Anglo-Danish Relations, 1714-82

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Various source media, State Papers Online
The Danish state of the eighteenth century was a much larger entity than the present-day small power named Denmark. During the eighteenth century, the Danish state was a middle-sized composite state consisting of the kingdoms of Denmark and Norway, with the latter’s old Norwegian North Atlantic dependencies of Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Furthermore, the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein were part of the Danish monarchy, and the latter duchy was part of the German Empire, thus making the king of Denmark a German prince in his capacity as duke of Holstein. The same was the case for the Northern German counties of Oldenburg and Delmenhorst. To this were added some minor colonies in the Caribbean (the present-day US Virgin Islands), on the African Gold Coast and in India.

Thus, Danish and British foreign political, diplomatic, military, naval, trade and maritime interests might meet each other in several areas: in the Sound, being the entrance to the strategically and commercially most important Baltic area; in the North Atlantic; in Northern Germany; in the Caribbean, West Africa or India; or on the oceans, as the Danish state was a great seafaring nation. Sometimes, they would coincide, sometimes collide.

Due to its large territory on both land and water, the Danish state was difficult to defend and needed to be strongly armed. And so it was: seen in relation to the number of inhabitants, the Danish state had the second greatest army in Europe, only surpassed by Prussia, whilst its navy was also significant and carried weight internationally. Thus, the Danish state might be a valuable ally.

The main challenges for the foreign policy of the Danish state were Sweden and the so-called Gottorpian parts of the duchies. The Danish state and Sweden had for centuries been rivals for the mastery of Scandinavia and the Baltic. A disaster, from the Danish point of view, had occurred in 1658 when Sweden had conquered the Danish provinces east of the Sound and thus a third of the territory of the kingdom of Denmark, leaving the remaining Danish state in a most exposed and weakened position. Several Danish attempts at reconquest had failed, not only due to military insufficiency but also to a diktat from the great powers (Britain, France and the Netherlands) who had strong trade and maritime interests in the Baltic area and were therefore unwilling to allow one power alone to control the Sound, the narrow entrance to the Baltic.

The Gottorps were a branch of the Danish royal family. During several of the wars of the seventeenth century they had sided with the enemies of the kings of Denmark and had afterwards been rewarded with independence from the king of Denmark. The Gottorpian territories were in themselves small and scattered and militarily insignificant. The problem was, however, that the Gottorps intermarried into the Swedish royal family and later into the Russian imperial house. Therefore, any one-sided Danish action against the Gottorps would immediately have serious international consequences. Thus, the Danish state had a hostile power within its territories and the problem could only be solved by international agreements.

By 1714, the Danish state had been involved in the Great Nordic War against Sweden for five years, in an alliance with Russia and Poland-Saxony. A Danish attempt to reconquer the provinces east of the Sound in 1709-1710 had failed disastrously; however, in Norway
and in Northern Germany the Danish state did better. In 1712 the duchies of Bremen and Verden - hitherto under Swedish rule - were occupied by Danish troops and transferred to George I of Britain-Hanover in 1715 in return for cash and a British guarantee of the Gottorpian parts of Schleswig for the king of Denmark. The same year, the isle of Rügen and Swedish Pomerania capitulated to the Danes, followed by the fortress of Wismar the year after. It also strengthened the Danish position that the electorate of Hanover, whose elector was also king of Great Britain in 1715, joined the war against Sweden. Indeed, the duchy of Holstein, the counties of Oldenburg and Delmenhorst and the electorate of Hanover now had borders in common and coinciding interests. Britain was keen on securing peace and stability in Scandinavia as a precondition for a general peace in Europe. Britain-Hanover had, along with the Danish state, been deeply worried about Sweden’s dominant position, but was now beginning to worry about the growing expansion of Russia in the Baltic and in Northern Germany. As Sweden, in British eyes, was the prime disturber of peace and stability, Britain declared war on that country in 1717 and increased her naval presence in the Baltic. Yet after the sudden death of the Swedish king Charles XII in 1718, the new Swedish government concluded a separate peace with Britain, whose aim of peace and stability in Scandinavia was thereby to a large extent achieved.\(^1\)

The Danish state now had no option but to begin peace talks with Sweden under Franco-British mediation. No territorial gains were obtained, the Danish state had to return the conquered Swedish provinces in Germany to Sweden in return for cash, Sweden had to refrain from supporting the Gottorpians and lost her customs freedom in the Sound. Moreover, Britain and France guaranteed the possession of the Gottorpian parts of the duchy of Schleswig but not those of Holstein for the king of Denmark, who incorporated them under the crown in 1721. The Danish state had on several occasions attempted to incorporate the wealthy, German, free city of Hamburg. As this city was of great commercial importance for Britain, the British had resisted this, and the fact that the right to the Gottorpian parts of Holstein remained unsolved was intended to keep the Danish state in check and prevent it from expansion into Hamburg or other parts of Northern Germany.

In Danish historiography, this peace has traditionally been seen as disappointing, even if the goal of weakening Sweden was a success. The fact that the provinces east of the Sound were not reacquired has contributed to that view. However, recent research has suggested that for the power-holders the failure to maintain and incorporate the Northern German conquests made from Sweden seems to have been a much greater disappointment, as they had been hoping to increase Danish-controlled territory in Northern Germany as compensation for the provinces east of the Sound.\(^2\)

The period from 1720 till 1801 or 1807 is in Danish historiography called 'The Long Peace', as the Danish state managed to keep out of the major European wars of this period. This does not, however, mean that it was non-aligned in international politics. It was not neutral in the modern meaning, but rather non-belligerent.\(^5\) In Danish historiography, it has generally been the assumption that the Danish state gave up all aspirations of further territories after 1720. Recent research has, however, indicated that the governments...
after 1720 might not have been that dismissive to the ideas of territorial acquisitions should an opportunity arise, and that they might have missed some opportunities after 1720 due to too much caution and too little audacity.\(^6\)

The 1720s saw a growing Russo-Swedish rapprochement. This led the Danish state to approach Britain, who was also interested in closer cooperation, not least to secure the electorate of Hanover. Thus, the Danish state had significant value as an ally when it joined Britain and France in the so-called Hanoverian Alliance in 1727, thereby getting French subsidies and French and British military assistance in case of Russian aggression. Furthermore, the two great powers once again guaranteed the king’s possession of the Gottorpian parts of Schleswig. The early 1730s saw a growing European détente, however; at the outbreak of the Polish War of Succession in 1733 the Danish state was again seen as a valuable ally and was offered subsidies by both Britain and France. As the British possibilities of making herself felt in the Baltic were considered better, a British alliance was chosen in 1734.\(^7\) At the expiration of this treaty in 1737 Britain had no interest in any renewal until the Spanish-British conflict in 1739.

As this conflict developed into the major European War of the Austrian Succession, the Danish state could once again pick and choose between offers of alliance. When the Anglo-Danish alliance expired in 1742, the Danish state chose to ally with France, and was promised subsidies and French military assistance in case of an attack.\(^8\) This was indeed a major change of foreign policy. In order to remain on friendly terms with Britain, a marriage between Princess Louise, the daughter of King George II, and the Danish Crown Prince Frederick (V) was arranged in 1743.\(^9\) However, perhaps this was rather the daughter of the elector of Hanover marrying the son of the duke of Holstein. A marriage between Princess Louise, the daughter of the Danish King Christian VI, and William Augustus, duke of Cumberland was also considered.\(^6\) This should be seen as a British attempt to wrest the Danish state away from the French alliance, while Danish military forces might be valuable to Britain and, above all, useful for Hanover. Prospects of territories conquered from Prussia were also held out for, but nothing came of this; France let its Danish ally understand that two royal Dano-British marriages would be one too many should the Dano-French alliance continue.

The Gottorpian problem was still in the foreground, and the more so when both Russia and Sweden elected a member of the Gottorp house as their respective successor to the throne. In 1743, this nearly led to war between the Danish state and Sweden. However, as Russia threatened to assist Sweden militarily and Britain and France put pressure on the king of Denmark, war was averted.

During the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) the Danish state was a close ally of France but formally stayed neutral, meaning non-belligerent. However, the acts of war immediately south of the Danish state were considered deeply worrying from a Danish point of view. In September 1757, negotiations in Kloster Zeven between France and Britain to secure Hanover’s neutrality took place under Danish auspices.\(^11\) In 1758, the alliance with France was further strengthened as the Danish state committed itself not to assist Britain and Prussia in any respect. This did not, however, imply any state of war. In return, France committed herself to
bringing about a satisfactory solution to the Gottorpian problem with Russian support.

In 1762, the head of the Gottorp family, duke Carl Peter Ulrik, ascended the Russian throne as Peter III. He was determined to use all his Russian resources to regain the Gottorpian parts of Schleswig. It looked like a war and neither Britain, France nor any of the other powers who had on several occasions guaranteed the king of Denmark his right to the Gottorpian parts of Schleswig were willing to make good on their promises. Before hostilities broke out, however, Czar Peter was deposed in a palace revolution in St. Petersburg and succeeded by his wife, Catherine II. She was interested in an alliance with the Danish state against Sweden. Thus, after France had declined to renew the alliance in 1764, the Danish state pursued a Russian alliance. A treaty with Russia was signed in 1765 and the Danish state was to stay as an ally of Russia for the rest of the eighteenth century. Consequently, in 1773 the Gottorpian problem finally found a solution as the counties of Oldenburg and Delmenhorst were exchanged in return for the Gottorpian parts of Holstein. The alliance with Russia was favourably looked upon by Britain as it drew the Danish state away from France. A further attempt to stress the Danish position in the anti-French camp was the marriage between King Christian VII and Princess Caroline Mathilde, the sister of King George III. This marriage ended up tragically, with her unfaithfulness with the doctor and courtier J.F. Struensee and subsequent divorce in 1772. The Danish government had intended to let the divorced queen stay in a provincial palace but this was totally unacceptable for Britain. Facing a threat of military action against Denmark, the Danish government agreed to let her leave the country. This affair contributed to strained Anglo-Danish relations for many years.

The second part of the eighteenth century is known as ‘The Flourishing Trade Period’, referring to the fact that international trade and navigation thrived under the neutral Danish flag of convenience. Firstly, this utilization of the neutral status meant taking over carrying trade that belligerents were no longer able to do themselves. Secondly, it meant importation of oversea products on behalf of the belligerent countries to the harbours of the Danish monarchy aiming at re-exportation to a European market. The Danish government was maintaining high-flown principles of neutrality (free ship/free cargo), yet in practice it realized the necessity of considering the belligerent powers and their strengths and interests, especially the British naval power. Thus, during the Seven Years’ War the Danish state had to accept the British so-called ‘Rule of 1756’ that neutral ships were not allowed to call on colonial harbours where they would not be allowed in peace time. However, during the American War of Independence when Britain was in a more pressed situation, a more audacious and offensive policy of neutrality was carried out. In 1780, Russia took the initiative in an armed league of neutrality to protect the shipping of all neutral countries. This might provoke Britain and would certainly prevent the Danish state from selfishly pursuing its own commerce and shipping interests. Nonetheless, as an ally of Russia, it had to join. However, the government used the league to make Britain agree on a convention on contraband favouring the Danish state at the expense of Russia and Sweden and moreover, it informed the British government that it had only joined the league reluctantly and that it would never invoke the league in
case of future Anglo-Danish trade and maritime disputes. And sometimes, Danish neutrality was advantageous to British interests: when employees of the British East India Company needed to remit home to Britain the fortunes they had earned privately in India, vessels under the neutral Danish flag were the only option. Still, especially during the late phase of the war there were situations where the Danish commercial utilization of its neutrality was such that circumventing it would seem close to foolhardiness. Thus, a comprehensive transaction to transport goods to and from the Spanish colony of Caracas in 1782-1783 on board neutral Danish vessels escorted by Danish frigates was organized. The transaction was being carried out by a state-sponsored trading company, the directors of which were the de facto Danish prime minister, finance minister and minister of commerce who were at the same time large-scale investors in that project together with a number of other leading state and court officials. The ships of the Caracas enterprise were being given dispensations and support by the government that other parts of Danish naval and commercial life did not enjoy, and especially the escort of frigates might have jeopardized relations with Britain. For the Danish state as a whole, this enterprise was of marginal importance. The organizers and investors of this enterprise were therefore at the same time state ministers and high-ranking civil servants, and the possibility of their being unable to distinguish clearly between state interests and their own personal financial interests, maybe even prioritizing the latter at the expense of state security, cannot be ruled out. The heavily armed Danish state was never directly at war with Britain between 1714-1782. In certain decades it was a British ally, in other periods an ally of France; from 1765 it was allied with Russia and within the anti-French bloc like Britain. How was it possible for the Danish state to stay neutral in the major European wars and still be an ally of the European great powers and even utilize its neutrality commercially? Certainly, coincidences might play a role as the policy of the Danish state in between seemed close to brinkmanship. But otherwise, its geographical position at the narrow entrance to the Sound and to the strategically and commercially important Baltic area where all the great powers had vital interests was instrumental in maintaining its neutrality. Thus, none of the great powers would ever be able to live with one single great power being in control of the entrance to the Baltic and thereby able to take a stranglehold on the other powers as they were dependent on trade with and/or importations of goods, such as grain or naval stores, from here.
ENDNOTES

[1] The most recent survey of Danish foreign policy during the period in question: Knud J.V. Jespersen: "1648-1720" and Ole Feldbæk: "1720-1814", in: Carsten Due-Nielsen et al. (eds.): Revanche og neutralitet 1648-1814, Dansk udenrigspolitiks historie, vol. 2 (Copenhagen, 2002). This text is generally based on this.


[7] SP 75/64 f.198

[8] SP 75/82 f.53

[9] SP 75/83 f.60

[10] SP 75/84 f.3


[12] SP 91/70 f.39

[13] See SP 75/126

[14] SP 75/136 f.120


