

## Denmark's security policy during the interwar period

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**Abstract:** Although it managed to keep its neutrality during the First World War, Denmark felt for a long time the lack of some effective security guarantees. For this reason it was natural for it to join the League of Nations, an international organization that was aimed at keeping the peace on the continent. The main mean of guarding the peace was the conception of a system of collective security among the European states. Due to its extremely important geostrategic position, Denmark was highly interested in supporting this new concept. Danish foreign policy was very cautious because it had a powerful enemy that it did not intend to provoke. For many years, Denmark's security policy was almost exclusively dictated by its position as a tiny neighbour to Germany. The weak defence policy in the interwar period was a function of the Danish effort of not provoking Germany. Denmark strongly supported the disarmament and concluded several arbitration treaties for a peaceful solution of any disputes with other states.

Usually after every major conflict the winner states or coalitions imagined and imposed to the world a plan of organizing peace that generated a series of political-military institutions aimed at ensuring the security.

The establishment of the League of Nations in April 1919, as an international organization with the aim of peacefully settling disputes between member nations was regarded with great interest by Denmark as well as other minor powers (Carsten Holbraad, 1991). An international system intended to maintain the peace of the continent matched their national interests.

After the end of the war, Denmark, as well as her Scandinavian neighbours, wanted to secure some protection for the status of neutral states in the post war world. Denmark's geographical and political situation and her historical background determined it to be extremely interested in the idea of a League of Nations who would replace the use of force by a system of co-operation based on the law (P. Munch, 1931, p.6). On 27 February 1920, the Danish Parliament unanimously approved the membership of the League of Nations (Carsten Holbraad, 1991, p.54).

Once the great powers started their negotiations about the projected League of Nations, the Scandinavians concentrated on influencing the drafting of the treaty. Danish representatives countered the great powers tendency of ignoring the smaller powers at the conferences held for drafting the League's Covenant. Unfortunately, the neutral states were denied the right to participate to this process in 1919.

The main objective of the League of Nations was avoiding the outbreak of a new war. An absolute condition for maintaining the peace on the continent was the *disarmament*.

Denmark was among the supporters of this idea and proposed the interdiction of private manufacture of munitions of war. The execution of the disarmament plan should be supervised by a permanent Military and Naval Commission (P. Munch, 1931, p.11).

All the Scandinavian states proposed the creation of a permanent mechanism for conciliation which should always be employed before international disputes were submitted to the Council. Denmark suggested that the machinery of conciliation should be centralized (P. Munch, 1931, p. 56).

The neutral states agreed that obligatory arbitration ought to be proclaimed for all disputes of a juridical nature. Sweden thought it necessary that economic and military sanctions be employed in order to guarantee the performance of the principles of the League of Nations.

The common desire of the neutral states had been to give a more juridical character to the new international organization. Dr Peter Munch, the Danish representative at the League of Nations, considered that such a change would make possible a greater restriction on the sovereignty of states. As the Great Powers wanted to maintain the political character of the League, the neutral states sought to accentuate the sovereignty of the members and to make as precise as possible the limits of the League's jurisdiction. Otherwise they feared that the interests of the secondary states would be endangered by the predominance given to the Great Powers (P. Munch, 1931, p.57-59).

Finally, the neutral states obtained to a slight degree an influence on the new world political *Sammenslutning*. In Dr. Munch's view, the most important achievement for them was the right of non members of the Council to participate and vote in the Council on questions of particular interest for themselves (P. Munch, 1931, p.60). As for the small states, they secured their independence of action in regard to military sanctions.

As it failed to attract great -power support, Denmark's attention focused on the projected system of *collective security*.

Since the foundation of the League of Nations, the "collective security" has generally been associated with the policy of sanctions, guarantees and pacts of mutual assistance between states. For some states, notably the Scandinavian, the security was better served by the diminution than by the extension of the sanctions provided for in the League. The use of military or economic sanctions was a double -edged sword from the standpoint of Danish interests. If Denmark was forced to participate in sanctions against possible German aggressions or to condemn German attempts to change the status quo in European politics, it could disturb Danish German relations. Denmark had to assure the compatibility of the two concepts of neutrality and collective security within the League of Nations (Hans Mouritzen, 1988, p.95).

Due to their geographical and political positions, for the Scandinavian states the advantages offered by a system of automatic military or economic sanctions were outweighed by the risks involved for them as producers of security. They feared of a possible war between the European great powers which might endanger the peace of the north. In case of a war, the Scandinavian states unquestionably would wish to avoid being involved. For that reason, they did not admit any obligation to employ military sanctions. But they recognized that all members of the League had to impose an automatic and complete economic blockade against a state which should go to war in disregard of its engagements within the League's Pact.

In 1929, when the Briand-Kellogg Pact was ratified, Denmark as well as the other Nordic states showed very little enthusiasm although all of them adhered to it without reservations. This attitude could be explained by the restricted nature of this anti-war pact. Unlike the Scandinavian peace system, it did not include any obligation for the pacific

settlement of international disputes. To be sure, the Scandinavian countries renounced to the war as a means of conducting national policy. Already in 1925-1926 they had signed a series of arbitration treaties so that all inter-Scandinavian disputes should be solved by a specially appointed arbitral tribunal.

In May 1931 the council of the League of Nations called the long delayed Conference for the Reduction and Limitation of Armaments to convene in Geneva on February 2, 1932. Denmark's constant support for reduction of armaments has testified to the sincerity of its belief that war can be avoided through peaceful means. Admitting the principle of equality in the application of the common obligations of the Covenant, Denmark pled for a "controlled equality" and warned against a return to the old equality which had meant the "right of everybody to do whatever he liked"(S. Shepard Jones, 1969).

The Danish support for the disarmament programme at Geneva was also an expression of her quest of security. In general, the Scandinavian states considered that armaments were not appropriate means of assuring security. But at Geneva they conducted their policy primarily taking into account the general international need. The world peace depended on the abolition of the old war system of "mailed-fist diplomacy", which had led to the catastrophe of 1914. Armaments and armaments-races were real threats to the world peace.

France and Great Britain opposed to the Scandinavian plans of hurrying the reduction of armaments arguing that the League must wait until the world was in a more peaceful atmosphere before actual disarmament should be carried out. Finally they secured the adoption of a report arguing that the disarmament had to be done in a gradual manner.

The Scandinavian states opposed to the subordination of the question of the reduction of armaments to that of guarantees. For Denmark a system of military guarantees was an inadequate basis for the world peace and therefore it refused any commitment to employ military sanctions.

In September 1934, the acceptance of the USSR in the League of Nations drew the attention of the Danish diplomacy as well as that of the main Danish newspapers that were commenting on this theme. The Soviet desire to become a member of the League was considered an expression of its need of peace and security for its European front in case of a war with Japan.

The "Politiken" newspaper, the press representative of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, although admitted that Russia was opposing the entire world by its internal policy, argued that the League's aim was not to judge on the governance methods of its member states, but to secure the peace on the continent. USSR's membership in the League strengthened the universal character of this institution and improved the balance of power on the continent.

On the other hand, the conservative newspaper "Dagens Nyheder" argued that receiving USSR in the League of Nations meant giving up the fundamental principles of this international institution. Moreover, this action was considered a step towards the conclusion of the Oriental Pact leading to a rapprochement between France and the USSR. According to the Locarno Pact France could not give any support to a state non member of the League of Nations (A.D.M.A.E. fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no. 21/8 September 1934, Gh. Assan to N. Titulescu, p. 32).

The Social Democrat Party questioned the compatibility of collective security with the communism. "Peace and collective security are not possible unless accompanied by disarmament and good relations between all the countries".

"Politiken" argued that collective security could be obtained only after solving the problem of border modifications. This was a hint to the border dispute between Denmark and Germany over the Nordslesvig.

The Danish Social Democracy a determined opponent of communism expressed its disappointment towards the reestablishment of the armed peace and the pre-war military alliances. It also expressed its distrust towards Russia's pretended sincerity and its return to normal diplomatic methods (A.D.M.A.E., fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no.737/11 April 1935, Marcel Romanescu to N. Titulescu ,p. 186-190).

In general, Scandinavian attitude towards Russia's entrance in the League of Nations was not very enthusiastic due to the aversion regarding the Soviet social regime. This triggered a very hostile Russian campaign against the Nordic countries.

The Soviet press accused the existence of a Nordic military bloc directed against Russia under Nazis' coordination aiming at turning the Baltic Sea into a German zone of influence. All these speculations derived from an article of a Norwegian captain, Erik Qvam that was promoting the idea of a Nordic defensive alliance for protecting the Scandinavian neutrality. Denmark was not to take part of this alliance because of its territorial dispute with Germany. The article was reproduced in "Den Nye Danmark" magazine by Colonel Ivan Carstensen, a Danish military expert that was sustaining the idea of a Nordic military defence alliance supported by substantial army reinforcement.

The Danish minister of foreign affairs, Peter Munch denied the existence of any plan of a Nordic political bloc. The existence of such a coalition was denied also by the Norwegian prime minister, Mowinckel (A.D.M.A.E., fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no. 330/21 Nov. 1934,Gh. Assan to N. Titulescu ,p. 36-39).

With the change in the international situation brought about by the departure of Germany from the League, the failure of the Disarmament Conference and the German denunciation of the military clauses of the treaty of Versailles, the hopes for any immediate reduction of armaments vanished and the Scandinavian states were left facing the failure of fifteen years of effort which they have been active in sponsoring. Meanwhile Denmark, as a member of the Council in April 1935, was confronted with the draft resolution submitted by the French, British and Italian governments, which condemned the German denunciation of the military clauses of the Versailles treaty.

The Scandinavian states tried to establish a common position. A conference of the Scandinavian foreign ministers was held in order to discuss the attitude to be adopted towards this question. An attempt to associate all former neutrals to an eventual Scandinavian action failed. In reality the Scandinavian countries avoided creating the impression of a Scandinavian political unity that would've attracted the foreigners' attention in an undesirable way (A.D.M.A.E. fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no. 724/4 April 1935, M. Romanescu to N. Titulescu, p. 161-164).

Dr. Munch refrained from voting on the resolution adopted by the Council because, as he said, by playing the role of a court of justice and condemning Germany's action, the Council was placing difficulties in the way of the successful negotiation necessary to emerge from the existing impasse in the international politics and of achieving universality of the League.

"Social Demokraten" the Government's press representative, explained German rearmament by the refuse of its former allies to carry out the disarmament plans (A.D.M.A.E. fund Denmark, volume 1, Report no. 710/1 April 1935, Marcel Romanescu to N. Titulescu, p. 144).

Regarding Denmark's attitude at Geneva towards the German rearmament there were speculations that Peter Munch's position was due to certain economic benefits granted by Germany. Danish foreign minister denied it. It is true that the German import of Danish agricultural products rose considerably at that time.(A.D.M.A.E., fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no.812/29 April 1935, Gh. Assan to N. Titulescu, p. 210-212). Beyond any

interpretation the Danish attitude must be explained awareness of the Danish leaders that Denmark's fate will depend one day of its powerful neighbour.

For many years, Denmark's security policy was almost exclusively dictated by its position as a tiny neighbour to Germany. The weak defence policy in the interwar period was a function of the Danish effort of not provoking Germany. From here derives the pure defensive character of the Danish defence policy and the rejection of any defence alliance with Sweden or other Nordic countries.

The Danish national defence policy was limited to measures of protection for Copenhagen against a possible air attack and the defence of the south border against illegal trespassing. Politiken, the Danish Foreign Ministry's official newspaper tried to demonstrate Denmark's inability to defend itself in case of a war unless it received great powers support. Politiken resorted to the Romanian example during the First World War showing that Romania's participation was determined by its double confidence in Germany's incapacity of sending significant troupes on the Romanian front and in a quick support from its allies. The result was a rapid defeat of the Romanian resistance and the occupation of its territory thanks to the delayed Russian intervention. In order to support this demonstration, Politiken published fragments of queen Mary of Romania ("The story of my life"). Concluding, it was said that "Romania was one of the most tragic examples of history that showed what happens to small countries when they play the war with the great ones"(A.D.M.A.E. fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no.800/22 April 1935, Gh. Assan to N. Titulescu, p. 190).

The Social Democrat ideology was against the adoption of an active defence policy although it was well known that during the First World War Germany and England had planned the occupation of Denmark. Only the Conservatives developed a pro-armament campaign for national defence. General With and Colonel Ivan Carstensen argued that the sanctions and not the disarmament represented the basis of the League of Nations. In Copenhagen, where several regiments were established, "one can see seldom a soldier except the Royal Guard which was rather a tourists' attraction" (A.D.M.A.E., fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no. 733/10 April 1935, Marcel Romanescu to N. Titulescu, p. 174-178).

A more revealing test of loyalty to the principle of collective security for Denmark was the Italo-Ethiopian conflict of 1935-1936. Danish representatives supported the fulfilment on the obligations of the Covenant. The government realized that one more defeat for the League would decisively show its inability to impose its principles in the political world. Denmark's representatives (P.Munch and M.W.Borberg) were members of the Coordination Committee that had to analyse the application of sanctions against Italy. (Privatarkiver – Munch, Peter Rochegune, Pakke no. 62, Societatea Natiunilor, Comitetul de Coordonare, Geneva, 12 octombrie 1935).

The Committee proposed an embargo on the export of arms, ammunition and equipment of war designed for both Italy and Ethiopia and certain financial measures.

During the Abyssinian crisis there were rumours that Abyssinia was receiving ammunition from Germany, Sweden and Denmark. The Nordic pacifism was seriously questioned. The Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that the government had not authorized those exports to Abyssinia (A.D.M.A.E. fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no.734/10 April 1935, Marcel Romanescu to N. Titulescu, p. 181-182).

The subsequent triumph of Italy over Ethiopia increased disillusionment in the Denmark. Public opinion, doubtful of the efficacy of collective security in the face of the new political realities, turned towards isolationism (Henning Friis, 1950,p. 260-262).

The Scandinavian governments agreed that the maintenance of international peace and justice, the primary function of the League should be supported by the development of

technical cooperation on all questions of common concern. It was not difficult for states such as Denmark and Sweden who already taught the world advanced lessons in agricultural and economic cooperation, to subscribe to the international cooperation.

Denmark fully cooperated to the humanitarian work of the League of Nations but always argued that the member nations should not be compelled to appeal to any sanctions. With Hitler seizing the power in Germany and after the conclusion of the Anglo- German naval treaty of 1935, Denmark became increasingly isolated from Western Europe and the rest of Scandinavia (Royal Institute of International Affairs,14).

Following the League of Nations indications, Denmark concluded a number of bilateral agreements for conciliation, judicial settlement and arbitration with several Balkan states: Turkey (1932), Greece (1933), Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (December 1935) and Romania (1937)(Udenrigsministeriets arkiver, jnr. 12.Dan.64, Danmark – Rumænien Voldgifttraktatsal, referat /12.06.1935).

Denmark was paying great attention to the South- East European alliance groups. The Balkan Alliance and the Little Entente were favourably appreciated by the Danish press. The firm attitude adopted by the member states in order to maintain the post war treaties and to consolidate peace was sincerely valued in Denmark (A.D.M.A.E. fund Denmark, volume 1, Dispatch no.855/15 May 1935, Gh. Assan to N. Titulescu, p. 232).

## **Conclusions**

Unlike other most supporters of collective security policy during the interwar period, Denmark had a different outlook on this concept and the means to put it into practice. In general, the collective security was associated with sanctions, guarantees and pacts for mutual assistance. From the very moment of its entrance in the League of Nations, Denmark had doubts and reservations concerning the sanctions clause that was foreseen by the member states in order to assure collective security. This contradicted the traditional Danish neutrality policy. The collective security model was based on participation and compulsoriness. Thus, Denmark would've been compelled to participate at common actions against any peace violator.

Consequently Denmark had to participate in sanctions also in the case of Germany. Or Germany was perceived at that time as a dreaded opponent. Moreover the Danish security policy especially in the late 1930s was dictated by its vicinity to her powerful German neighbour.

Excepting the sanctions question, Denmark fully supported the measures promoted by the League of Nations in order to ensure the collective security. Thus Denmark was strongly supporting the disarmament and the arbitration principle as solid means for keeping the peace on the continent.

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