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# AFGHANISTAN'S LESSONS: PART II

## Denmark's Lessons

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Sten Rynning

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**ABSTRACT:** This article argues despite opportunities to learn valuable strategic lessons from Denmark's effort in the Afghanistan War (2001–14), Danish civil authorities implemented a comprehensive approach policy that failed to establish a bridge to lessons learned by the military. Denmark's experience in the Afghanistan War demonstrates promises and perils of lessons learned processes.

In the dynamic security environment of the post-Cold War era, the small nation of Denmark has exploited its political-military agility to craft distinct contributions to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and argue that operational impact matters more than sheer size.<sup>1</sup> The so-called comprehensive approach to civil-military cooperation—the Danish and NATO version of whole-of-government policy—is a case in point. It was conceptualized during the Afghanistan campaign as a way to shape all strategic, operational, and tactical lines of effort into a multinational framework, and Denmark leveraged its tight-knit government community centered in Copenhagen and its can-do, activist strategic culture to be at the forefront.

Despite the promise of the comprehensive approach, however, the civilian government failed to learn strategic lessons. This failure can be attributed not least to the fact that the effort in Afghanistan was overwhelmingly military, whereas the comprehensive approach policy was civil-military. From the decision to deploy a battle group, and then put it in command of a specific and difficult territory—the Nahr-e Saraj district, comprising the commercial center, Gereshk, and part of the green zone along the Helmand River—the military went all in, adapting to counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare.

Other government agencies and especially nongovernmental actors have been less enthusiastic participants on the ground in Afghanistan. The fact that the celebrated comprehensive approach worked better in Copenhagen than in Helmand leads us to another source of failure, namely, the limited energy a nation can derive from its self-image. Danish officials like to convey that their country is a small, smart, and tough country. Lessons learned processes likely to confirm this self-image tend

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1 The author is grateful for the insightful comments from two anonymous *Parameters* reviewers; to Sibylle Scheipers and Hew Strachan for inviting this contribution to an Afghanistan workshop held in St. Andrews, Scotland, in January 2019; to Jens Ringsmose for constructive discussions; and to Julie Homegaard Milland for valuable research assistance. Where reference is made to Danish publications, the author has translated Danish titles into English.

to gain political support, whereas processes that are likely to challenge it do not.

Ultimately, Danish decisionmakers have proven unwilling to initiate learning processes that challenge the country's underlying culture of informal and reactive leadership. Danish security and development organizations have learned from the Afghanistan War, for sure, but as Danish civil authorities have preferred to play to their own perceived strengths while ignoring politically difficult issues, the overall result is impoverished learning. The Danish case thus illustrates the promises and pitfalls offered by lessons learned processes. Organizations need them, but political masters struggle to define and connect them. To paraphrase a US lessons learned inquiry, Denmark is a case study of how easy it is to encounter lessons but how difficult it is to learn—digest and implement—certain lessons, especially strategic ones.<sup>2</sup> This article explores the Danish case of learning selective lessons, tracing the interaction of national policy, military efforts, and the comprehensive approach.

### Political-Strategic Lessons

As the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission concluded in 2014, the political parties behind defense agreements, which compose the large majority of parties across the political spectrum, initiated a formal lessons learned process culminating in mid-2016 in a set of three publicly available reports.<sup>3</sup> But because this process focused on comprehensive and coordinated action to stabilize fragile states, it was not a comprehensive evaluation of Danish policy and Afghanistan engagement but of a narrow facet of the effort.<sup>4</sup>

The first report, managed by the Danish Institute of International Studies, a think tank under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (MFA), addressed the sum of international experiences with comprehensive approaches (also known as whole-of-government or defense, diplomacy, and development) to stabilization. It did not evaluate Danish policy in particular. The second report, led by development consultants hired by the MFA, explicitly addressed only the Danish development aid to Afghanistan. The third report, managed by the Royal Danish Defense College, assessed civil-military cooperation projects managed by the Ministry of Defense. As civil-military cooperation is a circumscribed set of activities, the report de facto dealt with a mere € 1.1 million of € 1,533 million in Danish military expenditures related to Afghanistan—0.07 percent.

The limited scope of the report could be, at least in part, a reflection of the political process of establishing the lessons learned mandate in the

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2 Richard D. Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 4–5.

3 Dansk Institut for Internationale Studier (DIIS), *Afghanistan: Lessons Learned 2001–2014*, Report 1 (Copenhagen: DIIS, 2016); DIIS, *Afghanistan: Lessons Learned 2001–2014*, Report 2 (Copenhagen: DIIS, 2016); DIIS, *Afghanistan: Lessons Learned 2001–2014*, Report 3 (Copenhagen: DIIS, 2016).

4 DIIS, *Mandate for Lessons Learned Process* (Copenhagen: DIIS, 2014).

first place. Several issues plagued negotiations over the mandate, finally adopted in November 2014 as ISAF was about to terminate its mission. The left-wing Socialist People's Party, part of the center-left government majority, wanted a comprehensive assessment, but one that highlighted the virtues of a comprehensive approach. Right-wing parties saw this as critical of the military effort and were reluctant to support such a comprehensive assessment. Partly for the same reasons, the parties split on whether a lessons learned process should take place at all, and if so, whether civil servants should run it or involve independent experts.

Consequently, the broad and independent format of the three lessons learned processes did not really address Denmark. They were written by independent consultants who were also recipients of ministry-controlled development aid, suggesting the possibility of less-than-independent findings. In military affairs, lessons were written in-house and concerned an exceedingly small proportion of the civil-military cooperation effort.

Significant political concern regarding political-strategic lessons learned from coalition conflicts in the early twenty-first century was evident in a parallel process that began in June 2012 and concluded only in February 2019. This process concerned the lawfulness of war in Iraq and the handling of detainees in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The original design of this parallel process aimed, in part, to hold accountable Danish decisionmakers and officials who might have acted wrongfully.<sup>5</sup>

Comprised of parties that had opposed joining the Iraq War in 2003, the center-left government that took office in October 2011 initiated this political-legal search for justice. A judicial commission of inquiry did proceed. But the effort was heavily politicized and undermined support for a comprehensive mandate behind the aforementioned three reports. Following a change of governments in June 2015, the judicial commission was closed. In the spirit of consensus in May 2016, however, the parties agreed to revive the commission but now as an historical inquiry into "the decision-making processes" that led to Danish military participation in interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

The revived but delimited inquiry of 2017–19 was mandated to balance political sore spots: the decision to become involved in the Kosovo conflict (1998–99), made by a left-wing government, and the decisions to join the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, made by a right-wing government. In theory, the blame would be spread equitably. Moreover, the inquiry was limited to the process that led to Denmark's decision to use armed force, not the subsequent war itself, leaving a politically convenient black hole of political-strategic learning.

The conclusions of the historical inquiry, in particular, amply demonstrate the discrepancy between parties' behavior when in

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5 "Mandate for Inquiry into the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," Danish Ministry of Justice (MoJ), April 11, 2012.

6 MoJ, *Agreement on Independent Historical Inquiry into Denmark's Military Engagement in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Copenhagen: MoJ, 2016).

government and when in opposition.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the inquiry highlights the considerable degree to which shifting Danish governments, rhetoric notwithstanding, have pursued foreign policy activism from the same baseline—balancing support for the United Nations, the United States, and NATO. On the other hand, it highlights how political games result not only in the aforementioned discrepancy in behavior but also reveal a dearth of formalized national security policy prioritization. National security policy is developed and implemented informally and adaptively, which keeps strategic issues fluid and allows Danish political parties room for maneuver. The downside is a lack of a disciplining framework to identify political-strategic priorities and draw lessons.

While dissent among political parties is normal in democracies, the informal Danish political culture of domestic contest and competition has proven stronger than the imperative to draw from and to embed strategic lessons in a formal document of national security strategy. The three aforementioned reports, along with the historical inquiry, unsurprisingly, have not led to a course correction in strategic policy. Rather they have fueled an ongoing game of political contestation. The rationale of Danish decisionmakers—Denmark is better off reacting to events—has limited value for political-strategic learning and indirectly pushed the military, foreign policy, and development communities to focus on lessons relevant for their particular domains but not necessarily relevant beyond them. We shall explore each domain in turn.

### **Military Lessons**

Denmark's engagement in Afghanistan started in December 2001, following a parliamentary decision to contribute aircraft and special operations forces to the international coalition.<sup>8</sup> Given the size of the country, Denmark's contribution grew to considerable proportions, especially from 2008 to 2012, when the country deployed a battle group to Helmand province. Today, engagement continues in the form of a reduced training and capacity-building mission.

The Danish military effort in Helmand province was considerable, sustained, and consistently enjoyed greater public attention than civilian development aid, even as the latter increased along with the military effort. In 2008, Danish annual development aid, both multilateral and bilateral, to Afghanistan reached a level of € 65 million, which has largely been sustained. Notably, Denmark did not shy away from “walking the talk” as it deployed and sustained a military contribution beyond the capacity of most other similar states. Militarily, Denmark deployed a battle group to Helmand from 2008 to 2012, deployed a total of 18,376 personnel through the ISAF years, and sustained 43 casualties.

In January and February of 2006, the Danish government proposed, and parliament made, a decision to deploy Danish troops to ISAF

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<sup>7</sup> Rasmus Mariager and Anders Wivel, *Why Did Denmark Go to War?* (Copenhagen: Rosendahl's a/s, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Danish parliament decision B 37, December 14, 2001.

Regional Command South and in support of the British provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Lashkar Gah, Helmand province.<sup>9</sup> With this decision, Denmark shifted its profile from one of dispersal to one of concentration, and it gained territorial responsibilities of its own in the Nahr-e Saraj district.

Previously, Denmark had contributed around 50 troops for ammunition and mine clearing in Kabul, 50 troops to the German PRT in Feyzabad, 10 troops to the Lithuanian PRT in Chaghcharan, and 6 troops to the Swedish PRT in Mazar-e Sharif. Politically, these contributions reinforced Danish commitments to NATO and individual NATO allies and partners. But beginning in 2006, Denmark shifted to a lead role in the stabilization of a high-risk district.

Denmark rotated a total of 17 task force teams to Helmand province. At its peak, from 2009 to 2011, each team was comprised of approximately 700 personnel, and the Danish effort through the ISAF years totaled nearly 20,000 personnel (see figure 1). The peak years of dead and injured soldiers were likewise defined by the Helmand campaign. Team 3 of 2007 lost 1 soldier. The next seven teams lost a total of 34 soldiers before casualties declined well into 2011 (see figure 2).

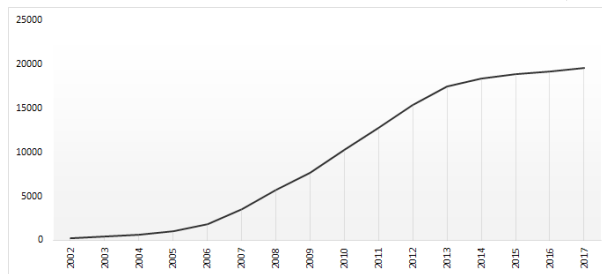


Figure 1. Number of Danish soldiers deployed to Afghanistan, 2002–17<sup>10</sup>

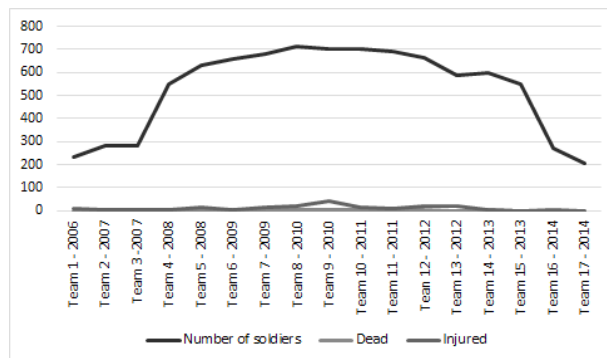


Figure 2. Number of Danish soldiers deployed, killed, and injured in Helmand, 2006–14<sup>11</sup>

9 Danish parliament decision B 64, January 12, 2006.

10 Forsvarsministeriets Personalestyrelse, “Afghanistan,” May, 2019.

11 Forsvarskommandoen, “Danish soldiers in Helmand: Helmand Teams: Team 1 through Team 17,” Danish Defence: Because Something Is Worth Fighting For, December 9, 2019.

The adaptability of Danish forces is evident in this shift from dispersed and protected deployment to the war effort in Helmand. Several things are notable. One, the defense agreement of 2004 had a “first in, first out” emphasis reflecting current thinking in the United States and NATO on reaction forces and expeditionary warfare. Denmark did organize a branch of its armed forces for international operations in the early 1990s. But it was not until 2002, when NATO enlargement to the Baltic states provided for a safe regional space, that the full Danish force was geared to international operations.<sup>12</sup> Danish land forces were then organized into a standing first brigade for reaction and a second brigade for training and mobilization.

The Helmand campaign undid this organizational design, demanding a new design whereby sustaining a rotation of teams gained priority over first in, first out. Battalions were preferred, and brigades had no real function. Moreover, a deployed headquarters had to be developed for the larger and more complex functional requirements of territorial management. Finally, troops had to learn COIN warfare and interact with the full range of civilian actors in the battle space.

Adaptability can likewise be found in the Helmand effort in the shift from a dynamic, counterforce campaign to a more classical clear-hold-build campaign fashioned around principles of COIN warfare. While the distinction is relative, the period from 2006 to 2008 represents a highly dynamic facet of the campaign where Danish forces joined the platoon house strategy of the British, got into the heaviest fighting any Danish force had experienced since the German-Danish War (1864), and ultimately deployed Leopard 2 main battle tanks from Denmark to Helmand to deliver precision fire and generally dominate the opponent. In the spring of 2009, Danish forces also participated in Operation Panchai Palang, an offensive operation to gain control of central Helmand. Still, by this time, a new US administration and shift of ISAF command signaled a turn toward a less offensive, more engaging COIN strategy.

Gradually, the Danish task force shifted from patrolling along the Helmand River green zone to consolidating its presence in Gereshk and partnering with the growing number of Afghan soldiers and police forces in its area. Danish forces maintained a patrol base line in the green zone. But from early 2012, gradually transferred responsibility to Afghan forces. In fact, Operation Panchai Palang was intended to clear key Taliban strongholds and enable this strategy of transitioning to Afghan lead. Thus, in the operation’s wake, in the fall of 2009 and early 2010, the forward operating bases were given Dari names. By February 2012, Danish forces relinquished their commanding role to focus on partnering and training. A special operations forces task force deployed to Helmand in 2012 to accelerate capacity building among the

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Sten Rynning, “Denmark: Happy to Fight, Will Travel,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July 2019): 877–95.

Afghan forces, leading to the unit's first loss of life in an operation north of Gereskh.

The army concluded its lessons learned process in March 2016 with generic lessons applicable to deployments to Afghanistan, the Baltic, or elsewhere:

- The military requires a mandate with a clear campaign plan, an assessment of the capacity for force buildup in the mission area, a legal framework for handling detainees and for employing local labor, a memorandum of understanding and technical arrangements with host and partner nations, and the integration of information operations in army education.
- The military requires support for developing a full-spectrum force capable of meeting unexpected circumstances, similar to the aforementioned deployment of Leopard 2 battle tanks to Helmand and the widespread introduction of tactical and sub-tactical drones for surveillance and reconnaissance in Afghanistan, which also influenced the post-Afghanistan force-on-force environment in Europe.
- Denmark requires an adjusted organization capable of better synchronizing deployments with key allies and partners and capable of deploying female engagement teams.
- The military education programs need to tailor staff officer education to distinct institutional contexts of Denmark's allies. Particularly, the introduction of military English would support joint operations with the United States and Britain. Enhancements should also include a more stringent use of lessons learned processes and integrate the home guard where applicable.
- Denmark requires fielding enough equipment for training and deployment to meet such missions as those in Afghanistan as well as ensuring redundant capacities for force-on-force scenarios in Europe.
- Denmark requires robust leadership capable of initiative and with the ability to entice similar influence up and down the chain of command. For context, Afghanistan was a company commander's war, and European defense and deterrence brings brigade-level leadership back into focus.
- The military should tailor human resource policies to identify distinct leadership profiles for training and capacity building in advance of operations.
- The military should commit to maintaining six-month deployments to preempt deployment fatigue. These efforts should reflect the uniquely straining experience of sustaining task forces in Iraq and Afghanistan over several years.
- Denmark needs an operational and readiness culture that institutionalizes and maintains the ability of troops to endure camp



conditions by improving training facilities at home and by increasing access to facilities in partner nations.

- Denmark should strive for a maximum level of interoperability with allies, including close allies such as Britain, to align understanding of comprehensive approaches like those used in Helmand province more easily. This capacity should also lead to more proactive use of liaison officers.<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned, the army lessons are formulated in generic terms and concern its organizational, tactical, and operational issues. The army has drawn lessons and shaped them to a changing security environment and is now in the process of implementing—actually learning—the lessons. As such, it is a promising case of lessons learned. Neither the government nor parliament, however, has requested strategic lessons, thus weakening civil-military integration and preventing critical dialogue on strategic objectives, ways, and means in national decision-making.

As we saw, the official lessons mandate of 2016 deliberately excluded the full military effort from the learning exercise, confining political-military learning to the very narrow civil-military cooperation sliver of the campaign. We thus return to the particularities of Danish defense policy-making. Parliament's decisions regarding defense resource allocations also function to define the primary tasks of the armed forces. In mid-2012, as Denmark relinquished command of the Helmand task force, the defense budget was cut by 15 percent, and the depth of the battalion structure was reduced from six to three, precluding any type of Afghanistan-style campaign, and instead, preparing the army for European defense operations.

These cuts were thus enacted not in respect of lessons identified but as a consequence of political fatigue with the Afghanistan campaign and a desire to reduce the military footprint to the benefit of other government programs. Later, in January 2018, as Denmark was confronted with further NATO regional defense and deterrence demands, parliament increased the budget 20 percent, reinforcing the type of brigade-size autonomous capacity NATO was requesting.

These increases reflected strategic concerns—with Russian aggressiveness and the imperative for allies to deliver on NATO's Defense Investment Pledge, the so-called two percent commitment (to bring defense spending up to two percent of gross domestic product)—but were not in any particular way connected to the military lessons drawn from Afghanistan. These lessons, drawn just two years earlier in 2016, addressed crisis management operations as opposed to regional defense and deterrence, and they lacked a connecting bridge to the political realm of strategic lessons learned.

In sum, the army has drawn considerable tactical and operational lessons, and parliament has shaped budgets and overarching priorities

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<sup>13</sup> Danish Army, *Army Report on Ongoing Development of Force Contributions* (Copenhagen: Danish Army, 2016).

to its liking. But strategy documents bridging the political and military levels—a safeguard against a jumble of politics, policy, and wishful thinking—are absent.<sup>14</sup> While consistent with the Danish political preference for informal and adaptive policy, it stands as a warning for Denmark's next employment of military force.

### Comprehensive Approach Lessons

The comprehensive approach as a tool for coordinating and integrating relevant actors and policies in support of stabilization has been a Danish priority since 2003. But the comprehensive approach policy has also become a malleable tool—both for demonstrating a political desire for broad-based stabilization policy in an era of protracted and politically contentious armed conflict and for actually offering improvements in security, development, and governance on the ground. The comprehensive approach is thus both aspirational—some would say symbolic—and a policy tool. As such, it has gone through several phases and is likely to continue to change.

Version 1.0 of the comprehensive approach evolved from 2003 to early 2009. Denmark was a front-runner in placing “Concerted Planning and Action of Civil and Military Activities in International Operations, or CPA,” as the idea was originally called, on NATO's agenda.<sup>15</sup> As NATO deliberations slowed, however, so did implementing the approach in Denmark where the key ministries—Foreign Affairs and Defense—did not take ownership of the issue. Further, the key Danish military effort in Iraq was not amenable to substantial civil-military coordination on the ground on the outskirts of Basra. But the transition out of Iraq from 2006 to 2007 and parallel entry into Helmand province offered Denmark a fresh opportunity to engage the policy. In 2006, at its Riga summit, NATO agreed to develop a comprehensive approach policy but then needed to work out details and implications.

In the following years, the political momentum behind the comprehensive approach increased, and Denmark spotted an opportunity to be influential. Critically, a new US policy, based upon the US Agency for International Development experience as it applied to comprehensive conflict analysis, led to the United States establishing an interagency system to manage contingencies.<sup>16</sup> By August 2009, the United States was able to present a fully integrated civil-military campaign plan for Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> Inspired by this process, NATO adopted a substantial, comprehensive approach policy in 2008, which included both generic and Afghanistan-focused directives. Denmark was following suit, and a preparatory commission delivered a framework policy of comprehensive

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14 Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

15 Kristian Fischer and Jan Top Christensen, “Improving Civil-Military Cooperation the Danish Way,” *NATO Review*, no. 2 (Summer 2005); and Peter Viggo Jakobsen, *NATO's Comprehensive Approach to Crisis Response Operations: A Work in Slow Progress*, DIIS Report 2008:15 (Copenhagen: DIIS, 2008).

16 White House, *Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Reconstruction and Stabilization*, National Security Presidential Directive-44 (NSPD-44) (Washington, DC: White House, 2005), 1.

17 US Embassy, Kabul and US Forces Afghanistan, *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan* (US Embassy, Kabul and US Forces Afghanistan, 2009).

and integrated action that informed parliament's 2009 defense agreement for 2010 to 2014.<sup>18</sup> In 2010, NATO allies agreed to put crisis management on par with collective defense tasks in the *Strategic Concept*, formalizing the window of opportunity for small allies to seek outsized influence on Allied affairs.<sup>19</sup>

To gain it, Denmark had to shift course. Version 1.0 of the comprehensive approach policy had become characterized by grand ambition and poor implementation. Policy development took place in the MFA by designated personnel from the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense under the guidance of a ministerial oversight team. The intention was to set up an MFA Stabilization Department modeled on the British Stabilization Office. In the interim, the team pursued its mandate to generate projects for the comprehensive approach as it applied primarily to Afghanistan, but also to East Africa, and include these projects in the Helmand plans and other official strategy documents of Denmark. While well-intentioned, this setup failed to deliver a unified policy platform for the political parties in parliament and instead got mired in a range of bureaucracy and organization that de facto impeded interdisciplinary planning and action.

Sensing a moment of opportunity, Denmark turned to version 2.0 of its approach. It benefited from the establishment of the aforementioned Stabilization Department in August 2009, the political energy that flowed from the US-led surge in Afghanistan, and the commitment of allies such as Denmark to follow suit. Thus, the new department could focus on the development of an ambitious, comprehensive approach concept that integrated military, civilian government, and nongovernmental actors in a single policy framework in the context of hostile armed conflict.

The diplomat who ran the Stabilization Department during the critical opening years from 2009 to 2010, Rolf Holmboe, pinpoints a number of factors that allowed Denmark to help shape NATO's comprehensive approach policy in Afghanistan. First, comprehensiveness began in the political arena where a broad majority in parliament supported comprehensive foreign policy priorities and the full chain of command. Second, a culture of cooperation and trust had gradually emerged among the two key ministries and the defense command. Third, Denmark was both small and smart—it benefited from its tightly knit informal network among senior civil servants and managed to maintain its culture of high trust. This enabled coherent policy initiative in multilateral negotiations. In short, Denmark had a firm idea of where to go (comprehensive approach policy) and was liberated from “policy mafias”—pursuing sectarian issues such as development or military security—that, in Holmboe's experience, characterize larger countries such as Britain and the United States and complicate negotiation mandates.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Danish Ministry of Defense (MoD), *Danish Defense Agreement* (Copenhagen: MoD, 2009).

19 NATO, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2010).

20 Rolf Holmboe, interview by the author, January 23, 2019.

This Danish moment of policy shaping influence could only last as long as the surge in Afghanistan. Beginning in 2013, Denmark had to consider if version 3.0 of comprehensive approach policy fit a non-Afghan centric world. Distinctively smaller in scale and ambition, Version 3.0 shifted the center of gravity from crisis management to crisis prevention. Similar policy debates within Allied governments and the United Nations centered on nebulous concepts of stabilization, resilience, and the need to counter violent extremism. Danish policy calls for a much smaller military footprint largely related to capacity building, and thus training of local security forces. It does not aim to coordinate development policy with nongovernmental, humanitarian actors.<sup>21</sup> Version 3.0 is thus distinctively civilian and governmental.

Revealingly, the 2018–23 defense agreement entered in January 2018 does not at any point refer to “comprehensive approach” but rather to capacity building. Moreover, humanitarian organizations are kept separate from the military effort.<sup>22</sup> The aid and development community was always skeptical of tight coordination and cooperation with the military on the ground and felt affronted by the ambitious policy outlined from 2009 to 2011.<sup>23</sup> As Holmboe puts it, MFA policy today aims to separate humanitarian work from ministry-led development and governance efforts, leaving that work to nongovernmental and private organizations.<sup>24</sup>

Current MFA policy is less ambitious and high-minded than during the peak ISAF and COIN years in Afghanistan: it is not captured in one learning document, like in the army, but spread throughout various policy documents related mostly to African crisis-prevention efforts. While the MFA continues its efforts on the ground, only in a narrower MFA framework, does the political level seem content to wave the symbolic flag of comprehensiveness in Danish policy and claim the mantle of balanced foresight into conflict prevention, as opposed to war and armed conflict. As should be clear from this discussion, though, the Danish comprehensive approach policy has gone through both armed and unarmed phases and is today distinctively less comprehensive compared to version 2.0. Denmark’s engagement in conflict areas remains, as always, dependent on support from allies and partners.

## Conclusion

In March 2012, then Foreign Minister Villy Søvndal argued in an op-ed that now was the time for Denmark to once again think and act like a small state. According to his sentiments and those of the left-wing government that took office in October 2011, Denmark had veered too

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21 Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Justice, *Denmark's Integrated Stabilisation Engagement in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Areas of the World* (Copenhagen: Danish Government, 2013).

22 MoD, *Defense Agreement 2018–2023* (Copenhagen: MoD, 2018).

23 Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Peter Gill, *Today We Drop Bombs, Tomorrow We Build Bridges: How Foreign Aid Became a Casualty of War* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

24 Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Justice, *Denmark's Integrated Stabilisation Engagement*.

far in the direction of military and strategic activism, beginning in Iraq and continuing in Afghanistan, and had lost sight of a wider and softer engagement favoring international rules and institutions. Consequently, the 2013–17 defense agreement cut the defense budget by 15 percent.

In September 2015, a few months after taking office, the right-wing government commissioned a seasoned diplomat, Peter Taksøe-Jensen, to sort out Danish foreign policy and security priorities in order to put the spotlight on Danish national interests. According to this perspective, Denmark had closed one chapter on ambitious Afghanistan-style crisis management policy and another on social-liberal and neutralist foreign policy with a cosmopolitan flavor. Instead, Denmark needed to recommit to strategic activism, bolster its commitment to national and allied defense, such as that of Greenland and the Baltics, and avoid overstretch. As a result, the 2018–23 defense agreement increased the defense budget by 20 percent.

Political leadership matters for large states and small. In the Danish case, the scope for such leadership was always contextual. In Afghanistan, counterterrorist policy, detainees, and civilian casualty policy divided parliament, and thus inhibited leadership. Meanwhile, stabilization and support for Afghan development enjoyed widespread support and emboldened it. Thus, the comprehensive approach became a rallying cry on the Danish political scene because it served to build consensus and move the country beyond the divisiveness of the Iraq War (2003–11) more than it served as a tool for coordinated action on the ground. Therefore, the comprehensive approach served as a symbolic framework within which Danish political interests could come together and claim leadership.

All countries experience partisan politics. But in the Danish case, it has resulted in a peculiar type of informal national decision-making that bolsters flexibility for the top echelon of the government and enables political blame games in the electoral arena. There is obvious political convenience in this, but a major drawback of informality is that it effectively breaks the political-strategic learning process that renders strategic ambitions, ways, and means explicit and anchors them in documents that pull in, rather than pull apart, political-military lessons.

The military, as well as the development community, did the heavy lifting in Afghanistan and have drawn separate lessons. The army, which bore the brunt of the hardship in the ISAF mission, has identified a range of tactical and operational lessons it is now pursuing in a new framework of both regional defense and deterrence and continued international operations. The development community and thus the MFA inherited the celebrated comprehensive approach policy and reduced it to a mostly diplomacy-development engagement for preventing crises, primarily in Africa, from escalating. As such, Denmark has learned some selective lessons and steered clear of others. This application has helped the country move forward but also exposed it to new risks.