Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power

“Inflection Points: Denmark's Response to the War in Ukraine”

DATE

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

FEATURING

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen

Ambassador of Denmark to the United States

CSIS EXPERTS

Dr. Kathleen McInnis

Senior Fellow, International Security Program and
Director, Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative

Transcript By
Rev Transcript
www.rev.com

Kathleen McInnis: This is Smart Women, Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world's most powerful women.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: This all sounds pretty good to me! Is there anything else to keep in mind?

Kathleen McInnis: We feature thought leaders at all career levels where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women's Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome the Ambassador of Denmark to the United States, Ambassador Christina Markus Lassen to the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast. Ambassador Lassen assumed her current role in September 2022, and has previously held the position of political director and under secretary for Political Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark. Ambassador Lassen has also been the EU Ambassador to Lebanon and the Ambassador of Denmark to Syria and Jordan. So, needless to say, it's a real treat for us all to hear about her experience representing and serving Denmark throughout her career. Welcome, Ambassador Lassen.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: Well, thank you so much. Thanks for inviting me. It's an honor to be here.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, thank you. So this, this is a real treat. You have years of experience working for the Danish Foreign Service and Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So, to start off, I'd love to learn a bit more about how you found yourself working in government.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: I think just since I was really young, I had this fascination with international affairs and politics. And of course I grew up in sort the late nineties and early -- late eighties and early nineties. And, where there was so much optimism, it was the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall, very optimistic in the nineties, there was so much hope somehow Europe was whole and free finally, and sort of the border was open. It was so easy to travel, and we were, I remember my youth as we were just traveling around in Europe and around the world really freely and so easily. So there were signs, I guess, that the world

was going in a much more democratic and free direction and so many opportunities. So already, I guess in high school and university, I had studied abroad, I was traveling in Europe, and I lived over here for a while.

And once I graduated, it was just so natural for me to go to the, try to join the Foreign Service. I, frankly, it was not very imaginative, didn't really know what else to do. I wanted to just serve my country and help forge those relations and grasp those opportunities that seemed to be out there to make the world more peaceful and more free and fair and more democratic. So all the aspirations we had in those years, and I ended up there as my first posting as a young staff at the embassy here in Washington, actually covering U.S. foreign policy, which was my favorite issue at the time.

Kathleen McInnis: Remember back in the day, right, we thought that at least I thought, you know, I'd be working myself out of a job, right? Like it's the end of the Cold War. There was some crisis management stuff, but, you know, we were all thinking that the world was going to be more safe and secure, right? We were not, we weren't going to need, you know, defense studies for much longer.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: That's right. And then of course, what happened for me here when, during my stay here, this was the early, I arrived here in 2000. So of course I happened to be in D.C. when 9/11 happened. And I think looking back now, I mean the impact of that day and the consequences, not just for the U.S. but really for the rest of the world and for national security for the next couple of decades, that, of course, as so many other diplomats and people were working with national security around the world, that really affected my career.

And for me personally, it was also a quite direct reason why I ended up spending a lot of time in the Middle East, as you said, both as Ambassador in Syria during the Arab Spring and Lebanon also in a quite difficult time. So it has really affected us. And then of course, coming back to D.C. at a time where, once again, you can say we are at a major inflection point. I mean, probably the biggest in a generation with the Russian aggression in Ukraine. At least for me, it feels very much like all the pieces coming together. Everything, I mean, all the tools I've sort of picked up in the last three decades, all the networks I've built, and that to be here now and hopefully be part of a solution and best serve my government and interest of the transatlantic relationship.

Kathleen McInnis: Just to go back to, you know, your recollections of the September 11th, 2001 experience, I'd love to know a little bit more about how you perceived that day and how you processed that day and what it meant

for you. Because it was so jarring and so transformational. And as you say, it was one key inflection point in our history and we're facing another one. I'd love to get a sense of your impressions today and how Denmark and the United States, you know, relations were at that time.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: We already had, of course, very close relation of Denmark. I mean, the U.S. is a most important ally and of course, security guarantor for decades. And already we did have a very strong alliance at the time. But of course, 9/11 just put all of that into perspective for all of us. And of course, as you will remember, all of Europe and NATO, and I mean, the whole world really stood with America in those days. And, months after 9/11, it was so transformational, as you said. And for everyone who was here in Washington D.C., I think it was just such a life impression really. I think we all felt those of us -- and you might have been here that day too -- that really the world order was shattered. I mean, something was broken that we just couldn't imagine something like this happening.

And it was not that this particular day where of course it was shocking for everyone not just here, but in the whole country and around the world. But also in the months after, as I remember, we really lived in this mindset of not knowing whether another attack might hit us. And that was really the feeling here in Washington. I remember you might recall there were so many events where most of them later on turned out not to have anything to do actually with 9/11 and the terrorism that we were fighting at the time, but that just made people feel very unsafe. And that, of course, also led to some of those major wars in the Middle East where my country also really stood side by side with the U.S. and participated of course, both in the Afghanistan operation, but also later on in the Iraq war.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah, that's exactly right. It's hard to remember sometimes given how some of these, the foreign policy choices of Washington played out. It's hard to remember that sense of vulnerability. That sense that at any time something could go horribly wrong again. And how that was psychologically affecting the decision making at the time.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: And maybe for the first time in the U.S., I mean since obviously Pearl Harbor, right? But as you said, the decision making was very affected by that whole, that leaves the feeling we had here in town by that whole psychology around that moment and how vulnerable everybody felt. I mean, all the new sort of things we started doing, if you look at security in the airport, right? All of that, that started really back at that time where we just suddenly felt so vulnerable, but particularly here in the U.S. it was a very new situation.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah. Well, so you mentioned you went from here and then you ended up spending a lot of years in the Middle East managing a variety of different crises. How did you see your decision making and leadership style evolve over that time? And you mentioned the networks that you'd built. How did those experiences shape your thinking on being a leader today?

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: Obviously that's a less positive side, probably, that some of that optimism we all brought with us from the nineties was more shattered. I mean, there was a lot of optimism to win. I served in Syria first, and when the Arab uprisings first broke out, what we called the Arab Spring at the time, of course, that this would actually lead to something better. And some very positive and organic democratic movements in many places in the Middle East. And of course most of that didn't turn out exactly like people wanted to put it mildly. So there's probably a more sense of realism there that we now bring with us, unfortunately, into this new decade with some other also really, really serious challenges. It also, of course as you said, there was a lot of crisis management involved in all of that.

So I picked up quite a lot of experiences with that being in situation that we hadn't really imagined ourselves being in. And I could add from my own country, we were also in a quite special situation. That was even before I went out to the Middle East. We had our own crisis that was somehow related, I would say also to 9/11 with what we call the cartoon crisis in Denmark. Which basically were some cartoons, satire cartoons in Danish newspaper that sparked a whole foreign policy crisis for us without government where our embassy being attacked a couple of places, several places in the Middle East and, and lots of resistance towards, or something that we had never experienced before. So it just gave us a much more sort of tough and, and realistic view in the world and our role in it, I would say.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and also the necessity for adapting to, and managing situations that just are wholly unthinkable the day before.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. That's very true.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah. Well, that's actually a really great segue to the decision that we wanted to talk through with you today, which is having a front row seat and history as Denmark formulated it to response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. There was all the buildup happening and there was all the signs and indicators, but the invasion was likely to occur. But still, it was hard to wrap our brains around the notion that

Putin would do something this strategically counterproductive. Just bizarre. At least from our, from our logical standpoint.

Could you set the scene for us? Like where were you when Russia invaded?

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: No, that's really true. I mean, luckily, and thanks to the American, very smart strategy, I think we all believe of sharing intel. We had, of course, heard about this massive troop buildup for months. And the American concerns I mean, there was a couple of intelligence services who picked this up and that was being shared both with allies, but of course also very publicly in an attempt to try to deter president Putin from these really reckless, and as you said strategically counterproductive or just counterintuitive plans. And that's of course also why we all had a hard time really believing that I was actually visiting Ukraine with our foreign minister just a little bit more than a month before that. And we went out to the contact line at the time, because of course, there had already been clashes taking place in Ukraine since, well, there was basically a sort of a war going on since 2014.

And we went out to the front line, and even that was late January of 2022. The Ukrainians themself had a hard time to believe that Putin would really go ahead with this reckless and of course, completely illegal mission. So we were prepared in a sense, and that's why at least we had had some time to build up and try to avoid it. First and foremost, of course, diplomacy was working at really high speed here to try to avoid that situation. But then when it finally happened I think like 9/11, it's probably going to be one of those days where we all pretty much remember where we were or what we did when we, when we heard about this. And personally, I was -- I received a phone call at 4:30 in the morning from the Ukrainian ambassador to Denmark saying that it was actually happening.

The Russians were now going ahead with this invasion, and that they were both, I mean, troops pouring into the country, but also I mean the capital of Kyiv, of course, being directly under attack. So it was so shocking, and still we were so prepared for that call, so to say. So it was a very, very intense day that it's hard when I even think back to remember all the details. We were just like everywhere in all the of course, bureaucracies and governments around the world tried to grasp with this doing everything we had in terms of coordinating with allies; consultations within the government with parliament; crafting our messages. And there were all these important meetings between allies taking place, of course. And then very importantly the European leaders, so the heads of state and government decided to immediately travel to Brussels for an emergency meeting.

So they basically cleared the calendar. All 27 went down there. So about four o'clock in the afternoon of that day, I was on my way to Brussels with the Prime Minister's delegation for this extraordinary meeting. And again, such a historic moment. So the leaders met that same evening. They had a conference call with President Zelensky basically being holed up in Kyiv that was under attack, and discussed what our reaction should be and that was of course such an important decision point for Europe. And of course, everybody came out the only way we really could which I mean, when we see a country being completely unjustifiably invaded by a much more powerful neighbor who really, of course, condemning in the strongest possible terms, this invasion. And we also, from the EU side, which I thought was also extraordinary, the same evening imposed the first package of sanctions, because again, we've had some time to actually prepare this in case, it really happened. And everybody was just on board from the first moment. And of course you can say, for both my country and for Europe, our role in the world was really decided that day, and everybody made that decision and stepped up to the plate. So an extremely important day and extremely worrying when you think back of it. And, and horrible, of course.

Kathleen McInnis: Interesting how the indicators allowed for that kind of advanced planning. So for our listeners, getting a multilateral organization to agree on anything within like years is difficult. Getting a group of 27 nations to endorse not only a common position, but sanctions so quickly -- that's an incredible, incredible feat of diplomacy.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: Well, that's right, Kathleen. But I think at this point, the EU, the European Union is really more than typical. I mean, it's not a multilateral organization anymore. It's a much, much closer relationship. And you have to think that these leaders who sat in that room, these 27 heads of state and government, they really have been together in so many difficult crisis situation, especially in the years, just prior to this situation because of the Covid situation also. So we had had this whole, I mean, of course, horrible for the whole world, but also another situation where the European countries were just closing so extremely closely about everything happening and meeting much more often that they used to do. And then we had, we had other major international crisis like the, the exit from Afghanistan. There had been so much going on, and they had also been coordinating very close to this fear of what was going to happen between Russia and Ukraine.

So in that sense, they had built a lot of trust between them. I mean, when these meetings happen, it's basically just them in the room. And they know each other well. Of course there are changes from time to time in certain countries, but still they know each other well, and

they're used to making these major decisions. And that's really one of the strengths of the European corporation right now that we are able to move ahead with some of these decisions. Of course, sometimes it takes time. We are 27 different countries but really in all these major crisis, we've been able to make those major decisions and really make Europe stronger along the way.

Kathleen McInnis: That is fascinating. That human connection -- being together in the hot seat, having to work through these problems over and over again, created these mechanisms for rapid diplomatic response. That is a really fascinating insight.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: It is, it is. And that was, I mean, again we have seen that basically ever since. I mean, that was the first sanctions package was of course, adopted that day, and the day's just following, and now just a couple of weeks ago, Europe has just passed its sanctions packaged number ten. And of course, we are not doing just doing sanctions here. We are doing I mean, there's so many, all the individual European countries, including my own, have of course done everything we could to both, I mean, sadly having to sort of punish Russia, but also of course, doing everything we could to support Ukraine.
So, I mean, just in my own country, and since day one of this you saw not just the government coming together to support Ukraine, but also there was such a popular support.

I think you've had quite a lot of that over here too, in the States. But really in Europe, we saw people coming out in solidarity, in huge rallies doing private charity events. I mean, driving, you saw people from all over Europe driving to the border of Ukraine, basically picking up refugees and hosting them in their homes. So of course, all over Europe, in addition to what we've done in, in immense military support and humanitarian support, financial support to Ukrainian government, we've of course also, I mean, on the humanitarian side, taking in millions and millions of refugees. I think it's about 8 million refugees now being hosted around Europe. And of course there have been so many consequences in terms of rising inflation. I mean, something I have never seen in my lifetime for sure. Energy prices, all of that. And still Europe has stuck together in this, I mean, a little bit against our odds because obvious, we often, we hear over here that people worry if Europe can really do this and stick together. But so far nobody, there's been no shaking anywhere, and everybody has really just done whatever was right and and supported Ukraine.

Kathleen McInnis: That's true. I mean, that's, that's definitely been one of the success stories. And I was one of the people that was a bit worried about energy costs and economic costs. You know, I guess six, seven months ago. But

I'm happy to have been wrong about that, that Europe really has held together and it's -- it's a really amazing positive story.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: That's right. Yeah. I mean, energy prices was one of the really, really big concerns about this, this winter, which we are now almost through. And what we managed to do in this past year, of course, we can be criticized for having been too dependent Russian oil and gas, and everybody completely acknowledges that now. But then at the other hand, we just made this very, very important decision that that's going to be history. We don't want that anymore. And just, I mean, the numbers that you see now are staggering in terms, I think Europe was something like 42% dependent on Russian gas back last spring, one year ago, and just six months later, it was something like 7% or 9%. I mean, it really felt very, very sharply. You also saw the way that we all tried to save energy.

I mean, I was almost, I mean, I was back in Denmark in November, and I came to visit some of the major corporations and government offices there, and I saw people almost sitting with their winter jackets inside. I mean, I'm not exaggerating, because everybody was really just trying. We had put sort of a goal out there. People should try to have only a certain temperature in public offices or in private offices. And people are really doing that because we wanted to really cut our energy consumption. So I think our country, like my own, we managed to cut by 30% just by some of these measures. And we, at the same time, and that's been one good thing about all this. Of course, it has accelerated our energy transition into renewable energy. So in the same time, we managed to increase our, our wind energy production by 30%. So now in my country it's about 50% of our electricity consumption is really just from wind energy. So we were doing all, and this is again, has been all over Europe that this has been happening. But of course, we are not completely out of the woods yet, and we still need to work on that. And there's another winter coming next year, of course, but at least so far so good.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah. Well, turning back to the day itself, when Ukraine was invaded. So you mentioned the wide number of different actors and organizations and interlocutors that you had to connect with and work policy with. I'm curious, how did the ministry organize itself upon hearing this news? And also related, how did you prioritize your response and what you thought needed to be part of the response, and how did you think about that given all of the craziness and the different, you know, possibilities for stray voltage at the time. Be curious to -- How did you organize and how did you prioritize the components of the Danish response?

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: I mean, like a lot of these crisis situation, I mean, everything seems to happen at the same time, right? I mean, we had some very immediate, practical issues, I mean, security issues with our own people underground, our embassy staff, like everyone else. Our embassy had at the time been relocated to Lviv in, in the east, in the western part of Ukraine. So they were relatively safe, and they actually pretty quickly moved back into Kyiv where they still are, of course, as most of the other embassies. But, so there are things like that, small and big things and of course, some major, major decisions had to be made. So we very quickly established basically a crisis organization within the foreign ministry. So basically pulling everybody and pulling lots of extra resources. I would say for months, most of us in the foreign ministry, relatively small, which is working on this one issue.

And a lot of people still are, of course. So it was highest priority from the government. So not, this was not just like a foreign ministry issue in that sense. So we also had a cross, what you call inter-agency group, of course, but with so many different actors that normally would not have been again, because it so affects our society in so many ways. So we had, of course, our ministry for energy and energy security. We had Ministry of Social Affairs and others, everybody linked to, I mean, the big, we were expecting that we will be receiving maybe up to a hundred thousand Ukrainian refugees in a matter of few weeks. So that was also being prioritized, of course, a lot of work with our Ministry of Defense, because we immediately decided, and again, this was groundbreaking for a lot of us, including a lot of our neighbors in Europe that we decided to actually deliver weapons, donations to a country in a conflict, which is something that we would probably had not done at least for many, many decades before.

So those discussions, of course, had to go very, very fast. And something that of course, the government would have to consult with Parliament. So we were working all the time, of course, and over the weekends and just having these massive decisions passed through the governments and preparing those decisions. So all of that was very important. We had after two weeks, of course, and you have seen similar major decisions in many places in Europe, for example, in Sweden and Finland deciding to join NATO. We also had sort of our big moments where a couple of weeks after the invasion, basically all the major political parties came together on a national agreement that just made a decision on an immediate injection into our defense budget, and also a permanent rise of our defense budget.

But also already at that time, two weeks after the in invasion, we decided to [stand more] to get rid of all our dependency of Russian oil and gas. So that was a bit earlier than the rest of Europe. And then we

also had a big decision for us, which was that we wanted to get rid of our special situation, not participating in European security and defense corporation, which we had a special opt out there. So we had a referendum about that actually very quickly after that was passed. So there were so many things happening at the same time, and the organization was basically just trying to have central coordination within the ministry, or, I mean, several times a day. And of course, delegating those different issues to various key points within the ministry and having them run ahead with it, basically.

Kathleen McInnis: That's fascinating. So I guess to, to wrap up our conversation today, which has been incredibly insightful. We're Smart Women, Smart Power. Do you think that your gender had an impact on any of the decisions or the approach that you've taken to these decisions throughout this time? If yes, why? But, and if not, why not?

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: You know, it's something, it's interesting because previously in my career I never really thought so much about that, and I was not very conscious about it. But then as I'm getting older and looking back, and it's been 26 years now, I'm with the ministry, and of course, working also with some of this issue, even before, I realized that how often I've been basically the only woman in the room, and especially when it came to these national security or foreign policy crisis, and that's one thing that I think has, it has obviously slowly changed in the last few years, and there's many more women in this field, luckily. But what has been special, I think, about this crisis, and I can't really, unfortunately, pinpoint whether it has affected the handling of the crisis or the decision making, but at least I think this is the first major international crisis where there have been so many women in the decision, in decisionmaking positions around the table.

I mean, both among the leaders, at least when I look at the European side, I mean, my own prime minister, obviously, also, you had the Swedish and Finnish Prime Ministers at the time at this very important moment for their countries. The European Commission President, of course, Ursula von der Leyen. She's obviously also a woman and been one of the most outspoken leaders on this and supportive of Ukraine. But also, I think in bureaucracy, feeding into the process, it's the first time that I've seen all these decision supporting roles with really, I mean, in this country, of course, lots of key persons, key women advising Secretary Blinken and the president here, but also in Europe. I mean, so many of the, of the actors and lots of my colleagues over there. So in this sense, I think at least women were represented around the table when these major decisions were made.

And that's of course, so linked to what we, my country, and also of course over here, very much in the U.S. our discussion on Women, Peace, and Security, what we've been talking about for the last couple of decades, right? How important it is that that women are also part of these decisions and solutions. When we do national security, and of course, even more, of course, when we talk about achieving sustainable peace. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem we are there right now, but it's just so important that women are present in that process.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah, and I guess one of the things that I've noticed, and it's hard to say is this correlation or causation, but we've had many more women in these decision making roles, and we've seen the broader holistic strategic aspects of this war, of this crisis being addressed, raised, brought to the fore in ways that that I haven't seen in other international crises. It's usually the conversation, at least in my perception, is about the military response and how do we get in and out. This is, you know, we're talking about, you know the refugee crisis; we're talking about energy, like all of these different components. We're talking about filtration camps and how are we going to reintegrate these, you know, the poor kids that have been sent...

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: Yeah.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah, right. And so in ways that are just a part of the conversation that I haven't noticed before.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: I think that's very true. I think, I mean, for again, for Denmark, we've always had more and argued for years for this comprehensive approach where we try to see all of these pieces as part of the same picture, really. And it's true that in this crisis, at least I think for Europe, I mean, it's so much part of our own neighborhood, so we are feeling it. I mean, people are feeling it in their daily lives, right? So it becomes very obvious, but it's true that there has been more focus on this also. I mean, I think it's so widely accepted that obviously military donations and weapons support is crucial for this war. But at the same time this, this year, Ukraine cannot survive. It's not, at the same time we help to keep the government running and to alleviate some of the humanitarian consequences and take care of the refugees until they're able to go back and even start some of that early recovery that we do in some of these cities now where there's been a push back to the Russian troops, for example, helping reestablish water and sanitation systems.

So all of these things, and of course, the whole accountability agenda, which is so important, and I don't, I mean, it's hard to say because I don't, we don't want to stereotype here. We don't know if that's

because there's more women around the table here. But at least accountability is so much higher on the agenda in this conflict than any time before, also because of some of the new possibilities we have, basically, frankly, with social media, we're basically technological possibilities of recording evidence so quickly on the battleground. So we are just in a completely different situation there in terms of this conflict. But of course, when it comes down to this conflict as ugly and brutal and tragic as any other historical conflict we know from, I mean, we didn't actually think or believe that we were ever going to see a war like this in Europe anymore.

Kathleen McInnis: Right. It's shocking in every sense of the word. Well, thank you so much, Ambassador. It's been a real honor to sit down with you today and learn about your experiences during your, the two major inflection points in our careers. So thank you so much for your time. Have a wonderful day.

Amb. Christina Markus Lassen: Thank you so much, Kathleen. It was my pleasure.

Kathleen McInnis: Subscribe to the Smart Women, Smart Power Podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to great content. Be sure to follow us on Twitter @smartwomen, or you can follow me on Twitter @kjmcinnis1. Thanks for listening and join us next time.

(END)