

Scandinavian governments divided over US-led war vs. Iraq

Steve James
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Divisions in Europe, and between Europe and America, over the preparations for war against Iraq are pulling the national governments in Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki in opposing directions.

The Danish government is the most vocal supporter of a US-led war. With a population of just 4 million people, Denmark has Special Forces active in Afghanistan and is preparing Special Forces and a submarine for conflict in Iraq. In November the national parliament, the Folketing, voted to support a war in the Persian Gulf.

Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a key NATO member and leader of a right-wing minority coalition government, appended his name to the recent pro-war statement circulated by the governments of the UK, Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary and Portugal in support of a US-led war.

Denmark, one of the world's oldest imperialist powers, is now considered part of the "new" Europe referred to by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Defending his decision to sign the letter, Rasmussen announced, "I want Denmark to be along for the ride in setting the day's agenda."

The Danish government has also indicated it would consider use of the Thule base in Greenland for the Bush administration's proposed National Missile Defense project and has already initiated a proposal for a large pool of commercial roll-on/roll-off vehicle carriers and container ships to be made available for NATO. These could be hired as and when required, instead of various national governments relying on their own custom-built military transport. Danish shipping companies Mærsk and DFDS have already hired vessels as war transport to the Persian Gulf.

NATO member Norway supported United Nations resolution 1441 demanding Iraqi compliance with

weapons inspections in November and has sent troops to Afghanistan. The country's press is currently filled with reports of a Norwegian F-16 fighter, one of six based in Kyrgyzstan, having dropped the first two Norwegian bombs since the Second World War. Ten people were killed when the laser-guided munitions exploded in what the Norwegian High Command claimed was a bunker. A Norwegian arms company, the state-owned Nammo, has provided MK211 explosive anti-personnel ammunition to the US in preparation for war, drawing criticism from the Red Cross.

In public, however, the Norwegian government is less enthusiastic than its Danish counterparts about an attack on Iraq. The government has not yet announced whether its forces will participate in the looming Gulf conflict. The governing coalition parties are divided, with the Conservative Party more belligerent than either the Christian Democrats or the Liberals. Norwegian diplomacy—Norway, like Sweden, presents itself on the world stage as an honest broker, thus allowing the country greater influence within the UN—was humiliated by the US when the Bush administration refused to release the contents of Iraq's 12,000-page report. Norway was, at the time, head of the UN Security Council. Foreign Minister Jan Petersen has repeatedly stated a preference for war to be backed by a UN resolution.

In recent days, the Norwegian position appears to have toughened further. On January 30 Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik went as far as to suggest that a UN resolution would not be enough to secure Norwegian participation, despite new requests from the US.

Sections of Norwegian industry have opposed war on the basis of the danger of disrupted export markets and increased oil prices. The partially privatised oil company Statoil is a player in the scramble for Middle

Eastern energy resources, having just signed a deal with the Iranian government, in opposition to US wishes, for a 40 percent share in three new gas pipelines.

Broad sections of the Norwegian population oppose the war, with 90 percent of respondents opposing a war without UN support and 66 percent against an attack even with a second UN resolution. The state TV channel, NRK, recently sacked Petter Nome, a news journalist, for his opposition to war. Nome had organised a chain email campaign to pressure US President Bush into changing his policy.

The Swedish and Finnish governments are European Union members, and, for the moment, outside NATO. Both have substantial interests in the Baltic, necessitating a close relationship with the Baltic states, Germany and Russia. Sweden, in particular, is in favour of a unified EU military and foreign policy.

Sweden's Goran Persson and Finland's Paavo Lipponen have been critical of US unilateralism in recent months, although both have supported the "war on terror" and UN resolutions against Iraq to keep in with the US administration. Neither of them was asked to sign the pro-war letter aimed at isolating Germany and France. Persson described the letter as a mistake and "a strange situation, when the pressure which should be on Saddam Hussein is moved to a discussion between parties within NATO and countries in the EU. It is a bad and dangerous development."

Both countries have nevertheless offered the US their support in "humanitarian" efforts at policing an occupied and colonised Iraq. Sweden's Ericsson was one of the first corporations into Kabul after the US destruction of the Taliban regime.

The two governments face considerable opposition to war at home. The vast majority of the Swedish population oppose war, with or without UN approval. The Swedish Social Democratic government has recently been forced into public protests about the fate of one of its citizens—a 23-year-old man held by the US military at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Persson has described the man's detention as unacceptable and has called on the US to either release or charge him. Many protests have been held in Stockholm over the past year on the issue.

Finland's Social Democratic-led coalition faces a general election on March 16. Currently 44 percent of the population oppose war under any circumstances.

Under conditions where the policies of the major parties are nearly identical, one of the most controversial topics in the election is possible Finnish membership in NATO—a debate that will be brought into sharp focus by thousands of cruise missiles falling on the defenceless population of Iraq.



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