

Brødsgaard, Kjeld Erik

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**Danish-Chinese Relations: The
Collapse of a Special Relationship**

Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard

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Editor of the Copenhagen Discussion Papers:
Associate Professor Michael Jacobsen

Asia Research Centre
Copenhagen Business School
Dalgas Have 15
DK-2000 Frederiksberg
Denmark

Tel.: (+45) 3815 3396
Email: mj.int@cbs.dk
www.cbs.dk/arc

Chinese-Danish Relations: The Collapse of a Special Relationship

Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard

Professor

Asia Research Centre

Copenhagen Business School

keb.int@cbs.dk

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Abstract

Denmark was among the first countries in the world to recognize the People's Republic of China. This created a good foundation for the development of a special relationship between China and Denmark, culminating in Prime Minister, Poul Hartling's meeting with Mao in October 1974 and characterized by further intensification of political, economic and cultural relations from the beginning of the 1980s. The recent agreement to establish a joint Sino-Danish University Centre in Beijing constitutes yet another high point. However, there have also been incidents of tension and conflict. This paper will especially address three of these incidents: the "cartoon crisis" of August 1967, the Danish criticism of China's human rights record in the spring of 1997, and the controversy relating to the Dalai Lama's visit to Denmark in May 2009. It is argued that the costs of pursuing a policy towards China based on normative considerations have become too high and is difficult to harmonize with a new Danish foreign policy of active internationalism.

Keywords: China-Denmark, foreign policy, cartoon crisis, human rights, Dalai Lama, active internationalism.

Introduction

The Scandinavian countries were among the first countries in the world to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC). Already in January 1950 the Danish Foreign Minister informed the Chinese Government that Denmark had recognized it as the lawful central authority in China and wished to establish diplomatic relations.¹

The Danish Government's decision to swiftly recognize the new Chinese government earned Denmark considerable goodwill in Beijing. This was further reinforced during the 1950s and 1960s where Denmark and the Scandinavian countries time and again expressed their support for the PRC's representation in the UN and other international fora. The Danish position was based on three considerations. First, the Danish government was of the opinion that all countries that could reasonably claim to be independent, sovereign states should be admitted to the UN. Secondly, Denmark was of the conviction that a country should be represented by the government that actually controlled the territory in question. Finally, successive Danish governments felt that it was an "anomaly" that the government of the PRC which held control over more than 600 million people held no seat in the UN. The PRC was perceived as an underdog in global affairs and therefore enjoyed widespread sympathy in Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries. The Republic of China on Taiwan was regarded as a puppet of the US and therefore commanded much less sympathy. This was very clear during the crucial discussions in the UN in October 1971, where Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries argued strongly for what they called "restoring the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China in the UN".²

The Danish support for China's struggle to be part of the international community did not go unnoticed in Beijing and contributed to the creation of a special relationship between Denmark and China. During the 1970s this special relationship was reinforced by the Chinese perception that Denmark enjoyed an exceptionally important strategic position controlling the Baltic approach to the North Sea and the Atlantic.

¹ This paper is based on a talk delivered at the Copenhagen Business Confucius Institute on May 3, 2010 as well as on Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Jan Rowinski, "Diplomatic and Political Relations Between Denmark and the People's Republic of China, 1949-1997," in Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Mads Kirkebæk (eds.), *China and Denmark: Relations Since 1674* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2001), pp. 192-232, and Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, "Denmark's China Policy, 1950-2000," in *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook 2000* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute of International Affairs, 2000), pp. 139-160.

² See Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, "The ROC and the United Nations from a Scandinavian Perspective," in Marie-Luise Näth (ed.), *The Republic of China on Taiwan in International Politics* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998), pp. 131-146.

This paper first presents an overview of Sino-Danish relations since 1970. First the paper discusses how the relationship deepened politically and economically and lately also in areas such as research and education. The relationship between the two countries has clearly benefitted from Denmark's early recognition in January of the new Chinese government. Second, the paper addresses three areas and instances of tension between the two countries, indicating that the relationship actually has experienced some turbulence in spite of the official rhetoric. These instances are the "cartoon crisis" of August 1967, the Danish human rights criticism of China in the spring of 1997 and Chinese reactions to the visit to Denmark by the Dalai Lama in May 2009. Finally, the paper discusses the evolution of Sino-Danish relations in the light of Denmark's new foreign policy stance characterized by middlepowermanship and active internationalism.

Hartling Meets Mao

That China and Denmark enjoyed a strong and friendly relationship became evident in October 1974 Prime Minister, Poul Hartling as the first head of government of a Scandinavian country visited Beijing. He was received at the airport by Vice-Premier, Deng Xiaoping acting on behalf of prime minister, Zhou Enlai who was hospitalized.

Renmin Ribao carried an editorial on October 18, 1974 noting that Hartling's visit was a major event in "the annals of the development of friendly relations between China and Denmark."



The most celebrated part of the visit was when Hartling on October 20, 1974 met Mao Zedong. The official picture on the front page of *Renmin Ribao* showed an old enfeebled Chairman. However, Hartling later claimed that the two had a conversation on a "high intellectual level"- apparently the Chairman was still functioning and in charge of affairs. The fact that Mao had found time to meet with Hartling, clearly illustrated that Denmark had a special interest for China in its capacity of both being a Scandinavian country as well a member of the EU.

In 1974 China was approaching the EU in order to establish official ties and good relations with Denmark, which at that time was a member of the EU troika, were considered to have a positive effect on the process.³

China and Denmark in the 1980s

At the turn of 1981/82 a gradual but critical reappraisal of Chinese foreign policy took place and the Chinese government began to steer a more independent or equidistant course between the superpowers, which involved a less aggressive anti-Soviet stance and a gradual retreat from the idea of strategic alliance with the US. At the same time there was a renewed support for EU independence of both superpowers. Beijing spoke of seeking closer relations with the EU and its members, focussing its efforts on development of bilateral contacts. It continued to emphasize the importance of Denmark's membership of NATO and a united Western Europe and pointed to the need to strengthen defence and be on guard against the dangers from the Soviet Union, but did so in a much more muted fashion.⁴ In general, the 1980s saw (until the tragedy of Tiananmen Square) a marked intensification of contacts between both countries in the political, economic, scientific, technological, educational and cultural spheres.

Without question, the most important event of the decade in bilateral relations was the visit from June 8-10, 1984 of the Premier of the Chinese State Council, Zhao Ziyang, the first visit to Denmark ever by a Chinese head of government. It was not only the awaited reciprocation of the visits to China of Danish prime ministers, Poul Hartling in 1974 and Anker Jørgensen in

³ See *Information*, November 5, 1981.

⁴ See, for example, *Xinhua News Agency Bulletin* (XNAB), February 11, March 31, April 9 and 20, May 26 and 27, July 6, August 31, November 4, December 16 and 17, 1983; February 13, March 27 and 31, April 17, May 4 and 20, 1984.

1981, it was also a reflection of the notable improvement in relations which had begun in the mid-1970s.⁵ Zhao met with the Danish Queen and held talks with his Danish counterpart, Poul Schlüter, and other leading politicians. He expressed support for Denmark's foreign policy, emphasizing the importance of steps to bolster security. His government, he said, wished to expand consultations and cooperation with Denmark. Zhao also stressed the Chinese interest in intensifying and expanding economic relations, especially in the area of farming.

After Tiananmen

Relations between Denmark and China were put at a severe test in 1989, following the military crackdown on the Chinese students in June 1989. Denmark was among the first countries in the world to deliver a protest to the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs and took immediate steps to cancel all pending aid and credit programs and to restrict official contacts.

Danish measures were coordinated with the other members of the European Council. They met in Madrid on June 26-27, 1989, and decided on a number of measures, including suspension of high level contacts, freezing of new cooperation projects, reduction of cooperation projects in the cultural and scientific field.⁶ In October 1990, under the framework of the European Political Cooperation, the EU countries decided to lift sanctions. However, a majority in the Danish Parliament forced the Danish government to give up attempts to resume Danish development aid to China.⁷

The beginning of the 1990s were still under the shadow of the Tiananmen Massacre. Only after Deng Xiaoping's famous "trip to the South" in 1992 restarted the reform process did the Danish attitude slowly change. The tremendous upsurge in foreign direct investment to China which took place after 1992 stimulated Danish companies' interest in establishing a presence in China and contributed to a change in Danish policies.⁸

⁵ *Kina Information*, No. 3, 1984.

⁶ Brødsgaard and Rowinski, "Diplomatic and Political Relations Between Denmark and the People's Republic of China, 1949-1997," p. 212.

⁷ *Børsen*, January 21, 1991; *Kristelig Dagblad*, March 11, 1991.

⁸ Brødsgaard, "Denmark's China Policy 1950-2000," p. 149.

As a member of the EU, Denmark took active part in the discussions leading to the formulation of the European Commission's new strategy towards China, which was made public in July 1995.⁹ The new strategy stipulated that "Europe's relations with China are bound to be a cornerstone in Europe's external relations, both with Asia and globally." The EU Commission had come to the conclusion that the more confrontational approach of the immediate post-Tiananmen era was not in agreement with the long-term goals of the EU. Therefore a policy of "constructive engagement" was to be implemented. As EU membership increasingly had become an important parameter for Danish policies towards China and Asia, the new policy document also meant a more accommodating Danish position.

Relations After 2000

The liberal-conservative Danish government, which took over in 2001 adopted a pragmatic attitude towards relations with China. The overall policy is built on an attempt to integrate China politically and economically into the international community while at the same time engaging China in a critical dialogue on issues such as human rights and the situation in Tibet. Following a visit to China the former prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen argued that the globalization process was to a high degree defined by China's integration in the economic world order and that it was essential for Denmark's future to be part of this process. He suggested increased cooperation in research and development and consequently the Danish minister of science and technology took the initiative of working out a comprehensive and highly ambitious national Danish strategy for cooperation between Denmark and China in the field of knowledge generation, including establishing a Chinese-Danish joint university.¹⁰ This input became the central part of an overarching Danish action plan for Chinese-Danish relations.

In sum Chinese-Danish relations have been characterized by cooperation and friendship. A deepening of the relationship has been made possible by the early Danish recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in January 1950. The Chinese have also stressed the positive impact of Denmark's strong support of PRC representation in the UN.

⁹ The European Commission, "A Long-Term Policy of China-Europe Relations" (Brussels: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1995).

¹⁰ See Ministeriet for Videnskab, Teknologi og Udvikling, *Strategi for Videnssamarbejde mellem Danmark og Kina* (København: Ministeriet for Videnskab, Teknologi og Udvikling, 2008).

However, there have also been incidents where relations were strained with a negative effect on trade and commercial relations. This was clearly the case in 1989 following “the Tiananmen massacre”. This crisis was not particularly related to Chinese-Danish relations, but also affected China’s relations to the rest of the Europe and the Western world. There have been incidents that were more directly related to the bilateral Chinese-Danish relationship. In the following we will look at three incidents. First the cartoon crisis of August 1967. Secondly Denmark’s criticism at the Human Rights Commission in 1997 of China’s behavior regarding human rights. Thirdly, the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen’s receipt of the Dalai Lama in May 2009.

Cartoon Crisis

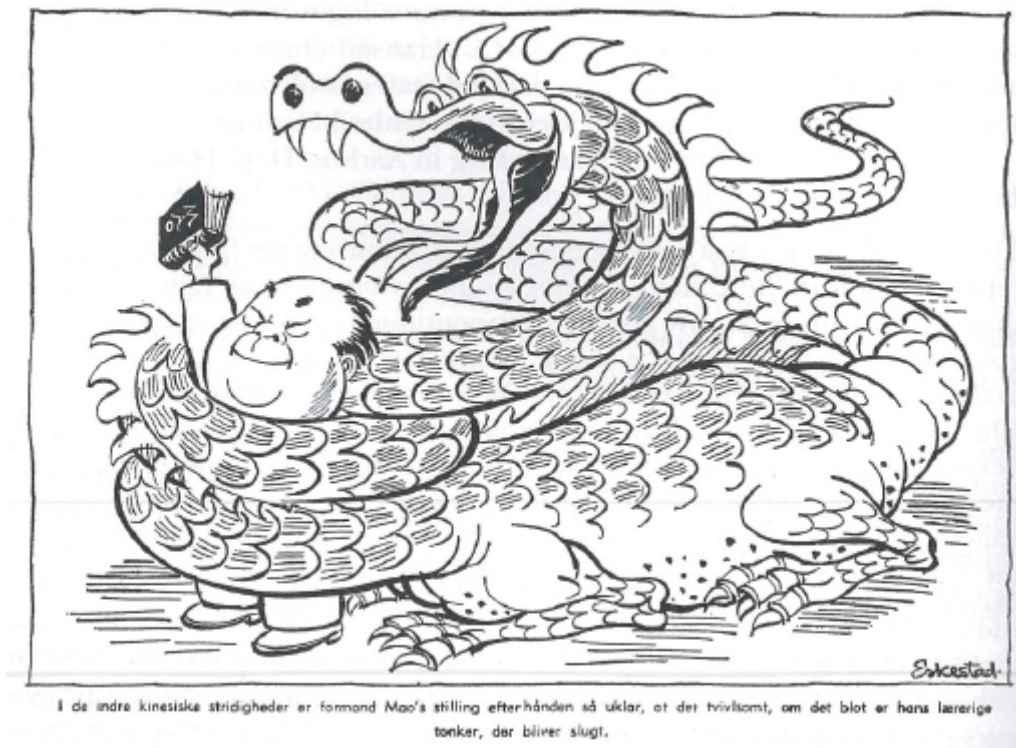
Though there were critical reactions in Denmark to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, this did not result in any serious exacerbation of relations as it did in the case of many other countries. However, on August 9, 1967 the main Social Democratic newspaper ‘*Aktuelt*’ carried a cartoon, showing Mao being devoured by a dragon, while waving his little red book with revolutionary quotations.¹¹ Immediately, The Chinese embassy in Copenhagen lodged a sharp protest to the Danish foreign ministry claiming that the cartoon was as a “sign of the ‘*Aktuelt*’ s hostility towards China” and an act the Chinese people “absolutely cannot tolerate”. The Chinese embassy apparently saw the case as especially serious since ‘*Aktuelt*’ was the main organ of the ruling Social Democratic Party and therefore was believed to reflect the position of the Danish government in the same way as the ‘*People’s Daily*’ would reflect the Chinese official position. Said the Chinese protest note:

”If the Danish government continues to cling to its obstinate attitude, continues to use the press for its anti-Chinese propaganda and undermines the peaceful relationship between the two countries, the Danish government must bear the full responsibility for the grave consequences that might occur.”¹²

¹¹ *Aktuelt*, August 9, 1967.

¹² *Aktuelt*, August 22, 1967.

'Aktuelt' carried an editorial which characterized the Chinese protest note as "insulting". The editorial stressed that the paper had attempted to cover not only the consequences of the Cultural Revolution, but also its background, and pointed to the fact that the newspaper had given the red guards an opportunity to present their views when they had been criticized for harassing a group of Danish tourists. However, in spite of the incident *'Aktuelt'* did not argue for any change in the direction of official China-Danish policy and concluded, "By the way, we still want the PRC to be admitted to the UN."¹³



The Danish government delivered an official reply which stressed that *'Aktuelt'* was "a privately owned daily newspaper which under no circumstances was subject to the directives of the Danish government" and since freedom of the press was a principle stipulated in the constitution as well as an integral part of the Danish social system, the Danish government could do nothing to accommodate the Chinese. This was also the position of the Danish government when a more recent cartoon crisis broke out in 2005, when the Danish

¹³ *Aktuelt*, August 23, 1967.

newspaper 'Jyllands Posten' published a number of cartoons showing the prophet Muhammed in various unflattering circumstances.

In 2005, the incident caused great turmoil and demonstrations in the Muslim world and the affairs continued to stain Denmark's image among many Muslim communities round the world to this day. However, in 1967 the whole affair was soon forgotten. The Chinese focussed their diplomacy on other and more important countries and Denmark continued to uphold a policy which implied a closer integration of China in global politics and admission to the United Nations.

However, in September 1967 the harassment being suffered by Western diplomatic personnel in the Chinese capital and the prolonged absence of the Chinese ambassador from Copenhagen (all heads of mission with the exception of Huang Hua in Cairo had been summoned home) led a foreign ministry spokesman to state that the government was considering a reduction in the staff of its embassy in China.¹⁴ But again, it was pure rhetoric and nothing drastic happened.

Criticism of Human Rights

The special Chinese-Danish relationship was dealt another blow in the spring of 1997 when the Danish government at the meeting of the UN Commission for Human Rights (UNCHR) in Geneva decided to sponsor a resolution critical of China's human rights record. Once again Denmark had become involved in a UN controversy concerning China, but this time as a critic rather than a proponent of Chinese interests. On behalf of 14 states and encouraged by the US, Denmark put forward a resolution which noted with concern reported violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms in China and criticized Chinese policies in Tibet.¹⁵ The Chinese government was encouraged to uphold the commitments inherent in the general convention on human rights and to sign the covenant on economic, social, and cultural rights and the covenant on political and civil rights, both from 1996.

¹⁴ *China Topic*, September 30, 1967, p.4; cited in: Kapur, *Distant Neighbours: China and Europe*, p. 100.

¹⁵ For the full text of the resolution see United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, "Situation of Human Rights in China," April 10, 1997.

China reacted strongly against the Danish initiative. The Chinese delegation in Geneva and official Chinese media repeatedly stressed that the Danish attitude would bring harm to the special relationship. One Chinese government spokesman said that Denmark “was lifting a rock only to drop it on her own head.”

In the end the Chinese delegation put forward a motion of no action, which was passed by a 27 to 17 majority, so the Danish proposal never became subject to serious debate in the UNCHR.

Scheduled visits by two Danish cabinet ministers were cancelled in the wake of the affair and Danish exports to China fell during the following year. Further measures of punishment were held back. One reason for this was that following the conclusion of the session in Geneva, the European Commission stressed that any steps taken by China against Denmark would be perceived as an unfriendly action against the EU as such and would have consequences for China's overall relationship with the EU. This was announced even though major European countries such as France, Germany and the UK had refused to sponsor the resolution.

Meeting with the Dalai Lama

Over the years the Danish government has managed to handle the Tibet issue with care. There has never been any doubt that Denmark acknowledges that Tibet is an integral part of China and that the territory has no legitimate claim to independence. In May 2000 the Social Democratic prime minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen agreed to meet the Dalai Lama, but he did so in the airport in Copenhagen and he brought along the vice-chairman of the Social Democratic Party to indicate that this was not an official receipt of the Dalai by the Danish prime minister on behalf the Danish government.¹⁶ In June 2003, the Liberal prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen also met with the Dalai Lama. The Chinese government protested, but Fogh Rasmussen managed to weather the storm without major Chinese reprisals.

In May 2009 the new Danish prime minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen decided to meet with the Dalai Lama during his visit to Denmark. He announced it was a private meeting but the

¹⁶ *Berlingske Tidende*, December 10, 2009.

meeting took place in the prime minister's official residence. The Danish foreign minister, Per Stig Møller also decided to meet with the Dalai Lama.

The Chinese government delivered a strong protest to the Danish government arguing that meeting with his holiness would be extremely detrimental to Chinese-Danish relations and would be an unfriendly act towards China and the Chinese people. The Danish prime minister went ahead with the meeting, primarily for domestic reasons.

Following the meeting visits to Denmark by Chinese delegations were cancelled and Danish ministers' visit to China was also cancelled, as they were not able to obtain travel visa to enter the country. There were also repercussions in terms of cancellation of business contracts as well as a drop in Danish exports to China.

The Danish government adopted a policy of wait-and-see, as it was believed that the Chinese anger would soon wear out. However, the Chinese had toughened their position and was clearly not going to let Denmark off the hook. As time went by and Danish high officials still could not visit China, the Danish government published a so-called "verbal note" that amounted to acknowledgement of the Chinese claim that it was detrimental to the relationship that a Danish Prime Minister met the Dalai Lama. The note stated that "the Danish government takes very seriously the Chinese opposition to meetings between members of the Danish Government and the Dalai Lama, and has duly noted Chinese views that such meetings are against the core interest of China, and will handle such issues prudently".¹⁷ By such formulations the Danish Government in fact declared that government ministers would not again meet with the Dalai Lama. The note caused heavy media criticism of the Danish government's accommodating attitude, but the Chinese government was satisfied and normal relations could resume.

The whole process clearly underlined who had the upper hand. Beijing had no rush and could live with a situation where meetings at a high level between the two countries were not possible. Such a situation was untenable for the Danish government who was worried about

¹⁷ AFP, December 10, 2009.

which impact the debacle would have for the Copenhagen Climate Conference which was only a few days away.

Concluding Remarks

Denmark was one of the first Western countries to recognize the People's Republic of China. By acting swiftly on this matter, Denmark followed a basic Danish foreign policy principle, namely to recognize the government which actually controls the territory. The Danish decision generated considerable goodwill in Beijing. During the 1950s and 1960s Denmark consistently argued for integrating the PRC into the international system in order to resolve major international conflicts such as the Vietnam war. It was considered a major achievement when the UN General Assembly in 1971 finally voted to grant the PRC and not Taiwan the Chinese seat in the UN Security Council.

In the 1970s, as the Sino-Soviet conflict escalated, Chinese interests in Denmark and Scandinavia increased. This was very much due to Denmark's position at the belts controlling the access to the Baltic sea. Although Denmark's strategic importance weakened during the 1980s due to a thaw in Sino-Soviet relations, the decade actually saw increased cooperation and China became the favourite travel destination of Danish ministers. This all came to a halt as a result of the so-called "Tiananmen Massacre" which caused Western governments to impose sanctions on China.

During the 1990s relations gradually improved as a result of China's increasing importance in the global order. Denmark participated actively in working out a new China strategy for the EU Community in the mid-1990s. After the turn of the century, the Danish Liberal Government has pursued a policy of establishing closer contact with China, not only in the economic and political sphere, but also in areas such as research, innovation and education. China is seen as crucial part of the globalization process and the Danish government sees a strategic interest of closer cooperation with China in this process.

Although relations in general have been excellent there have been occasional conflicts. One is the cartoon crisis of August 1967 which caused strong Chinese criticism of Denmark. Another is the Danish sponsorship of a motion criticizing China's human rights record at the

UNCHR in the spring of 1997. The Danish initiative was encouraged by the US. It was also an indication of Denmark shedding its small state syndrome and adopting a foreign policy stance characterized by middlepowermanship and active internationalization. The new activism strengthened the normative elements in Denmark's foreign policy which have always competed with economic interests in influencing the formation of the basic foreign policy orientation towards China. During the 1950 and 1960s this normative strand was to China's advantage, but now it increasingly works against the emerging Chinese superpower. China represents a huge market for Danish companies, but as foreign policy "follows the flag rather than the pork" these economic considerations cannot overshadow the imperatives of active internationalism and the normative elements in Danish foreign policy.

Therefore Danish prime ministers also decided to meet with the Dalai Lama in 2000, 2003, and 2009. However the strong Chinese reaction and Denmark's agreement to publish a "verbal note" stating that it would "carefully consider China's reaction before inviting the Dalai Lama again" clearly shows that the costs of pursuing a policy towards China based on normative considerations have become too high.

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