



Denmark: High on will, low on military capabilities

Peter Viggo Jakobsen

Political will

As of September 2025, Denmark was [Ukraine's largest donor](#) measured in proportion of GDP and number eight when measured in absolute numbers. By then Denmark had donated [EUR 9.9 billion](#) in bilateral assistance to Ukraine, out of which 927 million was humanitarian.

Prime Minister Frederiksen quickly positioned Denmark as a self-declared "[frontrunner](#)" on Ukraine urging other countries, including the United States, to do more. Thus, the Danish government together with other allies put [pressure](#) on the United States to speed up delivery of F-16s and has repeatedly argued that Ukraine should be allowed to strike targets inside Russia with long-range Western systems. Denmark has hosted donor conferences, donated major weapon systems such as Harpoon coastal defence missiles, CAESAR self-propelled howitzers, Leopard 1 main battle tanks and F-16 fighter jets, trained Ukrainian personnel in Denmark and the UK and launched the so-called called "[Danish model](#)", which finances weapons procurement and development inside Ukraine. Most recently, Denmark has allowed Ukrainian firms to develop [drones](#) and [fuel for long-range missiles](#) on Danish soil.

Denmark supported the Anglo-French proposal to deploy a security force to Ukraine from the start and sent [military planners](#) to participate in the planning process. Prime Minister Frederiksen has stated on several occasions that Denmark will make a contribution to a European force in Ukraine, and all

parties in parliament and the public is behind her. Eurobarometer polls show consistent support from [80-90%](#) of the population for Denmark's Ukraine support and [68%](#) support participation in a possible European security force in Ukraine. The only thing that is unclear is the nature of the contribution; the government line is that it will depend on the task at hand.

Danish Ukraine support has been shaped by [the three factors](#) that have driven Danish defence policy since the end of the Cold War: (1) interest in maintaining the US security guarantee in NATO, (2) interest in spending as little on the defence as possible and (3) a desire for a [high status](#) in the eyes of other NATO allies and especially the United States. In its own self-understanding and official narrative, Denmark is a "[core member](#)" of NATO contributing more than its fair share to the alliance.

This self-narrative and understanding was under severe pressure at the time of the Russian invasion, because Denmark was doing poorly in two of the three NATO burden-sharing C's introduced after 2014: [capabilities, cash and contributions](#). Denmark was scoring low on cash, with no intent of spending 2% of GDP on defence, and low on capabilities relevant for collective deterrence and defence against Russia, but high on per capita force contributions to NATO operations. Denmark's initial reaction to the invasion was to make a commitment to increase defence spending to 2% by [2033](#) – something that did not go down well in [NATO](#). While there is no doubt that

Denmark's high support for Ukraine is in part driven by strong identification with Ukraine, a belief that Ukraine is fighting "our" war, it was also seen as a way of maintaining Denmark's standing in NATO without spending 2% of GDP on Denmark's own defence. The hope was that high Ukraine contributions would compensate for Denmark's low defence spending and the inability to meet NATO's capacity goals thus allowing Denmark to maintain a high standing in the eyes of the other NATO allies. This strategy failed. The war continued and the pressure from NATO to increase defence spending rose as other allies increased their spending faster than Denmark and Denmark's capability goals were augmented. Denmark consequently began to increase its spending while maintaining its high support for Ukraine, which had given Denmark a [high profile on Ukraine](#). The government consequently [increased defence spending](#) so that Denmark would be spending 2% when Trump entered the White House in 2025. Trump's unexpected threats to take control of Greenland and abandon Ukraine created a [fear of abandonment](#) and [sense of urgency](#) in Copenhagen that not only induced the government to support Trump's demand for 5% defence spending, but also to increase the support for Ukraine out of fear that Russia would win, if the US abandoned the country to its fate. This fear will ensure strong Danish support for Ukraine, NATO and EU in the foreseeable future.

Military capabilities

Given its strong record with respect to participating in high-risk combat operations in the Balkans ([tanks in Tuzlain 1994 and F-16s in Kosovo](#)), Afghanistan (2001-2021), where Denmark suffered the highest number of fatalities ([44](#)) per capita, Iraq war (2003-2006),

[Libya \(2011\)](#), [Iraq/Syria against ISIL \(2014-16\)](#) and anti-piracy operations off the coast of [Somalia \(2008-15\)](#) and in the [Gulf of Guinea \(2021-22\)](#), Denmark can be expected to a military contribution regardless of the conditions. If the UK and France take the lead in deploying a Ukraine security force, Denmark will follow and make a contribution maintaining its tradition of providing high per capita force contributions in order to enhance Danish security and its standing in NATO.

The challenge facing the Danish government is that years of neglect and military cutbacks have left the Danish Armed Forces with limited and hollow capabilities that it will take years to rebuild. The army is already stretched to the limit due to its contribution of a [battalion battle group \(850 personnel\)](#) to the Canadian-led NATO brigade in Latvia, the navy is incapable of sending a frigate into the Black Sea because of problems with its [air defence systems](#) and the air force has limited capacity for international operations because of its ongoing transition from F-16 to F-35.

Against this background, it is difficult to see Denmark providing sizable army or fighter aircraft contributions to a Ukrainian security force. A battalion-sized contribution is only possible if other allies take over from Denmark in Latvia, and a contribution of fighter aircraft would likely require that other allies assume the duties that Denmark perform out in NATO's [Baltic Air Policing](#) and [Eastern Sentry](#) operations.

Another option would be to make contributions to multinational units such as military police, EOD specialists, MOVECON, Security and Escort specialists, Special Forces or staff officers.

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In the *Multinational Force Ukraine* series of policy briefs leading experts from allied countries assess key factors for participation in the Multinational Force Ukraine. This includes the political willingness of allies to deploy troops—on the ground, in the air, or at sea—to establish a military presence in or around Ukraine. They also examine the conditions for such deployments to occur (before, during, or after peace negotiations), the roles these forces would be expected to perform (defensive or offensive), the red lines imposed by national governments, and the specific capabilities each country could realistically contribute.