



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia external relations briefing:
The Defense Cooperation Agreement with the USA in the context of
attitudes toward NATO
Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava

The Defense Cooperation Agreement with the USA in the context of attitudes toward NATO

The most widely discussed foreign policy topic in March in the Slovak Republic is the political row over whether to continue the ongoing negotiations for the signing of a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the USA. This DCA is a precondition to a specific project of military cooperation which the USA is interested in, namely the reconstruction of the military airbases at Kuchyňa in Western Slovakia and Sliac in Central Slovakia. The DCA would be a building block in the development of the European Deterrence Initiative within the framework of NATO, specifically strengthening its Eastern flank against a perceived threat from Russia. This DCA was being quietly negotiated since 2016 without much controversy, only becoming a topic of public interest by the end of last month, when word got out that one of the two junior partners of the ruling coalition, the conservative nationalist SNS (Slovenská národná strana / Slovak National Party), which manages the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak republic through its nominee, former general Peter Gajdoš was obstructing negotiations on the DCA, by reopening closed issues and using other delaying tactics. Things came to a head by March 11th, when the Ministry of Defense withdrew from negotiations on the DCA. The official reasons given by the Ministry and later by SNS were that the terms of the DCA would limit Slovak sovereignty. Specifically, they claimed that the money which Slovakia hoped to obtain from the USA for the reconstruction of the airbases (105 million dollars, or just over 93 million euros) was contingent upon the arrival of US military personnel, construction of ammunition dumps at Kuchyňa and fuel depots at Sliac, and other concessions which would pave the way for a long-term US military presence in the country and make Slovakia a target in a potential NATO–Russia conflict. It demands that the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak republic, which lead the negotiations with the USA, release the draft text of the DCA. For its part, the Foreign Ministry, led by Miroslav Lajčák, a nominee of the dominant coalition partner Smer (Direction) party, rejects such an interpretation of the DCA and refuses to comply with the request of SNS to release the DCA text. Lajčák and other senior ministry officials claim that SNS is misleading the public, specifically that there is no negotiation on ammunition or fuel depots, much less about a long-term or permanent US military presence in the country. They also claim that such a military presence by a foreign power can only be passed by the government or parliament, and not by a DCA. Furthermore, they say that it is pointless and counterproductive to release a treaty before it is completed, as its provisions can be subject to

change in the course of further negotiations. They also criticize the steps of the Defense Ministry and SNS as damaging the reliability and credibility of Slovakia as a partner within NATO.

The SNS party is clearly identified in the media as being the initiator of this dispute. This party is seen as being the closest to Russia of all the political parties represented in parliament. Its chairman Andrej Danko, who is at the same time the Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic (the Slovak parliament), has made several trips to Moscow to meet with Russian politicians, which the Foreign Ministry had to distance itself from as not representing the official foreign policy line of the country. The other side of this dispute is represented by a broad grouping of pro-Western and Atlanticist politicians both from the center-right opposition and from the other two members of the Slovak governing coalition. Of the latter, the politicians of the center-right Most-Híd (Bridge) party are the most vocal in their condemnation of SNS and its overtures toward Russia.

More interesting is the position of the Smer party, the dominant party of the governing coalition. Officially, Smer identifies itself as a social democratic party, and therefore a party of the mainstream pro-Western consensus. However, the Western-style liberal or progressive left, an important constituency of traditional social democratic parties is not an important electoral bloc in Slovakia. This leads Smer to adopt more conservative or populist policies in the socio-cultural sphere to capture the vote of the rural working class, which tends to be more socially conservative. For this reason, Smer often portrays itself as a moderate political force in between two alternative currents in Slovak politics which constitute a moderate political cleavage which complements the traditional cleavages in Slovak society. On one side of this cleavage, there are the liberal conservative right-wing parties, which champion neoliberalism and a strong relationship with the EU, NATO and Western countries (and strong criticism of Russia and other so-called illiberal states). On the other side, there are the parties of the radical left and right which are critical of the West and its representative organizations such as the EU and NATO and of Western style neoliberalism, while having a much larger affinity toward alternative centers of power such as Russia or China. There are, of course, critics of NATO (and currently, of the DCA) from the progressive left, but as stated, this current is marginal in Slovak political life and Slovakia does not have a strong liberal or progressive political tradition. On a side note, it is curious that even the parties of the radical left are adopting conservative views on social issues as a pushback to what they see as Western liberal values. However, the main political force on this side of the political cleavage is SNS. The dynamic described above is visible in the ruling coalition itself, with the Most-Híd party representing the liberal conservative center-right, SNS representing the national conservative right and Smer representing the populist

center left. The lukewarm position towards NATO is expressed in the level of defense spending which has been only slightly over 1 % of GDP in recent years, compared to the mandated 2 % of GDP. While Slovakia has promised to reach the 2 % level by 2024, this is something that previous governments of the left and right neglected to accomplish, so we will have to see how sincere the current government is on the issue. But while Smer usually tends to adopt a flexible (not to repeat the word populist) policy of declaring itself to be clearly pro EU and pro-NATO while advocating for developing stronger relations with other global and regional powers, this time Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini of Smer, as well as Foreign Minister Lajčák can out firmly on the Atlanticist side, for reasons discussed below.

This political division ties into the divisions in Slovak society. As mentioned in the previous briefing, an important political cleavage line runs between the winners and losers of the economic transformation process following the fall of the regime of the communist party. The winners, by definition, tend to be better educated, wealthier and concentrated in the cities, while the losers tend to be less educated, poorer and concentrated in rural areas. This division expresses itself in different policy preferences in the expected areas of economic and social policy, but it also reaches into the area of foreign policy preferences of these two groups. The winners adhere to the dominant foreign policy consensus on the strategic orientation of Slovakia to the West, i.e. toward the EU and NATO. In the case of NATO, which is the focus of this briefing, this group sees the Atlantic alliance as the guarantor of peace, stability, prosperity and the system that made them winners in the first place. The losers, again by definition, are skeptical of the dominant consensus and are more open to alternative approaches. In foreign policy, they are more likely to advocate for neutrality or closer ties with Russia, which is seen as the main alternative center of power to NATO and the USA. This view is supported by nationalist feeling, which is a natural shelter for the losers of transformation, and strengthened by a sense of Slavic kinship toward the Russians, or in some degree among the older generation, nostalgia for the economic and social security of the Communist era, when Czechoslovakia was part of the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. In contrast, this segment of the population sees Slovak membership in NATO as part of the broader foreign policy of the country of being uncritically supportive of the West. This ostensibly results in what this group perceives as negative phenomena arriving from the West, such as neoliberalism and weakening of the welfare state, weakening of traditional values (embodied in the rise of the LGBT movement or a more permissive attitude toward drugs among young adults) or migration and multiculturalism. In the specific case of the DCA, these people fear a permanent US military presence (evoking the presence of the militaries of the Warsaw Pact which crushed the Prague Spring of 1968 and remained in Czechoslovakia until the fall of the communist regime in 1989)

and a resulting worsening of ties with Russia (to the extent that Russia might target the airbases and other infrastructure of the country in case of a conflict) due to a the sense of Slavic kinship. This sense of kinship extends to the negative attitude to the NATO intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999, where the sympathies of the Slovaks generally lie with the Serbs. This is a major reason why NATO is seen in these quarters as an aggressive alliance.

Of course, all this is not to say that there is popular demand to withdraw from NATO. The issue of NATO, and currently the DCA, is merely a proxy for the broader dissatisfaction of these losers of the transformation with the political, social and economic orientation of Slovakia in general. Indeed one poll showed that only 13 % of respondents would support Slovakia leaving NATO, far below percentage of the vote captured by the parties that rely on this segment of the electorate. Even for the openly anti-system or populist parties that define themselves as being against the establishment, NATO is a far less frequent target of criticism than the EU, because of the larger role the EU plays in the economic decision-making in the country, which impacts these voters. This is in contrast to NATO, the actions and decisions of which do not tend to have a tangible or easily sourced effect on the population. This is visible in the current presidential elections. Both of the candidates that made it to the second round, Zuzana Čaputová (supported by the center and the center-right) and Maroš Šefčovič (supported by Smer and, rather grudgingly, by the radical right and left against the liberal Čaputová) are staunchly pro-EU and pro-NATO, even while emphasizing the other political differences they have to mobilize their bases of support ahead of the second round of elections. The third and fourth place candidates, the nationalist populist Štefan Harabín and the extreme right-wing Marián Kotleba, both ran on a strong anti-Western platform, which did not convince the voters. However, they split the anti-EU and anti-NATO vote between themselves. Had the two candidates been able to come to an agreement (which would have been unlikely) for one of them to step down in favor of the other and thus pool their votes, it is very likely that one of them would have made it to the second round. The potential for the question of foreign policy orientation of the country to become a relevant political issue therefore exists. The same goes for a weakening (though not yet outright reversal) of this orientation. These phenomena may come to light in a future election.

It is possible to predict the outcome of this conflict. Currently, SNS is the only relevant party (both in the sense of support and in the sense of being acceptable as a political partner by other parties) to position itself as being against the DCA. However, as seen in recent electoral opinion polls, support for SNS is declining due to scandals surrounding its chairman and other major figures. On the other hand, there is a strong consensus shared by both the dominant Smer and the parties of the center-right political camp opposed to Smer in favor of sustained

cooperation with NATO on the DCA and other issues. Therefore, this deadlock is likely to extend at most until the next parliamentary elections which are scheduled for 2020 (though there is talk about early elections due to disagreements in the ruling coalition, e.g. over this DCA). After this, SNS might not get a chance to influence the formation of the next government. It is however likely that the coalition row will end sooner, as SNS has an interest in the continuation and stability of the current coalition due to its declining position in the opinion polls. The fact that the dispute arose so suddenly after years of uncontroversial talks seems to suggest that the dispute is to a large extent artificial, created by SNS to overshadow its recent political scandals and shore up its support by mobilizing the nationalist and anti/Western segments of the population. It would not be the first time that SNS was created an artificial political crisis during the current election cycle, and these crises have been overcome by coalition talks and SNS backing down. In this specific case, it is easy to imagine certain guarantees being written into the DCA that would allow SNS to save face and support the agreement.

A more relevant question concerns the relatively strong Atlanticist stance of Smer in this dispute. The issue is whether, on the one hand, it is merely a pragmatic attempt by Smer to portray itself as a reliable pro-Western partner in the eyes of the USA and its other NATO partner countries (and perhaps in the eyes of voters which may perceive it as becoming too anti-Western or populist) and perhaps also to portray itself as a more constructive alternative to the SNS among the more moderate voters in the electoral pool it shares with SNS. Both parties court the same electoral bloc of working class conservatives, and until last year SNS had been gaining ground to the detriment of Smer, before a series of scandal mired SNS and its chairman Danko. On the other hand, whether due to the influence of Minister Lajčák and Prime Minister Pellegrini, Smer is trying to carry out a small and cautious but real transformation into a more standard social democratic party. Such a rebranding may seem to be necessary to the party elite of Smer, due to the scandals it has been attached to during its almost uninterrupted 13-year time on power, which lead to ever more comparisons with the illiberal period of the rule of former Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar in the 1990s. That was a time of widespread corruption, proliferation of organized crime and isolation imposed by the Western countries which blocked Slovakia from pursuing its integration ambitions into the EU and NATO. While Smer inherited a major part of the electorate of Vladimír Mečiar (generally the losers of the economic transformation), it was always careful to distance itself from his rule and portray itself a much more pro-Western. This was true even while Smer formed a coalition government with Mečiar's HZDS (Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko / Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) party as well as SNS between 2006-2010. The stepping down of Robert Fico, chairman of the Smer

party, as Prime Minister was seen as an important step in the process of Smer trying to rehabilitate itself and stay relevant. Fico's resignation was triggered by mass protests in the wake of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in early 2018 apparently on the orders of a business oligarch close to Smer. However, Fico, who is often compared to Mečiar by opposition politicians, is staying on as party chairman and Smer still leads in election polls. It will only be clear after parliamentary elections, whether Smer will lose enough votes to trigger a more thorough soul-searching and change in the party toward a more traditional social democratic orientation. Such a change would imply a more firm pro-Western stance and condemnation of perceived illiberal regimes, and would constitute a marked shift in the political landscape of Slovakia towards a deeper commitment to NATO.