

Denmark's Military Capability 2020

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Danish defence policy is to a large extent characterized by cross-party understanding and cohesion. The current defence orientation originates from an agreement between the largest parties – both from government and opposition – in the Danish parliament. This tradition of consensus-seeking decision-making between the larger parties generates stability in key issues, such as NATO membership and defence spending. The Danish Armed Forces are currently undergoing a transformation towards deterrence and regional defence. This shift derives from a more hostile and confrontational Russia, but equally originates from new NATO and US demands. Due to the past decades' pronounced focus on expeditionary operations outside Europe, the Danish capability to act and contribute in the case of a high-intensity conflict in the vicinity is restrained. The Danish Armed Forces also face difficulties with retainment of educated personnel, maintenance of key materiel and logistics, and pursuit of military training.

SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

NATO is the cornerstone of Danish security and defence policy, and Denmark strives to be recognised as an active and important member of the Alliance.¹ This differs fundamentally from the role of a reluctant ally during the Cold War, when Denmark for many years was described as a free rider, wanting NATO protection but unwilling to pay for it.² However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and a significantly less threatening East, Denmark feared that the US would lose interest in the military alliance Danish security depended on, which generated a desire to prove its value to Washington and to improve its status within NATO.³ In the ensuing years, Denmark succeeded in this mainly by active participation in multiple allied missions in high-intensity conflict zones, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. This new orientation changed the entire structure of the Danish Armed Forces and led to the dismantling of practically every aspect of the territorial defence capabilities. At the same time, Denmark, through its frequent and reliable participation in allied international missions, strengthened both its self-image as a core NATO member and its relationship to the US.

In recent years, the dynamic within NATO has changed. Firstly, Donald Trump's taking office as president

has revived US demands of increased defence spending among NATO members. Furthermore, NATO members in general and the US in particular have shown a fading interest in faraway international missions, thus making Denmark's inclinations less relevant. Secondly, a more hostile and assertive Russia is once again destabilising its own 'near abroad', which has generated NATO insistence on enhanced efforts of deterrence and defence at home – capabilities that Denmark is now gradually, but also a bit hesitantly, rebuilding.

This changed focus is evident in the most recent Danish defence agreement, which was settled in broad parliamentary unity, in 2017. The agreement, covering the period 2018–2023, entails increased spending in order to provide the Danish Armed Forces with capability to combat threats both regionally and far away. This is also motivated by Denmark's desire to meet NATO requirements and to maintain its position as a core member state. The agreement introduces a wide range of initiatives to be pursued before 2024, for example the completion of a new deployable brigade ready to take part in collective defence and the final delivery of F-35A fighter aircraft. The regional dimension is further evident as the agreement allocates resources for increased pre

1 Danish Ministry of Defence, 'Denmark in NATO'.

2 Jakobsen, Peter Viggo, 'Denmark in NATO, 1949–2019', in *NATO and transatlantic relations in the 21st century: Foreign and security policy perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

3 Jakobsen, Peter Viggo, 'Military strategy-making in Denmark: Retaining "Best Ally" status with minimum spending', in Matlary Haaland, Janne and Johnson, Rob (eds.), *Military strategy in the twenty-first century: The challenge for NATO* (London: Hurst Publishers, forthcoming).

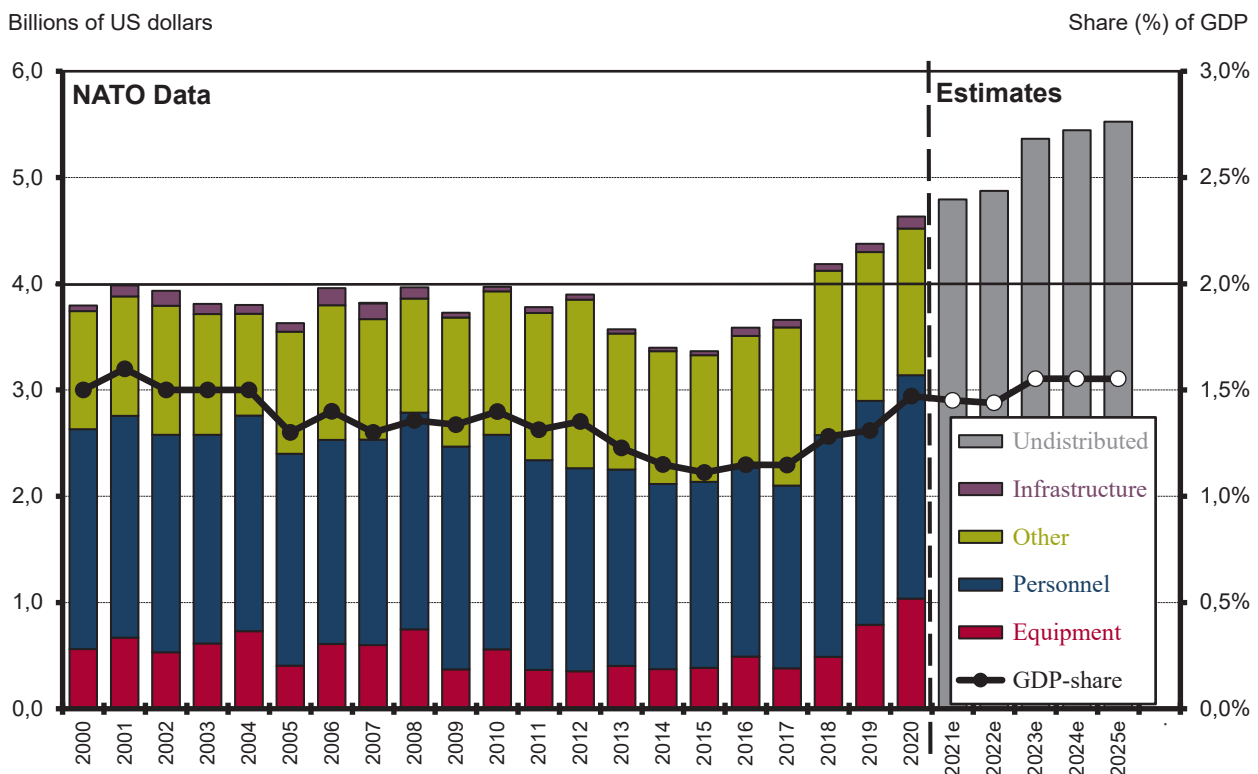


Figure: The military expenditures of Denmark 2000–2025: Billions of US dollars/2015 prices (columns) and as share (%) of GDP (curved line)

Sources: Bergstrand, Bengt-Göran, *NATO military expenditures*, Working Document (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI, October 2020).

NB: Estimates based on the Defence Agreement in January 2019 and the August 2020 defence budget stipulating that Denmark “will have a military expenditure/GDP share of 1.5% in 2023” (and then assumed to remain at this level in 2024–25).

sence and surveillance in the Arctic, as well as for the establishment of a new light infantry battalion, primarily intended to solve national security tasks, for example contributing to border controls or supporting the police.⁴

Denmark participates in several NATO operations and force pools, such as the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) and NATO Response Force (NRF). Denmark is also partner in the multinational corps headquarters (MNC-NE HQ) in Szczecin, together with Germany and Poland, and the newly established multinational divisional headquarters (MND-N HQ), partly in Karup, Denmark and partly in Adazi, outside Riga, along with Latvia and Estonia. Additionally, Denmark has in later years committed to a number of defence cooperation frameworks, such as the UK Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the French-led

European Intervention Initiative (EI2), and the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). Denmark is an EU member state, but has an opt-out from cooperating on security and defence issues. Nevertheless, Denmark supports the strengthening of the EU as a global security and defence actor and will not prevent closer defence cooperation between the other EU members.⁵

MILITARY EXPENDITURES

Between 2000 and 2012, Danish military expenditures were relatively stable in real terms, at a level just below USD 4 billion, in 2015 prices. However, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, in 2008, Danish military expenditures were reduced by approximately 15 per cent to a low of USD 3.4 billion, in 2015. In 2016, the

4 Danish Ministry of Defence, *Defence Agreement 2018–2023*.

5 Danish Ministry of Defence, ‘EU – The Danish defence opt-out’.

expenditures started to increase, to reach and pass USD 4 billion, in 2018.⁶

Danish decision-makers have been, and continue to be, hesitant about meeting NATO's requirements on spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence. Whilst still wanting to keep American security guarantees, the Danish outlook has instead been to "commit more, not spend more". During the years of out-of-area operations, this was seen as a way of getting closer to NATO and the US without having to drastically increase spending.⁷

The current defence agreement, presented in October 2017, included an increase intended to bring the Danish defence budget to a 20 per cent higher level in real terms by 2023.⁸ However, the agreement was criticised for only generating a defence spending of 1.10 per cent of GDP and, due to pressure from NATO and the US, an additional agreement was reached in January 2019. The latter included a reinforcement of the Danish defence budget by an additional DKK 1.5 billion, beyond the original increase of DKK 4.8 billion, a growth that was supposed to generate a defence budget of 1.5 per cent of GDP by 2023.⁹ However, due to the uncertain economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is unclear whether these ambitions will be met. Denmark is benchmarking its defence spending with other key allies within NATO and, if other members cut or postpone spending with reference to the Covid-19 pandemic, then Denmark will probably do the same. If other allies stay the course, then Denmark is likely to do so as well. In that case, the GDP drop caused by the pandemic could render relatively higher military expenditures, in terms of per cent of GDP. However, the economic impact of the pandemic might also well affect the defence spending in the longer run and become a justification for not going beyond 1.5 per cent after 2024.

The current agreements thus mark a shift in Danish

military expenditures, as they will not only revert to the same level as between 1970–2010, but also actually go well past it, in real terms. At the same time, a substantial part of this increase is state budget reallocations of expenditures, such as military pensions, which hence will not contribute to increased combat power.¹⁰ During the defence agreement period, Denmark also intends to follow NATO's guideline of investing 20 per cent of the defence budget on new equipment.¹¹ This represents a marked shift from the approximate 10 per cent spent on equipment in 2009–2018, and procurement increased both in 2019 and 2020, to 22.4 per cent, in 2020.¹² These increases can to a degree be explained by some expensive one-off purchases, and whether the 20 per cent ambition will survive in the next defence agreement remains uncertain.

ARMED FORCES

The Defence Command Denmark is the Danish joint military command and the supreme military authority of the Danish Armed Forces. It is located in Copenhagen, with the Ministry of Defence, and is led by the Chief of Defence. The Defence Command holds a Joint Operations Staff, the Special Operations Command, the Joint Arctic Command, and the three service staffs: the Army Command, the Navy Command and the Air Command.¹³

The Danish Armed Forces currently has approximately 14,500 employees, of which a majority are professional soldiers, but also annually trains 4200 conscripts, mostly for four months. The latest defence agreement stipulates a larger intake of conscripts, with up to 500 more every year, and that the number of those who serve longer than four months will increase. The agreement further specifies that national service henceforth is to be focused on skills that would be required in the event of a war or national crisis, rather than focusing solely on expeditionary capability.¹⁴

6 Hagström Frisell, Eva and Eriksson, Pär and Jonsson, Michael, 'Norden', in Pallin, Krister (ed.), *Västlig militär förmåga: En analys av Nordeuropa 2017* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency – FOI, 2018), p. 50–51.

7 Jakobsen, 'Denmark in NATO'.

8 Danish Ministry of Defence, *Defence Agreement 2018–2023*.

9 Danish Ministry of Defence, *Supplemental agreement for the Danish defence 2018–2023*.

10 News Øresund, 'Danmark avsätter mer resurser till försvaret efter press från Trump', 31 January 2019.

11 Danish Ministry of Defence, *Supplemental agreement*.

12 NATO, *Defence expenditure of NATO countries (2009–2016)*, 13 March 2017; NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013–2020)*, 21 October 2020.

13 Danish Defence, 'Defence Command Denmark', 26 February 2019.

14 Danish Ministry of Defence, *Defence Agreement 2018–2023*.

Army

The total strength of the Danish Army is approximately 7100 soldiers, but it is supposed to increase by 1000 soldiers by 2023, primarily in order to be able to completely man the 1st Brigade.¹⁵ The Army is organised in two brigades, but is currently unable to operate at the brigade level.

The 1st Brigade is the Army's professional brigade, and holds three mechanised and one reconnaissance battalion. The unit provides international mission training and can hence, if ordered, establish battle groups and other task forces for such deployment.¹⁶ It is developing its combat support and combat service support, and was planned to be capable of deploying in full by 2023.¹⁷ However, there are reports of considerable delays due to a lack of materiel and personnel. The personnel growth will partly be achieved by the introduction of three motorised infantry companies and supporting functions, manned by conscripts and reservists.¹⁸

The 2nd Brigade holds some professional units tasked with the defence of the Danish territory, but is primarily a training brigade. Apart from the training battalions, it holds the army's only armoured battalion, as well as a reconnaissance battalion and the new light infantry battalion.¹⁹ The 2nd Brigade is not intended to be able to deploy as one operational unit.

The development of the army is among the prioritised areas in the current defence agreement. However, the army faces several challenges, some of which are unlikely to be solved with the proposed changes. The army has continuous problems with manpower, several units lack personnel and the increase of conscripts and prolonged national service is unlikely to change this. The main issue is not the recruitment of new soldiers, but rather to retain educated personnel. Another major challenge is the lack of proper military training. Instead of focusing

on capability and readiness for high-intensity conflict, the armed forces in general, and the army in particular, are often used for other tasks, mainly police support, such as border controls and guard duties.²⁰ Another impediment to sufficient training is challenges connected to the maintenance and availability of equipment. As an example, in 2019 reportedly less than half of the tanks were operational, which presented a barrier to proper training as well as readiness.²¹ In February 2020, the first of a total of 44 modernised Leopard 2A7 tanks were delivered to the Danish Army.²²

Navy

The Danish Navy is organised in three naval squadrons. The 1st Squadron's focus is national operations in the Arctic region. The main capacity for naval support to international operations is gathered within the 2nd Squadron, including the *Iver Huitfeldt*-class frigates and the *Absalon*-class frigates, which have been used in operations in Libya and Syria and as a part of NATO's Standing Naval Forces. The 3rd Squadron is primarily dedicated to national operations and maritime surveillance.²³

The defence agreement of 2018–2023 contains several initiatives to strengthen the Danish naval capability, for example by equipping the *Iver Huitfeldt*-class frigates with SM-2 air defence missiles. The aim is to build a capability to protect and defend naval forces and coastal areas against hostile aircraft, and enable the frigates to deploy to international missions with area air defence. Furthermore, preparatory work will commence to acquire long-range SM-6 missiles, in order to provide complete frigate capacity that will meet NATO's force goals on maritime area air defence.²⁴ The agreement also contains initiatives to strengthen the Danish ability to conduct anti-submarine warfare by equipping the *Absalon*-class frigates and Seahawk helicopters with sonar and anti-submarine torpedoes.²⁵

15 International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The military balance 2020* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 98; Forsvaret, 'Historisk dag for Hæren: Ny brigade indviet', 10 January 2019.

16 Forsvaret, '1. Brigade', 2 October 2019.

17 Interview, Copenhagen, March 2020.

18 Danish Ministry of Defence, *Defence Agreement 2018–2023*.

19 Forsvaret, '2. Brigade'.

20 Interview, Copenhagen, March 2020.

21 Jakobsen, Peter Viggo and Rynning, Sten. 'Denmark: happy to fight, will travel'. *International Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 4, 2019: p. 886.

22 Forsvaret, 'Nye kampvogne ruller ind på kasernen', 5 February 2020.

23 Danish Defence, 'The Royal Danish Navy', 25 March 2019.

24 Danish Ministry of Defence, *Defence Agreement 2018–2023*.

25 Interview, Copenhagen, March 2020.

Air Force

The Danish Air Force holds an Air Staff, three different types of tactical air wings and an Air Control Wing with command and control facilities and radars. The three tactical air wings consist of six squadrons: 2 fighter squadrons (with F-16 Fighting Falcon), 1 air transport squadron (with C-130 Hercules) and 3 helicopter squadrons (with EH-101 Merlin, MH-60R Seahawk, and AS550 C2 Fennec).²⁶

Among the most notable developments in the upcoming years is the acquisition of 27 F-35A Joint Strike Fighters, which will replace the ageing F-16 fighter fleet. This initiative will be the most expensive modernisation programme in the history of the Danish Armed Forces.²⁷ The defence agreement of 2018–2023 also intends to increase the transport aircraft potential by adding new flight crews to the four C-130s.²⁸

The ongoing transition from F-16s to F-35As is challenging, and will affect both readiness and military

capability. In recent years, Denmark has continuously deployed F-16s in international operations, such as the Baltic air policing. However, due to the introduction of F-35As, it will not be until 2027 that the Air Force has the same number of combat aircraft available again.²⁹ Furthermore, the size of the fighter fleet will decrease from 30 operational F-16s to 20 operational F-35As, which has raised concerns about whether the Air Force will be able to carry out their expected level of tasks. Of the 20 continuously operational F-35As, six are to be used for training, which will leave only 14 F-35As for operational duty.³⁰

Personnel and materiel

Leaving the increased defence budget and planned reforms aside, the Danish Armed Forces face several challenges in the upcoming years. The main long-term challenge relates to recruitment and retention, as the army to a large extent, and the navy and air defence to some extent, all

Table: Personnel and materiel in the Danish Armed Forces

Personnel/Materiel	Numbers in 2020	Planned reforms towards 2025
Personnel^a		
Regular force	14,500	To be increased by 1000 soldiers
Conscripts ^b	4200	To be increased to 4700
Territorial defence forces	44,000 (volunteers in Home Guard)	
Reserves	-	
Materiel^c		
Tanks	44 (Leopard 2)	Will be upgraded from A5 to A7 standard.
Armoured combat vehicles	44 (CV90)	
Heavy artillery pieces	6 (M109)	Being replaced by 19 CAESAR in 2020.
Attack helicopters	-	
Surface combatants	9 (3 <i>Iver Huitfeldt</i> -class frigates, 4 <i>Thetis</i> -class frigates, 2 <i>Absalon</i> -class command and support ships)	<i>Iver Huitfeldt</i> -class frigates being equipped with SM-2 air defence missiles, and are eventually to be equipped with SM-6 missiles. <i>Absalon</i> -class frigates being provided with sonar equipment to detect submarines.
Submarines	-	
Combat aircraft	44 (F-16)	To be replaced by 27 F-35A.
Transport aircraft	4 (C-130)	Increase of transport aircraft crew.
Air defence batteries	-	

NB: a. International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The military balance 2020* (London: Routledge, 2020), b. NATO, *NATO Defence Planning Capability Review 2019/2020 Denmark Overview*, 14 October 2020, p. 2, c. Forsvarsministeriet, Materiel- og indkøbsstyrelsen. 'Forsvarets materiel'.

26 Danish Defence, 'The Royal Danish Air Force', 25 March 2019.

27 Forsvarsministeriet, Materiel- og indkøbsstyrelsen, 'Fra F-16 til F-35, Opgaver', 4 September 2018; Szymański, Piotr, *Overstretched? Denmark's security policy and armed forces in light of the new Defence Agreement*, OSW Commentary, no. 266, 2018: p. 7.

28 Danish Ministry of Defence, *Defence Agreement 2018–2023*.

29 Jakobsen and Rynning, 'Denmark: happy to fight, will travel', p. 892.

30 Interview, Copenhagen, March 2020.

have problems with military manpower. Several units lack personnel, and reforms in conscription and national service will not be sufficient to resolve this problem.

Another worrying concern involves the challenges in maintaining key materiel in readiness, which along with the lack of proper military training due to having other assignments, is a barrier to military capability development. The expensive acquisition of F-35As, along with the planned investments in the Arctic, may also risk hollowing out other parts of the Armed Forces, which are also in need of new and upgraded materiel.³¹

ASSESSMENT OF MILITARY CAPABILITY

Over the past decades, Denmark has developed an efficient military capability for out-of-area operations, an effort that no longer seems as valuable. This has resulted in armed forces too small and light for its tasks, a development that now must be compensated for when Denmark is reorganising its armed forces towards territorial and collective defence. Arguably, the most distressing challenge facing the Danish Armed Forces relates to a general lack of military manpower. In addition to this, the deficiencies in training and in readiness of equipment weaken Danish military capability.

The political line of limited defence spending is continuing, and although the Danish Armed Forces are accustomed to producing results with relatively small means and to balancing both national political demands and NATO pressure, the lack of proper spending and retention will eventually take their toll.

In the case of a conflict in the vicinity of Denmark, such as the Baltic Sea region, the majority of the available and operational Danish warfighting capabilities are located within various NATO operations. Within a week, Denmark should be able to muster a mechanised company that is part of the eFP battlegroup in Estonia, at least half a squadron of fighters, including aircraft allocated to the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI) in 2020 and one *Absalon*-class frigate that forms part of the Standing Naval Forces of the NRF. Beyond this, Denmark would likely have one company from each

combat battalion of the 1st Brigade, one to two frigates, and at least half a special operations company available.

It should be noted that the readiness of the Danish Armed Forces varies significantly from year to year, as Denmark's NATO commitments are shifting. In 2021, Denmark will contribute to the NRI with a full combat battalion as well as two frigates, which will have some impact on Danish readiness.³²

After three months, the deployable capabilities do not change significantly. The main improvement is the somewhat stronger Army contributions, as the Danish Army is supposed to have a full combat battalion ready within 30 days. Beyond this, additional air power contributions could also be deployed within three months.

Despite the ongoing transition to regional defence, the Armed Forces do not have any significant collective defence capabilities ready to deploy. Moreover, even in 2024, when the 1st Brigade is intended to be fully manned and deployable as a whole, the Army's high readiness capability will continue to be limited, as the brigade will need a 180-day notice if it is to be deployed in full. However, its battalions are expected to be available within 30 days, and single companies are to have a higher readiness.

If needed, Denmark would most likely make every effort to meet its stated readiness commitments, as Denmark still has a strong desire to prove itself as a core NATO member. But besides the concerns of a general personnel shortage, challenges in logistics and mobility would also affect Danish contributions to resolving a conflict in the Baltic Sea region.

As previously described, the current defence agreement includes several initiatives intended to strengthen Danish capability to combat threats both regionally and far away.

The most notable developments in the upcoming years are the acquisition of F-35As and making the 1st Brigade fully deployable. When completed, these efforts will make the Danish Armed Forces much more able to contribute to both national and NATO collective defence. However, the current difficult situation for Danish defence is likely to continue for some years. The Danish unwillingness to reach NATO's guideline of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence is weakening the bond that grew, some decades

31 Hagström Frisell, Eriksson, and Jonsson, 'Norden', p. 58–59.

32 Forsvarsministeriet, 'Orientering om danske tilmeldinger til NATO Readiness Initiative og NATO Response Force', 9 September 2019.



ago, between Denmark and the US, while the perception of Denmark as a contributing core member in NATO is at risk of shifting once again. NATO, with the US in particular, is increasingly emphasising that all members

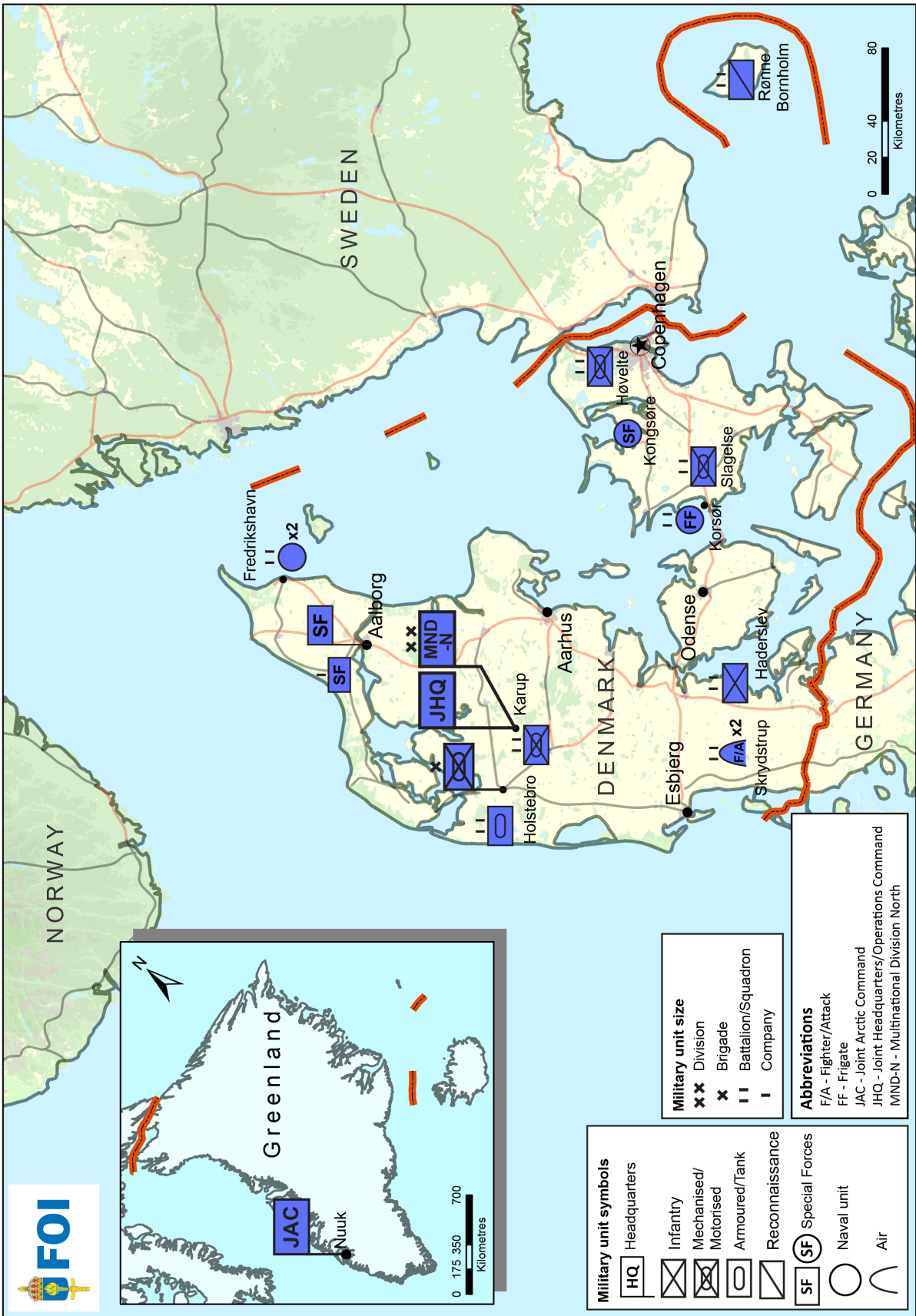
must take responsibility and spend more, and the earlier Danish idea of being vindicated by committing more instead of spending more might very well not be enough during the 2020s.³³ ■

This memo is an extract from FOI's report *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2020 – Part II: National Capabilities*, FOI-R--5013--SE.

³³ Interview, Copenhagen, March 2020.

Table: Force structure of the Danish Armed Forces

	Organisation 2020	Planned reforms towards 2025	Assessment of forces available at short notice
Joint	Defence Command Joint Arctic Command Special Operations Command		At least half a special operations company.
Army	1st mechanised brigade (3 mechanised battalions, 1 intelligence and reconnaissance battalion, 1 artillery group, 1 armoured engineer battalion, 1 logistics battalion, 1 command support battalion) 1 armoured battalion 1 reconnaissance battalion 1 light infantry battalion	1st brigade ready to be deployable by 2023. Increased number of professional soldiers.	1-4 companies or units ready within 7-14 days One combat battalion ready within 30 days.
Navy	3 naval squadrons	Capability to take part in anti-submarine warfare by equipping some frigates with sonar.	1-3 frigates
Air Force	2 fighter squadrons 1 air transport squadron 3 helicopter squadrons 1 air control wing	F-16s to be replaced by F-35As.	Half a squadron of F-16s.



Map: Overview of Danish armed forces and their basing
NB: Design by Per Wikström. The map covers only operational headquarters and manoeuvre forces.

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