



Punching above their weight, but why? Explaining Denmark and Estonia in the transatlantic relationship

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Abstract

This article asks *why* Denmark and Estonia have eagerly attempted to ‘punch above their weight’ in the transatlantic relationship since the end of the Cold War and shows *how* they differ in their strategies to do so. Using neoclassical realism as a theoretical point of departure, the article explains how a combination of changing constraints in the strategic environment and elite interpretations of how these changes affected national security resulted in ‘super atlanticist’ alliance policies in the two countries. Following this analysis, we discuss the future of super atlanticism.

Keywords Small states · Transatlantic relationship · Estonia · Denmark · Neoclassical realism · Alliance politics

Introduction

Most smaller NATO members are most accurately described as atlanticist in the sense that their foreign policies ‘centre around the transatlantic alliance.’¹ This is true for founding members such as Norway or the Netherlands and for those states in Central and Eastern Europe that became members through the enlargements of the alliance in 1999, 2004 and 2009. However, some small alliance members are more atlanticist than others. Whereas some small alliance members have occasionally refrained from supporting or even condemned US policies and military interventions—e.g., the strong criticism of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq from Belgium, Norway and Greece—others have taken on the role as ‘super atlanticists.’

In contrast to atlanticists, super atlanticists conduct foreign policies characterized by a strong and seemingly unwavering support for the American world order as well

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as specific US policies that goes beyond the policies of their peers and seek to foster a ‘special relationship’ between the small ally and the US superpower. Thus, super atlanticism, ‘is based on close, intimate cooperation with the USA, and thereby also committed to the prevailing US foreign policy ideology.’² Super atlanticism may be understood as a niche strategy in the sense that it is a response to a particular set of demands from the superpower and fulfills a specific role in international society in order to maximize the national interest of the small state. In contrast to military niche strategies (such as e.g., special operations forces), this political niche strategy is a multi-vector strategy encompassing a cluster of sub-strategies that allows the small state to pursue super atlanticist policies.

Based on these characteristics, how do we distinguish super atlanticism from atlanticism when we see it? First, super atlanticists emphasize an ideational community with the USA that goes beyond pragmatically pursuing common interest. Super atlanticists share a common cause with the USA, not merely a common goal in meeting a particular challenge. Thus, super atlanticists tend to emphasize a ‘special relationship’ with the US building on common values as well as joint interests. Second, and as a consequence of this perceived community with the USA, super atlanticists are willing to pursue costly and risky policies to support the super power. Thus, in contrast to conventional small state policies of hiding and free riding, super atlanticists are willing to be exposed to danger and pay extra to maintain their close relationship with the USA. When forced to choose sides between the USA and other allies, the super atlanticist will choose to side with the USA even when this is costlier than choosing the other side or simply to hide, i.e., to remain neutral in the conflict. In sum, atlanticist policies follow a logic of consequence emphasizing the practical benefits of allying with the super power in political and military affairs, whereas super atlanticist policies adds to these pragmatic benefits a logic of appropriate action where not only the interests but also the values of the state are viewed by national foreign policy decision makers to be in sync with those of the superpower.³

This article seeks to explain the super atlanticism of two small NATO allies, Denmark and Estonia. Small state super atlanticism is a puzzling phenomenon. The alliance literature predicts that small states, because of their inconsequential contribution to the military strength of the alliance and the unlikelihood that even great sacrifices on their part will affect the balance of power, are likely to free-ride and let the larger allies ‘bear a disproportionate share of the burden.’⁴ Moreover, these factors also create an incentive for passive, defensive and neutralist policies as the small states seek to play it safe in a world they have little chance of affecting anyway.⁵ Thus, as summed up in a recent review of the literature, small state alliance policies are typically viewed solely in terms of military protection.⁶ By actively supporting

² Mouritzen [2].

³ On logic of consequence and logic of appropriate action, see March and Olsen [3].

⁴ Olson and Zeckhauser [4].

⁵ Aron [5], Hey [6] and Olson and Zeckhauser [7].

⁶ Bailes [8].



the USA, even when this is potentially costly, the Danish and Estonian super atlantacists seem to contradict the predictions of the literature.

Might this contradiction not be explained by the recent assertive policies of Russia or the beliefs of individual decision makers? Neither Estonian nor Danish super atlanticism is limited to the term of a single influential pro-super atlanticist politician. Estonian super atlanticism is not limited to the term of super atlanticist President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, and Danish super atlanticism, precedes and exceeds the term of former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the focus of the hitherto most comprehensive study of Danish super atlanticism.⁷ As we will show below the super atlanticist policies of Denmark and Estonia precedes the recent resurgence of Russian foreign policy assertiveness and goes beyond what their peers are paying for protection. Latvia remains atlanticist, while Estonia is super atlanticist, and Norway remains atlanticist, while Denmark is super atlanticist.

We explain Danish and Estonian super atlanticism by asking *why* Denmark and Estonia have eagerly attempted to ‘punch above their weight’ in the transatlantic relationship since the end of the Cold War and show *how* they differ in their strategies to do so. We argue that super atlanticism is triggered by security concerns but conditioned upon the compatibility of small state security identity and the international order provided by the great power. Thus, a deteriorating security environment drives certain states, depending on their foreign policy outlook, into a position of super atlanticism. In both cases, super atlanticism was the response to a change in the balance of threat and the position of the two states between an assertive Russia and demanding USA. However, to Estonian and Danish policy makers the decision to upgrade from atlanticism to super Atlanticism went beyond a logic of consequence. In both countries, super Atlanticism was not only considered to be prudent but also to be morally superior. It was not only the result of a cost–benefit analysis but the choice of what the policy makers regarded the ‘right’ world order.

Explaining super atlanticism: choosing niche strategies in the American world order

The foreign policies of small states tend to be explained either in terms of the international system or in terms of domestic politics.⁸ The first type of explanation argues that small states suffer from a capability deficit vis-à-vis the great powers that makes them vulnerable to the insecurities of an anarchic international system and the interests of the great powers.⁹ The second type of explanation points to the importance of the domestic context for understanding small state foreign policy. According to

⁷ Mouritzen [2].

⁸ We understand ‘small state’ in accordance with Bjøl [9], who argues that ‘[b]y itself the concept of small state means nothing. A state is only small in relations to a greater one.’ Thus, a small state is ‘the weak part in an asymmetric relationship’ as noted in Steinmetz and Wivel [10].

⁹ For discussions of this type of explanation of small state foreign policy behavior, see Browning [11], Hey [12], and Elman [13].



this type of explanation, we need to understand the historical and institutional peculiarities of a small state in order to understand its foreign policy.¹⁰ In this way, the literature on small state foreign policy seems to reiterate a classical divide in international studies between nomothetic explanations from the outside and ideographically understanding the actors from the inside.¹¹ To be sure, both of these types of explanations provide us with valuable clues about why and how small states behave as they do in international politics.

The systemic explanation, ‘makes an important contribution to our understanding of small states by pointing out that inequality in capabilities creates inequality in opportunities for survival and influence internationally,’¹² whereas the domestic politics explanation helps us to understand why small state responses to these inequalities of capability and opportunity vary widely. At the same time, they share two blind spots. First, both types of explanation tend to underestimate the importance of location and distance. Even in a globalized world, power tends to wane with distance. Small states, in particular, are concerned about proximate threats, because their limited capabilities leave them with little influence on the overall balance of power and at the same time vulnerable to threats from great powers nearby.¹³ Second, power alone (no matter whether it is distant or nearby) tells us little about the foreign policy choices of states as states care not only about power, but how power is likely to be used.¹⁴ As argued by Spykman, ‘the full meaning of regional location becomes apparent only after considering both the geography and the historical and political significance of a state’s immediate surroundings.’¹⁵

We use these insights to explain the super atlanticism of Estonia and Denmark. Taking our point of departure in neoclassical realism, we construct a simple explanatory model that we use to analyze the policies of these two countries in the following sections. Neoclassical realists argue that systemic and domestic politics explanations are best understood as two ends of a continuum. In times of imminent and existential systemic threats, e.g., during the height of the Cold War, they will tend to dominate the foreign policy decisions of national elites. In times of imminent and existential domestic threats to the national elite, e.g., in the face of a revolution of coup d’état, domestic politics will dominate foreign policy decisions (e.g., by allying with states that may help quash the domestic opposition). However, the vast majority of decisions about foreign policy and grand strategy are made on various points of the continuum between these two extremes.¹⁶ In order to understand and explain these decisions, neoclassical realism starts from the general realist insight that ‘in anarchy there is no overarching authority to prevent others from using violence, or

¹⁰ See, e.g., Holbraad [14] and the discussion of how the development of the Scandinavian welfare state conditions the foreign policies of the Nordic countries in Schouenborg [15].

¹¹ Hollis and Smith [16].

¹² Wivel [17].

¹³ For discussions, see Mouritzen [18], Mouritzen and Wivel [19], and Walt [20].

¹⁴ Walt [21].

¹⁵ Spykman [22].

¹⁶ Ripsman et al. [23].



the threat of violence, to dominate or destroy them.¹⁷ Consequently, states tend to focus on national security as a primary goal. However, exactly how states pursue national security and other foreign policy goals, and why they choose one ally over another depends on a range of intervening factors. There is ‘no smoothly functioning mechanical transmission belt’ from structural incentives to foreign policy and ‘the translation of capabilities into national behavior is often rough and capricious over the short and medium term.’¹⁸

We argue that the *scope* of this translation of capabilities into policy depends upon the permissiveness of strategic environments. Strategic environments of a given state may be more or less permissive, i.e., vary in ‘the imminence and the magnitude of threat and opportunities that states face.’¹⁹ Variations in permissiveness are particularly important for small states, because of the ‘capability deficit’ that they suffer vis-à-vis the great powers.²⁰ This deficit places small states as the weaker part in asymmetric relationships with the great powers, where they can only rarely transform or ameliorate their strategic environment and therefore suffer from a smaller margin of time and error than more powerful states.²¹

For small states, the permissiveness of the strategic environment depends on the balance of threat.²² A proximate great power with aggressive intentions and offensive capabilities will restrict the action space of the small state. Moreover, this actions space will be further restricted by allies of the small state balancing this threat and placing demands on the foreign and security policies of small states in return for security shelter against the threatening power. Three points should be noted. First, permissiveness and restrictiveness of strategic environments vary along a continuum. Thus, the security environments of small states are not either restrictive or permissive. Variations in permissiveness of small state action space follow variations in the balance of threat between the great powers. Thus, for small states in Europe, the strategic environment of the Cold War was more restrictive than the strategic environment of the post-Cold War era, and the security environments of the 1950s and early 1980s, when the super powers increased their offensive capabilities and intensified aggressive rhetoric were more restrictive than other periods during the Cold War.²³ Second, the permissiveness of strategic environments of small states depend on the specific policies of the great powers. During the Cold War, the USA and the Soviet Union managed their spheres of influence very differently with the small states within the US sphere of influence enjoying a more permissive strategic environment than the small states in the Soviet sphere of influence. Third, permissiveness of strategic environments is about action space, not security. For instance, the Cold War left small states with relatively restrictive strategic environments, but

¹⁷ Grieco [24].

¹⁸ Rose [25].

¹⁹ Ripsman et al. [26].

²⁰ Browning [11].

²¹ Jervis [27] and Wivel [28].

²² Walt [29].

²³ However, as pointed out by Mouritzen [30], superpower détente also created challenges for small states.



their chance of survival was better than at any time before in the history of the modern state system.²⁴ During the Cold War period, Denmark and Estonia placed very different on the continuum. Occupied by the Soviet Union, Estonia's foreign policy action space was virtually non-existent. In contrast, Denmark and other small NATO member states such as the Netherlands and Norway took advantage of a larger action space for small states in the US sphere of interest using it to formulate foreign policies that were different from and occasionally in opposition to the American superpower.

We argue that variations in permissiveness, i.e., the balance of threat, have two consequences for small state foreign policy. First, permissiveness functions as a 'selector' of threats and opportunities faced by the small state, e.g., if the territorial integrity of a small state is threatened by invasion from a great power, then foreign policy is likely to become militarized and defensive as attention is focused on national defense. Second, permissiveness influences how much domestic politics is allowed to influence foreign policy decision-making: the less permissive the strategic environment, the less room for domestic influence as foreign policy decision makers focus their attention on adapting to the external environment.

Strategic environments are perceived and interpreted by foreign policy makers. The clarity of strategic environments varies.²⁵ Threats and opportunities as well as the optimal policy responses to these threats and opportunities may present themselves more or less clearly (e.g., a clear and present danger of a military invasion vs. opaque threats of cyber disruptions or 'little green men'). Also, the time horizon of these threats and opportunities may be more or less clear. Moreover, whereas 'policy processes are pushed and showed by international power dynamics,'²⁶ these power dynamics are only translated into policy through the 'world views' (religions, political ideologies), 'principled beliefs' (allowing actors to distinguish right from wrong) and 'causal beliefs' (ideas about cause–effect relationships guiding the actors on which means to employ in order to achieve their goals) of the foreign policy decision makers.²⁷ Taken together, these ideational factors may be summed up as 'regime identity,' i.e., 'publicly declared value-systems' associated with the governance of the state and serving as the legitimate base for law-making and political activism.²⁸ Consequently, the *content* of translations of capabilities into small state foreign policy depends upon the compatibility between the regime identity of the small state and the social order and specific policies promoted by great powers.²⁹

We structure our analysis in two main sections, one on Denmark and one on Estonia. In each country analysis, we analyze how ideational and material factors at the global, geopolitical and domestic levels interact in the production of super atlanticist policies. In accordance with our neoclassical realist point of departure, we focus on

²⁴ Maass [31].

²⁵ We base our understanding of clarity on Ripsman et al. [32].

²⁶ Rynning and Guzzini [33].

²⁷ Goldstein and Keohane [34].

²⁸ Mouritzen [35].

²⁹ See also the discussion on the interaction of power and ideas by Gvalia et al. [36].



how the permissiveness and clarity of the strategic environment interact with elite beliefs to produce super atlanticist security policies. Following the country analyses, we briefly compare the two cases and reflect upon the future of super atlanticism.

Denmark in the transatlantic relationship

Danish foreign policy is characterized by strong and unwavering support for the American world order and specific US policies. Danish foreign policy makers have since the early 1990s sought to foster a ‘special relationship’ between Denmark and the USA. This has been the case even when Danish choices questioned established principles of Danish foreign policy (such as participating in wars in Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003 without a UN mandate), put Danish soldiers at risk without a direct link to Danish national security (e.g., Danish military contributions in Afghanistan and Iraq) and risked endangering the relationship with other allies and cooperation partners (e.g., the decision to support US intervention in Iraq in March 2003 despite warnings from Germany and France).

Up until the end of the Cold War, Denmark seemed like an unlikely super atlanticist. Denmark was a founding member of NATO in 1949, but the decision to join the alliance was viewed by the political decision makers as a policy of necessity rather than a policy of choice. Denmark had initially pursued the option of Scandinavian Defense Union with Norway and Sweden, but in the end this option was deemed unfeasible, because distrust in Swedish military leadership and the US rejection to back up the Scandinavian Defense Union military. During the Cold War, Denmark was repeatedly reprimanded NATO officials for spending too little on defense.³⁰ At the same time, Denmark questioned NATO and US Cold War policy. Denmark (and Norway) argued that they should be allowed a bigger action space vis-à-vis other allies in order not to provoke the Soviet Union into limiting the action space of Sweden and Finland.³¹ From 1982 to 1988, a majority in the Danish parliament explicitly expressed the Danish dissatisfaction with the nuclear policy of NATO and the hardened US rhetoric toward the Soviet Union by forcing the Danish minority government to footnote a series of NATO communiqués.³² In sum, Denmark’s Cold War security posture can be characterized as ‘allied with reservations’ or even ‘latently neutral.’³³

To be sure, Danish governments never questioned NATO membership. Denmark was vocal about its reservations toward US security policy and NATO, but at the same time saw NATO membership as fundamental for Danish national security in the restrictive strategic environment of the Cold War. In addition, distancing Denmark from the USA and NATO took place in the context of a continuous and strong diplomatic relationship between the two countries. The first trade agreement

³⁰ Ringsmose [37].

³¹ Brundtland [38] and Noreen [39].

³² Petersen [40].

³³ Holbraad [41] and Villaume [42].



between the two countries date back to 1783, and in 1792 Denmark was only the second country to be recognized as an independent state by the USA since the US Declaration of Independence. The two countries have had diplomatic relations since 1801. In the early twentieth century, Danish migrants to the USA raised money for a national park in Denmark providing a setting for one of the largest 4th of July celebrations outside the USA each year since 1914 (only with exceptions during the two world wars). The fear of Germany during World War I led Denmark—with Norway and Sweden—to appeal to the USA to protect neutral countries against German military power. Denmark bought ammunition from the USA during the war before selling the three Virgin Islands St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John to the USA in 1917 with fear of a German take-over playing a role at both sides of the negotiation table.³⁴ Thus, an important driver behind Danish policy was changes in the balance of threat following from the unification of Germany in 1871, the ensuing build-up of German offensive capabilities and increasingly aggressive German intentions in the early twentieth century.

Danish foreign policy in the interwar years concentrated mainly on Germany and secondarily on the United Kingdom—the two strongest military powers in Denmark's geopolitical vicinity—and the two most important trading partners of Denmark. While Germany's occupation of Denmark and the Danish political elite's cooperation with the German regime until 1943 was decisive for Denmark's awkward international position after the war, the United Kingdom played a decisive role in Denmark's re-admittance into international society by using its influence to secure Denmark's role as a founding member of the United Nations.³⁵ However, the end of World War II was also the end of Denmark's neutral security policy, which was widely viewed by the political elite and the population as a failure endangering Denmark's national security and potentially putting the country's survival at risk. This view was underpinned by the post-World War II transformation of the balance of threat leaving Denmark vulnerable to a powerful and militarized Soviet Union with an expansive ideology. Consequently, atlanticism embedded in NATO came to play a central role in Denmark's security policy. NATO atlanticism was one out of four cornerstone's in Denmark's foreign policy balancing different and sometimes conflicting interests in national security, economic prosperity, national identity and value promotion.³⁶ The other three cornerstones were the EU/ECC (playing a key role in trade policy), the UN (playing a key role in development and détente policy), and the Nordic Council (playing a key role on intra-Nordic cooperation). The latter also served as a platform for Nordic influence outside the region—and was therefore linked closely to the UN cornerstone, where the Nordic countries cooperated closely.³⁷

³⁴ Wivel [43].

³⁵ Mariager [44].

³⁶ Hækkerup [45].

³⁷ Laatikainen [46].



The American world order: the end of small state policy?

Super atlanticism is a combination of the actions of the super atlanticist and the relationship between the super atlanticist and the USA. The super atlanticist must be able and willing to supply super atlanticist policies, but if it is regarded by the USA as useless or even a pariah state, super atlanticist policies are unlikely to be robust as there will be no demand for its attempted super atlanticism.

The American world order changed the demand for atlanticism in general and super atlanticism in particular. This was a consequence of the highly asymmetrical distribution of power as well as the political content of the American world order. In terms of distribution of power, the collapse of the Soviet Union left the USA as the strongest great power in terms of relative capabilities in the history of the modern states system.³⁸ This distribution of power allowed the USA to pursue a foreign policy agenda of spreading values such as liberal democracy, human rights and market economy.³⁹

For a small NATO member not bordering Russia such as Denmark, this order entailed challenges as well as opportunities. On the one hand, the post-Cold War transformation of the balance of threat left Denmark less dependent on the US security guarantee. On the other hand, the US super power demanded three changes with fundamental consequences of the security policy of smaller allies: they should be willing and able to go out of area, out of institutions and out of consensus. The American world order was an expansion of the sphere of interest that had created an ‘invited’ and ‘integrated’ empire in Europe during the Cold War.⁴⁰ In comparison with other states in the beginning of the 1990s, the USA was a global power with interests all over the international system. Consequentially, European allies were now expected to change from a defensive posture primarily contributing to the territorial defense of the alliance to an offensive contribution to expanding the American world order. This change of US priorities had implications for NATO—which according to the oft-quoted one-liner by US Senator Richard Lugar had to go ‘out of area or out of business.’ It also meant that the USA would now lead coalitions of the willing, which required the willingness of participants to participate in military conflicts that went beyond core national security interests and could place them decisively on one side of a military conflict and therefore in opposition to other states, even long-term allies. These demands are constant features of the American world order and not linked to the early post-Cold War period or a specific presidency. They were the objects of considerable debate among allies in the 1990s and early 2000s, but they are now accepted as relatively uncontroversial characteristics of the post-9/11, post-Iraq War and post-Russian resurgence American world order.

For small European states perceiving Russia as a threat, these demands were one end of a bargain. The USA continued as Europe’s security provider and, in return, US allies were expected to lend their support to the maintenance of the American

³⁸ Wohlforth [47].

³⁹ Hansen [48].

⁴⁰ Lundestad [49, 50].



world order outside Europe. However, for a small state like Denmark, which since the early 1990s no longer perceived Russia as a threat,⁴¹ US demands for out of area, out institutions and out of consensus were a demand for super atlanticism, i.e., these demands went well beyond the security interests of Denmark. Moreover, small states typically work to create strong international institutions (in order to level the playing ground and bind the great powers), focus on their close geopolitical vicinity (because of their relatively modest capabilities), and prefer to act on behalf of international society (in order not create new enemies among great powers). US demands challenged these small state priorities, and for Denmark, these demands provided an even stronger contrast to traditional ‘Nordic’ foreign policy priorities such as peaceful conflict resolution and international rule of law.⁴² So how and why did Denmark transform itself into a super atlanticist ready to meet these demands?

The changing geopolitics of European security: trading territorial security for ontological insecurity

The end of the Cold War radically changed the geopolitical foundation for Denmark’s foreign and security policy. Since the seventeenth century, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany and most recently the Soviet Union had posed a direct military threat to the Danish territory, and ultimately a threat to Denmark’s survival as an independent state. With the Central and East European revolutions and the collapse of the Soviet Union the balance of threat was transformed, and there was no longer a direct military threat to the Danish territory: The Russian successor state to the Soviet Union was significantly weaker in terms of absolute and relative capabilities, it had less offensive power, did not convey the same level of aggressive intentions and was furthermore farther away from Denmark. Consequently, Denmark now faced a more permissive security environment.

However, new societal security challenges related to regional instability, civil war and migration emerged with the wars in former Yugoslavia soon to be followed by a new focus on environmental and economic security and terrorism.⁴³ This strategic environment was more permissive than the Cold War strategic environment, but with lower clarity. Denmark enjoyed a bigger action space than before, but threats could emanate from anywhere at any time, rather than being the result of a great power’s military build-up. In this strategic environment, the central security challenge for Danish policy makers was no longer territorial survival but seeking to influence the agendas of the strong in order to improve societal resilience.⁴⁴

Whereas this new security order increased the Danish action space, it also traded Danish territorial security for ontological insecurity: What was the foreign policy identity and international role of Denmark? Danish decision makers were unsure. Cold War value promotion had been embedded in the Nordic cluster of

⁴¹ See, e.g., Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs [51].

⁴² Schouenborg [15].

⁴³ Bailes et al. [52].

⁴⁴ Løvold [53]. See also Bailes et al. [52].



states providing a common ideational starting point in the welfare state and self-consciously promoting a Third Way between the Communist East and the Capitalist West.⁴⁵ However, as one of these alternatives collapsed the *via media* between the two became obsolete.⁴⁶ The Nordic countries had based their international position on being different from and better than the USA and the European great powers, but now they found themselves in the margins of Europe rather than at the center of the Cold War leading to an identity crisis in the foreign policies of all Nordic states.⁴⁷

In addition, the organization of Denmark's foreign policy into four functional pillars, which had served as the foundation for Danish foreign policy during the Cold War collapsed as a consequence of the new security order. The four pillars had all been fundamental, but they had not been equally important, and they had served different goals. The NATO and Europe pillars had been fundamental for pursuing defensive national security interests focused on securing the survival of the Danish small state. Trade, primarily with European partners and underpinned by increasing European integration, allowed Denmark to secure economic growth, whereas security cooperation, primarily with the USA reduced the risk of a military attack and enhanced the chance of withstanding such an attack if it should ever happen. The Nordic and UN pillars were fundamental for pursuing ideational offensive goals most importantly focused on the establishment of a rule-based international order inspired by the Scandinavian welfare states and their emphasis on economic equality, the rule of law and peaceful conflict resolution typically pursued through high-profile policy areas such as development policy and UN peacekeeping.⁴⁸ Now the distinction between defensive security-seeking and offensive peace-making made little sense, and the Nordic and UN pillars lost influence in comparison with the US and European pillars.⁴⁹

Escaping the ghosts of the past and meeting the challenges of the present: super atlanticism as a means and as a goal in Danish foreign policy

Danish foreign policy decision makers saw two candidate solutions to Denmark's ontological insecurity. Their first option was Europe. The EU offered a successor-option to the abandoned Nordic platform. To the extent that the goals and values of EU foreign and security policy were made clear, they coincided with traditional Nordic priorities such as the spread of democracy, peaceful conflict resolution and human rights to the extent that the much-celebrated Nordic bloc in UN politics were soon subsumed by a larger EU bloc.⁵⁰ The EU seemed to have an almost perfect fit with the emerging all-European and multi-dimensional security agenda covering almost all aspects of security and creating incentives for non-violence and the

⁴⁵ Schouenborg [15].

⁴⁶ Wivel [54].

⁴⁷ Wæver [55].

⁴⁸ Branner [56] and Schouenborg [15].

⁴⁹ Jakobsen and Kjærsgaard [57] and Olesen [58].

⁵⁰ Laatikainen [46].



peaceful resolution of conflicts in most parts of the European region through accession and neighborhood policies. To Danish decision makers, the lack of military capabilities made the EU an even more attractive solution as the non-military nature of the EU allowed Denmark to avoid political marginalization, while preserving its traditional Atlantic security identity embedded in NATO.

In addition, the European solution fitted with an emerging consensus in the Danish foreign policy elite on how to understand the European security order. First, despite uncertainty about the consequences of deepening European integration,⁵¹ and a general reluctance toward German unification,⁵² Danish foreign policy makers agreed that Europe's new security order should be seen as 'a unique window of opportunity' allowing small states to pursue activist and internationalist foreign and security policies.⁵³ Second, there was a strong perception in the Danish political elite in general that the EU was to be the primary institution for most types of European policy-making in the future and therefore the institution to focus on if Denmark was to succeed in its activist and internationalist ambitions.⁵⁴ The European solution, however, proved to be short-lived. Following the rejection of the Maastricht Treaty by the Danish electorate in a referendum in 1992, Denmark was granted opt-outs from the Treaty on migration, monetary policy and defense allowing the country to stay in the EU, but in effect undermining the EU as the answer to the question of Denmark's international identity and role in the world.

With the Nordic answer effectively undermined by the end of the Cold War, the UN answer marginalized because it had been so closely coupled to Nordic cooperation and the European answer blocked by domestic opposition to the Maastricht Treaty, the USA became the answer to Denmark's ontological insecurity problems. This was a policy of necessity rather than a policy of choice. The USA offered what the EU could not: an opportunity for taking advantage of the more permissive strategic environment and meeting the challenges of its lower clarity in a way, which was consistent with Denmark's Nordic security identity—and even the opportunity for strengthening the profile of this identity. At the same time, Denmark's Nordic brand was an asset for the USA: a small social democratic peacemaker emphasizing rule of law at home and abroad supporting the agenda of going out of consensus, out of institutions and out of area in order to protect and develop the American world order.

Denmark was now not only a peacekeeper and a force for rule of law internationally, but a peacemaker and a force for regime change. Thus, arguments in favor of Danish military activism in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria focused on the importance of contributing to creating a more just international society in addition to security considerations. Denmark joined the American-led coalition in Iraq despite the lack of a direct mandate from the UN Security Council and deep disagreements between Denmark's most important international partners. This was

⁵¹ Wæver [55].

⁵² Mouritzen [59].

⁵³ Holm [60].

⁵⁴ Kelstrup [61].



neither the first time Denmark participated in a US-led international military coalition of the willing (having contributed to the 1990–1991 Gulf War), nor was it the first time Denmark contributed to a war without a direct UN mandate (having contributed actively to the 1999 air campaign against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in the Kosovo War). Throughout the post-Cold War era, Denmark has continuously committed a relatively high level of troops to international operations with NATO overtaking the role of the UN as the most important institutional framework for Danish military participation since the mid-1990s.⁵⁵ The ‘extensive Danish willingness to deploy a significant number of forces in high-risk areas in Afghanistan has been met with much appreciation and applause inside NATO.’⁵⁶ In Libya in 2011, Denmark deployed six F-16 fighters and one Hercules transport plane along with corresponding ground crews and being one of the most active and efficient participants in the coalition Denmark dropped a total of 923 bombs and bombed approximately 17% of all targets hit by the coalition in Libya.⁵⁷

For leading Danish politicians, military activism had a close fit with Danish regime identity and represented a continuation with other means of Denmark’s Nordic security identity during the Cold War. Promoting democracy, human rights and gender equality was still top priorities, but conflict resolution was no longer exclusively peaceful and embedded in the UN, but increasingly involved resorting to military means in close cooperation with the USA. Thus, social democratic prime minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen argued that the NATO air campaign in the Kosovo War should be viewed as the beginning of a new international order with greater respect for the protection of people against state atrocities and saw 9/11 as an attack not on the USA, but on common values of all democratic states. His successor as prime minister and later Secretary General of NATO, liberal Anders Fogh Rasmussen viewed Danish participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as both paying a moral debt to the USA for protection during the Cold War, and as a war for democracy, human rights and even gender equality.⁵⁸ In 2013, assessing the situation in Syria, Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s successor as prime minister, social democrat Helle Thorning-Schmidt argued that Denmark had a duty to protect civilians in Syria against the Syrian President even if there were no UN authorization to do so, but left the timing and content of any such operation to the US ally.⁵⁹ Thus, to Danish politicians, super atlanticism in the form of military activism was the right thing to do and closely coupled to Danish regime identity.

In this context, the Danish defense budget—subject to both NATO and US criticism in recent years—may be viewed as the Achilles’ heel of Danish super atlanticism. With 1.14% of GDP, the Danish defense budget is well below the 2% target set in the Defense Investment Pledge agreed on the 2014 NATO summit in Cardiff. Moreover, Denmark was the only Baltic Sea country not to increase its defense

⁵⁵ Wivel et al. [62].

⁵⁶ Ringsmose and Rynning [63].

⁵⁷ Saxi [64].

⁵⁸ Wivel [65].

⁵⁹ Rasmussen et al. [66].



budget in the first 3 years after the Russian 2014 annexation of Crimea. However, these numbers hide that Denmark has collected a lower peace dividend than the average member country and with a large majority in the Danish parliament agreeing on a new defense budget in 2018 and further increasing defense spending in early 2019, Danish defence spending is now closer to the NATO average defense spending (1.5% of GDP in 2015) than any time before.⁶⁰ The Danish 6-year defense budget 2018–2023 secures a 20% increase in defense spending as well as the creation of a new brigade of approximately 4000 soldiers.⁶¹ Moreover, when measured on output, Denmark remains a ‘NATO starlet’ with more than 700 troops on foreign deployment (almost 400 of them on NATO missions) and new deployments in Estonia and Afghanistan in 2018.⁶² Furthermore, Denmark is initiator of and key actor in creating a new Multi-National Division North (MND North) in NATO a division-level headquarters led by Denmark, Latvia and Estonia and co-located in Latvia and Denmark. Initial operational capability is expected in 2019 and full operational capability in 2020.⁶³ Like the recent increases in Denmark’s defense budget this initiative reflects a change in the balance of threat with the Russian annexation of Crimea signaling a more offensive Russian foreign policy.

Rather than a radical break with the past super atlanticism was seen by Danish foreign policy makers as a continuation of traditional Danish (and Nordic) foreign policy goals with other means. The more permissive strategic environment following from a transformed balance of threat gave Denmark a bigger action space for pursuing an activist foreign policy agenda, and, at the same time, the lower clarity of this environment necessitated and legitimized that Denmark used different means than in the past. Atlanticism had been transformed from one of four pillars supporting the overall goals of Danish foreign policy into serving as the overall foundation for Danish foreign policy, but through this transformation of its functionality, atlanticism was itself transformed into super atlanticism. Atlanticism served not only as the means to fulfilling Danish foreign policy priorities, but also as the foundation for Danish foreign policy. As such, it had become a goal in itself and therefore something that could no longer be questioned.

Estonia in the transatlantic relationship

Estonia’s roots as a super atlanticist can be traced to the 1990s, even though it has long identified as a Western state. During the first period of independence between World War I and World War II, it developed its identity as a Western state, fostering closer ties with Finland and the other Baltic states as well as joining the League of Nations. After Estonia regained its independence, the decision to reorient with the West was not a difficult one. Estonia viewed the Russian Federation as the successor

⁶⁰ Rasmussen [67].

⁶¹ Danish Ministry of Defence [68].

⁶² Braw [69].

⁶³ Milevski [70].



to the Soviet Union. The close proximity of a powerful Russia with offensive capabilities and an ambiguous attitude toward the three Baltic states created a balance of threat, which allowed for strategic environment with some action space, but still one, which was significantly more restricted than that of Denmark and the other Nordic countries. Russia's economic problems, the first Chechen war, and the 1993 constitutional crisis between President Yeltsin and the *duma* only contributed to Estonia's fear of how Russia might use its offensive capabilities in the future. An unstable and threatening Russia sent Estonia down a path toward reintegration with the West. Estonia faced a more permissive strategic environment that it had before at any time of its history (having just suffered five decades of *de facto* integration into the Soviet Union despite the refusal of Western governments to recognize this officially), but at the same time the clarity of the strategic environment was relatively low. Russia was perceived as the biggest security challenge, but the exact nature of this challenge and if and how fast it might develop into a military threat was unclear.

The decision to become a super atlanticist within the Western order garnered more debate. This was mostly evident in discourses surrounding Estonia's security and defense strategies. Estonia regained its statehood in 1991, but some 50 years in the Soviet Union meant that Estonia's defense forces and security strategy had to be created from scratch. Finland began military and defense cooperation with Estonia and had an influential impact on Estonian strategy. The Finnish model combined territorial defense with pragmatic diplomacy during and after the Cold War. Military education, officer trainings, and counseling all had an impact on the Estonian military forces.⁶⁴ Specifically, contact with Finnish military leaders introduced the strategy of total defense, based on territorial defense. The armed forces of Estonia supported this model, and elements of the total defense strategy have remained a key part of Estonia's military strategy, e.g., mandatory military service. In contrast, Ministry of Defense officials supported a collective defense model.⁶⁵ Thus, despite the influence of Finland in the initial stages of Estonian defense and security reforms, it had a limited impact on the overarching security culture of Estonia. In 1996, the Estonian parliament (*Riigikogu*) supported two pillars of Estonia's national security. The first was a commitment to territorial defense, while the second was international cooperation with Euro-Atlantic security organizations. Estonia's explicit and official goal was to become a full member of NATO.⁶⁶ Later in 2000 and 2002, in cooperation with NATO's Partnership for Peace program, Estonia reevaluated its defense structures. This resulted in a focus on a more modern, agile, and sustainable force structure.⁶⁷ When choosing between Finlandization and atlanticism, Estonia embraced the opportunity of potential NATO membership and full integration into the West.

In the 1990s, US policy makers viewed NATO enlargement as a positive step in cementing a free and unified Europe and strengthening the American world order

⁶⁴ Mölder [71].

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶⁶ Laaneots [72].

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 53–54.



and the position of the USA as a super power.⁶⁸ President Bill Clinton made clear the prospects for NATO enlargement, when he noted that it was not a question of if but when NATO would enlarge.⁶⁹ The risk of extending article 5 protection was perceived as rather low given Russia's weakened geopolitical position in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In contrast, for Estonian policy makers, the Russian threat never went away, and this was what made NATO membership desirable. Ants Laaneots, the former commander of the Estonian armed forces, noted that more than a thousand years of interaction between the Baltic Sea area and Russia has confirmed the threat from Russia, and argued that this threat continues due to Russia's ongoing political, military and economic interests in the area.⁷⁰

Estonia left behind any prospect of being a pragmatic nonaligned country like Finland or Sweden. Though elements of territorial and total defense would remain an aspect of Estonia's military culture, a collective defense system based on NATO and EU membership accompanied with a basic national self-defense became the first priority of Estonian decision makers.⁷¹ As Estonia's cooperation with NATO increased in intensity, NATO members' perception of Estonia and the other Baltic states improved. This was partly due to the Baltic states' participation in NATO missions as well as efforts to be model allies. In addition, key events such as the Balkan conflicts and 9/11 changed perceptions.⁷² The Baltic states were perceived as reliable and stable democracies and allies. NATO membership came a few short years later in 2004 completing Estonia's journey from born-again independent state to atlanticist NATO member. However, in order to understand Estonia's willingness to go from atlanticism to super atlanticism, we need to focus on the interaction between Estonia's strategic environment and national policy elite perceptions from 2001 to 2016.

Estonia as a super atlanticist: military readiness and cyber competences

A super atlanticist security posture depends on both the actions of the super atlanticist and the acceptance/encouragement of those actions by the USA. When analyzing the strategic environment, one must consider how those factors impact both the United States' acceptance of a super atlanticist as well as how they motivate the behavior of the super atlanticist. Key factors in Estonia's strategic environment influencing the country's journey to super atlanticism are how Russia and the USA have affected the balance of threat as seen from Estonia.

The 1990s ushered in a period of wealth, prosperity, and power for the USA leaving it as unrivaled unipole in the international system.⁷³ The USA was interested in allies willing to provide an offensive contribution to expand the American world

⁶⁸ Mandelbaum [73].

⁶⁹ Goldgeier [74].

⁷⁰ Laaneots [75].

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷² Paulauskas [76].

⁷³ Wohlforth [47].



order by going out of area and working outside of global institutions and without consensus among the great powers in international society. The USA supported NATO enlargement to strengthen the global order and to promote democracy. This opened a window of opportunity for Estonia and other Eastern European countries. When the strategic environment of the USA changed after 9/11, this presented another opportunity for super atlanticists. The threat of terrorism and ‘the axis of evil,’ a term George W. Bush used for Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, were now direct security threats and the top priorities for the USA. The change in strategic environment for the USA meant it would value contributions of allies greater than in the 1990s when the USA faced indirect security threats or had to deal with the direct security threats of its allies (Somalia, Balkans).

For Estonia, this presented an opportunity to brand itself as a producer of security and activist guardian of the West, rather than a weak Eastern European country recently freed from Soviet occupation. Already in 1997 then minister of foreign affairs, Toomas Hendrik Ilves stated ‘I think that the important point is that we have begun to demonstrate that as a NATO member Estonia plans to be not only be a security consumer, but also a security provider.’⁷⁴ In order to signal its readiness for super atlanticism, Estonian decision makers put forth extra efforts to contribute in the name of US security interests.⁷⁵ Estonian super atlanticism had two main characteristics: (1) showing unconditional willingness to contribute militarily to the maintenance of the American world order; (2) branding itself as a genuinely Western and postmodern state with special expertise in the security challenges of the future, i.e., cyber security. In the controversial 2003 Iraq war, Estonia like many other small European states faced a dilemma: either to side with the two dominant states in the EU, France and Germany, and oppose the war, or to side with the dominant state in NATO, the USA, and support the war. The war did not have a direct security impact on Estonia, so the decision to participate in the US-led coalition of the willing strongly signaled Estonian solidarity with the USA. Sven Mikser, the minister of defense during the Iraq war and minister of foreign affairs (since 2016), stated in a 2017 address to parliament (Riigikodu) that ‘It is Estonia’s desire to see a strong America and a America dedicated to keeping its alliance commitments.’ He continued, ‘Estonia has stood as an ally with the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq [...] that will continue to be. We are working to ensure that the United States will remain a reliable ally in whom we can trust in complicated situations.’⁷⁶ The motivation and hope behind this strategy was to provide a service of value to the USA, which would in turn keep the USA an active part of the European security architecture, thus offering the best security protection for Estonia.

The Afghanistan war was not as controversial as the Iraq war but demonstrated the extent of Estonia’s efforts just the same. Like the Iraq war, Estonia did not have a direct security interest in the war; rather participation was to enhance the transatlantic relationship. Estonia was one of the few countries to have troops in the ISAF

⁷⁴ Ilves [77].

⁷⁵ Kasekamp and Veebel [78].

⁷⁶ Mikser [79].



(International Security Assistance Force) mission with no strings attached. This meant deploying Estonian troops (like Danish troops) to the volatile Helmand province, which resulted in a significant number of casualties for Estonian troops.⁷⁷ This ‘striving’ was important in establishing a super atlanticist relationship with the USA. Estonia backed its willingness to contribute troops abroad with defense spending. Estonia is one of the six NATO countries (USA, UK, Greece, Poland, Romania, and Estonia) that spends over 2% of its GDP on defense.⁷⁸ Although Estonia spent below 2% during the great recession, spending has exceeded 2% since 2015, and it was close to 2% for several years before. Estonia’s commitments to NATO and to the USA make Estonia a model ally, a point emphasized by President Barack Obama on his 2014 visit to Tallinn.⁷⁹

As technology advanced, cyber operations became increasingly important for the USA and its allies. The development of cyberspace introduced a new arena for geopolitical competition and more importantly ushered in a new realm of vulnerability for the USA from both non-state and state actors. These developments aligned a key US interest with Estonian interests, as highlighted by the signing of a cyber partnership agreement between the two countries promising deeper cooperation on cybersecurity, e-governance, and internet freedom and internet governance.⁸⁰ These three topics representing the three core pillars of Estonia’s cyber promotion agenda, a core interest for Estonia that goes beyond traditional security interests, while closely coupled to societal resilience and development. Estonian society relies heavily on e-services, in both the public and private sectors. Estonia has launched an e-residency program, and cyber issues are at the forefront of maintaining a friendly business environment for IT startups contributing to the country’s branding as a Western country of the future rather than a former Soviet republic. Estonia’s intention to play an activist and leading role in cyber security was furthermore signaled the by first and second Tallinn manuals aiming to apply international law and norms to cyber warfare and attacks. Even though they are not official NATO documents, the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Center of Excellence (CCDCEO) supported and funded both manuals. In the first Tallinn manual, in particular, the norms were closely aligned with the United States’ view of cybersecurity norms.⁸¹ In general, the Estonian liberal norms of cyber governance, including internet freedom that transcends national borders, are closely aligned with those of the USA, and the nature of cyber means that Estonia’s lack of material capabilities does not have the same negative impact on its ability to seek influence as in military affairs.

⁷⁷ McNamara [80].

⁷⁸ Estonia Ministry of Defence [81].

⁷⁹ The White House [82].

⁸⁰ U.S.-Estonian Cyber Partnership Statement [83].

⁸¹ Mällsoo [84].



Russia and Estonia's changing strategic environment

Russia is the single most important variable in Estonia's strategic environment. Variations in Russian capabilities and foreign policy has had a direct impact on Estonian atlanticism and super atlanticism. First, Russian instability and weakness were determining factors for driving Estonia down a path of atlanticism in the early 1990s. Russian instability created an incentive for Estonian policy makers to seek Atlantic security shelter. Russian weakness allowed Estonia to opt for NATO and EU membership. Later Russia's strengthening position would have a similar impact on Estonia's decision to become a super atlanticist. A stronger and more offensive Russia led Estonian policy makers to tighten their relationship with the USA beyond NATO membership.

After the 1998 crash, Russia's economy began a period of impressive growth fueled by a rise in global oil prices. From 2000 to 2008, GDP growth was 83%.⁸² The rise of Russia's economy also meant a modernization of Russian defense forces, i.e., an increase in Russian offensive power. This was coupled with an assertive foreign policy that eventually turned confrontational with the West. The 'New Look' military reforms earmarked over 700 billion USD to modernize Russia's military equipment from 2011 to 2020.⁸³ In a 2007 speech at the Munich security conference, Putin stated that a unipolar world was unacceptable and that NATO expansion fostered mistrust. In addition, he accused some of trying to transform the OSCE into a 'vulgar' institution.⁸⁴ To Estonian policy makers, the Georgian war and the Ukrainian conflict highlighted the willingness of Russia to use military force to achieve its foreign policy goals. This only confirmed Estonia's existing belief of Russia as a security threat. If Russia's instability in the 1990s cemented Estonia's decision to be an atlantics country, then Russia's rise in the 2000s set Estonia on the path as a super atlanticist. While a resurgent Russia presented challenges for Estonia's strategic environment, it took significantly longer to influence the USA to see a resurgent Russia as a security threat. President Putin was the first leader to call George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks, and US-Russian relations improved afterward only to deteriorate again before the 2003 Iraq War. Russia opposed the war, along with key US allies like Germany and France. The mantra in the US at the time was to 'forgive Russia, ignore Germany and Punish France.'⁸⁵ Although the 2008 Russian-Georgian War was viewed as a Russian reaction against US influence in the former Soviet sphere, US-Russian relations improved again after the Obama administration's reset policy seeking a pragmatic working relationship with Russia from 2009. Not until the Ukraine conflict in 2014 did Russia escalate to a top security policy for the USA. These variations in US-Russian relations made Estonia's strategic environment more opaque as it was difficult to discern the nature of the Russian threat as well as the US policy on Russia. Consequently, Estonia's incentive to pursue super

⁸² Kudrin and Gurvich [85].

⁸³ Braun [86].

⁸⁴ Putin [87].

⁸⁵ Gordon [88].



atlanticist policies in order to seek a ‘special relationship’ with the USA increased. In addition, the Soviet past functioned as an amplifier of both fears of Russia and the perceived need of a close relationship with the USA. The symbolic conflict over the relocation of a World War II memorial, the bronze soldier, came to play a special role in this development.

Super atlanticism: when memory wars and domestic politics come together

The strategic environment has positioned Estonia as a natural atlanticist, but the willingness of Estonia to become a super atlanticist is in large part due to the perceptions that the Estonian elite have of both the USA as a security provider and of Russia as a potential security threat. The bronze soldier riots in 2007 were a complicated set of events that saw a mixture of domestic unrest along with foreign meddling from Russia. The riots were triggered by the relocation of a World War II memorial. For ethnic Estonians, the memorial represented the illegal Soviet occupation and the hardships that followed. For Russian speakers in Estonia, it represented the defeat of fascism. The conflicting narratives represented core aspects of each group’s identity.⁸⁶

The bronze soldier riots are a pivotal point in understanding the strategic culture that Estonian policy makers operate in. On the one hand, the events were about a legitimate grievance held by portions of the minority Russian speakers. On the other hand, the line is blurred between national and international. The Russian speakers are informed by Russian media channels and so their grievances are shaped by Russia. In the aftermath of the riots, Estonia was the victim of a cyber-attack, attributed to Russia. Estonia ‘seized the moment,’⁸⁷ and the event was used as a platform for Estonia to become a cyber expert, both in terms of cementing domestic support for the agenda and in building Estonia’s cyber brand internationally. Internally, the event polarized party politics which resulted in the majority of Russian speaking voters to side with the Center party and a plurality of Estonians to vote with the Reform party. The Russian card was a dominating factor, and the Reform and Center parties remain the most influential parties to this day.⁸⁸

Most importantly, the bronze soldier riots resulted in a consensus in Estonia’s political elite on pursuing a super atlanticist foreign policy. The Reform party was a member of the governing coalition for 17 years. Though the Reform party is now in the opposition, the current coalition (as of October 2018) agreed to maintain the status quo of Estonia’s foreign and security policy. Even though the Center party is supported by the majority of Estonia’s Russian speakers, it should not be mistaken for a Russian party and has maintained the super atlanticist position of the previous

⁸⁶ Lehti et al. [89].

⁸⁷ Merle Maigre Interview with author on 10.11.2014. At the time of the interview, Merle Maigre served as President Ilves’ security policy advisor. Before working for the President, she worked in NATO headquarters as part of Secretary General Rasmussen’s policy planning unit.

⁸⁸ Raun [90].



government. This is especially true since Jüri Ratas, the Prime Minister of Estonia took over party leadership in 2016.⁸⁹

There are two points worth noting when describing the consensus of the foreign policy elite regarding Estonia's role as a super atlanticist. First, the long-standing viewpoint that Russia is a threat. The Baltic states were suspicious of Russia long before the Ukraine crisis. As Kristi Raik has noted, the Baltic states' skepticism of Russia is best understood in terms of democratic peace theory, which states that democratic states do not go to war with each other. Unlike Western European states whose Russian policies can be better understood via complex interdependence theories.⁹⁰ The democratic peace theory forms an ideational structure, a perceptual lens through which Estonian policy makers view Russia. Until Russia makes strides in democracy and human rights, Estonia will remain skeptical and perceive Russian intentions as aggressive.

The second point that is that the USA is not only pivotal for balancing the Russian threat, but also closely coupled to Estonian regime identity as a democratic state and responsible member of international society. When analyzing the role of the USA in Estonian security discourses, the role of the USA often overlaps with NATO. Estonia's stance can best be summed up as 'More of America.'⁹¹ To get more America, Estonia realizes that it needs to do more itself. As noted by President Kaljulaid in her 2017 Independence Day speech:

During the last quarter century, our foreign and security policy has been successful. Our politicians have accepted international responsibilities and fulfilled them, sometimes at the cost of domestic popularity. Today we see how important this has been. We are being assured that, in turbulent times, we will not be abandoned.⁹²

The underlying belief in the Estonian policy elite is that free riding is never free; there is a significant risk and cost, namely abandonment. This is something Estonia experienced in the run up to World War II, when it was annexed by the Soviet Union. Though the strategic environment has largely shaped the Estonia's options, the perceptions of the local elite have been decisive when choosing among these options. The outcome of which has been 'more America' or the choice of becoming a super atlanticist, and the USA has made several significant gestures acknowledging Estonian super atlanticism from a cyber security partnership to public statements such as those made by President Obama on his official visit to Estonia.⁹³

⁸⁹ Jüri Ratas became party leader in November of 2016 and at the time of writing in March 2018 is Prime Minister of Estonia.

⁹⁰ Raik [91].

⁹¹ Ora [92].

⁹² Kaljulaid [93].

⁹³ The White House [94].



Security through entrapment: the future of super atlanticism

Denmark and Estonia came out of the Cold War both triumphant and insecure. The advent of the American world order signaled the end of the super power rivalry that Denmark and the other Nordic countries had at the same time criticized and tried to mediate during the Cold War, but it also fundamentally questioned Denmark's foreign policy identity and place in the world. The American world order provided both the geopolitical conditions for the rebirth of Estonia as an independent state and direct support from the USA to preserve and develop this state, but reborn Estonia was a weak state with a continuously problematic relationship with Russia.

For both countries, super atlanticism offered a way out of insecurity, whether ontological as in the case of Denmark or territorial and institutional as in the case of Estonia. Denmark and Estonia have decided to accept the costs of super atlanticism; go out of area, work outside of global institutions and without international consensus. However, differences in capabilities have dictated the type and extent of the contributions. Denmark has exceeded Washington's expectations by its ability and willingness to engage in combat and stay the course despite casualties.⁹⁴ Estonia has contributed actively to NATO's cyber security agenda and boosted its status as a model ally by its willingness to spend 2% of its GDP on defense.

Super atlanticism is by definition a deeply paradoxical policy: it is seeking security through extreme dependency and focusing on non-essential security threats in order to secure a shelter against the essential security threats. In the language of alliance theory, super atlanticism entails accepting permanent entrapment in the decisions of US policy makers in order to minimize the risk of abandonment.⁹⁵ The changes in US security policy over the past decades have illustrated the challenges associated with super atlanticism for both Denmark and Estonia. As the USA has focused less on military intervention and less on the spread of liberal democracy, Denmark's transformation of its military forces to a combination expeditionary troops and total defense may become less valuable to the USA and therefore also to Denmark. Today, the USA insists on measuring Denmark's contribution on input, i.e., is Denmark allocating 2% of its GDP to defense (it is not)—as well as output (what is Denmark's contribution to the US world order). To the extent that Denmark is measured on output, the Danish contribution to the Baltic Sea region is now just as important as Danish willingness to place the country's soldiers in the most dangerous spots in the Middle East. The security of Estonia depends on the ability and willingness of the USA to deter Russia. Super atlanticism is a policy designed to increase that willingness, but the US-Russian relationship has fluctuated in the past decades and continues to do so even after the Russian annexation of Crimea. In 2015, an Estonian security officer was sentenced to 15 years of prison after allegedly being abducted in 2014 by Russia just a couple of days after an official visit of President Obama to the country to signal US commitment to Estonian security, and the US State Department responded modestly with a statement. At the NATO summit in

⁹⁴ Jakobsen and Ringsmose [95].

⁹⁵ For a discussion of entrapment and abandonment, see Snyder [96].



May 2017 in Brussels, President Trump failed explicitly to reaffirm US commitment to Article 5 even after his advisor Newt Gingrich had said that ‘Estonia is in the suburbs of St. Petersburg’ during the 2016 presidential election campaign.

Yet, while these are real challenges to Danish and Estonian security policy, super atlanticism may not only be part of the problem, but also part of the solution. For small states in need of a security shelter, super atlanticism may be a ‘premium insurance’ option increasing the chance of better access to US policy makers, more comprehensive information on US policy choices and US attention to national security concerns. Denmark and Estonia have received much attention and rhetorical support from the USA in return for their super atlanticism. President Obama’s 2014 visit singled out Estonia as a model ally. The British Defense Secretary characterized the UK-led Estonia battlegroup deployed by NATO in 2017 as the biggest UK military deployment in Europe since the end of the Cold War.⁹⁶ Danish foreign policy makers, diplomats and defense staff regularly mention increased access to key US decision makers and information on US policy positions as an important benefit of the special US-Danish relationship.⁹⁷ Moreover, Danish expeditionary forces are still a valuable asset. They are now deployed in Estonia as well as in the Middle East.

The two cases show us that two different types of benefits may flow from super atlanticism. Estonia primarily sought negative benefits from its US ally in the form of freedom from outside interference in domestic affairs and armed attacks. These ‘first-order benefits’ reflected Estonia’s vulnerable position as a relatively weak state in close proximity to an assertive Russia. Denmark primarily sought positive benefits from its US ally, i.e., seeking to influence the American super power and gaining access in Washington, through a so-called activist foreign policy. These ‘second-order benefits’ reflected that Denmark was located further from Russia and did not view Russian assertiveness as a direct challenge to Denmark’s territorial integrity. Thus, Denmark faced a different balance of threat than Estonia, and saw its main security challenge as a question of how to continue its Nordic foreign policy priorities in a US-dominated international order.

A changing strategic environment is likely to impact the super atlanticism of Denmark and Estonia. The increased assertiveness in Russian foreign policy is making the security environment less permissive for both Estonia and Denmark, but with different effects. Estonia is now enjoying the attention to the challenge from Russia that it has been craving from allies for years. The Estonian foreign policy elite always viewed Russia as a potential threat, only they could not convince their North American and West European allies that this was the case. Thus, paradoxically, for Estonia, increased Russian assertiveness has also increased national security by securing political attention and military deployments. In contrast, the Danish foreign policy elite disregarded a threat from Russia in the foreseeable future leading them to abandon territorial defense in favor of expeditionary forces. Russian resurgence has led Denmark to increase its defense budget significantly and refocus attention to the Baltic Sea, while maintaining a military presence in the Middle East.

⁹⁶ BBC [97].

⁹⁷ Jakobsen and Ringsmose [95], Jakobsen et al. [98], and Henriksen and Ringsmose [99].



US foreign policy is the second decisive factor in the strategic environment of Estonia and Denmark. Two trends are of particular importance. First, a long-term trend of increasing US demands on European allies to pay a bigger share of the costs of defending Europe. Second, a short-term trend under the Trump administration stressing the legitimacy of putting America first and withholding clear guarantees to honor commitments and develop ties with allies. Taken together these two trends creates a more opaque strategic environment for small US allies. Small allies cannot take the USA for granted as they did in the past. They need to work harder and endure more costs in order to secure the attention and support of the super power. As long as support from the USA is deemed viable, this dynamic is likely to turn more atlanticists into super atlanticists as smaller allies compete for ‘special relationships’ with the USA. This development is likely to prove a challenge to existing super atlanticists such as Denmark and Estonia, because there is a limit to how many relationships can be ‘special’ and how many atlanticists can be ‘super.’

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