CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DEBATE ON DENMARK’S DEFENCE 1900–1940

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This paper endeavours to appraise Danish democracy’s ability to formulate adequate defence policies in the period 1900–40. The point of departure will be the state’s key aims viz. Denmark’s survival and integrity, as they were fundamental requirements for its effective foreign and defence policies.

As, according to Carl von Clausewitz, defence is a central item in the political toolbox, the state’s primary objective becomes the raison d’être of its defence policy.1 In the study of foreign policy the so-called Realist School sees this cognition as the basis of their analysis. Thus, for the purpose of this paper the notion ‘realist policy’ pertains to foreign and defence policies heeding this. National defence policy, however, resting as much on the defence debate as on strategic realities, is to a large extent a product of domestic factors, of which many are extraneous.2

Closely in line with the realist foreign policy, this paper will use the expression ‘classic logic’ as a designation of the nexus between realist foreign policy and defence. Classic defence logic, then, has to do with realist appreciation of looming threats vis-à-vis the weighing of resources needs of armed defence and those of other sectors. Coherent defence policy reflects the important challenges to national security. It rests on the realistic understanding of international conditions and is adapted to available resources in terms of manpower, funds, raw

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materials, and industrial output. Optimum balance of these requirements is hard to achieve and, within as well as without the academic world, it is often presumed that reconciling these ends is especially difficult for democracies because peacetime democratic governments do not have defence as their primary, let alone only concern. Theoretically, democracies are governed by the interests of the voters, who are assumed to be preoccupied with domestic concerns, largely dispassionate to the wider world, overtly averse to economic sacrifice, and mired in political or religious ideologies.

In reality, democratically elected governments often rule unchallenged between elections, thus having a relatively free hand in allocating resources and using the military instrument to buttress their policies. However, frequently the democratic decision-making process is burdened by sociological factors such as the relationship between the ruling elite and the armed forces, the social composition of the population in general, political traditions, and hidden agendas of party politics.

In the study of foreign policy the logical opposite of the realist way of thinking is the idealist one. This will have to be seen as including foreign and defence political approaches, which shift the focus away from the basic objectives of state survival and integrity. While in an international relations universe the classic defence policy logic follows a track parallel to that of the Realist School of, inter alii, Hans Morgenthau, the idealist view emphasises the non-provocative aspect allowing low-budget defensive measures. The ‘idealist label’ indicates that various ideal purposes do have important roles to play. In a defence policy context ideal aims are often of a pacifist inclination, and pacifist idealism has been one of the most significant elements of the defence policy debate in the twentieth century. Conversely, it is mostly realist arguments which are being used when it comes to procuring and employing arms. Nevertheless, realism and defence friendliness do not necessarily coincide, nor do pacifism and defence negativism. While it is possible to imagine realistic scenarios where armed defence does not benefit state security, idealist arguments that certain wars are worth fighting abound. Such arguments may include patriotism, commitment to human rights, peace enforcement, toppling of dictatorships etc.

Foreign policy – be it realist or idealist – remains closely linked with defence issues. British political scientist Barry Buzan points out that “because policy has a powerful impact on security problems, as illustrated by the feedback effects of arms racing and trade wars, the