See also Olesen, 2025). Such threats, however, simultaneously jeopardised US efforts to portray itself as a benign power to the Greenlandic population.

The split between these two essentially incompatible strategies, however, would cause considerable problems for the US throughout the crisis (see below).

The Kingdom of Denmark: To maintain a united front against US pressure while frantically seeking an off-ramp

The Kingdom of Denmark is far from a perfect unitary actor. The Kingdom of Denmark's situation in Greenland is complicated by the internal bargaining between Denmark and Greenland leading to what Clive Archer (2003) and others (e.g. Ackrén, 2019; Olsvig, 2024) have argued constituted not just a classical two-level game with an international level and a domestic level, but rather a three-level game with Greenlandic–Danish relations constituting the third level. Indeed, leading up to the Greenland crisis Danish–Greenlandic relations were troubled by many internal disagreements, especially linked to the colonial past (see for example Jensen et al., 2025 and Uldall, 2026). Add to this the question of Greenlandic independence: a clear majority in Greenland favour independence from Denmark, but only if economic circumstances allow for this without jeopardising the Greenlandic welfare state (Østergaard et al., 2023). These factors all posed a challenge for the Kingdom in terms of keeping a united front.

Additionally, another key challenge for the Kingdom of Denmark was how to reject US pressure while simultaneously seeking conciliation with the US and avoiding that the conflict escalated to military conflict. Here, a key strategic option, also pursued during the first Greenland crisis of 2019, was to try to alleviate US pressure by making defence investments in the Arctic (see also Olesen et al., 2020).

The struggle for Greenland: December 2024 to January 2026

The following section divides the Greenland crisis into two periods: the year running from December 2024 to December 2025, and the month of January 2026 when the crisis reached a peak.

The first year of the crisis: both sides cling to failing strategies

When the crisis broke in December 2024, the initial reaction from both the Danish and the Greenlandic side suggests that they expected a rerun of 2019. Though initially complicated by Greenlandic Minister of Finance Erik Jensen's invitation for Trump to visit Greenland in late December 2024 (Westh, 2025), the Greenlandic Government quickly repeated its rejection of 2019. The day after Trump's 22 December Truth Social announcement Greenlandic Prime Minister Mute B. Egede stated, 'We are not for sale, and we never will be for sale' (Jungersen & Jenvall, 2024). The Danish Government initially took a more cautious approach, perhaps drawing a lesson from the crisis of 2019, and when journalists asked for the Government's position it simply directed them to the Greenlandic statement (e.g. Ritzau, 2024).

After New Year the crisis picked up speed. First came the sensational announcement that the President-elect's son, Donald Trump Jr., was going to Nuuk on 7 January 2025, as a tourist, to 'see a lot of the sights, talk to some people and have a good time' (Bryant, 2025). During his short stay in Nuuk, he handed out dollar bills and MAGA hats (Gettleman, 2025). The real shock came not from Trump Junior, however, but from his father, who held a press conference at Mar-a-Lago on 7 January. The topics of the press conference were many, but when a journalist asked about the use of military force in Greenland, Trump, as mentioned in the introduction, refused to rule it out

(WFAA, 2025). The disagreements with the US over Greenland had officially turned into a full-blown crisis.

The Danish Government initially tried to defuse the situation, the same way it had done in 2019. It arranged for a phone call between Donald Trump and Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. In contrast to 2019, however, sources in the Danish Government told Danish media, the phone call only further inflamed the crisis, and it confirmed Mette Frederiksen in the belief that Trump was deadly serious about annexing Greenland this time around. Additionally, Mette Frederiksen herself told reporters that Trump had threatened Denmark with economic sanctions (Trier, 2025). Nevertheless, the Danish Government tried hard to accommodate the US on issue areas where it was deemed possible, above all on security. On 27 January 2025, it launched a new comprehensive Arctic package – or sub-agreement – to heighten security in the Arctic, totalling DKK 14.6 billion (FMN 2025a). Exactly how much of the package was new and a reaction to Trump is unclear, however, as hefty investments in the Arctic had been underway for years (See for example FMN, 2023, p. 6).

As January neared its end, the first reputable poll on Greenlandic attitudes concerning Greenland being a part of the US came out. The results were clear: 85% of Greenlanders rejected becoming part of the US. As has been the case for many years, there was still also a sizable majority for independence from Denmark, though the question becomes less clear if independence is to come at the cost of the Greenlandic welfare state (Verian, 2025).

On 11 March 2025 elections were held in Greenland. Prospects for independence and the pressure from the US dominated the elections. Pele Broberg, leader of Naleraq, the party most in favour of very rapid independence from Denmark, expressed himself as positive towards independence with a possible free association agreement with the US, though he also stressed that the Greenlandic population had no desire to become part of the US (Broberg, 2025). The two governing parties, IA and Siumut, suffered serious setbacks. The formerly small, centre-right party Demokraatit became the largest party with Naleraq coming in second. The parties then began government negotiations (Asmussen, 2025). On 13 March 2025, Trump repeated his desire for Greenland to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte. That led the leaders of all five parties elected to the Greenlandic Parliament (Inatsisartut) to issue a joint statement condemning US ambitions and attempts to foster strife in Greenland (Nielsen et al., 2025).

On 22 March 2025 Greenlandic newspaper Sermitsiaq announced that they had information suggesting that the second lady Usha Vance would visit Greenland to witness a dog sledge competition (Veirum et al., 2025). It set off a cascade of resistance to the US in Greenland, since the Greenlandic Government negotiations were not complete. As a result, Usha Vance's ambitions of meetings with Greenlandic elites largely fell through (Fauerholdt, 2025; Reinwald & Honoré, 2025). In the end, Usha Vance ended up going to the American Pituffik Space Base instead of Nuuk and Sisimiut as originally planned. Even more importantly, Vice President J.D. Vance, suddenly decided to join the trip himself (Bugge, 2025).

The visit had originally had all the markers of a charm offensive: a sign that the US was beginning to understand that convincing the Greenlanders to join the US voluntarily was the only way to succeed short of military invasion. J.D. Vance's speech at Pituffik Space Base, on 28 March 2025, starkly criticised the Danish security efforts in the Arctic, but also stressed the Greenlandic people's rights to freely choose the US (The American Presidency Project, 2025). This concession, however, was almost immediately contradicted by Donald Trump stating in a phone interview that 'There's a good possibility it could be done without military force', but 'I don't take anything off the table' (Welker & Marquez, 2025). On that same day, all Greenlandic parties in the Greenlandic Parliament, save Naleraq, formed a coalition government with Demokraatit chairman, Jens-Frederik Nielsen, as new prime minister (Dall, 2025).

Though the crisis did not continue to capture the headlines of the world media, it persisted behind the scenes. The *Wall Street Journal* had previously announced in May 2025 that the US intelligence agencies had received orders to step up intelligence gathering in Greenland (Long & Ward, 2025). During the summer a story broke, based on Danish investigative journalism, that the US had initiated influence campaigns in Greenland. Furthermore, Danish police intelligence, PET, confirmed that Greenland was a target for influence campaigning, 'especially given the current situation' (Fastrup & Quass, 2025). The Danish Government stuck to its strategy, however, of trying to appease the US through security investments. On 10 October 2025, the Danish Government launched yet another Arctic package, sub-agreement 2 on the Arctic, totalling a further DKK 27.4 billion (FMN, 2025b). The Greenland crisis returned to international attention in December 2025 with the appointment of Jeff Landry, governor of Louisiana, as special envoy to Greenland with the explicit purpose

of acquiring Greenland in a move widely seen as escalatory by Denmark (Stockwell & Tuncer, 2025).

Overall, the first year of the crisis saw a very uneven US approach to Greenland. The US strategy for winning hearts and minds in Greenland was consistently disrupted by Trump's military threats. Instead of making inroads, Greenlandic popular opinion hardened against the US and most leading Greenlandic politicians turned against them. At the same time, however, the period also saw failure of the Danish strategy of trying to appease the US by making defence investments in Greenland. Denmark notably earmarked at least DKK 42 billion for Greenlandic security in 2025 alone, but when Trump mentioned Danish investment plans on 4 January 2026 (also see below), he ridiculed them as amounting to nothing more than a dog sledge (White House, 2026). With the strategies of both the US and the Kingdom of Denmark failing, the crisis was arguably even further from resolution at the end of 2025 than it had been when it first made the news a year earlier.

January 2026: Escalation leads to decisive diplomatic standoff

The crisis reached new heights in early 2026. On 4 January 2026, Donald Trump reiterated his desire for Greenland in perhaps his strongest terms yet: 'We need Greenland from a standpoint of national security. And Denmark is not going to be able to do it, I can tell you that!' (White House, 2026). The comment came right on the heels of the successful US military operation against Venezuela. Moreover, just the day before Katie Miller, wife of White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, had posted a picture of Greenland painted with the American flag and with the caption 'SOON' (Miller, 2026).

This led Mette Frederiksen to openly state that she took Donald Trump very seriously concerning Greenland, but that the idea of a military invasion of Greenland would have catastrophic consequences:

'I will also make it clear that if the US chooses to attack another NATO country militarily, then everything stops, including NATO, and thus the security that has been established since the end of the Second World War', (Starcevic, 2026).

This escalation quickly galvanised European support for Denmark and Greenland. On 6 January the leaders of the main European powers, UK, France,

Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland, joined Denmark in a statement rejecting the US advances (Sheerin & Pomeroy, 2026).[2] Just hours afterwards, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt confirmed such fears:

'The President and his team are discussing a range of options to pursue this important foreign policy goal, and of course, utilising the US Military is always an option at the Commander in Chief's disposal' (Sheerin & Pomeroy, 2026).

On 13 January 2026, Denmark and Greenland met with Vice President J. D. Vance and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. While the meeting ended with an 'agreement to disagree' and with plans to set up a technical work group to explore common ground, any pause in the conflict was quickly shattered when the White House announced that the technical meetings that had been agreed to were meant to work through how the US could acquire Greenland (Skarum, 2026).

The Danish Government then announced new exercises in Greenland: Operation Arctic Endurance. The official reason given was to protect the island against Russia and China. 'We actually expect an increase in Russian activities in the coming years, and... we have to start training and increase the presence here in the Arctic to protect NATO's northern border', said the Chief of the Joint Arctic Command in Greenland, Danish Major General Søren Andersen (Grønholt-Pedersen & Laizans, 2026). Most importantly, the mission quickly received support from seven NATO countries: the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and Finland. Critics were quick to point out, however, that the actual threats from Russia and China to Greenland were close to non-existent, while the threat from the US dominated the news worldwide (see for example Dagaev, 2026). Moreover, although the seven countries sent only token forces, the reinforcements had all the characteristics of a trip-wire defence: the few troops from the seven countries would be unlikely to make a difference in case of a US invasion, but their presence in the midst of a potential invasion would threaten to trigger a war between the US and those countries (Brewster, 2026).

Trump certainly saw it as such a step. He quickly retaliated by threatening tariffs on the seven countries and Denmark. The response from Denmark, in particular, was consistent with the official explanation for the sending of the troops, expressing surprise that the US would take offence for troops sent

exactly to enhance Arctic security (Eklund, 2026), implicitly referencing Trump's repeated calls for a greater effort. The responses of some of the Allies were more direct. French President Macron condemned the tariffs swiftly on X: 'No intimidation nor threat will influence us, neither in Ukraine, nor in Greenland, nor anywhere else in the world when we are confronted with such situations' (Macron, 2026). Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson did the same, writing on X that 'We will not let ourselves be blackmailed. Only Denmark and Greenland decide on issues concerning Denmark and Greenland' (Kristersson, 2026). Hardly the reactions of countries that had been misunderstood.[3]

The effect of the sending of the troops cannot be overstated. Trump, notably, did *not* react to the European military posture by increasing the military pressure on Greenland. Instead, he chose to pivot to economic threats against Europe, and here the balance of power between the US and Europe is far more equal than in the security sphere. The EU vowed to consider an appropriate response to Trump's threats, including the so-called 'trade bazooka' – the EU's Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI) – allowing the EU to put significant restrictions on US business practices in the EU (Di Sario, 2026). Furthermore, it pulled the rug from the US–EU trade deal that was to be ratified in the European Parliament (Griera, 2026). Jeopardising the trade deal was a significant problem for Trump, as the deal was very advantageous to the US and had been hailed as a Trump victory at the time. The Greenland crisis thereby threatened one of his greatest successes. 'We can't exchange sovereignty for economic interests', one European diplomat remarked (Di Sario, 2026). At the same time markets fell, initially by around 2%, and pressure started building among Congress Republicans while public opinion dropped to just 4% for military invasion according to one poll (Bolten, 2026; Downs, 2026a, 2026b).

At this point Trump started retreating. In his speech at Davos, he still thundered on about the need for Greenland, but he vowed for the first time to abstain from using military force. He even remarked on how the crisis had caused the stock market to take a dive – a clear result of the European threats (World Economic Forum, 2026). The final climb-down came shortly after with his meeting with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte. The tariffs were called off, and the concept of a deal was proclaimed to the world (Breuninger et al., 2026). The call for sovereignty over Greenland, for so long an uncompromising demand from the US president, was replaced with a call for unrestricted access.

Trump declared victory by securing for the US negotiations a deal that, quite possibly, could come to closely resemble the deal with The Kingdom of Denmark that the US had already had in place for 75 years. If so, the crisis may end up giving the US concessions that could have been gained simply by asking nicely. The damage to US–Danish relations was significant, however. The second phase of the crisis saw, as shown above, a hardening in the rhetoric and actions by which the Danish Government rejected the US advances, making it difficult to believe that these leading politicians would be comfortable putting their trust in the US again anytime soon. Furthermore, a look at the wider Danish political environment confirms the far-reaching damage caused by the crisis. Deputy chairman of the Danish Foreign Relations Committee, Lars Christian Brask from the Danish party the Liberal Alliance, stressed the US 'betrayal' of a close ally (Avrahami, 2026), and the US brand in Denmark plummeted with 60% of Danes viewing the US as an adversary and only 17% as an ally (Wellman, 2026).

Overall, the culmination of the crisis in January 2026 marked shifts of strategy on both sides. On the one hand, the US continued to aggressively seek Greenlandic support for US annexation. In so doing, however, the US managed to further alienate the Greenlanders and unify Denmark and Greenland, culminating in the statement by Greenlandic Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen on 13 January 2026, that if forced to choose between Denmark and the US right now, he would choose Denmark (Danielsen, 2026). At the same time the US hardened its approach to Denmark, stepping up both military and economic coercion. It achieved little, however, beyond forcing through a change of Danish strategy away from appeasing the US through defence investments towards mobilising allied military support for Greenland directed against the US. Denmark managed to mobilise EU support to resist the US, which, coupled with a market dip and growing Republican scepticism about the endeavour, likely led to the Trump retreat in Davos.

Why Trump tried to take Greenland: unpacking Trump's narrative

Having discussed *how* the Greenlandic crisis played out, the article will now move to consider the official explanations for *why* it happened in the first place by focusing on the validity of the three main types of arguments used either directly or indirectly by the Trump administration: security arguments, economic arguments and prestige arguments tied to ambitions of territorial expansion.

The security arguments

Of all arguments used by Donald Trump during the Greenland crisis the security argument has been the most persistent. It started out simple: Denmark had not done a good job in protecting Greenland – and by extension the US. According to this argument, the US had to take over Greenland because Denmark had demonstrated neither the will nor the ability to take care of Greenlandic security itself. Trump put words to this argument by asserting that the waters around Greenland were compromised: 'You look outside, you have China ships all over the place. You have Russian ships all over the place. We're not letting that happen. We're not letting it happen' (WFAA, 2025).

To be clear, there are no indicators of any Russian or Chinese ships near Greenland in recent years (Reuters, 2026; Gad, 2025b). But if we take Trump's statement figuratively, the US had long pushed for Denmark to do more on situational awareness. In concrete terms that especially meant boosting capability to detect Russian planes, but also, increasing capability to detect Russian submarines. Indeed, Trump also occasionally took aim at the Danish failure to implement the 2019 Arctic capability package (World Economic Forum, 2026). Add to this, the US plans to upgrade its missile defence systems by constructing a 'Golden Dome' over the US. In Donald Trump's words, 'We are building the Golden Dome, we call it...and it works much better if we have access to Greenland' (FOX News, 2026). Specifically, according to some sources, Greenland would be important for radar capacity, and because Greenland's 'dry air' will make it ideal for communication with space-based elements of the dome (Davis, 2026).

Looking at the US National Defense Strategy of January 2026, it was also very much about preventing 'US adversaries from controlling or otherwise exercising undue influence' over Greenland (mentioned twice), as it was about maintaining US military and commercial access to Greenland (mentioned three times) (DoW 2026, pp. 2, 3, 9, 16, 19). This fear may be tied to previous Greenlandic interest in attracting Chinese investments. However, it bears mention that such attempts never amounted to much and were generally also opposed by the Danish Government, most famously when the Danish Government offered the Greenlandic Government a very favourable deal for financing new airports designed to keep China out (Pedersen & Olesen, 2025).

The security arguments further crumble upon closer inspection. For even if Denmark had failed to caretake US security interests in Greenland, there was nothing preventing the US from taking care of that issue itself, as it had done during the Cold War and afterwards, by using the existing 1951/2004 defence agreement between the US, Denmark and Greenland. In other words, as long as Denmark and Greenland would continue to honour the defence agreement and continue to implement it in a way favourable to the US – which had been true for 75 years, and which every indicator would seem to suggest would remain stable – then there really should not be a problem (Gettleman et al., 2026. For scholarly critique of Trump's security argument for taking Greenland see Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2025; Dean & Lackenbauer, 2026; Warren, 2026).

However, if we are to take the security argument seriously, then some of those assumptions must be wrong. A closer look at some of Trump's own statements may provide a clue. In an interview with the BBC, Donald Trump was confronted with this exact argument – that the US could already do what it wanted in Greenland – to which he responded that he still needed ownership of Greenland:

'Because, when you own it, you defend it. You don't defend leases the same way. You have to own it… Countries have to have ownership, and you defend ownership, you don't defend leases. And we'll have to defend Greenland' (Smith 2026).

In an interview with the *New York Times* the day after Trump expanded on this point, underlining that ownership was important to him because he needed it 'psychologically' for success (Sanger et al. 2026). Moreover, it is no secret that

the Trump administration has long harboured deep mistrust in the value of alliances (Benitez, 2019, p. 193), which would include worry over the alignment of an independent Greenland, see for example the testimony to Congress by former Trump official Alexander Gray (2025).

Taken together, it raises the question of whether Donald Trump's actions could be explained by his distrust of allies and fears for what might happen the day an independent Greenland would stop being forthcoming to the US. Or, alternatively, if Trump's maximalist demands could be seen as an attempt to move the Overton window for what Denmark and Greenland would be willing to accept by making outrageous statements about annexation. According to a Trump aide, interviewed for a Time article in February 2026, the Trump strategy could simply be, 'browbeating people and getting the closest deal to what you want' and then simply coming back later for 'another bite' (Cortellessa, 2026). If either case is true, however, the strategy backfired since Trump did not manage to acquire Greenland at that time, and both Denmark and Greenland are likely significantly less enthusiastic allies now compared to before the crisis. And while Danish defence investments may have gone up because of the crisis, the extensive damage done to US–Danish and US–European relations would seem a stark price for a relatively modest (in US defence budget terms) defence spending increase in Greenland.

Finally, the fact that Trump did not follow through in the end, when it became clear that a serious conflict with Europe was likely, further casts doubts on the security argument as the main driver for President Trump. As such, Trump's lack of commitment to annexing Greenland when faced with real resistance would seem more consistent with an opportunist having his bluff called, than a state leader worried about acute security interests of his nation.

The economic security argument

Trump has often mentioned the need for Greenland 'for economic security', and he indeed did so already in his Mar-a-Lago speech of 7 January 2025 (WFAA, 2025). At the core of this argument is the assertion that Greenland's significant deposits of rare earth minerals are critical for the American tech industry. Again, on the surface, the argument makes sense. The US has a strategic interest in managing access to these minerals in the face of a Chinese near-monopoly, and the Greenlandic resources are likely to become

more accessible as global warming progresses (Deaux, 2025). Additionally, the December 2025 US National Security Strategy stressed the need for 'strengthening critical supply chains in this Hemisphere' (White House, 2025b).

However, there are several problems with this line of reasoning. First of all, that even with global warming it is unclear exactly how many potential sites will actually become profitable. Infrastructure is lacking and even with global warming the climate is will still be extreme (Schwartz & Baskaran, 2026; Pappas, 2026). But even if rare earth mineral extraction can become profitable in time, why invade if you can just buy it? Greenland has been actively seeking to attract American investments for rare earth mining for years (Gad, 2025a). While there are a few examples, such as the Kvanefjeld project, where environmental concerns have complicated the Greenlandic enthusiasm for mining (Alomar & Gad, 2024), this is by no means true for all deposits. Add to this that Trump himself stated in his Davos speech that the security argument was more important than rare earth minerals:

'It's [Greenland] not important for any other reason [except security]. You know, everyone talks about the minerals, there's so many places… There's no rare earth. No such thing as rare earth. There's rare processing, but there's so much rare earth, then to get to this rare earth, you have to go through hundreds of feet of ice' (World Economic Forum, 2026).

There have been other motives mentioned, however, when it comes to economic security. Trump's administration has included several prominent members of the US tech industry. During his brief tenure in the administration, Elon Musk was arguably the most prominent of these, but US ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark, Ken Howery, also deserves mention. These magnates have been linked to various grand projects such as the building of a new free city in Greenland, using Greenland as a staging area for going to Mars or as a major cooler for AI data centres (Levy & Ulmer, 2025. For an overview of the rise of private actors in the US space industry see Tjalve, 2024). This would be less about the US economy as a whole and more about the wellbeing of a few wealthy business elites. As of yet, however, it is unclear how big of a reach these individuals have in the Trump administration, as well as why such plans would necessarily depend on Greenland becoming part of the US.

The prestige argument

The idea that Donald Trump may in fact not be primarily motivated by strategic concerns at all, but rather driven by expansion for its own sake, tied to concerns for personal or national prestige and ego, has gradually been gaining ground. That is, the idea that Donald Trump wants to go down in history as one of the great American presidents that *expanded* America (Leonard, 2025; Fraser, 2026). Looking at Trump's speeches, his inaugural address also touches on this – although indirectly – stressing that,

'The United States will once again consider itself a *growing* nation – one that increases our wealth, *expands our territory*, builds our cities, raises our expectations, and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons. And we will pursue our *manifest destiny* into the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars.' (20 January 2025, White House, 2025a, author's italics).

The examples of Donald Trump seeking prestige are many. His renaming of the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America would be another example of this tendency, as would be his willingness to accept the Nobel Peace Prize medal from Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado (Holland et al., 2026), or – according to *New York Times* reporting – that he expressed his interest in becoming the fifth president on Mount Rushmore during his first presidency (Martin & Haberman, 2020). Of particular importance for the present study, however, is Trump's angry text message to Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, linking his decision to try to take Greenland with Norway's (the Nobel Committee) decision to pass him over for the peace prize:

'Dear Jonas: Considering your Country decided not to give me the Nobel Peace Prize for having stopped 8 Wars PLUS, I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace...The World is not secure unless we have Complete and Total Control of Greenland.' (The American Presidency Project, 2026).

Furthermore, there have also been other clear signs in his pursuit of Greenland of prestige concerns. Perhaps most prominently, both Trump and his supporters have continuously posted pictures of Greenland covered in the American flag. As late as 20 January 2026, Donald Trump posted two AI generated pictures on his Truth Social profile: one showing him in his office looking at a map of

Greenland covered in the American flag (Trump, 2026a), and another showing himself, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President J.D. Vance planting an American flag on Greenland (Trump, 2026b).

However, perhaps the strongest argument in favour of the prestige motivation is the uncompromising approach that Donald Trump pursued for over a year. Security and economics should, in principle, be issue areas suitable for compromise, because they are seldom 'all or nothing' dilemmas. Despite Trump's assertions regarding his psychological need for ownership, compromises on base rights and mineral deals are possible. The prestige associated with expanding America is arguably different with no obvious middle ground to be found. Either the US is added in a little parenthesis next to Greenland on globes and in atlases across the world, or it is not.

Conclusion

The Greenland crisis marks a critical moment in Euro-Atlantic relations that may impact transatlantic relations for years to come. Understanding how the crisis evolved as well as Trump's stated reasons for pursuing the confrontation is therefore critical. If Trump's approach was merely a negotiating strategy, the US will have expended decades of goodwill on what may turn out to be only minor tweaks to an existing agreement. If Trump was serious, it would seem to constitute a major foreign policy blunder, as he would then have both underestimated the Kingdom of Denmark and Europe's will and ability to resist, and completely ignored that they had very few options available to them except to fight US demands, because surrender risked undermining the very foundation of both NATO and their sovereignties.

By studying the chronological development of Trump's drive for Greenland 2024–2026, this article has argued that the crisis can best be understood by dividing it into two distinct phases. In the first phase the US pursued an uneven strategy of simultaneously trying to win hearts and minds in Greenland while also threatening with invasion. This approach, essentially attempting to fuse together two fundamentally incompatible strategies for acquiring Greenland, may explain why the US found it difficult to achieve progress. At the same time, however, the article also finds that the Danish strategy during the first phase of the crisis of trying to appease the US with defence investments in

Greenland failed as well. On that basis, the confrontation in January 2026, phase two analysed in this article, was in many ways the logical conclusion of both parties realising the futility of their existing strategies. The US stepped up its focus on achieving its goals through military and economic coercion, while Denmark and Greenland gave up appeasing the US, focusing instead on mobilising European allies and on standing firm in rejecting the US advances – with military means if necessary. The result was that Trump backed down, providing the potentially vital lesson for Europe that standing firm against Trump may sometimes yield better results than appeasement.

Due to the inconsistency between goals and means, this analysis has found many logical inconsistencies in Trump's reliance on the security argument for needing to take Greenland. If Trump truly worried about security, nothing in the original agreement with Denmark and Greenland would prevent him from doing something about it. Even if we accept that Donald Trump's low confidence in alliances and/or fear of difficulties with a future independent Greenland may make a takeover seem somewhat more appealing, there is nothing to indicate that the US would not maintain the military option at such a later point. And while a point could be made for Trump raising the Overton window to get Denmark to invest more on defence in Greenland, the price for achieving such a limited goal would seem unreasonably high. After all, the Greenland crisis is likely to have lasting negative ramifications for transatlantic relations for years to come. Most importantly, however, the fact that Trump *backed down* when faced with determined political resistance from Europe, makes Trump seem less the concerned leader dealing with an acute security problem and more an opportunist trying to get away with a quick land grab.

The economic hypothesis seems even less well founded. Nothing would prevent the US from investing in Greenland under the current rules, and little would stop the US from using its political weight to keep the Russians and the Chinese out. Finally, even Trump seemed to acknowledge, at least around the time of the Davos meeting, that extraction of Greenland's rare earth minerals may not necessarily be all that profitable.

Conversely, the article found solid indicators for the validity of the prestige argument and the drive for territorial expansion for its own sake, as also argued by Fraser (2026) and Leonard (2025). Trump himself started out his second term making the territorial expansion a priority. He has consistently

shown his willingness to prioritise prestige throughout his presidencies, be it by talking about adding his face to Mount Rushmore, or through his push for the Nobel Peace prize – including his acceptance of the prize from Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado – or by wanting to plant an American flag on Mars. Finally, his rhetoric and, indeed, his image postings concerning Greenland have continuously come back to the motif of himself as a president who expanded America. The prestige argument therefore appears the most plausible of the official or semi-official arguments investigated here, though the existence of other non-public motivations for Trump's actions cannot of course be ruled out.

Where does this leave us now? Even if the crisis were to end now along its current trajectory, the damage to transatlantic relations has already been substantial. US–European relations have suffered in general, and US–Kingdom of Denmark relations have suffered in particular. For decades the US had no better friend in Europe than Denmark, giving rise to the idea of Danish super Atlanticism, the idea harboured by successive Danish governments that Denmark's interests were best served by maintaining as close a bond to the US as possible. This kind of thinking is now gone, and unlikely to re-emerge anytime soon, even under a new president. Instead, the feelings of betrayal associated with the Greenland crisis are likely to haunt US–Danish relations for many years to come.

Notes

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2 Poland, however, was internally divided on the Greenland issue between the centre-left Donald Tusk government supporting Denmark and Greenland, and the pro-Trump Polish President Karol Nawrocki declaring that Europe should stay out of the conflict (Mularczyk, 2026).

3 Not all the allies were prepared for the Trump backlash. For example, the Trump tariffs triggered much concern in Finland, whose foreign service tried to dismiss the incident as a misunderstanding (Toosi et al., 2026).

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Denmark's agency in the 2025 UNSC: a small state's exercise of 'voice' and 'loyalty'

Bjarke Zinck Winther[1]

Introduction

On 7 June 2024, Denmark was elected to a seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for 2025–2026 with 184 votes out of 192.[2] The result reflected broad international support for Denmark's candidature and marked a return to what remains the most authoritative body in the international security architecture. (Pay & Postolski, 2022, p.1.) The membership was framed as an opportunity to strengthen respect for international humanitarian law, support peace operations and conflict prevention, advance the women, peace and security agenda, and highlight the security consequences of climate change (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2024). These priorities are also reflected in Denmark's broader foreign and security policy strategy documents (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2023).

Denmark entered the Council when its effectiveness was widely questioned, not because institutional constraints were new, but because they were highlighted concerning ongoing conflicts. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza demonstrated how vetoes, threatened vetoes, and hardened positions among the permanent members could block collective action, a pattern that has characterised the Council at various points throughout its history (Winther, 2020, pp. 76–77). Recent assessments likewise note that the continued use of the veto and declining unanimity in voting have reinforced the structurally constrained environment in which elected members operate (Security Council Report, 2026). The Council's agenda was shaped by intensified rivalry among China, Russia, and the United States, and elected members operated in a setting where decisive outcomes on the most politically charged conflicts did not materialise.

This coexistence of constraint and ambition is not unique to the present period, nor is it unusual in Danish foreign policy. It has long been a characteristic feature of Denmark's international conduct that efforts to promote rules, norms and institutional solutions take place within the limits set by great power politics (Fritzler, 2024; Ingebritsen, 2002). What highlights the present case is that this duality unfolds at a moment where political tensions between Denmark and its most important ally, the United States, have been unusually visible in public debate. The question is therefore not whether Danish diplomacy is constrained, but how Denmark navigates a situation in which alliance dependence and normative ambitions coexist under conditions of strain.

Recent developments suggest that the degree and form of Denmark's dependence on the United States cannot be treated as entirely static. In public statements following renewed tensions over Greenland and uncertainty about future US commitments to NATO, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has emphasised that the US is no longer Denmark's nearest ally (but still the most important) (*Berlingske*, 2026). Such statements indicate an adjustment in Danish strategic discourse. In practical terms, Denmark continues to rely on the United States as its indispensable military ally, and Danish foreign policy still operates within a framework where access, credibility, and influence are closely tied to the transatlantic relationship (*The Guardian*, 2025).

The article does not assume that Danish voting behaviour in the UNSC simply reflects American pressure. Rather, the point of departure is that Denmark conducts its UNSC diplomacy under conditions where the United States remains the most consequential external reference point. This reflects both a substantive and a methodological choice. Substantively, Denmark remains firmly anchored in the transatlantic alliance with the relationship to the United States continuing to constitute the central pillar of Danish security policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2023), even as recent frictions, including renewed US interest in Greenland and broader uncertainty about long-term NATO cohesion, have underscored the need for greater flexibility in Danish strategic positioning. For Denmark this creates a persistent balancing act that also shapes its conduct in the Security Council, where Danish diplomacy must remain close to the United States while simultaneously defending principles associated with a rules-based international order, including sovereignty, treaty commitments, and international law.

Methodologically, the relationship with the United States provides a particularly revealing lens through which Danish agency can be observed, because the asymmetry of the alliance makes both alignment and divergence politically meaningful. While Denmark balances its relations with several major actors, including European partners and other permanent members, the United States functions as a consistent reference point that allows variation in Danish positioning to be traced across cases. The Security Council offers a suitable arena for this analysis, since voting behaviour and official statements make it possible to identify patterns of alignment, qualification and differentiation even when broader diplomatic relations appear tense.

Denmark's behaviour in the UNSC can therefore be read as a pragmatic approach to diplomacy. It involves continuous judgement about when to focus on thematic priorities, when to seek influence through allies, and when to avoid confrontations that could undermine broader strategic relationships. To analyse these choices, the article draws on Albert O. Hirschman's framework of 'exit, voice, and loyalty' (Hirschman, 1970). Originally developed to explain how actors respond to dissatisfaction within organisations, Hirschman distinguishes between three basic strategies: exit, meaning withdrawal from cooperation; voice, meaning attempts to change outcomes through protest or articulation of preferences; and loyalty, meaning continued alignment despite disagreement in the expectation that influence can be preserved from within. Applied to UNSC practices, the framework provides a vocabulary for analysing how a small, allied state may combine alignment with selective contestation without assuming either full autonomy or simple subordination.

In the UNSC context, exit is not a meaningful option. Membership itself is the principal instrument through which Denmark seeks influence, and withdrawal would amount to abandoning that platform altogether. The analysis therefore focuses on the interaction between voice and loyalty. Loyalty is understood here as continued alignment with the United States in situations where maintaining alliance credibility seems to be judged politically important. Voice refers to instances where Denmark articulates positions that qualify, reinterpret, or oppose US preferences to advance its own priorities. The purpose of applying the framework in this way is not to reduce Danish diplomacy to alliance management alone, but to examine how agency unfolds when a small state operates inside an asymmetric but enduring security relationship.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section situates the analysis within existing debates about agency in the Security Council and outlines realist, liberal and constructivist perspectives on small state influence. A subsequent section places Denmark's current membership in historical and foreign policy contexts. The article then returns to Hirschman's framework in greater detail and uses it to analyse patterns of Danish voice and loyalty in the Security Council during 2025.

Taken together, the analysis moves beyond the binary question of whether Denmark matters in the Council. Instead, it asks how Denmark operates considering normative predispositions and practical constraints.

Analysing and understanding agency in the UNSC

Agency in the UNSC has traditionally been analysed through the major theoretical traditions of International Relations. While the empirical complexity of Council politics resists reduction to any single framework, Niels Schia, based primarily on analyses of Norway's agency, has suggested that most interpretations of UNSC dynamics tend to cluster around realist and liberal perspectives (Schia, 2017). Collectively, these approaches describe a setting in which structural constraints are strong, yet not absolute, leaving limited but meaningful room for manoeuvre for elected members.

From a realist standpoint the Council is chiefly an arena of great power politics. The permanent members possess superior material capabilities, privileged institutional positions, and veto prerogative, enabling them to shape outcomes in line with their strategic interests (Bosco, 2009; Boulden, 2006). In this view elected members have limited independent influence. Their relevance derives primarily from their willingness to align with permanent member preferences, or at least from their ability to avoid obstructing them. Taken to its logical conclusion, a realist reading implies that Denmark's influence is meaningful mainly when it operates within the political space tolerated by the permanent members. Denmark may participate actively in negotiations and debates, but decisive outcomes ultimately hinge on interactions among the major powers.

Agency in the Council, however, is not limited to formal voting. Influence may also be exercised through informal consultations, corridor diplomacy, and processes of information sharing that shape how positions develop before a vote takes place. Studies of diplomatic practice emphasise that such face-to-face interaction, emotional signalling, and personal trust can affect negotiations in ways that are not visible in formal records (Holmes, 2018; Keys & Yorke, 2019). This article does not capture these dimensions systematically. Instead, it focuses on diplomatic behaviour in the form of voting patterns and official statements. This choice reflects a methodological delimitation rather than a claim that agency only exists in and through the vote.

Liberal institutionalist approaches offer a more permissive interpretation of agency. Rather than viewing the Council solely as a transmission belt for great power preferences, institutionalist scholarship emphasises how international organisations create arenas in which cooperation, bargaining and influence become possible even for small states. (Moravcsik, 1997; Einsiedel et al., 2015) The existence of formal procedures, agenda-setting mechanisms and rules of participation allows elected members to exercise forms of influence that would not be available outside the institutional framework (Farrall et al., 2020). From this perspective, Council membership itself provides access, information, and opportunities for coalition-building that can amplify the agency of small states, even when the distribution of power remains unequal.

Constructivist and related perspectives push the analysis further by foregrounding ideas, identities, and discourse (Klotz, 2006). Rather than focusing only on who prevails in formal decision-making, constructivist scholarship examines how meanings are produced and stabilised within international institutions. From this angle, the Security Council is also a site where states jointly shape understandings of what counts as a security problem, which forms of behaviour are legitimate, and which norms deserve protection (Hurd, 2008). Small states may therefore exercise influence by framing conflicts in humanitarian terms, emphasising civilian protection, or linking emerging issues such as climate change to international peace and security.

Such discursive interventions do not always translate directly into observable policy outcomes, and it is often difficult to establish clear causal links between normative arguments and concrete decisions. Nevertheless, existing research

suggests that framing and agenda-setting can shape negotiations, open space for compromise, and in some cases contribute to longer-term institutional change (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Arias, 2022). The gradual consolidation of norms such as the Responsibility to Protect is frequently cited as an example of how discursive processes within the United Nations may acquire material significance over time (Welsh, 2013).

These theoretical perspectives generate different expectations about the scope of small-state agency. Rather than choosing between these traditions, the present analysis treats them as background assumptions about the environment in which agency unfolds.

Hirschman's approach is not a general theory of international politics, but a mid-level analytical framework concerned with how actors respond to dissatisfaction within organisations and institutional settings. In International Relations scholarship the framework has been used to analyse situations in which exit is costly, influence is unevenly distributed, and continued participation remains necessary (Helfer, 2005; Lavelle, 2007; Morse & Keohane, 2014).

Seen in this light, Hirschman's concepts provide a bridge between structural and agential perspectives. Realist accounts explain why constraints are strong, institutionalist accounts explain why participation still matters, and constructivist accounts explain why language and framing can influence outcomes. The distinction between loyalty and voice captures how states navigate this environment by choosing when to align, when to seek influence from within, and when to articulate positions that diverge from those of more powerful actors.

In this article, loyalty refers to situations where Denmark's voting behaviour aligns with the United States. Voice refers to situations where Denmark votes differently than the US or qualifies, reinterprets, or opposes US preferences in statements. The framework thus serves as an analytical tool for categorising observable patterns of behaviour rather than as a theory explaining why those patterns occur.

The theoretical backdrop allows Denmark's UNSC practice to be analysed not as a simple choice between obedience and independence, but as a continuous process of calibration.

The Danish context

Denmark entered the Security Council in 2025 with a self-understanding as a state that combines strong alliance anchoring with an active commitment to multilateral institutions and liberal international norms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2024; Engberg-Pedersen and Pedersen, 2024, pp. 107–110, 2024). This dual orientation was not new. Rather, it reflected a durable pattern in Danish foreign policy in which close ties to the United States have coexisted with sustained efforts to shape international cooperation through institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union (Henningsen, 2022; Jakobsen, 2016).

Historically, Danish foreign policy has oscillated between adaptation to external power structures and attempts to exercise influence through institutional engagement. Midtgaard characterised Danish diplomacy as marked by a pragmatic acceptance of structural constraints alongside a persistent belief that small states can increase their room for manoeuvre through active participation in international organisations (Midtgaard, 2005). This tradition rested on the assumption that Denmark could not meaningfully alter the distribution of power in international politics but could affect how that power was exercised by investing in rules, procedures, and cooperative frameworks. Similar interpretations can be found in earlier Danish foreign policy analyses, which describe a consistent effort to combine alliance reliability with active multilateral engagement (Henningsen, 2024, pp. 60–65).

This continuity does not eliminate the analytical puzzle outlined in the introduction. Rather, it sharpens it. If Danish foreign policy has long combined alliance loyalty with multilateral activism, the question is how this balance is maintained under conditions in which tensions with the United States have become unusually visible, and where UNSC politics has been dominated by highly polarised conflicts. The present membership therefore provides an opportunity to examine not whether Denmark balances these considerations, but how this balancing is performed in practice when both alliance expectations and normative commitments are simultaneously under pressure.

Denmark's previous membership of the Security Council in 2005 to 2006 illustrates how this dual orientation has been translated into diplomatic practice. In her retrospective account, Ellen Margrethe Løj emphasises that

Denmark entered the Council with realistic expectations about structural constraints, but also with a clear ambition to identify areas where sustained diplomatic effort could produce incremental results (Løj, 2007). This approach was not unique to Denmark but reflected a broader pattern among elected members seeking to balance relations with major powers while still exercising influence. What appears distinctive in the Danish case is the degree to which this strategy was consciously articulated and pursued as part of a broader foreign policy tradition.

Four areas stand out in Løj's account: Denmark's chairmanship of the counter terrorism committee, its leadership of the Liberia sanctions committee, its co-chairing with Tanzania of negotiations on establishing the Peacebuilding Commission, and its engagement with the situation in Sudan. In each case, Danish influence derived less from headline positions than from sustained work on drafting, committee leadership, and coalition-building. Løj characterises Denmark's most notable achievement as its role in the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission, which was the result of prolonged negotiation over institutional design rather than a breakthrough on an active conflict (Løj, 2007, pp. 38–41). These examples illustrate how influence was pursued through concrete practices such as drafting compromise language, coordinating with elected members, chairing subsidiary bodies, and working through procedural negotiations with both permanent and elected members.

This experience resonates with Henningsen's later analysis of Denmark's small state strategy in the UNSC. Drawing on archival material from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Henningsen argues that Denmark, in 2005 to 2006, developed what he describes as a theory of success centred on flexibility, broadly defined priorities, and proactive engagement (Henningsen, 2022, pp. 130–134). Rather than leaving priorities undefined, Danish diplomats formulated thematic ambitions that were sufficiently open to allow adaptation to shifting political circumstances. This made it possible to pursue influence through drafting work, coalition-building, and active participation in committees and subsidiary bodies, while avoiding early commitments that might prove impossible to realise.

Henningsen identifies several recurring elements in Denmark's approach: extensive preparation before entering the Council, close bilateral diplomacy with key actors including permanent members, coordination with European

and Nordic partners, and a willingness to invest resources in technically demanding but politically less visible issue areas (Henningsen, 2022, pp. 132–138). He also notes that Danish diplomats sought to translate their close relationship with the United States into access and credibility, while using this access to introduce concerns related to international law, peacekeeping, and human rights into discussions otherwise dominated by security considerations. This could take the form of proposing language changes during drafting processes, coordinating positions within the group of elected members, or using committee work and mandate negotiations to raise issues that might not otherwise have reached the Council agenda.

The lesson suggested by former experiences is not that Denmark exercised decisive influence, but that Danish diplomacy has repeatedly sought to shape outcomes incrementally through negotiation practice and coalition work. Influence has typically been pursued by participating actively in drafting processes, coordinating with like-minded states, and using institutional roles such as committee chairmanships to affect language, procedures and agenda-setting. This pattern is consistent with a broader Danish foreign policy profile in which contributions to peacekeeping, support for the women, peace and security agenda, and engagement in multilateral rule-making have been used to maintain visibility and credibility within alliance structures (Jakobsen, 2016; Engberg-Pedersen and Pedersen, 2024, pp. 114–116).

Contemporary Danish foreign policy discourse reinforces this interpretation. The government's Foreign and Security Policy Strategy emphasises what has been described as pragmatic idealism, an approach that seeks to reconcile value-based ambitions with a sober assessment of power realities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2023; Engberg-Pedersen and Pedersen, 2024, pp. 106–108). Pragmatic idealism stresses the importance of strengthening multilateral cooperation and a rules-based international order through partnerships and alliances rather than through unilateral moral positioning. Engberg Pedersen and Hundsbæk Pedersen note that the concept remains deliberately flexible, but that its core logic is clear: Denmark seeks to pursue normative objectives in ways that remain compatible with existing alliance commitments and power structures (Engberg-Pedersen and Pedersen, 2024, pp. 112–113). This logic closely mirrors the historical patterns identified by Midtgaard, Løj, and Henningsen.

Overall, these strands point to a Danish foreign policy tradition that can be described as calibrated activism. Denmark has sought to remain visible, constructive and norm-oriented in multilateral settings, but rarely at the expense of its core alliance relationships. Examples include Denmark's longstanding engagement in United Nations peacekeeping, its support for the women, peace and security agenda, and its consistent effort to operate through coalitions and institutional procedures rather than unilateral initiatives (Jakobsen, 2016). Independence and alignment have therefore not been treated as opposites, but as interdependent elements of a broader strategy.

Denmark's current membership of the Security Council should be understood against this background. The behaviour observed in 2025 does not represent a break with earlier practice, nor a simple exercise in following United States preferences. Rather, it reflects a continuation of a longstanding Danish approach to international politics characterised by working from within institutions, investing in alliances, and searching for limited but meaningful spaces in which to advance normative priorities.

This context helps explain why Hirschman's concepts of voice and loyalty are particularly well suited to analysing Danish Security Council agency. Danish diplomacy has historically relied on loyalty to powerful partners as a source of access and credibility, while simultaneously cultivating selective forms of voice through institutional engagement, coalition-building, and norm promotion. The following section develops this framework in greater detail and specifies how it is applied to Denmark's Security Council practice in 2025.

'Exit', 'voice' and 'loyalty'

Hirschman's basic argument is that actors confronted with decline, disagreement, or perceived malfunction tend to choose from among three broad responses. They may exit, meaning that they withdraw their participation. They may exercise voice by articulating dissatisfaction and attempting to change the situation from within. Or they may remain loyal, continuing to participate despite misgivings, in the expectation that continued engagement will preserve influence or improve outcomes over time.

In this article, loyalty does not primarily refer to loyalty to the UNSC as an institution. Instead, it refers to Denmark's sustained loyalty to its core alliance

relationship with the United States. This choice reflects the empirical reality that Denmark's security policy has long been anchored in the transatlantic relationship, primarily through NATO and the United States security guarantee (NATO's Article 5), and that this dependence makes alignment with United States preferences politically consequential even in multilateral settings (Jakobsen, 2016, p.751; Henningsen, 2022, pp.134,137). Loyalty, in this sense, denotes a strategic orientation in which Denmark seeks to maintain credibility as a dependable ally to preserve access, trust, and influence within alliance structures.

Such loyalty may at times constrain Denmark's room for manoeuvre. Support for United States-led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, has often been interpreted as reflecting the importance attached by Danish governments to alliance credibility, even where domestic or international support has been contested (Jakobsen, 2016). At the same time, loyalty can also function as a source of influence. Close alignment with a great power may provide access to information, participation in drafting processes, and opportunities to shape negotiations from within, which are advantages that are often unavailable to states perceived as unreliable partners (Long, 2017; Carvalho & Neumann, 2015). Loyalty is therefore treated here not as the absence of agency, but as one possible mode through which agency is exercised.

Voice, by contrast, refers to situations in which Denmark articulates its own priorities, including in cases where these do not fully align with United States preferences. Voice may take several forms. It can involve sponsoring or co-sponsoring draft resolutions, proposing language emphasising humanitarian law or civilian protection, speaking in open debates, or working through coalitions of elected members to advance specific agendas. In earlier Council memberships, Danish diplomats have used committee work, drafting negotiations, and coordination among elected members to introduce concerns related to peacekeeping, human rights, and the women, peace and security agenda into discussions otherwise dominated by the permanent members (Løj, 2007; Henningsen, 2022). Such interventions rarely overturn the preferences of major powers, but they may influence wording, sequencing, or the scope of mandates.

Voice and loyalty are therefore not treated as mutually exclusive categories. They coexist in tension, and the balance between them varies across

issues and situations. Excessive reliance on voice may jeopardise access and reduce the willingness of powerful partners to accommodate Danish concerns. Excessive loyalty, on the other hand, risks undermining Denmark's credibility as a norm-oriented actor and weakening the rationale for seeking influence through multilateral institutions. The analytical task is therefore not to determine whether Denmark is loyal or vocal, but to examine how Danish diplomacy calibrates between these two orientations.

This also clarifies the role that loyalty plays in the analysis. Loyalty may function as a constraint when the need to maintain alliance credibility limits the scope for open disagreement. It may also function as a resource, when the trust generated through alignment makes it possible to exercise influence in less visible ways. These two logics do not operate simultaneously in every case, but they often coexist across different issue areas, making it necessary to examine patterns of behaviour rather than isolated decisions.

Applied to Denmark's UNSC membership in 2025, Hirschman's framework directs attention to how Denmark positions itself across different types of issues. It raises questions about whether voice is most visible in thematic areas such as international humanitarian law, women, peace and security, or climate security; whether loyalty is most pronounced on geopolitically central conflicts; and whether Denmark attempts to convert alliance loyalty into opportunities for limited forms of voice.

The framework also resonates with the mentioned broader notion of pragmatic idealism in Danish foreign policy. Danish governments have rarely sought either full independence from great power politics or unconditional alignment. Instead, they have attempted to navigate between normative ambitions and structural constraints. Hirschman's concepts provide a vocabulary for analysing this navigation in concrete cases.

In the sections that follow, Denmark's statements, voting behaviour, and hence diplomatic positioning during 2025 are examined through this lens. The focus is not on whether Denmark determined outcomes on Gaza or Ukraine, outcomes largely shaped by the permanent members, but on how Denmark chose to position itself, where it invested political capital, and how it balanced principled articulation with alliance maintenance.

Data and methodology

The analysis draws on all official Security Council voting procedures conducted throughout 2025 (United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library, 2025).[3] The dataset consists of recorded voting outcomes and official meeting records containing member states' statements delivered in connection with these votes. All statements have been consulted in English.

Formal voting records and public statements do not capture the full spectrum of influence within the Council. Informal negotiations, closed consultations, and so-called silent vetoes shape both agenda-setting and final outcomes, yet these dynamics are not directly observable in the material used here. Nevertheless, they are indirectly reflected in the official record insofar as informal processes shape which draft texts reach a vote and how member states publicly justify their positions. The principal limitation of the study is therefore not the absence of informal politics as such, but the inability to trace precisely how specific informal interactions translate into statements or voting decisions.

Methodologically, the analysis combines material and interpretive approaches. Voting outcomes are treated as materially observable indicators of positioning. Statements, by contrast, are analysed interpretively as expressions of political alignment, signalling and framing. This reflects a broadly constructivist orientation, in the sense that language is understood not only as descriptive, but as constitutive of political relationships and meanings. Statements are therefore examined as sites where degrees of support, distance, and contestation become visible, even in situations where voting behaviour remains constant. This also aligns with insights from the literature on diplomatic ambiguity, where meaning is often conveyed through nuance, omission and carefully calibrated phrasing (Byers, 2004, 2021).

To capture variation within both voice and loyalty, the analysis operationalises each category along a moderate-to-tenacious continuum. This approach builds on a categorisation scheme developed in earlier work (Winther, 2020), adapted here to the study of UNSC practice rather than reform debates. The operationalisation is based on the relationship between voting behaviour and discursive positioning in relation to the United States, and on the degree to which Danish statements reproduce, qualify, or challenge the framing associated with American positions.

Position on continuum →	Tenacious loyalty	Moderate loyalty	Moderate voice	Tenacious voice
Voting behaviour	Votes with US	Votes with US	Votes with US	Votes differently from US
Discursive positioning	Reproduces US framing	Adds limited Danish emphasis	Qualifies or challenges US framing	Explicitly contests US positions
Degree of alignment	Highest alignment	High alignment	Mixed (alignment + distance)	Lowest alignment
Form of agency	Reinforcement	Calibrated support	Discursive differentiation	Open contestation

The distinction between moderate loyalty and moderate voice is necessarily interpretive, because diplomatic positioning is often expressed through nuance rather than through formal disagreement (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019). Rather than treating this as a weakness, the analysis treats it as a reflection of how UNSC diplomacy operates, where meaning is frequently conveyed through wording, emphasis and framing rather than through voting behaviour alone. The purpose of the categorisation is therefore not to impose rigid boundaries, but to capture the nuanced ways in which small-state diplomacy unfolds within asymmetric alliances.

Analysis

Denmark participated in 48 Security Council votes on draft resolutions and amendments during 2025. Of these, Denmark voted the same as the United States in 41 instances and differently in 7 instances. In all cases of divergence, Denmark supported draft resolutions that the United States either abstained on or opposed, primarily concerning Gaza and, to a lesser extent, Ukraine-related procedural votes. Denmark did not cast a negative vote against a draft resolution supported by the United States.

The analysis does not provide a full case-by-case discussion of all votes. Instead, it focuses on selected cases that most clearly illustrate the different modes of agency identified in the table above. These cases are chosen because they provide the clearest empirical expressions of each category,

rather than because they are statistically representative of the full dataset. The purpose of the analysis is therefore to demonstrate how the categories operate in practice, not to quantify their distribution across all observations.

It should be noted that 2025 cannot be regarded as typical year for the UNSC. A significant portion of the Council's agenda was dominated by the war in Gaza, an issue on which US positions frequently diverged from those of most other Council members. This context made potential tensions between alliance considerations and normative positioning more visible than in less polarised periods.

This distribution sets an important empirical baseline. Denmark's most common pattern of positioning was alignment with the United States. This should not be interpreted as evidence that Denmark acted against its own preferences, nor that Danish positions were determined by American pressure. Rather, within the observable domain of votes and statements, Danish positions most often remained compatible with those of the United States.

Analysing and illustrating examples on the continuum

Tenacious loyalty

Tenacious loyalty refers to situations where Denmark voted with the United States and accompanied this alignment with statements that mirrored US problem definitions, causal narratives, and policy preferences. In these cases, Danish agency was aligned with US-led agendas rather than through the introduction of distinct Danish framing. This categorisation does not imply that Denmark acted against its own preferences. Rather, it denotes situations in which Danish positioning remained fully compatible with US policy direction and framing, without attempts to qualify or reinterpret it publicly.

The driving force behind tenacious loyalty should not be reduced to either automatic alignment or simple agreement. Instead, this pattern tended to emerge in cases where the issue at hand did not conflict with core Danish priorities, where the political and normative stakes were relatively limited, and where alignment with the United States could be maintained without

undermining Denmark's broader diplomatic profile. In such situations, reinforcing US positions could serve both as alliance maintenance and as a low-cost signal of reliability, without foreclosing the possibility of exercising voice in other contexts.

Several 2025 cases fall into this category, particularly on sanctions regimes and mandate renewals where the United States acted as penholder and where the issues were more procedural or technical in nature. This pattern is visible in cases such as the renewal of sanctions on Sudan and South Sudan, the extension of reporting on Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, and the renewal of the UNIFIL mandate in Lebanon.

Concerning the renewal of sanctions on Sudan and South Sudan through resolution 2791 (Sept. 12 / vote / 2791), all fifteen Council members voted in favour. Denmark explicitly expressed support for the resolution and aligned itself with the United States' overall assessment of the sanctions regime. No Danish effort to qualify or nuance the framing is visible in the meeting record. Denmark's positioning therefore reflected not only voting alignment but also discursive reinforcement of the US-led approach.

A similar pattern appears in the July 15 resolution on continued reporting on Houthi attacks in the Red Sea (July 15 / vote / 2787). Denmark voted in favour alongside the United States, while Russia, China and Algeria abstained. The resolution reflected earlier US–Greek initiatives that framed the Houthis' maritime attacks primarily as a security threat requiring sustained international monitoring. Denmark did not seek to broaden the framing to regional political dynamics, Gaza, or Iranian proxy relations, nor did it distance itself from the resolution's narrow focus. This absence of alternative framing, combined with voting alignment, places the case within tenacious loyalty.

The August 28 renewal of the UNIFIL mandate in Lebanon (Aug. 28 / vote / 2790) also displays important elements of tenacious loyalty. The resolution was adopted unanimously. In its statement, the US emphasised that the mission was approaching its end and highlighted Israel's right to defend itself against Hezbollah. Denmark stated that it supported the mission and looked forward to the Secretary-General's recommendations regarding its future (Aug. 28 / record / 2790). Danish policy had previously favoured continuation of the UNIFIL presence (Permanent Mission of Denmark to the UN, 2025), yet

by adopting the language of 'when' rather than 'if' the mission ends, Denmark implicitly aligned with the US preference for a time-limited mandate. While Denmark refrained from reproducing the US emphasis on Israel's security prerogatives, the overall positioning remained compatible with the trajectory associated with the US and therefore falls closer to tenacious than to moderate loyalty.

Resolution 2799 on removing Syria's transitional president and interior minister from ISIL and Al-Qaida sanctions lists (Nov. 6 / vote / 2799) constituted a more ambiguous case. Denmark voted in favour alongside thirteen other members, while China abstained. Denmark did not deliver a statement in connection with the vote. In Security Council practice, the absence of a statement does not necessarily indicate a lack of political intent. Diplomatic positioning is often expressed implicitly, and states may choose not to articulate positions publicly where these are already reflected in the statements of others or where silence avoids unnecessary political exposure (Zaczynska et al., 2024; Morse & Coggins, 2024). In this case, alignment with the United States and the absence of public qualification suggest acceptance of the US-led adjustment of the sanctions regime. The most parsimonious interpretation is therefore moderate to tenacious loyalty rather than voice.

The concentration of tenacious loyalty in technically oriented resolutions should not be dismissed as analytically trivial. While these cases involve lower political stakes, they reveal a consistent pattern in which Denmark actively refrains from complicating US-led initiatives and framings and limits the articulation of distinct priorities. This restraint is not automatic but constitutes a strategic choice of when not to exercise voice. In this sense, tenacious loyalty contributes to maintaining Denmark's credibility as a predictable and cooperative ally, thereby preserving the political space within which more assertive forms of voice can be exercised in other contexts. The significance of this category therefore is not in the individual cases themselves, but in the systematic variation they reveal. Denmark calibrates its behaviour across issue areas, reserving contestation for situations where core priorities are engaged while reinforcing alignment elsewhere.

Moderate loyalty

A substantial share of Denmark's Council activity in 2025 fell within the category of moderate loyalty. These were situations where Denmark voted in line with the United States and broadly supported the direction of US-sponsored or US-aligned initiatives yet accompanied this alignment with statements that introduced or highlighted Danish emphases, qualifications, or normative framing. Here Denmark did not challenge the overall political direction associated with the US position, but neither did it fully reproduce the American framing. Moderate loyalty therefore describes cases where alignment was maintained at the level of voting, while statements signalled a degree of independent positioning without amounting to explicit disagreement.

Compared to tenacious loyalty, moderate loyalty appears more frequently in cases where the political stakes were higher or where the issue touched more directly on themes central to Danish foreign policy, such as humanitarian access, civilian protection, or international law. In these situations, Denmark remained within the orbit of US-led outcomes but used the available discursive space to emphasise its own priorities. This pattern is visible in cases concerning Yemen, Libya, Sudan-related sanctions, and the authorisation of a stabilisation force in Gaza, where Denmark supported the resolutions but introduced normative qualifications in its statements.

The January 15 resolution on Yemen and Houthi attacks in the Red Sea illustrates this dynamic (Jan. 15 / vote / 2768). The resolution, co-penheld by Greece and the United States, passed with twelve votes in favour and abstentions by China, Russia and Algeria. The US representative framed the Houthi threat through an Iran-centred lens, while China acknowledged the Houthi problem but linked it to Gaza and criticised the omission of this broader context.

Denmark voted in favour and aligned itself with the resolution's condemnation of Houthi attacks. Denmark's representative stated that Denmark had hoped for an even stronger condemnation of the Houthis, while refraining from mentioning Iran, Gaza, or Israel (Jan. 15 / record / 2768). This supported the US focus on the Houthis as the immediate problem while avoiding endorsement of the broader proxy narrative. The combination of voting alignment and selective rhetorical restraint is characteristic of moderate loyalty.

The January 16 update of the Libya sanctions regime showed a similar pattern (Jan. 16 / vote / 2769). The United Kingdom-penheld resolution passed with fourteen votes in favour and a Russian abstention. The United States emphasised that modifications to the arms embargo would enable legitimate Libyan authorities to improve border security, while Russia warned against repeating the 2011 mandate abuse[4] and argued that sanctions could obstruct humanitarian shipments.

Denmark voted in favour and stated that the resolution was positive because it facilitated the delivery of emergency aid (Jan. 16 / record / 2769). Denmark thus supported the outcome while justifying its position through humanitarian considerations rather than through the security logic emphasised by the United States. This placed the case within moderate loyalty, as Denmark remained aligned with the overall direction of the resolution while introducing its own normative emphasis.

The February 17 renewal of Sudan and Darfur-related sanctions further fits this pattern (Feb. 17 / vote / 2772). Denmark voted in favour and did not deliver a statement. The absence of a statement does not in itself indicate disagreement, and in this case there is no evidence of discursive distancing from the US position. Denmark supported the resolution without publicly qualifying its framing, but the lack of explicit reinforcement places the case closer to moderate than to tenacious loyalty.

The May 30 extension of sanctions on South Sudan also belongs in this category (May 30 / vote / 2781). Denmark voted in favour and did not make a statement. As in the previous case, the available material provides no indication of disagreement, but neither does Denmark actively reproduce the US narrative. Moderate loyalty therefore remains the most consistent classification.

The November 17 resolution authorising an international stabilisation force in Gaza adds further nuance (Nov. 17 / vote / 2803). Denmark supported the resolution but stated that it would have preferred greater clarity regarding the role and composition of both the Board of Peace and the stabilisation force, and stressed that implementation must comply with international law and respect Palestinian self-determination (Nov. 17 / record / 2803). Denmark endorsed the overall framework while inserting normative qualifications. This combination of support and limited reservation falls within moderate loyalty.

Across these cases Denmark used the available discursive space to shape the normative vocabulary surrounding US-aligned initiatives without contesting their core political direction. Moderate loyalty therefore reflects calibrated agency rather than passive alignment. Denmark remained within the orbit of US-led outcomes but sought to preserve a distinct normative profile through selective qualification.

Moderate voice

Moderate voice captures situations in which Denmark voted in line with the United States but used statements to qualify, challenge, or partially reframe key elements of the problem definitions, causal narratives, or policy emphases associated with US positions. In these cases Denmark accepted the overall political direction of the resolution yet signalled substantive distance in its public justification. The defining feature of moderate voice is therefore not voting divergence, but the presence of explicit discursive qualification of the framing linked to the US. Agency is exercised through interpretation and articulation rather than through blocking outcomes.

Compared to the categories of loyalty, moderate voice tends to appear in cases where Denmark supported the practical outcome of a resolution but sought to emphasise legal, humanitarian, or institutional considerations that were less central to the US framing. These situations often involve operational mandates or regional security questions where Denmark did not oppose the measure itself but wished to signal that its support rested on a different understanding of the problem or of the appropriate justification. Moderate voice therefore reflects an attempt to preserve alliance alignment while maintaining a distinct normative profile.

The September 30 resolution authorising a mission to combat gang violence in Haiti illustrates this pattern clearly (Sept. 30 / vote / 2793). The resolution, penheld by Panama and the US, was adopted with twelve votes in favour and abstentions by China, Pakistan and Russia. The US representative emphasised the stabilising potential of multinational security cooperation.

Denmark voted in favour but delivered a statement that departed in important respects from the overall US framing (Sept. 30 / record / 2793). Denmark stressed the need for adequate funding and drew attention to language

authorising the 'neutralisation' of armed actors, warning that such wording created risks for children associated with gangs. By highlighting humanitarian and legal concerns that were not central to the US's framing, Denmark supported the resolution while simultaneously questioning elements of its underlying logic. This combination of material alignment and explicit qualification places the case within moderate voice.

A similar pattern appeared in the July 15 resolution extending reporting requirements on Houthi attacks in the Red Sea (July 15 / vote / 2787). Denmark voted in favour alongside the United States, while Russia, China and Algeria abstained. In its statement, Denmark emphasises concern for civilian shipping, the need for de-escalation, and the importance of respect for international law, while avoiding references to Iran or proxy dynamics (July 15 / record / 2787). The United States framed the issue primarily in terms of regional security and deterrence, whereas the Danish framing remained within legal and humanitarian registers. Denmark therefore supported the practical measure but refrained from reproducing the broader strategic framing associated with the United States. This discursive differentiation, combined with voting alignment, corresponds to moderate voice.

Across these cases, Denmark accepted US-backed outcomes while consistently inserting humanitarian, legal or institutional considerations that qualified the dominant framing. Moderate voice thus operated through discursive distance without material rupture. Denmark did not seek to obstruct decisions, but used statements to signal that alignment did not imply full agreement with the US interpretation of the situation.

This pattern highlights the importance of distinguishing between agreement on outcome and agreement on meaning. Even where voting behaviour remained identical, Danish statements sometimes mark clear differences in emphasis, justification, or normative priority. Moderate voice therefore appears as a recurring strategy in situations where Denmark sought to remain aligned with the United States while preserving interpretive autonomy. The category makes it possible to capture this form of agency, which would remain invisible if analysis relied on voting behaviour alone.

Tenacious voice.

Tenacious voice denotes situations in which Denmark voted differently from the United States and articulated positions that directly challenged the policy direction or normative framing associated with US preferences. In these cases, Denmark accepted visible political distance from its principal ally and justified this divergence through explicit reference to legal, humanitarian or political principles. Tenacious voice therefore represents the most explicit observable form of Danish agency within the framework used in this article.

In contrast to moderate voice, tenacious voice appears only in a limited number of highly contested cases. These instances were characterised by pronounced political disagreement within the Council and by issues that Denmark framed as involving core principles, such as international humanitarian law, protection of civilians, or the rejection of false equivalence between aggressor and victim. In such situations Danish representatives accepted open divergence from the US, while expressing disagreement through legal and institutional language rather than through confrontational rhetoric. Tenacious voice thus combined material opposition with a restrained diplomatic style.

The February 24 resolution on Ukraine constitutes a central example (Feb. 24 / vote / 2774). Denmark abstained on the US-penheld resolution, supported amendments identifying Russia's actions as a full-scale invasion, opposed Russian amendments that sought to focus on the 'root causes' of the conflict, and rejected what it described as a false equivalence between aggressor and victim (Feb. 24 / record / 2774). Denmark thus diverged materially from the United States while articulating a clear normative position grounded in sovereignty and international law. This combination of voting divergence and explicit justification fits squarely within the category of tenacious voice.

The June 4 draft resolution calling for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza represents an even clearer case (June 4 / vote / S/2025/353). Denmark co-sponsored and voted in favour of a text that was vetoed by the US. In its statement, Denmark criticised Israel's blockade of humanitarian assistance and framed the situation primarily in terms of international humanitarian law. Denmark thus knowingly supported a resolution that placed it on the opposite side of a US veto, while avoiding personalised criticism of Washington. The divergence concerned the substance of the resolution rather than the alliance

relationship itself, illustrating how disagreement was contained within a legal and institutional framework.

The September 18 Gaza ceasefire draft reinforces this pattern (Sept. 18 / vote / S/2025/583). Denmark was among the organisers of the initiative, spoke on behalf of the elected members prior to the vote, defended the resolution following the US veto, and rejected attempts to portray the text as reflecting a narrow or partisan agenda (a critique raised by Israel). Denmark thereby assumed a visible role in advancing a position that did not command US support. This case also illustrates that tenacious voice may involve leadership within coalitions of elected members, rather than purely bilateral disagreement with the United States.

Across these cases, divergence occurred primarily in situations where Denmark framed the issue as involving fundamental legal or humanitarian principles and where continued alignment would have undermined the credibility of those positions. Even in these instances, Danish statements avoided direct criticism of the United States and remained within a legal and institutional vocabulary. Tenacious voice therefore did not take the form of confrontational rhetoric, but of principled disagreement expressed through restrained but unambiguous diplomatic language.

The limited number of such cases underlines the selectivity of Danish contestation. Open divergence from the US appears mainly on highly politicised conflicts, often in coordination with other elected members. Tenacious voice was therefore not a default mode of behaviour, but a strategy employed in situations where the costs of alignment, measured in terms of normative consistency and political credibility, seem to have outweighed the benefits of maintaining alignment.

Calibrated small-state agency under great power constraint

This article has analysed Denmark's agency in the UNSC during 2025 under conditions of structural and political constraint created by the permanent members, and by the US as Denmark's principal ally. The analysis does not

reveal a simple pattern of either alignment or independence. Instead, Danish behaviour is best understood as a continuous calibration between loyalty and voice, where positioning varied across cases within the framework of an enduring asymmetric alliance. Hirschman's framework, operationalised through the distinction between tenacious and moderate forms of loyalty and voice, makes this pattern visible across otherwise diverse cases.

Across the empirical material, the most consistent observable pattern was voting alignment with the US. This finding should be interpreted with caution. The analysis does not prove that alignment reflects Danish preference accommodation in each individual case, nor that it captures the full spectrum of Danish diplomacy, which also unfolds through informal negotiations, coalition building, and interaction with other partners. Rather, within the observable domain of votes and statements, Danish positions most often remained compatible with those of the US. In the analytical framework applied here, this compatibility is understood as loyalty in Hirschman's sense: a strategic orientation towards maintaining alignment within an asymmetric alliance while exercising agency from within it.

At the same time, alignment did not imply passivity. A substantial share of cases classified as moderate loyalty demonstrate that Denmark frequently supplemented voting alignment with statements emphasising humanitarian considerations, civilian protection and respect for international law. These interventions did not alter voting outcomes, but they shaped the normative framing surrounding them. Agency therefore appeared less in decisive control over outcomes than in the capacity to attach meaning, emphasis and qualification to decisions taken within a constrained institutional setting.

Moderate voice illustrated a more demanding form of positioning. In these cases Denmark maintained voting alignment with the US while using statements to question, reinterpret, or partially contest elements of the dominant framing. Such interventions were visible in cases such as Haiti and the Red Sea, where Denmark emphasised legal and humanitarian considerations not central to the US narrative. These cases demonstrate that alignment and disagreement are not mutually exclusive. Denmark could remain materially aligned with its principal ally while marking discursive distance in ways that preserved its normative profile.

Tenacious voice appeared less frequently but was clearly present. On a limited number of highly politicised issues, most notably concerning Gaza and Ukraine, Denmark accepted voting divergence from the US and justified this divergence through explicit reference to international law, civilian protection and the rejection of false equivalence between aggressor and victim. In these cases, Denmark did not withdraw from cooperation with the US but promoted visible disagreement to uphold positions presented as fundamental.

The four categories reveal a consistent pattern of calibrated agency. Denmark neither maximised alignment nor contestation. Instead, it varied its positioning across cases, combining material alignment with discursive differentiation in most situations and reserving open divergence for a narrower set of conflicts tied to core legal and humanitarian principles. Agency, in this sense, was located not primarily in the ability to determine outcomes, but in the continuous management of proximity and distance in relation to a more powerful ally.

This pattern also clarifies the broader analytical contribution of this article. The findings do not support a simple distinction between idealism constrained by alliance politics and instrumental alignment designed to generate influence. Instead, they show how these logics operate in tandem. Alignment contributes to maintaining access, credibility and predictability within the alliance relationship, while selective expressions of voice allow Denmark to sustain a coherent normative profile. Agency emerges in the combination of these practices, rather than in their separation.

This has implications for how small-state agency is understood in contemporary geopolitics. Rather than conceptualising small states as either constrained followers or autonomous norm entrepreneurs, the Danish case illustrates how agency may be exercised through calibrated positioning within asymmetric relationships. Influence may lie less in determining outcomes than in shaping interpretation, framing, and the limits of acceptable policy within institutional settings.

While this article does not systematically analyse developments outside the UNSC, the findings also speak to broader debates about how Denmark navigates asymmetry in its foreign policy. The evolving tensions surrounding Greenland and Arctic security underscore that alignment with the US remains structurally central, even as points of friction emerge. In this context, the

patterns identified in the UNSC suggest the value of maintaining room for calibrated positioning, where cooperation and principled boundary-setting are combined rather than treated as mutually exclusive.

Denmark's Security Council membership in 2025 thus points to a form of pragmatic diplomacy suited to an era of renewed great power rivalry. It accepts structural constraints, invests in alliance relationships, and employs voice selectively. This combination does not remove dependence, but it prevents dependence from translating into political silence.

Notes

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2 Afghanistan could not vote due to missing payments of membership fees.

3 All voting – and meeting records can be consulted via the link provided in the list of references.

4 Referring to R2P resolutions 1970 and 1973 from 2011, which Russia and China believe where misused by NATO to enforce regime change.

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Translating the 'whole-of-society' approach: towards a Danish framework for societal resilience

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Introduction

Escalating hybrid threats, technological interdependencies, climate-related disruptions, and renewed great power rivalry have fundamentally altered the risk landscape confronting European states in recent years (Niinistö, 2024). Where risks can be mitigated through foresight, awareness, prevention policies and preparedness planning, actor-driven threats require strategies of deterrence – either by punishment or denial (Mazarr 2018). While deterrence by retaliation addresses the calculus of the opponent by demonstrating the consequences of aggression, resilience can be understood as a sub-component of deterrence by denial, which seeks to prevent aggression by convincing an adversary that an attack will fail to achieve its objectives. The idea is to reduce the effect of attacks through institutional and cognitive resilience involving public and private actors across the entire societal spectrum (Bertonlini et al. 2023; Bukowski 2025). Resilience alone, however, does not deter hybrid attacks, but nevertheless constitutes an important 'first line of defence' for Western nations faced with grey zone warfare aimed at eroding societal coherence (Bjørnsson & Dahlberg, 2025).

In response to the recent shifts in the security landscape, Denmark has strengthened its military capabilities, reorganised crisis governance, and established a Ministry for Societal Security and Resilience (The Security Policy Analysis Group, 2022; Liebetrau & Tetzlaff, 2025; Zilmer-Johns et al., 2026). Yet, while institutional reforms are underway the broader strategic question remains unresolved: what would it mean to organise Danish resilience according to a 'whole-of-society' logic? This question is at the core of the research conducted at Denmark's newly established Centre for Societal Security and Resilience (SECURE) at Roskilde University, and this article contributes to the conceptual understanding of relevant policy and practice

from a Danish perspective. However, reality sometimes overtakes just before the finishing line. On Friday the 20th of February 2026, as we were writing the last lines of the first draft of this article, the Danish Government called a press conference to announce 'Totalberedskabet' ('Total Preparedness'). The ministers of societal security and preparedness; health and interior; energy, climate and supply; and of the environment took the stage at Eigtveds Pakhus in Copenhagen to present a policy concept which resonates very well with the framework that we propose below (Monggaard, 2026).

The Danish Government's total preparedness concept (Figure 1) contains six components: state; regional and municipal level authorities (defined as having a special responsibility for maintaining vital societal functions and safeguarding democracy etc.); private companies; civil society; and citizens (Regeringen, 2026, p. 5). According to the pamphlet issued by the Danish Government at the event, all societal actors must work together to obtain a true whole-of-society approach to preparedness, asking one fundamental question that, in one sentence, expresses the core of total preparedness culture: 'How can I contribute during a crisis?'

This resonates well with the notion of a whole-of-society (WoS) approach, which has become increasingly prevalent in both EU and NATO policy. It underpins the European Preparedness Union Strategy, shapes implementation of NIS2 and CER directives, and forms part of NATO's strengthened resilience agenda under Article 3 of the Washington Treaty (Bjørnsson & Dahlberg, 2025). Across these arenas, WoS signals an ambition to integrate public authorities, private actors, civil society and citizens in safeguarding vital societal functions. However, the concept remains more rhetorical than analytical. As a concept, WoS is invoked as a solution to fragmentation yet rarely defined with precision – and even more rarely translated into national governance models sensitive to historical, sociocultural, and institutional contexts.

This article argues that the WoS approach is best understood as move towards an interactional, functional and embedded framework for resilience governance that must be translated rather than transplanted. Drawing on EU and NATO frameworks and comparing Nordic variants – particularly in Finland, Sweden and Norway – the article develops and discusses a conceptual framework for a Danish interpretation. It proposes 'Total Preparedness' as an organising framework that preserves Denmark's sectoral responsibility model

while strengthening civil–military integration, public–private coordination, and cultural embedding of preparedness in civil society. By clarifying the usage of WoS as a framework and situating it within Danish governance traditions, the article contributes both analytically and practically to the ongoing debate on how Denmark should organise societal resilience in an era of persistent crisis.

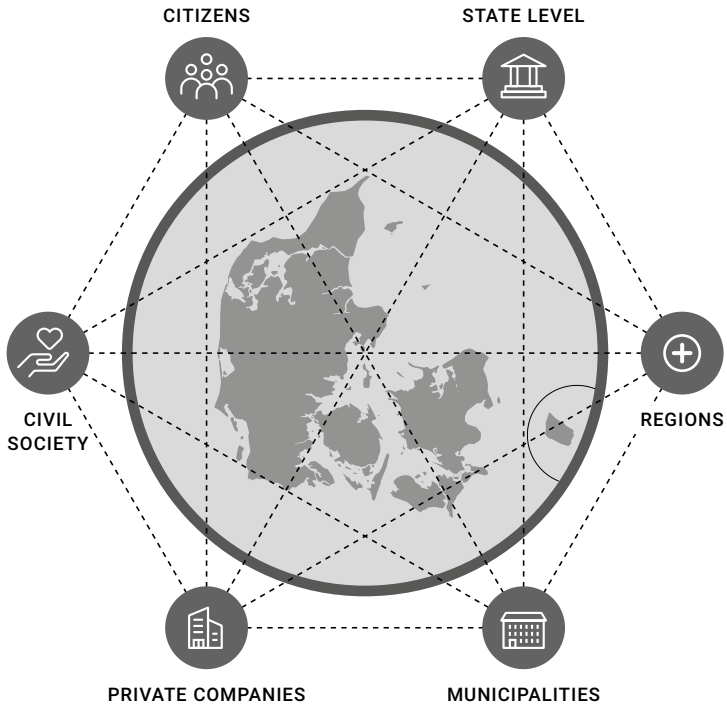
The whole-of-society approach: origins and developments through policy

According to the Google Books Ngram Viewer, almost no occurrences of 'whole-of-society' can be identified prior to the year 2000 in English language literature. The broader term 'whole of society', which may appear more frequently in sentences not related to security and preparedness, also skyrockets in usage after 2000. Reviewing policy and academic literature, current notions of a 'whole-of-society' approach (with hyphens) start appearing in disease prevention research and policy papers in the late 2000s (see WHO, 2009; Dubé, 2010; Oldenburg & Harper, 2008). The 2008 World Health Report in particular mobilises both the notion of whole-of-government and whole-of-society in disease prevention (WHO, 2009, pp. 64, 72, 95). With its origins in the public health sector (Akintayo, 2024), the following usage of the notion within broader crisis management studies and policy (whether through inspiration or simultaneous emergence) seems to follow naturally.

Around 2010 the usage of the whole-of-society approach appears primarily in crisis and resilience management (Jermalavičius & Parmak, 2012), as well as in policymaking to counter religious radicalisation (Ramakrishna, 2010), maintaining its core orientation towards risk management. The approach is then employed in UN policy and development studies efforts at inclusively working towards the Sustainable Development Goals (Kjellén & Wong 2023), and later as an approach in countering (mainly external) threats to well-established democracies in European and North American states (European Commission, 2025; Feisel, 2025).

Variants of the whole-of-society approach within resilience and preparedness governance have, however, long been developed in the Nordic countries in Scandinavia and in the Baltic countries. These variants include the Swedish notion of total defence, Norwegian total preparedness, and Finnish

Figure 1. The Danish Government's 'Total Preparedness' concept



Source: The Danish Government "Totalberedskab". February 2026. Layout by Mark Gry Christiansen.
Note: English translation of labels added by authors.

comprehensive security and total defence (Wigell et al., 2021). The notions of total defence and whole-of-society preparedness are closely related and are often used interchangeably. All the Nordic nations employed a total defence approach during the Cold War, and while only Finland somewhat maintained these structures and practices after the collapse of the Soviet Union (ibid.), current whole-of-society approaches are developed in conjunction with the total defence idea and associated historical experiences. The difference with regard to a new whole-of-society notion is tied to the recent developments in the threat landscape, which not only counts military threats, but has expanded to include hybrid warfare (Bjørge & Høiby, 2024); a growth in natural hazards related to climate change and biodiversity loss (Pörtner et al., 2023); increased risk related to a higher dependency upon complex critical infrastructure and digital systems (Weir et al., 2025); and infectious diseases (GPMB, 2024).

Therefore, whole-of-society resilience serves a much wider purpose than during the Cold War, but is still part and parcel of, and builds upon, the idea of total defence.

From this historical and contemporary regional development of governance and practices that comprises different versions of the whole-of-society approach, the notion has been adopted by the European Commission after the former Finnish president, Sauli Niinistö, was tasked in March 2024 with reviewing the European Union's crisis preparedness measures and policies and recommending areas for improvement. The work of defining a European preparedness strategy was, however, preceded by legislative efforts to address elements of what was later strategically consolidated under the umbrella of whole-of-society preparedness. The 2022 CER and NIS2 directives significantly expanded European Union legislation on physical security and cybersecurity for national implementation in member states, concurrently expanding the range of actors to which such regulation applies and thus addressing a wider part of the whole-of-society (Bjørnsson & Dahlberg, 2025). We will briefly sketch out this legislation to demarcate what areas of WoS resilience are governed through local implementations of these EU directives in order to show which aspects of societal resilience are not covered by this regulation, identifying areas where we might see larger divergence between national approaches due to local interpretations of WoS.

EU legislation

Thus far, the main avenue of direct implementation by the EU of the 'whole-of-society' notion is through legislation, primarily the NIS2 and CER directives. These contain clear preparedness requirements pertaining to actors both public and private within Information and Communications Technology (NIS2) and Critical Infrastructure (CER). Furthermore, the 2022 DORA (Digital Operational Resilience Act) regulation puts further demands upon cyber- and information security within the financial sector. These regulations cover mainly public sector actors as well as medium and large businesses within vital societal functions and thus constitute a significant increase in resilience regulation covering a broad section of societal actors. The NIS2 directive is the second rendition of the earlier NIS directive and puts further cybersecurity demands on a wider range of actors, both public and private, that deliver critical services

(EU, 2022a). Notably, stronger risk management, reporting of incidents, and a harmonisation of demands across member states are added in NIS2, drawing on principles also observed in the EU Preparedness Union Strategy to increase communication and interaction, in this case within strengthening cybersecurity. Furthermore, DORA (the Digital Operational Resilience Act) has been implemented in the financial sector and has as a central demand that financial risk management must consider not only financial risks, but also cyber risk (EU, 2022c). This further underlines the effort made by the EU to increase awareness of the interdependencies that the whole-of-society approach addresses and ties in with the 'all-hazards' approach as later described in the Preparedness Union Strategy.

The Critical Entities Resilience Directive (CER) replaced former legislation from 2008 which focused on the protection of critical infrastructure within the transport and energy sectors (EU, 2022b). This was based on a recognition of the interdependent and cross-border nature of European critical infrastructure, and the decision was made to expand regulation of physical security of critical entities beyond the two sectors. Again, the central efforts to ensure the resilience of vital societal functions and to do this through (and in light of) increased interaction stand out. Furthermore, the connection of the directive with a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach is articulated in the directive, as member states must ensure '…a comprehensive approach to the resilience of critical entities' and '…provide for a policy framework for enhanced coordination between the competent authorities under this directive and the competent authorities under NIS2' (EU, 2022a, p. 167).

The EU's legislative efforts thus expand the scope of national resilience regulation. However, regulation that continues to prioritise vital societal functions – particularly infrastructure – does not in itself address or mobilise society as a whole. The Niinistö Report and the Preparedness Union Strategy situate these functionally oriented approaches within a broader whole-of-society notion.

Principles for whole-of-society resilience in EU and NATO policy

The European Commission report *Safer Together* (Niinistö, 2024) laid the groundwork for the 2025 European Preparedness Union Strategy (European Commission, 2025) which presents the whole-of-society notion as a vision for developing resilient EU member countries. Former Finnish president Sauli Niinistö based his recommendations on his many years in executive service for a country whose comprehensive resilience strategy and geographical proximity to 'such an unpredictable and aggressive neighbour' [Russia] was seen to serve as ideal inspiration for the EU's coming preparedness strategy (European Commission, 2025). The resulting strategy thus builds directly upon experiences from Nordic countries, Finland in particular, whose approaches will be explored later. For now it suffices to identify the central tenets of the EU vision for whole-of-society resilience, only to later explore variations in its application across Nordic national contexts.

Across the thus interrelated Niinistö Report and European Preparedness Union Strategy, we identify three core principles of how societies can work towards whole-of-society resilience: 1) *increased interaction;* 2) *strengthening vital societal functions;* and 3) *(culturally) embedding resilience*. A central argument of the Niinistö Report is that 'Comprehensive preparedness requires *interaction*' (Niinistö, 2024, p. 10, [Authors' italics]). This portrays an intention to break with overly compartmentalised resilience management, whether it is strong dichotomies between civil and military preparedness, or 'silo thinking' within governance of critical sectors. The critical areas of society need to speak together, to interact and to comprehensively prepare for a wide variety of crises or incidents. In the report, the whole-of-society approach is defined alongside what is similarly dubbed a whole-of-government approach: 'These frequently repeated terms mean in practice the ability to develop and use in a concerted and coordinated fashion all the necessary tools and resources across different policy areas, while engaging the private sector, civil society organisations, and citizens' (European Commission, 2025, p. 8). Here the principle of *interaction* is expressed in the call for coordination, particularly within the whole-of-government, but is also expressed as a call for engagement of the wider society. The major societal divisions tackled through interaction most notably include the public–private and civil–military divisions. Bridging

the civil–military division can also be seen expressed in the interaction between EU and NATO on resilience policies, where the functional approach in the EU strategy directly supports NATO's seven 'Baseline Requirements for National Resilience' (see NATO, 2024). With NATO having no regulatory influence, their interaction and alignment with the EU is regularly stated as important (NATO, 2016; 2018b; 2023) and serves as an example of the whole-of-government approach at a supra-national level (Bjørnsson & Dahlberg, 2025).

The NATO baseline requirements focus heavily on protecting and strengthening *vital societal functions*, the second principle we have identified. To a large extent, the aforementioned EU regulations, NIS2, CER and DORA, are the main avenue by which vital societal functions are identified through the scope of the legislation and protected according to specific legislative demands. As will also become evident in the following analysis of the WoS approaches of Nordic countries, the functional approach to societal security has a long history in the region and is typically combined with a principle of sectoral responsibility, that is divisions of responsibility during crises or incidents mirror 'peacetime' divisions, and incidents are handled at the lowest administrative level possible (Larsson & Rhinard, 2021, pp. 8–10; Oscarsson et al., 2025). This strong functional tradition, however, is then to be placed within the broader whole-of-society framework through increased *interaction* and with an aim to support the functional approach through *embedding preparedness*.

The engagement of 'the private sector, civil society organisations, and citizens' (European Commission, 2025) points to the third principle of *embedding preparedness*. This stands in contrast to the vital functions that can be more clearly identified and directly governed through legislation, as embedding preparedness through cultural, educational or other social means is to be done according to a currently ill-defined set of tools. This is evident when reviewing the 30 'key actions' and seven 'action areas' presented in the European Preparedness Union Strategy. The large majority of tools address our first and second principles, while only a few address *embeddedness* through such means as education and state-issued civil preparedness guidelines (European Commission, 2025, p. 8). As will be discussed later in our analyses of the Nordic countries, there are larger divergencies in how this part of a WoS approach can be carried out, even when focusing on the otherwise quite similar looking citizen/household preparedness guidelines. This points to a central challenge

of employing an actual whole-of-society approach, namely how a 'culture of resilience and preparedness' is fostered (ibid.), and even, how one such actually looks and translates into a particular sociocultural context.

To briefly conclude, by referring back to the initial statement from Sauli Niinistö, it is the principle of *interaction* which is set to ensure that developments within what we identify as *functional resilience* and *embedded preparedness* are satisfactorily compatible, coordinated and negotiated within a comprehensive whole-of-society approach. With this in mind, we now turn to our analysis of Nordic variations on whole-of-society approaches, which are particularly to be found in the first and third principles, that is within forms of interaction and embedded preparedness.

Nordic variations on the whole-of-society notion

To better grasp the potential of implementing an interpreted version of the whole-of-society approach in a Danish context, we now zoom in on the region from which the concept has been sourced: the Nordics. While Finland stands as the clearest source of inspiration due to the influence of the Niinistö Report on EU policy, other Nordic countries such as Sweden and Norway employ variants of the whole-of-society approach. Therefore, looking at select differences and their political and sociocultural contexts will help to inform the development of a more comprehensive Danish whole-of-society approach. Here, following the analysis of how the whole-of-society notion has developed in its origins and EU/NATO policy usage, we are comparing and contrasting three Nordic countries whose resilience organisation and governance differently reflect efforts towards whole-of-society mobilisation for resilience.

The comparison is based on readings of national resilience, preparedness and defence strategy documents, state campaigns targeting citizens and civil society, as well as academic and policy literature on the national contexts. While information boxes also highlight the many similarities in the Nordic approaches, we choose to emphasise and unpack select divergences to display the breadth of what the whole-of-society notion can entail. The common geopolitical situation of the Nordic countries, the similar governance and welfare state traditions and a strong tradition of functional societal security are shared across Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Crucially, all of these countries have historically relied on the principle of sectoral

responsibility, that is the rule that those responsible for peacetime operations are responsible for maintaining operations during a crisis and thus preparing for such crises (Oscarsson et al., 2025). To anchor crisis management in the everyday expertise of those who are in charge of day-to-day operations can be seen as a central tenet of the Nordic whole-of-society approaches.

Finland: Collaborative and functiona

Governance structure and organisation	- Collaborative, network-based coordination within and between vital societal functions - Led by the Security Committee under the Ministry of Defence - Strong reliance on sectoral responsibility principle - Extensive public–private cooperation via the National Emergency Supply Organisation (NESO)
Three core principles	Interaction: Highly institutionalised collaboration across state, business, and civil society; strong emphasis on information-sharing networks Protection of vital functions: Functional approach centred on maintaining vital societal functions across all sectors. Sectoral responsibility principle Embeddedness: High level of societal integration; preparedness framed as a shared societal responsibility; focus on education, media literacy, and everyday resilience
Threat perception	- Strong focus on military and hybrid threats, disinformation, and geopolitical pressure - Shaped by shared border with Russia - High awareness of information influence operations
Policy tools and instruments	- Security Strategy for Society (regularly updated) - NESO public–private coordination mechanisms - Media literacy and anti-disinformation initiatives (e.g. Mediapooli) - Citizen preparedness guides and online citizen education initiatives
Distinctive feature	A collaborative, network-based model where resilience is co-produced across society building upon 'peacetime' responsibilities

As described, the whole-of-society approach being implemented by the EU draws heavily on Finnish resilience policy, notably Finland's comprehensive security approach to resilience. Comprehensive security implies a functional approach where vital societal functions are upheld in a 'collaboration between

the authorities, business community, [civil society] organisations and citizens' (Security Committee, 2025, p. 10; Wigell et al., 2021, p. 27). The Finnish *Security Strategy for Society* has been updated five times since its original version from 2003 and has maintained its functional approach to societal security throughout its renditions, with the latest published in 2025. While the first versions of the strategy did not employ the whole-of-society approach as such, the 2010 edition included non-governmental organisations in the strategy, and the 2017 version marked the starting point of a decidedly whole-of-society based approach to comprehensive security in Finland (Security Committee, 2025). The Finnish comprehensive security model emphasises that the whole of society is mobilised through interaction and sharing of information, a key point which is again reflected in the Niinistö Report (Niinistö, 2024, p. 10). This is echoed elsewhere, with Ruggiero et al. defining the whole-of-society approach in a study of the Finnish case as 'a collaborative framework' (Ruggiero et al., 2024, p. 2).

Finland has no centralised department of preparedness or resilience – coordination is ensured through the Security Committee under the Department of Defence. The general principle of national crisis management states that all vital societal functions must uphold their own functioning during crises, a principle of sectoral responsibility (Oscarsson et al., 2025). Certain networks and public authorities do support this division of responsibility. The National Emergency Supply Organisation (NESO) coordinates collaboration within the business community, particularly between companies, authorities and organisations that are critical for security of supply (Security Committee, 2025, p. 42).

Finland's geopolitical location, particularly its extensive border with neighbouring Russia, influences the Finnish way of employing a whole-of-society approach. This is particularly expressed in a large focus on creating resilience in the face of hybrid threats, which was also cited as a main reason for the request to their former president to write up the report behind the European Preparedness Union Strategy (European Commission, 2024). Specifically, the Finnish approach highlights citizen's media literacy and their concurrent resilience in the face of misinformation or similar tools in hybrid campaigns. Not only are citizens educated with an aim of higher media literacy, but initiatives such as the Mediapooli network, under the NESO, work to bolster resilience in involvement with media across the entire spectrum of society (Wigell et al., 2021, p. 30).

Sweden: Centralised and part of civil defence.

Governance structure and organisation	- More centralised coordination - Led by the Civil Defence and Resilience Agency, under the Department of Civil Defence - Strong integration between civil and military defence - Formalised role for voluntary defence organisations
3 core principles	Interaction: High degree of state coordination; interaction often mediated through formal structures and state-linked organisations Protection of vital functions: Integrated into the broader total defence concept, linking civilian resilience directly to military defence Embeddedness: Promoted through state-led communication and education, including national campaigns. Emphasis on home preparedness (hemberedskap)
Threat perception	- Focus on hybrid threats, especially disinformation and psychological operations - Increasing emphasis on military threats - Climate change and forest fires
Select policy tools and instruments	- Total defence planning framework - Psychological Defence Agency - 'If Crisis or War Comes' preparedness guidelines (issued 2018, updated 2024) - Legal obligations (e.g. total defence duty / krigsplacering)
Distinctive feature	A state-driven and structured model, with strong regulatory and institutional integration

Emergency preparedness and resilience in Sweden are coordinated centrally by the Swedish Civil Defence and Resilience Agency (as of 1 January 2026, formerly MSB). On a conceptual level, the whole-of-society approach in Sweden is best expressed within their total defence approach, a concept comprising a combination of the civil and military defence of the country (Regeringen, 2024, p. 19). Sweden has been in the process of re-establishing its total defence capabilities during the last decade, with a 2017 report by the Swedish Defence Commission, ordered by the Government at the time, cited as a particular step forward (Wigell et al., 2021, p. 32). This report particularly addressed a rise in hybrid threats and proposed a focus on strengthening the Swedish total defence, and especially the civil defence part, through strengthening areas such as civil, voluntary engagement and psychological resilience, for instance against misinformation (Swedish Defence Commission Secretariat, 2017,

p. 4). On the particular subject of misinformation, Sweden has been at the forefront of building 'psychological defence' among its citizens, establishing the Psychological Defence Agency in 2022 (Tofvesson, 2024). The Swedish concept of psychological defence is part of the Swedish total defence and is thus particularly directed towards enhancing 'society's common capabilities for detecting and resisting malign information influence directed at Sweden by antagonistic foreign powers' (Psychological Defence Agency, 2026). The psychological defence is thus directed towards intentional and external threats, in protection of democracy and Swedish national interests.

At the level between state and citizens, the Swedish total defence system also relies on 18 different 'voluntary defence organisations' (frivilliga försvars-organisationer), semi-autonomous voluntary organisations funded by the Civil Defence and Resilience Agency, contributing each to their own part of civil defence, particularly in supporting the public emergency services, military services or carrying out citizen education (Frivilligförsvaret, 2026). These differ from other civil society organisations in the mandate they are given by the Swedish state, their more formal integration with emergency services, as well as their being somewhat supervised by the Swedish authorities on state-funded projects such as citizen preparedness education (authors' interview with senior representative of a voluntary defence organisation, October 2023). At the citizen level, the Swedish state published guidelines on citizen crisis preparedness in 2018 in the brochure 'If Crisis or War Comes' (MSB, 2018).

Through the guidelines as well as through citizen education by the voluntary defence organisations, the Swedish state has been promoting the idea of 'home preparedness' (hemberedskap) as a basic building block of Swedish resilience (MSB, 2018). This also highlights a difference between the Swedish and Finnish whole-of-society approaches, namely that citizen and civil society mobilisation and education take place through slightly different channels. Where the Finnish strategy seems to emphasise taking the differing lived contexts of citizens as starting points and fora for reflection on what is needed, as per the collaborative approach, the Swedish state has a more regulatory relationship with its citizens, with fewer mediating levels in between, such as businesses or independent civil society organisations. We will discuss the reasons for such differences, particularly with respect to traditions within governance and welfare state models, in the last section of the article. This does, however, exemplify how the whole-of-society approach varies across

national contexts, and particularly that the all-important aspect of interaction can take various forms according to governmental or social context.

Norway: Functional and value-based

Governance structure and organisation	- Combines the functional approach with value-based societal security - Coordinated across ministries with strong local and community roles - Emphasis on multi-level governance (national–local)
3 core principles	Interaction: Strong focus on community-level interaction and local networks Civil society plays a key mediating role Protection of vital functions: Value-based approach has developed on top of a strong functional approach. Sectoral responsibility principle and a high degree of responsibility/ autonomy for municipalities[7] Embeddedness: Resilience connected to societal values, especially trust, solidarity and community. Preparedness framed as part of social cohesion
Threat perception	- Geopolitical tensions in Arctic regions - Hybrid and external threats - Social cohesion and internal threats
Policy tools and instruments	- National preparedness guidelines - Total Defence planning framework - Strong emphasis on community preparedness, with campaigns like 'preparedness buddy' (beredskapsvenn) - Support for voluntary and civil society engagement
Distinctive feature	A functional model, integrating functional resilience with social cohesion and shared values

While stating that neither Sweden nor Finland are attuned to shared values in their security strategies would be wrong, the Norwegian national security strategy centres upon this more explicitly through organising its priorities around six 'basic security interests', stating that 'These are our basic security interests. We must shape our prioritisations accordingly to maintain, defend and promote them' (Regjeringen, 2025, p. 7). While 'defending' values and seeking to 'maintain' them seems a normal part of preparedness and security, leveraging security to further 'promote' such values and interests portrays a recognition of the fact that preparedness and security have societal impact beyond the delimited realm of security. Of these interests, a 'safe and trusting

society' ('*Et trygt og tillitsfullt samfunn*'), points to a key distinction. Where both Sweden and Finland strategically place the protection of an open and democratic society highly, Sweden's security strategy does not place trust as a central value for protection (Regeringen, 2023, pp. 6–7), while the Finnish security strategy defines trust as a functional means to security, not a value to be protected or promoted in itself (Security Committee, 2025, p. 12). Trust, therefore, comparatively, takes on a more central role in societal security in Norway, as a shared value not only tied to the state, but also practiced among its citizens and local communities.

Morsut (2021) traces one possible genealogy of a combination of functional and value-based security or preparedness in the development of the Norwegian concept of societal security ('samfunnssikkerhet') (Morsut, 2021, p. 79). The combination of functional and value-based societal security is interesting as it somewhat bridges two otherwise rather separate academic strands of the concept, the functional approach which has taken a foothold in Nordic resilience policy and research, as well as the Copenhagen School approach where identity and social belonging are placed at the centre of what is to be protected (see Larsson & Rhinard, 2021, p. 9).

Morsut points to the terrorist attack on Utøya in 2011 as a turning point when the need to introduce common values to be protected arose in the face of an ideologically motivated 'internal' threat (Morsut, 2021, p. 79). This further exemplifies how whole-of-society approaches can differ and weigh in differently on specific elements of society, be that functions or societal processes such as establishing common values or upholding trust as part of building resilience. While the Utøya massacre was a major and disastrous historical event for the Norwegian population, the centrality of trust and community in Norwegian society has long been identified as a widely shared cultural value in Norway (Gullestad, 2002). Therefore, the emergence of trust and shared societal values as objects of security should perhaps have come as no surprise in Norway in particular. More than anything, this case highlights the importance of recognising that the whole-of-society notion emerging in the Nordic countries has not only developed through policy reactions to perceived developments in threat or hazard landscapes but is also rooted in sociocultural practices and shared values in less explicit ways.

It makes sense for the end of this section to zoom in on the issue of how citizens are best mobilised, being the actors furthest from the grip of state policies, as manifested in the European Preparedness Union Strategy's slight lack of 'key actions' within the area (European Commission, 2025, pp. 8–10). The preparedness guidelines are a central tool for society-wide citizen education and mobilisation and they are also recommended as a key action by the EU (European Commission, 2025). Therefore, analysing select key points of difference between national civil preparedness guidelines offers a way to observe variations in this (most central) element of whole-of-society approaches.

Comparing citizen mobilisation in WoS approaches

The citizen preparedness guidelines of the Nordic countries share their main topics as a general rule of thumb, but they do differ slightly in how these topics are emphasised. While a complete comparative analysis of these is beyond the scope of this article, comparing key points of difference between the Swedish and Norwegian approaches, thus portraying variations in WoS approaches, is worthwhile.

One difference can be seen in the Swedish preparedness guidelines 'If Crisis or War Comes', and particularly in how this document was updated in 2024 after its first release in 2018. The 2024 update saw some interesting changes within one particular topic, that of engaging communities and of general citizen collaboration in building resilience. While the 2018 edition briefly mentions the value of taking your local community into consideration for crisis preparedness, the 2024 edition has integrated this community aspect more into the different sections, for example emphasising collaboration with neighbours on home preparedness and being particularly attentive towards those with special needs. The section for volunteering and education possibilities is also expanded somewhat, and the language is more attuned towards invoking a sense of (national) community around 'our collective preparedness' ('*vår gemensamme beredskap*') (Myndigheten för civilt försvar, 2024, pp. 3, 6, 18).

This development and prioritisation of mobilising citizen communities is even more present in the Norwegian guidelines, where an entire page is dedicated

to 'joint preparedness' in different communities such as housing associations, religious or civil society organisations or other everyday communities (DSB, 2024, p. 16). Most emblematic of this approach is the concept of a 'preparedness buddy' ('beredskapsvenn'), which was voted Norwegian 'word of the year' in 2024 by the Norwegian language council; a simple word that encourages citizens to think of how they can help, and be helped, by the people that surround them, be they family, coworkers, neighbours, friends etc. (Språkrådet, 2024).

Noting what types of voluntary engagement are promoted in the guidelines, the Finnish and Norwegian guidelines encourage citizens to engage in a wide range of civil society and voluntary organisations and to build resilience from there (DSB, 2024; Security Committee, 2025: 43; HAUS, 2025), whereas the Swedish guidelines emphasise the 'voluntary defence organisations' as an ideal way to engage in building collective resilience (MSB, 2018; MSB, 2024, p. 6). In the same way, the obligatory tasks of Swedish citizens in case of a major emergency such as war are also more specifically mandated by and connected to the state. Through the 'total defence duty', Swedes must, by law, either continue their regular job during a crisis or carry out specified tasks instead, depending on their 'war placement' ('krigsplacering') (MSB, 2024, p. 9).

As such, both the peacetime and crisis engagement of citizens is more directly managed by the Swedish state and regulation than is the case in Norway. This can, in part, be connected to differing historical forms of welfare state governance in the Nordic states and serves as a good case exemplifying how the whole-of-society approach is interpreted and translates differently across national contexts, however culturally, politically and geographically proximate these seem.

Interactional, functional, embedded: Total Preparedness in Denmark

We have now identified the central tenets of the EU and NATO whole-of-society approaches and highlighted certain developments and differences between the Nordic countries' arrangements. Based on this, we are now able to suggest a model of the whole-of-society approach suited to the Danish context with regard to both governance and sociocultural concerns.

To reiterate, the NATO and EU positions on the whole-of-society approach to resilience and preparedness focused heavily on three overarching factors: 1) increased interaction, 2) securing vital societal functions, and 3) (culturally) embedded preparedness. This must be done with an all-hazards orientation, and in conjunction with a whole-of-government approach. The all-hazards and whole-of-government approaches are hard to discern from the whole-of-society approach and are often addressed naturally by developing a whole-of-society approach. As we will shortly describe, measures have been taken to move towards a whole-of-government approach in Denmark, and the main focus of this discussion will therefore zone in on the whole-of-society approach with less direct focus on governmental organisation.

Denmark: Hazard landscape and developments in national resilience governance

The crisis management system in Denmark has long relied on the principle of sectoral responsibility where each sector (e.g. energy, water, health systems etc.) is responsible for handling incidents and their effects. This responsibility is tied to the relevant ministers of the sectors and is much more present in those government departments that deal with areas of critical activities than in other departments (Oscarsson et al., 2025).

However, recent crises, most notably Covid-19 and the increased threat from hybrid attacks, have challenged the somewhat fragmented organisation of Danish preparedness. With Finland, Sweden and Norway all relatively more affected by the proximity of neighbouring Russia, the perceived threat to Danish national security includes a slightly stronger emphasis on the hybrid, rather than military, campaigns carried out by actors with affiliations to the Russian Government (DDIS, 2025; SAMSIK, 2025b). Hybrid campaigns are potentially very effective at targeting Danish infrastructure, due to the highly interlinked and digitalised nature of Danish, critical infrastructure. Adding to the breadth of hazards in the Danish context, recent years have seen an increase in the severity of storm surges experienced in the predominantly low-lying parts of the country (Kystdirektoratet, n.d.).

The hybrid threat is not only evident in terms of its potential effect upon infrastructure; the ongoing debate surrounding possible drone observations

over military zones and major airports in September 2025 displayed both a lack of capacity for handling the event as well for clear communication and maintaining public trust. With such debates and incident management gaps being obvious aims of hybrid campaigns, bridging gaps and ensuring coordinated communication are key issues that a whole-of-society framework could address in the Danish context. The period from August 2024 to April 2026 has seen the establishment of a dedicated Ministry for Societal Security and Preparedness with two subordinate authorities: the more operatively focused DEMA (Danish Emergency Management Agency) and the Danish Resilience Agency (DRA), which takes on a more advisory role with responsibilities within crisis coordination, communication and broader societal involvement (SAMSIK, 2025a).

This organisational change in governance structure seeks to bridge the silos that, over time, have built up in each responsible sector – a much-needed improvement as many of the potential crises Denmark currently faces will have cross-sectoral impacts that cut across boundaries and require coordination. The DRA, however, does more than coordinate the bridging of efforts across sectors. In their advisory capacity, the agency is responsible for facilitating the implementation of the aforementioned CER and NIS2 directives, and for general advice on resilience to Danish businesses. Their role in the whole-of-society context is clear, as they also advise SMEs not directly affected by the EU directives on how they can strengthen their resilience to cyberattacks (SAMSIK, 2024). In a highly digitalised country such as Denmark, where SMEs employ more than a third of private sector employees, this is a key process in achieving whole-of-society involvement.

At the same time the DRA also increasingly advises citizens and civil society organisations on preparedness and resilience initiatives. In line with the other Nordic countries and the recommendations of the European Preparedness Union Strategy, guidelines for citizen preparedness were published in Denmark in June 2024 (SAMSIK, 2024). These more specific guidelines and recommendations resulted from a period of civil society pressure to address both individual (Madsen, 2024; Krogh, 2024a; 2024b; Bubandt, 2024) and collective needs (Lessel, 2025; Olsen, 2025). The contents of the guidelines and recommendations were also created in dialogue with relevant civil society actors and even build upon existing grassroots initiatives. Since then, the DRA has also published guidelines for local, community-based preparedness,

and recommendations targeted specifically at helping vulnerable citizens prepare according to their individual needs (SAMSIK, 2025a, 2025b). They also established relevant fora for both business representatives and civil society representatives respectively, to enhance mobilisation of non-state actors in building resilience (MSSB, 2025a; 2025b).

The latest development has been the establishment of a Total Preparedness strategic framework for organising Danish resilience (MSSB, 2026). The press release for the new framework presented the allocation of significant (although short-term) funds to enhance the resilience of vital societal functions within these specific sectors. The new strategic framework presents itself more as a show of intention than a concrete set of tools. With the statement 'We are all part of the total preparedness of Denmark' (Regeringen, 2026), the release should be seen, rather, as a tool of invoking responsibility and involvement among the broader society. One major question, which calls for clarification in the Danish discourse, is the conceptual relationship between Total Defence and Total Preparedness, specifically the role of the military within the latter. This falls outside the scope of this article, but further research and policy development on the subject is highly recommended.

Danish cases of WoS initiatives

While the relevant authorities are publishing guidelines and engaging in dialogue with civil society and businesses organisations, there is still a space to be filled in terms of engaging those parts of society that cannot be activated through direct regulation such as EU directives. Business and civil society actors are also taking on the mantle themselves and engaging in autonomous resilience building, both addressing their own potential security needs, but also taking on responsibility outside their own immediate spheres of interest. We present two cases, one Danish and one Swedish, to exemplify how this unfolds and as inspiration for further inclusion in the Danish context as part of a whole-of-society approach.

Virksomhedsberedskabet ('The Preparedness Coalition of Businesses') is an initiative by private healthcare and emergency services provider Falck, building upon their professional profile to involve Danish firms of all sizes in a network of businesses willing and able to support authorities during national

crises (Falck, n.d.). The main purpose is to clarify how private companies can contribute in the event of a national incident and to provide a central point of contact for authorities to assess how businesses might aid in a particular situation. The initiative is autonomous and member-driven, with each member paying DKK 15,000 a year to participate (ibid.) An advisory board comprises a small group of business leaders as well as the director of the Danish Resilience Agency. As such, the initiative has a direct line, however informal, to the central coordinating authority within preparedness and resilience.

What remains a crucial point of development with the Danish whole-of-society approach to resilience is how the Government and authorities can support, motivate and ensure the continued existence and stability of such initiatives. That is, in accordance with the EU and NATO strategies analysed earlier, how can sufficient *interaction* be ensured between state and non-state actors in mutual support? This could be achieved by anchoring initiatives in more formalised collaborations, while upholding the autonomy and sociocultural basis of the initiatives. This, for instance, could entail a more formalised point of collaboration with organisations such as Virksomhedsberedskabet, who have expressed frustration at not being activated in relevant situations (own correspondence), taking into account the costs of mobilising businesses during a crisis before the need appears.

With regard to civil society or citizen initiatives, looking to the Swedish concept of *voluntary resource groups* ('Frivilliga Ressursgruppen') might inspire such collaboration. Voluntary resource groups are formed by citizens engaged in the Swedish voluntary defence groups who step forward to assist their local municipalities in case of an incident (Krisinformation, 2025). These groups are made up of members already educated or experienced in emergency aid through the voluntary defence organisations and thus mirror similar Danish concepts such as volunteering through DEMA or local fire brigades. They do, however, differ in being both locally anchored and they are more accessible as participation requires only a minimum of training and education.

While the Swedish Voluntary Defence organisations are partially anchored in their state collaboration, a Danish version should consider ensuring that citizen or civil society initiatives are more thoroughly anchored in local or grassroots movements or organisations, which do not need to have resilience or preparedness as their original or primary purpose. In this way, civil mobilisation,

like Virksomhedsberedskabet, is anchored in existing resources, interests, and local identities and forms of meaning making. This is one central way to *embed* resilience within culture, thus fostering a preparedness culture by anchoring it in existing culture and communities, ensuring autonomy while empowering citizens, civil society organisations and businesses to take responsibility. That is, the mandate of such organisations in relation to the state should be worked out clearly while sustaining and supporting the autonomy and origins of business, civil society or citizens initiatives. This is of particular importance in the Danish case, where civil society participation in the national or local community typically takes place in associations and organisations at the civil society or local community level (Anderson, 2008) instead of directly within a public or state setting, such as DEMA, or the only Danish voluntary defence organisation, Hjemmeværnet (the Danish Home Guard).

Again, with the EU and NATO resilience strategies in mind, this is part and parcel of achieving *embedded preparedness* and building a culture of preparedness. With the final main point of *protecting vital societal functions* in mind, establishing a framework for a Danish whole-of-society approach must take seriously the foundations of Danish resilience management as developed through the principle of sectoral responsibility, with these divisions having resulted in strong, function-specific preparedness (Smidt, 2024). Therefore, maintaining this while significantly strengthening interaction/coordination and embedding preparedness should be the central points of development.

Total Preparedness – a framework for Danish WoS resilience

In this final section, we discuss elements and possible issues associated with the Danish Total Preparedness framework. We draw particular attention towards a mode of deliberation that can be achieved from mobilising the 'whole-of-society' under the banner of resilience and security. Figure 2 represents our own mapping and description of the central actor categories within societal security under a 'Total Preparedness' framework that builds upon the whole-of-society, all-hazards and whole-of-government notions as described above.

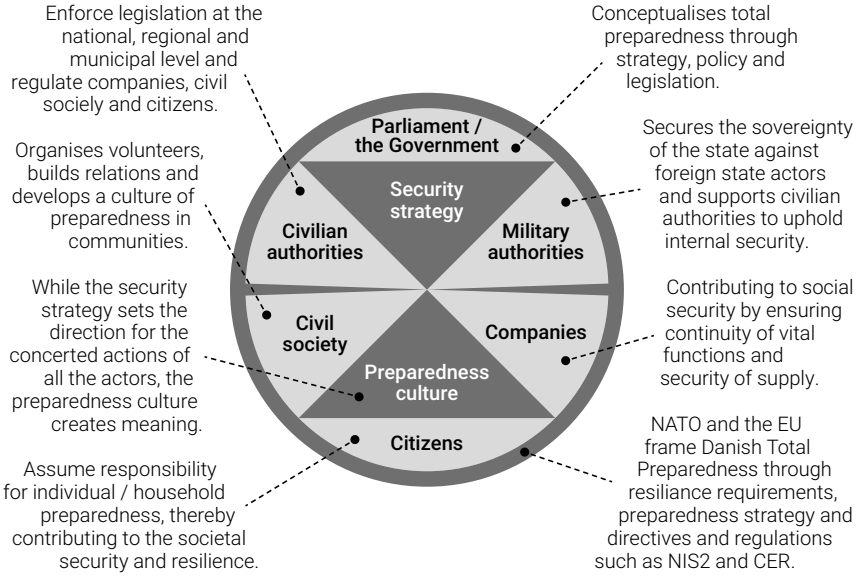
At the model's upper centre, the national security strategy guides government and authorities' actions within preparedness, while preparedness culture

functions as the central organising factor for civil society, citizens and businesses. The framework portrays the different actor categories contributing towards building resilience and carries as its main message the fact that all actors are able to contribute.

Putting all options on the table with the goal of achieving security is nothing new in and of itself, having been done time and time again during all sorts of crises, and often during times of war (Lucas Jr., 2009, p. 32). Therefore, presenting them all together should not only constitute a presentation of the complete 'toolbox of securitisation', but should be seen as a chance to critically weigh one's options across the spectrum. Put another way, part of this is realising that all of society can mobilised in the name of security, but how this is done, and whether it should be done at all, are central questions that a Total Preparedness framework should stimulate. Exemplifying this, Bjørnsson & Dahlberg (2025) bring attention to the matter of deterrence, pointing out how not only military actors, but also civil preparedness can deter aggressors in a hybrid/military context. The underlying idea here is that societal resilience increases the cost of disruption by reducing the effects of attacks (i.e. if the majority of citizens have emergency water supplies at home, the consequences of a cyberattack or sabotage against utility companies become less significant). This constitutes an example of how different (partial) solutions to an issue can come with different potential costs and consequences and could (theoretically) save lives, in this case deterrence through denial by way of civil resilience, and not military intervention.

As such, moving resilience management into the whole-of-society domain, considering the wider effects of mobilising the broad society in the name of resilience and security, comes with an equal responsibility to weigh the wider-reaching, possible consequences that follow from employing such tools as military intervention or state mobilisation of civil society or culture actors.[3] As should be evident from decades of literature on the corollary impacts of crisis handling (or opportunism) by states and major corporations (see. Klein, 2008; Buzan et al., 2022, Schuller & Maldonado, 2016), the efficient mobilisation of societal resources in the name of security can have serious and lasting impacts on populations, even fostering inequality or impacting the rights of minority groups.

Figure 2. A framework for Danish Total Preparedness



Source: Created by authors. Layout by Mark Gry Christiansen.

While this is perhaps to be expected to some extent during actual crisis management, the largely preparatory phase that we find ourselves in at the moment allows us, and perhaps even obligates us, to prepare in such a way that these unwanted 'side-effects' are mitigated and considered as best as possible. It allows us to think thoroughly about crisis management in a way that explores the multitude of options and does not simply revolve around the idea of rearmament alongside a resilience arms race that is more about scale than kind. While the functional approach to building preparedness has long prevailed in the Nordic states, the whole-of-society approach necessitates the inclusion of a value or identity-based approach, building on and developing approaches such as the one identified in the Norwegian development of societal security (Morsut, 2021). This is necessary but might also be hugely consequential if not handled with the requisite care and inclusion. The power to define these values should not simply rest on the Government, or on bodies such as a Government-mandated 'cultural robustness council', but should be continually defined through a central tenet of whole-of-society preparedness,

that is, *interaction*. Returning to the three principles identified in the EU strategy, the interaction which ensures that *functional resilience* and *embedded preparedness* work together is not simply one of practical coordination, it should be seen as an ongoing democratic process.

As such, leveraging a whole-of-society approach to both local and national preparedness in Denmark constitutes an opportunity to engage the broad society in creating resilience that is anchored in the diverse needs and interests of citizens and communities, as well as in national security. Conceptualising this under the umbrella of Total Preparedness allows not only the broad societal inclusion of diverse actors, but also an active engagement with weighing different approaches according to both positive impacts and potential consequences, and considering this impact in periods of significant 'turbulence' (see Torfing et al., 2025) as well as in periods of stability.

Conclusion

In light of worrying developments in the threat landscape and a particular rise in the complexity and hybridity of possible threats that Denmark faces as a nation, developing security governance that aligns with the EU resilience notions of an all-hazards, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is key to both bridge preparedness planning across silos and to mobilise the resources of the entire society. In this article we have presented the development of the notion of the whole-of-society approach from its Nordic roots, and specifically the Finnish interpretation, moving through the Niinistö Report into the EU and NATO preparedness strategies. With particular focus on the European Preparedness Union Strategy, we have identified three key principles in developing whole-of-society preparedness: 1) Protecting critical societal functions, 2) (culturally) embedding preparedness, and 3) interaction between relevant societal actors.

While the protection of critical societal functions has a solid history in Nordic preparedness models, embedding preparedness in our societal activities across the spectrum is a more novel concept under development, and needs further attention. The last principle of interaction is key to breaking with compartmentalised resilience planning across all levels of society, but is equally important for establishing civil society and citizen engagement that

is rooted in both national security needs and local needs and interests. That is, the interaction feeds information both ways, allowing for a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. We have pointed to key whole-of-society elements of the Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian preparedness strategies, and shown how whole-of-society approaches vary according to national context, even among neighbouring Nordic countries usually considered highly similar. From this, we have situated Denmark comparatively, particularly with respect to the significant role of civil society as a mediator between state and citizens, and as the locus where societal contributions from citizens often take place. Finally, proposing a framework of Total Preparedness for the Danish case, we set the stage for an analysis of preparedness initiatives within a whole-of-society approach that considers and compares initiatives across society, and takes seriously the wide-ranging opportunities and consequences of potentially securitising such broad and diverse societal actors and activities.

The Total Preparedness framework takes seriously the potential to mobilise all parts of society in the name of resilience and security, and therefore takes equally seriously the just as broad impacts of such initiatives. Drawing on the analysis of the Nordic whole-of-society approaches, we see one possible element in addressing such issues as being to develop further the Norwegian notion of societal security (‘*samfunnssikkerhet*’), taking both an analysis of vital societal functions and identifiable shared values as the basis of the national strategy for resilience. Crucially, opening the door for mobilising all societal resources in the name of resilience, under the umbrella of Total Preparedness, equally requires involving the whole-of-society in the surrounding democratic debate on what we protect and how.

Notes

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3 For a recent example of the state mobilising non-security actors, the Danish Ministry of Culture established a 'Council for Cultural Resilience' (Kulturministeriet 2026). Its rather vague commission and an unwillingness to specify the actual purpose of the council beyond strengthening 'cultural resilience' has been met with broad critique and worry that Danish cultural personalities are being leveraged to increase military support from the Danish population (Malmos 2026a; 2026b; Jensen 2026).

1 In practice all Nordic countries, at least before Covid-19, operated with a principle of managing an incident at the lowest operational level possible. This meant that municipalities in Denmark, Sweden and Norway were to handle the pandemic if deemed possible (by the central administration). During Covid-19, only Norway maintained local responsibility for managing contagion, while coordination and regulation were centralised in Denmark and Sweden (Sefton 2023).

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