This is an AI-generated AUDIO=>DANISH=>ENGLISH transcript of the Danish podcast, May 29, 2024

INTRO **Carsten, Insightview.eu editor**

In this podcast, Insightview has talked with Camilla Tenna Nørup Sørensen from the Royal Danish Defence Academy. Insightview asks Camilla about the world the EU is facing. The conversation will focus primarily on what could soon become the EU's next big problem after Russia, namely "Xi Jinping's China." We also discuss whether "comprehensive de-risking" away from "Xi Jinping's China" might become necessary.

Several European politicians believe it cannot happen fast enough, as China's so-called neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine conflict no longer holds. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, the EU has changed its perception of who President Xi Jinping really is and what he wants with China – although what Xi says today, he also said before the invasion. We discuss whether the EU not only misjudged Russia but also misjudged Beijing.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Camilla Tenna Nørup Sørensen, the EU misjudged Russia. Has the EU also misjudged Xi Jinping's China?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

I think "misjudged" is the wrong word because that would imply that we made an assessment, one might say. I would rather say that in Europe, we have seen what we wanted to see and what we could benefit from.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Camilla Tenna Nørup Sørensen, thank you for taking the time to participate in this podcast. In this podcast, we will talk about the geopolitical situation that the EU is facing, with a predominant focus on the EU's relationship with Xi Jinping's China. The relationship's future direction will be determined during a period when Europe is facing

an EU parliamentary election in June, the Bundestag election in Germany in 2025, and the French presidential election in April 2027 – all elections that currently point towards a strong rightward shift in Europe. There have been many shifts in opinion within the EU recently. For example, less than a year ago, the Danish government stated that the country's defence spending should increase to 2% of GDP by 2033, using what many call the "hockey stick method". That has changed, and now we must already reach the 2% goal this year. In the EU, we also talk about de-risking away from China. What do Danish and European politicians see now that they did not see six months ago? Maybe not even two years ago?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

I think what we are witnessing now is the culmination of many challenging developments, crises, and wars that can no longer be ignored or dismissed by the Europeans. They must now deal with it. I think perhaps it is especially the prospect of Donald Trump being re-elected in the US that has really caught Europe's attention. The idea that the American security guarantee can no longer be taken for granted. What kind of situation are we facing, especially in handling Russia and the further development of the war in Ukraine?

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Is it a fact that the EU must now put on realistic glasses and, based on its economic foundation, begin to manifest itself as a real military power to survive not only the pressure from Russia and China in the future but also the pressure from an increasingly unpredictable USA?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

There is certainly no doubt that Europe needs to rethink its role and what Europe's contribution should be, so to speak, to the new world order that is developing and what Europe's strengths should be. What should we emphasize to get other countries to look towards Europe and simply to consolidate ourselves as an important pillar or actor in the world order that is developing? And we are challenged in that regard, no doubt about it.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Is the process too slow?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

Yes, one could say it is, but Europe also faces the challenge of finding common ground. Some European countries are more ready than others, especially regarding the recognition that there are significant movements underway. We have seen Macron's recent speeches where he has really tried to sound the alarm about getting other European leaders to understand that there are these major geopolitical shifts underway, and as he has said, it is not given that the EU will survive. And I think many other European leaders are not yet that far in their analysis or recognition. So, one of the challenges is also to get a unified EU or a unified Europe.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

The EU continues to focus heavily on Russia, which no longer hides its intentions regarding which territories belong to Russia, pursuing a clear revisionist policy. Listening to Moscow, the Baltic states and Poland have every reason to be concerned. For many years, several Western experts have ignored what Putin has said. Yes, many experts have even softened Putin's statements, suggesting "Putin does not necessarily mean it." Can we still afford such an attitude when it should be clear by now that Russia is currently arming itself for more than just defeating Ukraine?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

No, we cannot, but I also do not think there are many European experts and leaders who are still out there trying to excuse Putin. I do not think we have these illusions about Putin anymore and a return to what we had before the war in Ukraine. There is a great recognition in Europe that we have misread Putin and made many mistakes in handling Putin in the past.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

As I said, we talk a lot about Russia in the EU, but we can no longer avoid talking significantly more about "Xi Jinping's China" as Beijing's so-called neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine conflict no longer holds, according to many observers of the conflict. Several politicians in the EU have changed their perception of who Xi Jinping really is and what he wants with China. When I look at Xi Jinping, he does not seem to have changed, but we Europeans have just started to listen to what he says and has always said. So, my introductory question is, is the problem that the EU has not only misjudged Russia but also misjudged Xi Jinping? I know your original answer.

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

Yes, yes. But I would say that "misjudged" is the wrong word because I do not think we have tried to make a proper assessment. We have, as you also allude to, not really delved into what the Communist Party and Xi Jinping have long made clear about their ambitions. And you could say we have started doing that now, simply taking the Communist Party and Xi Jinping more seriously, whereas previously we tended to see China only as an economic powerhouse from which we could derive great benefits and expand relations. It has only recently dawned on us that China is also a political, diplomatic, and military power that, like other powers, ruthlessly pursues its own interests, and that is what we must deal with.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Recently, I read that EU Commissioner Margrethe Vestager now believes that the EU has become too dependent on China. Therefore, there is increasing talk in Brussels about de-risking away from China, as I mentioned earlier, with a strong emphasis on "talking about." Why is it that European politicians only see things after the clock has struck twelve? Has EU countries' foreign policy been based on business interests rather than national security interests for too long?

Well, it is probably because we have been forced to. We have lived in this somewhat privileged situation in an American-led world order where we largely shared interests, values, and analyses with the dominant power in the international system, namely the USA. So, in that sense, we have been quite comfortable, and we have, as you say, been able to focus on our economic interests in cooperation with China and other authoritarian states without really being forced to choose sides. But now we are entering, or are well into, a situation where, especially due to the relationship between the USA and China, which has worsened significantly in recent years, we are increasingly forced to choose sides. The Americans' pressure and expectations for Europeans to support a more confrontational line against China are increasing, and I only see that continuing. Therefore, it will be difficult for Europe to continue trading with China without really considering the political and security implications. But you can also say that, of course, the COVID crisis and the more authoritarian turn we have seen in China in recent years with increasing restrictions and a rising security agenda within the Communist Party make it difficult for European companies and investors in the Chinese market. Yes, that also contributes to Europe's realisation that they are facing a different situation regarding their relationship with China.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Now you mention that we need to follow the Americans. From a European perspective, hasn't it been long overdue for us to somehow draw a line in the sand with China?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

Yes, that is also what I am alluding to. I think there are these two, and there are more developments, but two main developments, which are the deteriorating relationship between the USA and China, which means that the USA's demands and expectations for their European allies have increased regarding supporting this more confrontational line with restrictions, especially on trade with China within technology. But also, especially due to COVID, I believe, we became aware of how dependent we were on China in many critical areas. Combined with the more authoritarian turn under Xi Jinping in recent years, and perhaps in all the 12 years he has been in office, it has certainly become clear to us in recent years because it has also led to increasing restrictions on European companies and investors active in China.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Camilla, I have been told by many experts, both Chinese and European, that the collective leadership in Beijing would limit Xi Jinping's ability to change China in the wrong direction, away from reforms. Contrary to these assessments, is it not a fact that Xi Jinping is now the undisputed "core leader" in China, after many anti-corruption campaigns have eliminated Xi Jinping's potential enemies both within and outside the party, including the collective leadership?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

How strong is Xi Jinping? It is a difficult question because we know so little with certainty about these power dynamics and power constellations within the top Chinese leadership. But having said that, there are many indications that Xi Jinping has managed to consolidate himself as a very strong leader and has placed himself at the forefront of all important institutions and decision-making forums in the Chinese system, both regarding the state, the party, and the military. But we must also consider that China, the Chinese society, the Chinese economy, the Chinese political system has developed into a much more complex and comprehensive system. So, imagining that one leader can sit at the top and have control over everything, I think, is also stretching it too far. It is probably somewhere in between, and it is just that with authoritarian leaders, authoritarian systems, it looks very strong until it collapses.

So given that we have so little insight, I think we should be a bit humble about predicting how things will develop. And it would surprise me greatly if there were not also some within the Communist Party who are very, very dissatisfied with the way Xi Jinping is leading the country, especially the economy. But also, with the fact that they have fought for decades to reach where they are in their careers, and now there is a cap on it all because he has not appointed leaders from the next generation and such. So, it has given rise to considerable dissatisfaction within the Communist Party, especially in the top echelons of the party. I would still argue that he faces considerable opposition and has many challengers, even though he has undoubtedly removed many of them through anti-corruption campaigns and other measures.

^{**}Carsten, Insightview.eu editor**

If you are interested in reading more about what President Xi Jinping actually wants in the future, I would strongly recommend reading one of the best books I have read, namely the book "The Political Thought of Xi Jinping." It is certainly the best book regarding documentation about his thoughts. The book's conclusions are based on Xi Jinping's many speeches, books, and articles over the years.

Among experts, there is much talk about China taking on an international role that Beijing itself believes it deserves. It is also often mentioned that China wants to be a so-called "second superpower" to the USA, with the implied understanding that China has real intentions opposite to the USA. On the other hand, if we take the previously mentioned book for granted, Xi Jinping's China only thinks about what is best for China, and not least what is to Xi Jinping's advantage. How should and how will the EU relate to Xi Jinping's China, which is a so-called "second superpower"?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

Regarding how they should relate, I think they should try to relate to China as they would to any other great power, especially when it comes to questions about what we should expect from China. Just as you mentioned, we should expect that China, like other great powers, will ruthlessly pursue what is in China's interests. But what should be included in our analysis of China and China's development as a great power is that China has a unique political system.

So, when we talk about what is in China's interests, it is not in the same way in the interests of the state or the nation, but rather the interests of the Communist Party, and perhaps ultimately what is in Xi Jinping's interests. And I still believe that what is most important for the Communist Party, what is most important for Xi Jinping, is to maintain control and power within China. So, it is still the case that the Chinese domestic political agenda largely drives the development of Chinese foreign and security policy.

So, what we need to understand is this complex interplay between the challenges the Communist Party faces domestically and what kind of foreign and security policy best helps them handle these domestic challenges. But answering that question has become more complex in recent years. And that is especially because the Chinese economy has run into problems. Because what has always been the glue, so to speak, between the Chinese society, the Chinese population, and the Communist Party, has been that the Communist Party could deliver continuous economic progress and better living conditions for the ordinary Chinese. That has been the primary basis of the Communist Party's legitimacy. But that is now becoming more difficult, and therefore

there are signs that what one might call the social contract, or this glue, is being renegotiated.

And what is it that the Communist Party needs to deliver? Is it also about nationalism, that China is now finally emerging, returning to this great power role, which the Communist Party has promised the Chinese people, that China would return to its rightful position as a great power in the international system? And if that is the case, then perhaps it is a different kind of foreign and security policy. Maybe a more assertive, more aggressive foreign and security policy that we will see from the Chinese side, which best helps handle the domestic challenges.

Right now, we are in many ways at a point where there are different forces pulling in various directions regarding what kind of Chinese foreign and security policy best helps the Communist Party handle the domestic challenges. That is why we see the many different tendencies, many different developments, that we see these years in Chinese foreign and security policy. One week, Xi Jinping travels to Europe and tries to promote an image of China, the Chinese market, as a place one can safely invest in. Yes, as someone who is very safe to trade with, and so on. And the next moment, he is out meeting with Putin and talking about significant changes coming in the international system and wanting to move away from a Western-led world order. So, we need to understand these very different statements and initiatives coming from the Chinese side in these years.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

I have just one interjected question about Xi Jinping before we move on. We have concluded, or at least I have concluded, that the collective leadership is non-existent. That can be debated. But it often makes me ask people in China and the EU who will actually succeed the "core leader," Xi Jinping, in Beijing if Xi Jinping dies tomorrow. When I ask the question, it is often followed by silence. No one knows. Can you answer that question?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

No, I cannot. And I would also argue that no one can. It is related to what we discussed earlier. We simply know very little with certainty about these power constellations and dynamics within the top Chinese leadership. And I would say, Xi Jinping has moved away from the practice that had developed of appointing at least a small group of

people who could be potential leaders to take over. He has not done that, so we have no clear ideas about who would take over if he were to die, for example.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

That also makes China somewhat vulnerable, doesn't it?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

Yes, it does. There is no doubt about that, and it also increases uncertainty within the system. That was precisely why Deng Xiaoping introduced these practices. It was to counter the fact that in authoritarian systems, leadership transitions often cause significant problems. To counter the possibility of power struggles that could split the party and lead to various experiments from potential leaders, which would also create considerable instability in China.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Let's get back on track. Camilla, there is no doubt, at least from my perspective, that the EU is in a mess, with skeletons, perhaps provocatively said, continuing to fall out of the closet after failed foreign, defence, and energy policies over the past three decades. Yes, the EU can get out of the mess, but it requires decisive political action and a massive increase in defence spending, as we discussed. And even a party like the Danish Social Liberal Party has acknowledged this after having had a significant responsibility for dismantling Denmark's military defence capability over many years.

On the other hand, there is a form of defeatism in several places in the EU, at least I feel, where we, the "European colonialists," must take the blame for everything in the world. We must take the blame for the conflict in the Middle East, and we must take the blame for the Ukraine war. Is that fair, or is the West a victim of a well-coordinated information strategy carried out by Russia and China?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

I do not think there are many in Europe who take on this victim role you refer to. I do not think there are many European decision-makers and high-ranking diplomats who show understanding for Putin and Hamas. So, I cannot quite recognize that picture, but I agree with you, and I think it is a very important point, that there is a lack of vision in Europe.

There is simply a lack of, one could say, investment in vision in Europe to what kind of world order Europe wants to see develop, and what role Europe wants to play in that world order. There is simply too little, one could say, being invested in Europe to... what can Europe offer? There is no doubt that what we are in now is a competition. A completely different form of competition about what is a world order? A world order is a set of rules. What are the rules that should apply in the international system, economically, diplomatically, and also in the military area? The West has had the upper hand, been dominant since the end of the Cold War, in setting these rules. That is what is really changing now. We are no longer that. Other actors are coming into play. It is especially the Chinese, but also the Indians, the South Africans.

More broadly, the "global south" is coming into play and wants to have a say. And I think we in Europe are far too much on the defensive. One could say that we are desperately trying to defend or secure a world order that the rest of the world has moved away from. And one could say that what we see the Chinese doing is very proactive in shaping the world order that is developing and setting a strong Chinese mark on it. So, I think that is a very big challenge for Europe – that we are so much on the defensive. And one could say, of course, with the war in Ukraine taking so much attention. And that is clear, it is unavoidable that it will do so. But for the rest of the world, the war in Ukraine just does not mean that much. And they are moving on to thinking about these bigger questions. Precisely about these rules in the international system. So, we are clearly falling behind, one could say, or on the defensive.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

But one could say that we have adopted many of the strategies that China has used. We have introduced a form of state capitalism by now giving subsidies to companies that will move to the USA in the first instance. And we will likely also do so much more strongly in Europe. We are introducing tariffs, and so on.

^{**}Camilla T. N. Sørensen**

I agree with that, but again, it is very much a reaction. It is very defensive. And again, we are adopting something. We do not have our own big new ideas or new initiatives that can inject some energy into it and promote Europe's role as a place where new ideas and new initiatives come from.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

We will come back to whether we can do that at the very end of the podcast.

Putin and Xi Jinping, again according to me, love to alternately represent the "global south" against the "colonialist USA and EU." At least that is a narrative that seems to be laid out, even though it seems a bit comical from a historical perspective. The story of the Western colonialists has Russia and China over the years successfully spread in the world, even though both China and Russia are very much built on colonialism themselves. I have often heard the story, for example, that China has never been expansive. That cannot be true because both Russia and China are built on colonialism. By the way, Russia today has areas, including where Vladivostok is located, that belong to China. Is it not a fact that EU countries must take off the velvet gloves and increasingly defend themselves based on the same rules that Beijing and Moscow direct?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

Yes, that is also what I am trying to say with this thing about coming more onto the field. We simply must get into the competition, and the competition also takes place on ideas, visions of what the future world order will look like. And there is much to suggest that it will be a more hardline, geopolitical world order. And the EU, or Europe, must of course be ready to step into that. And it is also about gearing up to enter the dialogue with the Chinese and the Russians. And also, being ready to expose what they are saying, and that it is not as deep as you mentioned. That it is also just as hypocritical and inconsistent as they accuse us of being, equally hypocritical and inconsistent, is also what they are coming with. But it requires investing time, energy, and intellectual resources into thinking this through. And there is just no surplus for that in Europe these years.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

But there are also many who argue that there has been far too much dialogue and far too little action from the EU's side, that we stand firm on our principles... and if you do not want to be part of our system, then you must stay away.

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

Yes, but it is not so much dialogue with China and Russia that I am talking about. But it is what I see playing out, it is a competition about especially the "global south," but generally, what can one say, world opinion, when we now talk about this thing with visions and ambitions. We see the Chinese, but also the Russians, being very offensive. They come with one initiative after another on how to create global development and global security. The Chinese have also been out with a proposal at the recent UN General Assembly about what the global order should look like, what rules, as we talked about earlier, should be guiding, and presented the Chinese proposals for that. And if we are not there in that competition on that field, then even if the Chinese proposals can be very vague and perhaps not very coherent, they are still the ones left standing if we do not come with a counterproposal. And that is where I see that we are really not present at all.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Regarding action, so far, the EU's ability to act has been limited by Berlin's perpetual fear of the opponent's next move. This attitude is seen by many as a weakness in a geopolitically unstable world where there is no longer an international rule set as you mentioned. And there is no doubt that Berlin is almost like an open book regarding its next strategic and tactical moves on the international scene. And not least Moscow takes advantage of that in the current conflict in Ukraine. And the same goes for China partly in these trade tensions between the EU and China. Is Germany's cautious attitude a hindrance for the EU, and do you see any signs of change in Berlin?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

What I was referring to earlier is not that there is no international rule set. But it is that the international rule set is in great flux. There is an intensified negotiation about what

rules should apply and how those rules should be understood. So just to say, I do not agree with those who say that it is the end of the rule-based world order. My argument is rather that it is the end of a rule-based world order defined and set by the West. And I think that is an important difference. And when it comes to Germany's role, yes, there is a slow development underway. We have seen from Germany over the past year that they are coming up with a new foreign and security policy strategy, a new China strategy, and so on, where there are new tones in it and perhaps a more realistic, even geopolitical reading. But from there to acting on it, that is the difficult part for them. And it is probably also because there are some internal disagreements within the German government about how hard they should go on China, especially. We have recently seen this with Scholz's visit to Beijing, where they were not really willing to follow up on what is actually in the German China strategy. And right now, I think that in the German foreign and security policy strategy, and specifically in their China strategy, one sees this ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, they want to hold on to everything as it was, and they have not quite lost hope that it can return, and on the other hand, there is still this recognition that things are fundamentally different, and they need to adapt to that. But they still swing back and forth between those points.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Yes, because it requires strength if you want to change things. More and more people today are questioning whether our society in the EU, which is largely based on an institutional framework, is still compatible with China, considering that Xi Jinping wants to "Make China Great Again," based on a completely different set of rules than ours. The EU's regulated society has not only given companies in EU countries a better platform for trade in the form of a Single Market. It has also given companies from non-EU countries, such as China, access to our markets, technology, infrastructure, and more. And the same unrestricted access has never been granted to EU companies in the same degree in China. Therefore, politicians and business people in the EU and the USA have been talking for many years about the need for reciprocity. And very little has happened in this area, which I have also shown in previous podcasts. Combined with the fact that China is "our enemy's best friend," namely Russia, there is increasing talk of what could result in comprehensive de-risking away from Xi Jinping's China. Is that a possible outcome that you also see?

Yes, I think it is, but there is no doubt that it will be difficult and costly. But it is, in a sense, already underway, especially in some areas within technology and also driven by pressure from the USA. But it is a challenge for Europe that not everyone in Europe is ready to go as far as the USA would like Europe to go, and as some in Europe believe we should go. Europe has always stood for cooperation, multilateralism, free trade, this whole globalization agenda. But the big players, China and the USA, are moving away from that with industrial policy and more state control. And I also think we will see that in Europe. We are already well underway, but it meets some resistance because it goes a bit against the idea of what Europe should stand for. So it is somewhat related to the need to rethink what Europe actually has to offer and what role Europe should play in this new world order. But I also think that another wake-up call will make it clear. And that is what we need to understand when we look back over the last many decades of Europe's history. It has never been predetermined how the EU should develop with expansion and all that. Much of it has also been driven by events, things that have happened externally, which Europe has had to deal with. And one could imagine that being the case here as well, and perhaps even a necessity for Europe to truly recognize that there is a new reality, a new context they now need to operate in. And I think the upcoming American presidential election could be a real wake-up call because if we get Trump back as American president, then it will be a completely different USA we will have to deal with. But even if it is not Trump who is elected, even if Biden is re-elected, he will also have to operate in a completely different domestic context in the USA. And the USA's role in the international system and the USA's view of Europe and commitment to Europe is just undergoing huge development. And it does not matter who becomes the new American president, Europe will have to deal with it. But right now, we are in a sort of waiting, passive position in Europe. No one is really preparing for Trump to come back. But if he does, then we will have to deal with it. So maybe that is what it will take.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

But we should not let the Chinese pressure us to change, for example, the EU's greatest success, which is the Single Market for goods and services. But that is what many believe is happening now because we allow subsidies for some companies, and other companies do not receive subsidies. But as you say, it will be expensive, it will be very expensive. But on the other hand, if we face a military conflict with Russia, we cannot be dependent on China.

No, it is not easy. It is definitely not easy, and there are many conflicting interests, many conflicting developments in the international system. And it is not because I am saying it will be an easy thing at all, but there is a need to really rethink how Europe should organize itself to stand as best as possible in this new, much more geopolitical world order or international system that is developing. And I do not see many signs that this rethinking is happening. And maybe it is that there is a need for yet another drastic wake-up call, which a re-election of Trump as American president could be.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Camilla, taking for granted what China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Putin say, combined with a USA, which you also mentioned, is likely to be led again by Donald Trump, requires European decisiveness that we have not seen until now. In such a scenario and with a significant nationalist rightward shift, does the EU have what it takes to become decisive and stand stronger in a world that is more hostile than ever before? In other words, will the EU not just move from one crisis to the next?

Camilla T. N. Sørensen

Yes, but as one might have gathered, I share a bit of your pessimism, Carsten, when it comes to the EU's role in this more complex, geopolitical order or international system that is developing. It is simply hard to see who in Europe will take the necessary leadership. We have seen Macron over the past few months coming out with strong warnings and trying to shake up other European leaders. But Macron points out the problem, the challenge, but does not really offer solutions or suggestions for the rethinking that is needed. And I lack seeing where these ideas and visions will come from, as you mentioned. And something we have not even talked about, the entire migration agenda, the rightward shift, and such. There are a multitude of challenges facing Europe. Many of them are also internal in terms of internal cohesion and common ground in Europe. So it certainly looks difficult. And it is hard to see, yes, a strong role for Europe in the world order that is developing. But having said that, we must also be careful not to become too pessimistic and deterministic, because again, if we look back at the EU's history, we have surprised many times. There have been many times when it was written off, and then things happened that surprised, and generally, in European history, there are things that one did not foresee. Also, positive developments.

So, I think we should not completely write off Europe, but we must be very clear that we face significant challenges that require an extra effort.

Carsten, Insightview.eu editor

Thank you, Camilla Tenna Nørup Sørensen, for participating in this podcast.