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BRIEF

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Special Operations can make a difference in integrated conflict prevention

In the paper on stabilisation, *Denmark's Integrated Stabilisation Engagement*, Denmark revitalizes the vision of combining the strategic instruments of the state. This brief follows up on that vision with a more tangible operationalization and provides knowledge about the fact that special operations can be an attractive instrument in integrated conflict prevention.

The stabilisation paper, which was published in September 2013, provides three general suggestions for the vision on integration: the main point is to make our military and civilian instruments interact better. This will be achieved by bringing all instruments to use and by *integrating* the efforts. Military efforts, including traditional military operations and military capacity building in fragile states, are part of Denmark's aggregated contributions to stabilisation.¹ The stabilisation paper formulates a clear vision for increased integration, including recognition of the fact that no crises or conflicts can be resolved permanently with military means alone. The best way to manage conflicts is simply to prevent their occurrence.

This requires that the means fit together and that all the strategic instruments in the state's toolbox are integrated without prejudice.

This is a considerable task, because there is a tremendous span in the methods and means of the state. These means can be roughly divided into the categories of political-diplomatic, informational, economic, financial, intelligence, legal, and military. If we look closer at, e.g. the diplomatic means, this instrument alone comprises several different instruments: negotiations, (diplomatic) representation, building of consensus, recall of the ambassador, signalling of will and ability to act, etc.²

Thus, the state has hundreds of different options to integrate its methods and means towards the strategic goal: to prevent conflicts from occurring and developing into armed conflicts, resulting in instability, refugee flows that strain the asylum system and general human suffering.

Nevertheless, there is still some distance from vision to concrete action, and it requires a more tangible operationalization to realize the vision. Just because Denmark chooses to give priority to non-military instruments (the only ones that can build lasting stability), we cannot expect all actors in and around fragile or failed states to respect this choice. Any impact on a system, even with the most non-military means, alters the entire balance of the system - that is, of course, the whole purpose of the impact. The forces which thereby get their room for manoeuvring

(1) Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2013), *Denmark's Integrated Stabilisation Engagement in Fragile and Conflict-affected Areas of the World*, Copenhagen.

(2) Harry R. Yarger (2008), *Strategy and the National Security Professional*, Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Security International, p.72

curtailed might well feel compelled to attack asymmetrically. If Denmark attacks their power base with economic means and if they cannot defend themselves with similar means, they can choose to attack asymmetrically through destabilisation, violence, or threats of violence. We must be able to manage this kind of situation in the integrated engagement but with means that do not escalate the conflict.

Denmark thus needs military means that can function dynamically and flexibly together with other government measures and to complement these with military effects long before any considerations about intervention with conventional military power are made. Many countries have long realized that special operations are suitable for these kinds of task.

Therefore, the purpose of this brief is to suggest how an integrated approach can be effectively operationalized and how the particular characteristics of special operations make them suitable for supporting the non-military instruments.

Danish use of special operations is still constrained by a substantial institutional resistance and by the many myths and misperceptions. For example, many people only associate special operations with secret and often illegitimate use of violence. This brief should therefore be seen in context with the previous briefs in the series on special operations from the Royal Danish Defence College. The series analyses special operations as an attractive strategic instrument for a small state which has considerable foreign policy ambitions but limited strategic capacities.³

It should be emphasized that the brief does not deal with *special operations forces* such as Frømandskorpset (the Naval Special Forces) or Jægerkorpset (the Army Special Forces), but with the discipline of *special operations* per se. Special operations are not restricted to the aforementioned units. All of the Armed Forces' capacities may be included in special operations as long as they operate within the unconventional way of thinking that is unique to special operations.

Special operations provide freedom of action in an integrated engagement

The integrated stabilisation engagement cannot be decoupled from Denmark's other strategic efforts. Therefore, Denmark needs to find a balance between its freedom of action and the limited resources which are particularly characteristic of a small state. This goes for the non-military as well as the military resources. These two variables – freedom of action and economy of force – are crucial for any state's strategic courses of action.⁴

(3) Lars H. Ehrensvärd Jensen (2014), *Special operations – myths and facts*, Copenhagen, Royal Danish Defence College Publishing House, [http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen\(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0\)/publications.html](http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0)/publications.html)

(4) Ferdinand Foch (1903), *Des Principes de la Guerre*. Translated to English by Hilaire Belloc (1920), *The Principles of War*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, pp. 48-51 and pp. 97-102

Certainly, diplomacy is the best means of creating an optimal balance between maintaining the state's freedom of action and the means it has at its disposal. As mentioned, the state has a wide range of strategic instruments, ranging between two imagined extreme points in the state's options for actions: massive insertion of conventional military power and use of diplomacy.

First of all, economy of force is paramount for a small country. Any effort must give maximum effect, and Denmark cannot waive its freedom of action to change strategic focus if that better serves the nation's interests.

The central element in integrated stabilisation engagement is to increase the *social cohesion* of the fragile states with all that that implies in terms of economic, physical, or legal security. As was previously argued, it is undoubtedly deluded to believe that increased social cohesion can be achieved without deliberately filling the power vacuum which characterizes fragile and failed states.

If the vacuum is filled with conventional forces, one's freedom of action can easily be jeopardized. The sheer distance from the home country to the area of operation significantly limits the options. The farther away you have to operate, the less power is achieved with the available resources and the more your freedom of action is reduced.

Special operations have a number of features which make them attractive in connection with conflict prevention far away from Denmark's borders. As a result of special operations' operational nature, they can achieve strategic effects with relatively modest efforts that do not impede Denmark's overall strategic freedom of action.⁵

The possible contributions of special operations to operationalization of the vision

Before providing a summarized sketch of the possible contributions of special operations to the operationalization of the vision of integration of the state's tools, we must dispense with a psychological misperception). Obviously, Denmark cannot apply military capacities of any kind, not even special operations, without the knowledge and acceptance of a given host country. Many believe that special operations are always secret and must be denied. This is incorrect.

Special operations can be executed in three different ways: clandestinely, covertly or overtly. In principle, special operations only require concealment if the political leadership demands it or if the practical military objective requires it. This will hardly be the case in an integrated stabilisation engagement.

(5) Lars H. Ehrensvärd Jensen (2014), *Special operations can increase Denmark's strategic options*, Copenhagen, Royal Danish Defence College Publishing House, [http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen\(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0\)/publications.html](http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0)/publications.html)

Special operations can also be conducted covertly. This means that the operation isn't denied but that it isn't trumpeted either. Covert or discreet deployment can be especially desirable in connection with a preventive stabilisation engagement in which the host country is unlikely to want its lack of control exposed by the visual presence of foreign forces.

The whole idea of an integrated stabilisation engagement is to prevent a conflict in due time. For exactly this reason, a covert (but not necessarily clandestine) deployment that takes place long before a tangible and visible armed conflict has arisen can be decisive for success. If the alternative is costly and politically risky, the result can easily be failure to act in due time.

Finally, special operations can also be conducted overtly. Special operations are especially suitable for political, psychological and military signalling. They can signal that the Danish authorities are wholehearted in their efforts: in essence, 'We are sending the best we have got.' We can signal will while simultaneously applying economy of force and preventing a strategic deadlock. We can show our will by using the military to deploy appropriate and credible instruments which do not have an escalating effect.

As mentioned, the state has hundreds of possible methods and means which can be combined according to the task. Likewise, special operations offer numerous combination options. The most crucial element in integrated efforts is that the political leadership already seeks to integrate the military options in their earliest considerations. Therefore, this brief only presents a summarized list of ideas since the complete operationalization of special operations in connection with integration must take place within the framework of the specific political-strategic considerations regarding objectives, methods and means.

Features which make special operations suitable in an integrated stabilisation engagement

Special operations are characterized by a number of features which make them well suited as strategic instruments in an integrated stabilisation engagement. The following are some of them:

- Special operations are integrated by nature. Special operations focus on political, psychological, informational or economic factors. In special operations, there is nothing new about operating closely together with civilian organizations or under the control of them.
- Special operations can easily be integrated into international operations in a way that makes sense even with small contributions. Special operations are organizationally flexible and task-oriented by nature, which means they can easily be included 'plug and play' in multinational task forces, e.g. in a Nordic task force.

- Special operations are relatively inexpensive to launch, supply and end. They only require a small logistical system. A special operation need not include more than 2-4 advisors but can be scaled up and down as necessary.
- Special operations do not constitute visible and attractive targets for an insurgency movement.
- The soldiers are trained to survive in extreme conditions, so it is not necessary to deploy a larger, more robust force for the sake of the safety of the soldiers – a force which, in itself, might risk escalating the conflict or causing unwanted costs. The prospect of such a cost can result in opting out of using the military instrument.
- Special operations give strategic *agility*, i.e. the ability to quickly adapt to changeovers by adjusting the initial organization and methodology.⁶ The forces are flexible and relatively easy to move from one area of operation to another, which makes it easy for Denmark to shift its strategic focus in a dynamic world.
- Special operations are suitable for operating in irregular conflicts, because by nature they are themselves irregular.
- Special operations are relatively easy to end when desired. The operations do not occupy terrain and are not a visible and dominating power factor. They thereby reduce or eliminate the risk of political and military binding and deadlocking.

Specific tasks which can be solved through special operations

As previously described, the state can combine its methods and means in hundreds of possible ways. Likewise, the tasks which can be solved with special operations span a large number of combinations due to the great flexibility and agility which characterize these types of operations. The basic element is the three core tasks of Military Assistance, Special Reconnaissance and Direct Action. Please see brief no. 1 for detailed descriptions of the core tasks.⁷ Direct Action is less relevant in a preventive stabilisation engagement, but the mere presence of special operations forces provides an inherent option of transition to the use of force, e.g. if Danish citizens are in danger and have to be evacuated. In the following, a few of the many examples of possible tasks in an integrated stabilisation engagement are presented:

- The core competence of special operations is to gather information. Without sufficient and correct information, it is not possible to prevent conflicts and manage crises. Especially in fragile and failed states, information about ‘the human terrain’ is decisive for making appropriate plans and actions. By virtue of their focus on the human aspect, special operations are very well suited

(6) William Mitchell (2012), *Three C2 Models for Military Agility in the 21st Century*, Copenhagen, Royal Danish Defence College Publishing House, p. 4, <http://forsvaret.dk/FAK/Publikationer/Briefs/Documents/Three%20C2%20Models%20for%20Military%20Agility.pdf>

(7) Lars H. Ehrensvärd Jensen (2014), *Special operations – myths and facts*, Copenhagen, Royal Danish Defence College Publishing House, [http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen\(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0\)/publications.html](http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0)/publications.html)

to contribute to presenting a complete picture of a complex and complicated situation, in which incorrect assessments and actions can lead to further destabilisation.

- Physical risks and threats can be difficult to recognize, understand and assess properly in unstable areas. Very few civilian stabilisation capacities are trained or equipped to gather and assess information which indicates the use of violence. Special operations forces are, though. Incorrect assessments can result in late or inappropriate responses, including overreactions to threats that are not, in fact, real. The mere presence of a small number of special operators is empirically known to create a sense of security among the civilian staff.
- One of the problems in fragile or failed states is that the political process has failed and that it is therefore difficult to identify and find the decision-makers to engage with diplomatically. As was seen during the conflict in Libya, special operations can help in locating the political decision-makers, bring them together and create a framework for getting the political process restarted.⁸ Likewise, special operations can create the necessary preconditions for Denmark's political efforts under circumstances where security risks would otherwise hinder such efforts – as was seen in Baghdad in 2003-2005.
- Special operations seek solutions matching their design, which is to *avoid fighting*, and this makes them easy to coordinate with non-military instruments. Special operations work best through indirect or catalysing effects.⁹ This entails that special operations can help build the capacities of the host country very early in the process and thereby prevent further destabilisation. The characteristics of fragile and failed states are often inadequate resources for exercising power compared to tasks and geography. In such cases, building an own capacity for special operations can enable the host country to take action against strategic threats with small means (without thereby building a complete military capacity which could have a destabilizing effect for, i.e. the neighbouring countries, since special operations cannot be used for invasions and occupation of ground). Australia has allegedly supported Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nigeria with special operations in such a role.¹⁰
- The deployment of a small number of special operators provides security measures for evacuating Danish citizens from fragile or failed states through building up situation awareness. Given that the conflict prevention efforts take place in fragile and failed states, it cannot be excluded that there will be a need to evacuate Danish citizens if the prevention efforts fail. Special operations provide possible courses of action and reduce the risk of strategic deadlock, e.g. in hostage taking situations. Please see brief no. 2 for a detailed examination of evacuation of Danish citizens at a great distance from Denmark.¹¹

(8) SAS on mission to protect diplomats, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12658054>, SAS tasked to protect/escort diplomats, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/africaandindianocean/libya/8365007/Libya-inside-the-SAS-operation-that-went-wrong.html>

(9) NATO SOF Study (2012); NATO SOF HQ, pp. 6f and 15

(10) <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20120313/DEFREG03/303130002>

(11) Lars H. Ehrensvärd Jensen (2014), *Special operations – the central role of air capacities*, Copenhagen, Royal Defence College Publishing House, [http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen\(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0\)/publications.html](http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0)/publications.html)

Special operations have great strategic efficiency in an integrated engagement

Small, discreet teams (2-10 men) of special operators can increase the knowledge of 'the human terrain' and provide recognition and assessment of physical threats in close coordination with the non-military actors. Thereby, they can contribute to offsetting the information deficit which we will always have, especially in situations that threaten to develop into armed conflicts. These soldiers are trained to gather, process and assess information about physical security risks, which most non-military actors aren't. They can thereby contribute to preserving freedom of action with a very limited military effort because information is decisive in order to be able to act in a balanced way and manage the crises that will inevitably occur. Please see brief no. 3 about the role of special operations in crisis management.¹²

As mentioned, simply because we wish to give priority to the non-military stabilisation engagements, Denmark cannot presume that all actors in and around the fragile and failed states will respect this. We must therefore protect our stabilisation engagement against physical and psychological attacks. Special operations provide a politically and economically attractive instrument by strengthening the host country's own capacities through the task of *Military Assistance*.

Future conflicts will occur between people and about people. By virtue of their training and operational character, special operations are well suited for supporting the actual stabilisation engagement – to increase the social cohesion – by solving problems which support the main mission in a way that does not have an escalating effect or deprive us of our freedom of action. Since special operations are always militarily inferior, they naturally compensate for this by open-mindedly seeking to integrate means and methods.

In special operations, the decisive element is the human being and not military hardware. Special operations have great strategic efficiency in the range between deployment of conventional forces and diplomacy. They are therefore well suited for operationalization of the visions laid out in the stabilisation paper and for doing so cost-effectively, which is attractive to Denmark due to its very limited resources.

Nonetheless, this requires a paradigm shift in relation to the decision-makers' current view on special operations, including debunking the prevalent myths and delusions about special operations.

The Royal Danish Defence College has previously published four briefs which address these myths and provide information about what special operations are and are not. An important factor in this context is to explain how to balance on one hand

(12) Lars H. Ehrensvärd Jensen (2014), *Special operations can increase Denmark's strategic options*, Copenhagen, Royal Defence College Publishing House, [http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen\(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0\)/publications.html](http://pure.fak.dk/portal/en/persons/lars-h-ehrensvard-jensen(0826baec-5699-44dc-b7ec-5a5bde31eff0)/publications.html)

the secrecy that special operations occasionally require and on the other hand the political need for openness and transparency regarding the military.

The next brief in the series about special operations will thus analyse this balance between secrecy and openness. The brief can soon be found online.