



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic external relations briefing:
Mike Pompeo's "Czech Mission": Surprise and Disappointment
Ladislav Zemánek

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Mike Pompeo's "Czech Mission": Surprise and Disappointment

The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo set out for a journey through the CEE region in August, the Czech Republic being his first stopover. It is the first visit of this prominent US representative to our country since 2012 when Hillary Clinton arrived. In this briefing, I will analyse the Pompeo's agenda and issues discussed and promoted, starting from the focus on China and Russia, ending with the unconcealed US interest in the Czech energy industry, military or the 5G development.

Within his visit to the Czech Republic on the 11th and 12th of August, Mike Pompeo had meetings with the highest representatives of our country including President Miloš Zeman, the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, Minister of Industry and Trade Karel Havlíček, Minister of Defence Lubomír Metnar or the Senate chairman Miloš Vystrčil. Besides them, he met with Pavel Fischer, an unsuccessful presidential candidate in 2018 and the incumbent chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security. The US representative delivered two major speeches – during the press conference following the talks with the PM and in the upper chamber of the Parliament.¹ Unlike the negotiations with Andrej Babiš, the meeting with the President had rather polite, formal character. It was short and without any joint appearance. Even though Miloš Zeman has much in common with the US President Donald Trump, he is frequently criticised for pragmatic, unbiased attitudes towards China and Russia which are depicted as openly and dangerously pro-Chinese and pro-Russian by the President's opponents. Both Zeman and Pompeo appreciated good Czech-American relations and their future potential as well as the need for deepening of mutual economic cooperation including the principle of free trade. The Czech President expressed his support for friendly US policy towards Israel. In addition, he emphasised the common task of the fight against terrorism, warning about the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan. As far as the Chinese and Russian question is concerned, the Czech side stressed pragmatic character of the relationship based on economic diplomacy. On the contrary, the official statement of the US Department of State is marked by anti-Chinese and anti-Russian rhetoric, speaking about the alleged common

¹ Full text of the press conference of the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Czech PM Andrej Babiš is available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-czech-prime-minister-andrej-babis-at-a-press-availability/>. See the Senate speech at <https://www.state.gov/securing-freedom-in-the-heart-of-europe/>.

interest in “combatting malign influence from Russia and Communist China”.² It is a testament of the ongoing US confrontational campaign aimed against the Asian superpower. Notwithstanding multiple shared interests between the two presidents, the dissimilarity of the discourses used in this case is obvious.

Assaulting on the China’s leadership

Mike Pompeo kept similar confrontational style in his speech at the Office of the Government and the Senate, accusing China and Russia of undermining democracy and freedom in the world, and disrupting the Western alliance. The Secretary of State addressed alleged disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks launched by the both Eastern powers, blaming the Communist Party of China for attempts to seize control over the world through economic expansion. During his speech in the upper chamber, Pompeo labelled China as bigger threat than the former Soviet Union. He stressed that the US had supported our nation throughout the 20th century, especially after the so-called Velvet Revolution when the rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was overthrown. Pointing to these events, the US minister stated that the US contributed significantly to the establishment of the Western-style democracy and as such they had commitment to support and defend the current political system in the Czech Republic. He emphasised in this regard that in case of the existence of a threat (having primarily China and Russia in mind beyond any doubt), the US are prepared to take our side in order to protect democracy and freedom in our country. Denouncing the Nazi and Soviet regimes, he referred to the role and merits of the US army in the liberation of the Western part of Czechoslovakia. Not by coincidence, Pompeo took part in commemorative events organised in the city of Pilsen which is a main venue of celebrations of the US-led liberation traditionally.³

Another important issue which hid behind the Pompeo’s visit is the US special interest in the enlargement of the Czech nuclear power plant in Dukovany. The project is of great importance for the Czech Republic and its energy security and will be financed by the State in conjunction with the ČEZ Group, the biggest public company in Central and Eastern Europe with 70 per cent of shares in the ownership of the Government. Given the lucrativeness of the enlargement, several foreign subjects have already expressed their interest in the tender, namely

² The original statement is available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-czech-president-zeman/>.

³ See the full text of the Pompeo’s speech at the “Thank you America” Memorial in Pilsen at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-thank-you-america-memorial/>.

Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power, the French EDF Group, the Russian Rosatom, the China General Nuclear Power and last but not least Westinghouse from the US. One of the aims of the Pompeo's visit was lobbying for the American company as the project has not only a business dimension but also a geopolitical one. And that is the reason why the US administration has been so concerned. The Secretary of State therefore stressed the importance of the "right choice" declaring that partnership with Chinese or Russian companies would weaken the Czech Republic's national security and sovereignty. It is not surprising that – according to Pompeo – collaboration with the US partners would be beneficial, safe, law-based and strengthening energy security of the whole CEE region. During the press conference, he stated that he agreed with the Czech PM that cooperation with China and Russia is dangerous. However, Andrej Babiš presented a somewhat different view, moderating Pompeo's attacks. The PM opposed his pressure and refused the possibility to exclude any tenderer pointing to the EU legislation.

Lobbying for American interests

The Secretary of State appreciated that the Czech Government had decided to substitute old Soviet military equipment for the US one. The Ministry of Defence declared repeatedly in this regard that the goal was to get rid of the dependency on Russia in the field of military, unifying it with that used within the NATO. Furthermore, Pompeo put emphasis on the obligation of the NATO members to increase the military expenditures to 2 per cent relative to GDP. Nevertheless, our country will not meet the obligation to do so no later than in 2024. It is caused by the coronavirus crisis, great amount of unexpected expenses as well as deepening indebtedness of the State. Under such circumstances, a substantial rise in military expenditure would do political harm to the Government and diminish its popularity. According to the recent plans, the Czech military expenditures will amount to 1.46 to GDP next year and 1.6 per cent in 2023 (the figure was 1.2 per cent in 2019).

Both statesmen also discussed the question of the 5G networks. Pompeo reiterated the frequent US claims as to an alleged China's attempts to make use of the construction of the 5G networks for expansion of its influence, calling upon the Czech side to refuse Chinese technologies. At the same time, he acknowledged the PM's initiative in the field. Andrej Babiš organised an international Prague 5G Security Conference in May 2019 in which experts from the EU, NATO and OECD took part, adopting The Prague Proposals.⁴ The document is to

⁴ The document is available at https://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/PRG_proposals_SP_1.pdf.

define principles of safe 5G networks in order to mitigate possible risks. The second conference should have been held this year but has to be postponed due to the coronavirus epidemic. Furthermore, the Secretary of State put forth the topic of cybersecurity which was discussed not only with the Czech politicians but also with prominent businessmen, namely managers and directors of the Avast and SRTV technological companies as well as of the Czech section of Cisco, IBM and Y Soft.

The abovementioned repeated assaults on China were subjected to criticism from the Chinese embassy in Prague which strongly refused such allegations. The Chinese partners accused the Secretary of State of defaming China, provoking disputes and conflicts, meddling into the internal affairs and resorting to ideological prejudice and outdated thinking of the Cold war. According to the high-ranking Czech diplomats, the Pompeo's visit brought unpleasant surprise because of his aggressive remarks about China, especially during the press conference at the Office of Government, which was not expected as the preceding talks with the Czech PM concerned to a wide array of different issues such as mutual cooperation, cybersecurity, military expenditures, trade, academic exchanges or fight against the epidemic but not coordination of mutual positions towards China. Whereas Mike Pompeo pushed the Czechs to give up the possibility of cooperation with China on the nuclear energy or the 5G, Andrej Babiš refused to do so. At least from this point of view, the US Secretary of State's "Czech mission" can be considered disappointment for the Americans.