

Danish Defence Modernization

During my most recent visit to Denmark, the Danish government announced its proposed new defence agreement covering the next six years of defense expenditure and planning. It is clear from this document that the Russian challenge to the region, along with the threat from ISIS, rank as the two top threats the Danish government will be focusing upon and highlighting in terms of priorities and spending.

This new Danish defence agreement, released 11 October 2017, acknowledges that the country “faces more serious threats than in any other period following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The freedom and security we value so highly cannot be taken for granted.”

First noting that “NATO faces a confrontational and assertive Russia” the document goes on to highlight instability in the Middle East and North Africa as “fuelling militant Islamism, sowing the seeds for the threat of terror and irregular migration flows.”

The challenges of cyber security are also mentioned. *“Threats in cyberspace have serious security and socio-economic consequences. Propaganda campaigns challenge our democratic principles and established rules while, in the Arctic, there is increased activity and military presence. These are challenges which we cannot afford to ignore. That is why the Government wishes to substantially increase military spending over the next six years.”*

The intent is to gradually phase-in substantial increases that will ultimately result in the Danish Defence’s annual budget in 2023 being increased by DKK 4.8 billion. According to the government, this amounts to an increase of 20% compared to current military spending.

“The substantial increase in spending will increase operational capacity, and as a whole, the Danish Defence will have more staff, a less leadership-heavy structure and more operational units and soldiers by the end of the period covered by the agreement,” states the agreement. “We take the security of Danes seriously, and we back up our words with action.”

While in Copenhagen, discussions underscored how the Danes were looking at ways to deal with these many evolving threats and challenges, ranging from tight immigration control, cyber defences and approaches, counter-propaganda efforts, and force modernization.

Regarding the force modernization challenge, the Danes recognize the differences between the historical Cold War threat and those of today. The difference is substantial and as Gary Schaub, Jr. a long time American researcher based in Denmark explains it this way:

“With the Soviets, there was a direct threat of territorial invasion; the new Russian threat is not about invasion, it is about intimidation to achieve their objectives in the region, notably with regard to the Baltic states and the Arctic. The Russians have shaped a significant missile and air bubble over the region which includes surveillance, electronic warfare, and various other means to reach deep into the entire region. The Russians are able to see fairly well what’s going on with their own sensors, and can put Nordic air forces at significant risk in their operations, which also include frequent direct encounters in the region’s airspace.”

“One should also realize that the Russians are using exercises like ZAPAD 17 to influence Western behavior. They are triggering Cold War reminiscences for military and political purposes. It is not about the primacy of the Army and the ground forces, it is about generating our own anti-access and area denial strategy to counter them from the Arctic to the Baltics. We should be very wary of sinking money into ground forces, which are costly and not really directed at deflecting the real Russian strategy.”

Rear-Admiral Nils Wang, head of the Royal Danish Defence College, confirmed this perspective during recent hearings in the Danish Parliament.

During those hearings (held in September), the question of whether Denmark would return to the submarine aspect of their force when they modernized was dispelled. Answering with a decisive ‘no’, the Rear-Admiral provided significant perspective on how best to characterize and deal with the current and evolving Russian threat.

Meeting in his Copenhagen office later, we had a chance to further discuss the hearings and his own perspective, which clearly reflects the government’s new defense policy.

Looking back to history, the Soviet-Warsaw threat was one of invasion and occupation and using Nordic territory to fight U.S. and allied forces in the North Atlantic. In many ways, this would have been a repeat of how the Nazis seized Norway during an armed amphibious operation combined with a land force walk into Denmark.



At the time, notes the admiral, the Danes, along with their allies, were focused on sea denial through the use of mines (and with fast patrol boats providing protection for those laying the mines). Aircraft and submarines were part of a defence strategy to deny the Soviets any ability to occupy the region in time of a general war. He contrasted this with the current and evolving situation in which Russia is less focused on a general war, and more on building out capabilities for a more limited objective, namely controlling the Baltic States.

Rear Admiral Wang is convinced that any talk of the Cold War reoccurring is not only “completely wrong” but “missing the whole picture”. He notes how different the current situation is.

Today, Rear-Admiral Wang notes that arms modernization by the Russian military is focused on ground-based missile defense, and land- and sea-based attack missiles, along with airpower, as the backbone of its plans to further its anti-access and area denial strategy. Military modernization tied to the area denial strategy is intended to allow the Russians significant freedom of manoeuvrability to achieve their key objectives.

The Kalibr cruise missile, which can operate off of a variety of platforms, is a core asset of the Russian forces. With a dense deployment of missiles, Russia can provide cover for their forces. They focus on using land-based mobile missiles in the region as their key strike and defense asset.

The admiral quoted the open-source Danish intelligence assessment that Russia can mobilize quickly to seize and hold the Baltic States, if it so chooses. And the Russians have developed a cruise missile that makes it difficult for allied navies to operate in the Baltic and adjacent waters to contribute to Baltic defence.

“The Russian defence plan in the Baltic is all about telling NATO ‘we can go into the Baltic countries if we decided to do so. And you will not be able to get in and get us out.’ That is basically the whole idea.”

NATO deterrence is not being seen as effective right now. “If the Russians are neglecting NATO’s deterrence – deliberately or by accident – then we are in a situation where we go from a defensive to an offensive dynamic, because NATO then needs to kick them out again,” he asserts.

“If we are going to cope with that situation, the first thing we need to do is to neutralize the mobile missile batteries in



The Danish Navy maintains a presence of four ships in the Arctic during winter and up to six ships during summer. The Danish Air Force utilises C-604 Challenger patrol/surveillance aircraft and these efforts will be reinforced by a Danish satellite from February 2018, when the Ulloriaq satellite is launched.

the woods of Kaliningrad and along the borders of the Baltic nations. And you don’t do that with submarines unless they have strike capability. You do that with F-35s and with strike missiles. And you do that with Danish frigates, together with a U.S. aircraft carrier, or a Brit aircraft carrier, and whoever wants to come too,” he says.

“One needs to create air superiority, or air dominance as a prerequisite for any operation and, to do that, NATO would need to assemble all the air power they can, [including] carrier-based aircraft in the Norwegian Sea,” he continues.

“This is where the ice-free part of the Arctic and the Baltic gets connected. We will have missions as well in the Arctic at the northern part of Norway, because the Norwegians would be in a similar situation if there is a Baltic invasion.”

He argues for a renewal or augmentation of ASW capabilities by the allies to deal with Russian submarines in the Baltic, notably any missile-carrying submarines. He sees a focused Danish approach to frigate/helo-based ASW in the region as more important than buying submarines to do the ASW mission.

“There is a fundamental misperception by many in Denmark that the best weapon against a coastal conventional submarine is another coastal conventional submarine –

and that is simply not the case, especially not in the Baltic Sea where you can hide in the salt layers, where there is so much background noise that you are not able to hear anything in the same moment you start to accelerate yourself in your own submarine.”

Rear-Admiral Wang sees the best option as a “combination of Maritime Patrol Aircraft, ASW ships/helicopters, and satellites working together to destroy the Kilo-class missile launchers in the Baltic.”

Specifically, he suggests a “reverse engineering” approach to combine several key elements: a combined ASW, F-35 fleet, and frigate- and land-based strike capabilities (including from Poland as well).

In short, the Danish government is very clear about what the threats facing them are, the importance of allies modernizing and working effective interdependence in the defence of the North Atlantic and beyond, and need to invest more in new equipment and personnel.

They see both global terrorism and the current and evolving challenge by Russia as key drivers in the need for a strong defence strategy working closely with allies. **FLD**

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