

## Foreign languages and strategic thinking - the Danish case

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This presentation explores what strategizing - or the lack thereof - means for the generation and delivery of foreign language capabilities in the case of the Danish Armed Forces. The intention is to start a conversation across countries about the topic. The presentation recommends taking an insurance policy rather than a cost-benefit approach to foreign languages that are deemed strategic.

First, I look at foreign language (FL) strategies across a number of NATO and non-NATO countries. Some countries like Sweden and the US have strategies, directives and policies in place. Other countries are looking to develop them such as the UK, while countries like Canada and Denmark do not have foreign language strategies in the sense of a careful plan towards a goal.

In the case of Denmark, a training and education strategy that covers the whole of the Danish Armed Forces (DAF) does exist. However, it does not include foreign languages as a discipline or academic field despite the fact that DAF has trained military linguists for nearly 70 years and other military personnel in English, French and German for even longer.

It seems paradoxical to fund a programme for decades to train military linguists and assign them reserve officer rank upon graduation, and yet have no strategy for a capability that is manifestly in demand in support of national and international operations. Furthermore, demand is not restricted to the Danish Armed Forces and its allies but also comes from other government agencies in Denmark.

In the absence of a FL strategy, key stakeholders appear to act independently but not necessarily in unison. In a Danish context, it is noteworthy that it is mainly the provider, the Defence Language Academy, rather than the "customer", the Defence Command and wider armed forces, that attempts to instigate strategic thinking and planning. In the absence of a strategically led comprehensive approach, key stakeholders tend to opt for something closer to a just-enough, just-in-time approach based on needs assessments with limited predictive power. Whereas this modus operandi may seem prudent from a cost-benefit perspective, it is less effective from an operational point of view as evidenced by events in recent years in e.g. Iraq and Ukraine.

Against this backdrop, I argue for foreign language capability as an insurance policy that is worth having in the not-so-rare events that it is called upon – a fact borne out by historical demand for military linguist officers in the case of Denmark. Such an approach would take a long-term planning and investment view of select strategic languages based on a comprehensive approach.