Mr, Jesper Sahl Nielsen, University of Copenhagen, Fighting tomorrow’s war with yesterday’s tools: Danish Intelligence in Helmand (2007-12)

This presentation is part of an ongoing PhD project, due for completion in late 2026. While the focus is on part Denmark’s Helmand campaign in 2007-12, the findings may also shed light on how small states more broadly manage intelligence in complex, modern conflicts, often with limited resources and a dependence on larger coalition partners. My initial findings point to that, when Denmark deployed to Helmand in 2006, it entered a complex counterinsurgency campaign with an intelligence structure ill-suited for the task. This paper explores how outdated assumptions, fragmented systems and institutional inertia hampered the Danish Army’s intelligence ability to function fully properly in an asymmetric environment. Three core deficiencies defined the intelligence effort: First, technical shortfalls, particularly the lack of integrated ISTAR systems, severely limited the processing and dissemination of battlefield information. Second, the absence of a formal education pipeline or career path for intelligence personnel led to reliance on underprepared and short-term staff. Third, intelligence remained culturally and structurally subordinated to operations, limiting its operational impact and reinforcing a reactive attitude. Drawing primarily on interviews with S2-officers, relevant examinations and official archives, I argue that the Danish Army failed to recognize the specific demands of counterinsurgency. Training emphasized conventional warfare concepts, like fixed frontlines and kinetic targeting, over context-sensitive approaches suited for decentralized insurgency. Intelligence often defaulted to simplified outputs (enemy positions, weapon caches etc.) at the expense of deeper situational understanding. The consequences were operational tunnel vision, poor adaptability and missed opportunities for long-term effects. This case study of Denmark’s Helmand deployment offers lessons on the institutional prerequisites for effective military intelligence in asymmetric warfare. It stresses that technology alone is not enough and what’s needed is a professional, empowered, and adaptable intelligence culture that can break with outdated paradigms when confronting new types of conflicts.