

Danish referendum produces majority for participation in European Union defence policy

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Approximately two-thirds of voters backed Denmark's involvement in the European Union's (EU) defence policy in the June 1 referendum, according to exit poll projections. The government and main opposition parties campaigned to overturn the country's 30-year refusal to participate in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy.

The result means that Danish troops will be integrated into EU military operations and Copenhagen will participate in EU decision-making processes for military deployments. This will also open up opportunities for the EU to deploy military forces in the Arctic, an increasingly geopolitically explosive region.

The referendum was the product of the Social Democrat government's full support for the US-NATO war against Russia. On March 6, less than two weeks after Washington and its European allies successfully goaded Russian President Vladimir Putin into launching his reactionary invasion of Ukraine, the Danish government announced a comprehensive agreement on defence policy with the opposition Venstre (Liberal) and Conservative parties. The agreement, also supported by the ex-Stalinist Green Left, included a pledge to hike Danish defence spending to 2 percent of GDP by 2033, end the country's reliance on Russian gas and hold the June 1 referendum.

In another indication of Copenhagen's backing for military escalation against Russia, the Social Democrat government confirmed last week that it is sending Harpoon anti-ship missiles to Ukraine to target Russian vessels in the Black Sea.

Denmark negotiated the opt-out from EU defence policy in 1992 following the rejection of the Maastricht Treaty. The defence opt-out was one of four in the Edinburgh Agreement, which included exceptions for justice, immigration policy, and economic and monetary union (the euro currency).

Denmark's defence policy has traditionally focused on its full participation in NATO, of which it was a founding member in 1949, and cooperation with the US military in operations from its Arctic bases in Greenland. Denmark agreed to the establishment of a US military presence on the island during World War II, after Washington expressed growing concern that Greenland could become a base for Nazi Germany to

launch attacks on North America. The main US base is Thule, which was built in 1951 and became a key location for ballistic missile defence and spying activities.

Although EU military operations have been less extensive than those of NATO, there have been more than 30 EU-led operations since the first deployment to Macedonia in 2003. They range from missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo to Bosnia, Mali, Somalia, Iraq, Georgia, and Afghanistan. An EU-led naval operation also patrolled the central Mediterranean to prevent refugees fleeing imperialist wars from reaching Europe.

Sections of the European ruling elite, above all in Germany and France, are pushing to strengthen the EU's military capabilities in order to facilitate a European imperialist foreign policy that is more independent of, and if necessary in opposition to, the United States. This includes the development of joint European weapons systems and command structures.

Denmark's participation in the CSDP could open up new possibilities for EU military operations in regions where it has yet to establish a foothold. Although Denmark, with a population of only 5.8 million, has a relatively modest military of between 7,000 and 9,000 professional troops, its control of the Faroe Islands and Greenland give it access to geostrategically important areas in the North Atlantic and Arctic.

Denmark is one of a handful of nations, including Canada, Russia and the United States, that has territorial claims to vast areas in the Arctic. Due to climate change, control over the Arctic is an increasingly significant concern for the major powers, and minor ones like Denmark. Melting ice caps are opening up access to significant deposits of oil and gas, critical minerals, and other raw materials, and to previously ice-blocked sea lanes that would significantly shorten trade routes.

One of the most highly contested routes is the North Sea Route (NSR), which passes along Russia's Arctic coast and is claimed by Moscow as internal waters. Russia has begun to develop cooperation with China to enable Chinese ships to use the NSR. Washington opposes this, claiming the NSR should be considered international waters with free passage for all

shipping.

Danish military and surveillance activities in Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and their territorial waters is overseen by the Joint Arctic Command. In October 2020, NATO entered a formal partnership with the Joint Arctic Command, which included the sharing of intelligence, joint military exercises, and monthly coordination meetings.

The NATO powers seized on Russia's invasion of Ukraine to ratchet up tensions in the Arctic. Seven of the eight members of the Arctic Council, a body established in 1996 to oversee interstate cooperation on ecological, economic, and research issues in the region that is currently chaired by Russia, suspended their participation in its committees.

This provocative move by the United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden effectively brought the Arctic Council's activities to a halt. Finland and Sweden's joint decision to apply for NATO membership also impacts Arctic geopolitics: they are located on the shores of the strategically important Baltic Sea, and they provide NATO military forces the opportunity to train in Arctic conditions.

The EU and its largest states, in particular Germany, have long been pushing for a larger role in Arctic affairs. In 2021, the EU published its new Arctic strategy. One of its main complaints is that it has yet to be granted official observer status at the Arctic Council. The strategy also pledged to open an EU Commission office in Greenland. The press release announcing the new strategy noted that the Arctic is "of key strategic importance for the European Union, in view of climate change, raw materials as well as geostrategic influence."

In its first official strategy document for the region, titled "Guidelines for German Arctic Policy," Germany's Foreign Ministry noted in 2019 that Berlin views the Arctic as a "region with increased crisis potential." The document continued, "Several states are increasingly securing their interests in the Arctic militarily. This could lead to an arms race. The development of dual-use capabilities as well as their constant modernisation, and technological progress and the strategies of external players undermines the division between defensive and offensive policy options. ... The possibility thus increases of non-cooperative behaviour in the Arctic, which would endanger economic, ecological and security policy stability in the region and thereby impact German security interests."

A study published this February by the government-aligned German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) was even more explicit on the growing importance of the Arctic for Berlin's foreign policy, which is based on a revival of global German imperialist ambitions not seen since the first half of the 20th century. Entitled "Russia in the Arctic," the paper observed, "The area is, of course, also of critical importance to Germany: in any military confrontation, the German Federal Armed Forces (Bundeswehr) would be called on as part of NATO; and Germany itself lies on Northern Europe's geo-economically and geo-strategically important sea

lines. Any disruption of these would have consequences for the security and stability of the whole region."

The European Policy Centre, a Brussels-based think tank, suggested in a recent report that the EU could propose an Arctic Council 7+ model, i.e., to form a body consisting of the seven Arctic Council members boycotting the organisation and the EU.

At a conference in Esbjerg on May 18, ostensibly held to discuss wind energy generation between Denmark, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, both German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen expressed their support for Denmark abolishing its opt-out in EU defence policy. Two days later, Danish Defence Minister Morten Bødskov announced that plans are under way to make the port of Esbjerg a NATO hub for transporting military equipment and personnel to the Baltic Sea region by the end of 2023.

Overwhelming support in Denmark's political establishment and media for abolishing the defence opt-out, together with the lack of any genuine opposition to the move, helped produce Wednesday's lopsided result.

The "no" campaign was led by the far-right Danish People's Party on a nationalist basis. They said Denmark should retain full sovereignty over its armed forces and warned of Danish personnel being deployed in a European army.

The pseudo-left Red-Green Alliance (RGA) sought to salvage its tattered anti-militarist credentials by campaigning for a "no" vote. Its campaign had virtually no credibility, however.

The RGA has long worked to suppress and strangle left-wing opposition to war. Since 2019, its votes in parliament have been critical in securing a majority for Mette Frederiksen's minority Social Democrat government, which is sending Ukraine military equipment and weaponry, including Harpoon missiles. The RGA also voted for imperialist wars, including the US-led war in Syria and Iraq from 2014.



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