



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:**  
**The Senate Chairman's "Taiwan Adventure": A Negligible Episode**  
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## **The Senate Chairman's "Taiwan Adventure": A Negligible Episode**

*The Senate Chairman Miloš Vystrčil paid visit to Taiwan at the turn of August and September. This unprecedented decision was opposed by the other highest constitutional representatives who declared the Czech Republic's adherence to the Czech-Chinese strategic partnership as well as the One China Policy. In the briefing, I will reveal the reasons behind the "Taiwan adventure", analysing broader political contexts and demonstrating that such an act is a deviation from the normal in terms of both the Czech Republic's and EU policy.*

### **Vystrčil's political ambitions**

Miloš Vystrčil announced his plan to visit Taiwan in June with the aim to strengthen mutual economic, cultural and scientific relations.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, his mission has a clear political dimension. Vystrčil is a vice-chairman of the opposition right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS). The party presents itself as a main opposition force with an ability to defeat the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and his ANO movement which, however, still remains to be a hegemon on the domestic political scene. As such, the party and Miloš Vystrčil as the Senate Chairman criticise the policies promoted by the government coalition as well as by the President Miloš Zeman. Both the President and the Government follow the One China Policy which is the Czech Republic's official position towards People's Republic of China adopted in the 1990s. Unfortunately, Vystrčil misused this issue and this principle for the opposition's battle against the Government and its supporters in the Chamber of Deputies, rendering it a part of the domestic political struggle. It is beyond any doubt that such irresponsible behaviour does damage the position and image our country has in the international community, having potential to weaken and undermine the Czech-Chinese relations which have been gradually improving in the last years as proven by the multiple meetings between the Presidents Miloš Zeman and Xi Jinping.

Apart from this motivation behind his decision, there is another reason. The trip is likely to be a symbolic start of his efforts to stand as a candidate for the presidency in 2023 when the Miloš Zeman's second, thus the last term, ends up. Vystrčil is both a regional and Senate

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<sup>1</sup> The list of members of the delegation is not public but a part has been leaked: <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Jen-na-PL-Exkluzivni-seznam-elity-ktera-jede-na-Tchaj-wan-Zadna-firma-protrideni-novinari-i-ajtaci-z-Vysociny-A-Hribuv-urednik-k-tomu-635282> (in Czech).

politician. At the turn of the century he was a mayor of the city of Telč in the Vysočina Region and subsequently a governor of the same region. In 2010 he was elected a senator, being a member of the upper chamber since then. In this February he became the Senate Chairman after his predecessor Jaroslav Kubera passed away. At the same time, he has moved up in the hierarchy of the Civic Democratic Party, being its vice-chairman since 2014. Even though Vystrčil had rarely occupied himself with international relations and foreign policy before he took over the presidency of the Senate, he started to pursue radical anti-Chinese attitudes after. For many, such a turn seemed very surprising. Instead of a calm, dispassionate, modest politician he had been in the past, the new second highest constitutional representative became a zealous propagator of the anti-Chinese agenda.

The sudden adoption of such a policy can be rationally explained only as an attempt to gain support among senators and liberal, pro-Western circles in the civil society. Whereas the senators' support is necessary to maintain the Senate presidency (which happened indeed after the election held in October), the popularity and support among the public is needed for presidential election in 2023. Vystrčil's decision was welcomed by these forces immediately. On the political scene, the „Taiwan adventure“ was supported by his own party<sup>2</sup>, the liberal Pirate party, the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL), the pro-European right-wing TOP 09 party, the region-based movement of the Mayors and Independents (STAN) and some members of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). On the contrary, Vystrčil's decision was subjected to criticism by the populist Freedom and Direct Democracy movement (SPD), the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) or the Tricolour Citizens' Movement.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the “Taiwan adventure” was opposed by the President Miloš Zeman, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, the Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček, Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies Radek Vondráček as well as Jan Hamáček, the leader of the Social Democratic Party. The most critical stance was adopted by the President who called the trip “a boyish provocation” and decided not to invite Miloš Vystrčil to the regular meetings of the highest constitutional representatives. On the meeting held at the end of September, Zeman, Babiš and Vondráček agreed that the Czech Republic's policy towards China remained unchanged and in harmony with the strategic partnership established in 2016.

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<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, a negative attitude was held by Jan Zahradil, a deputy of the European Parliament since 2004, President of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (2009–2020) and Chairman of the EU-China Friendship Group in the EP.

<sup>3</sup> The Tricolour is a national conservative movement led by a son of the former President Václav Klaus. It was found in 2019 and currently has 3 deputies.

## **Opposing both the Czech and EU policy**

There is a clear polarisation on the domestic political scene regarding cooperation with China. Whereas in the past decades, Czech-Chinese relationship was not considered very problematic and controversial, the anti-Chinese attitudes being marginal and held predominantly by the Christian Democrats, in the last years the situation started to change. It has several reasons, both external and internal: (1) China becomes increasingly strong, influential and assertive and together with other non-Western countries impede the triumph of the US unilateralism, disproving the dogma of superiority of the liberal democratic system and pursuing multilateral, more inclusive and more democratic model of the international relations. (2) After the President Xi Jinping's visit to the Czech Republic in 2016, President Miloš Zeman and proponents of the Czech-Chinese cooperation committed a tactical mistake as they created excessive expectations about allegedly immediate fruits and results of the mutual cooperation, thus playing into hands of the anti-Chinese groupings in fact. These could refer to the amount of the Chinese investment in our country which was lagging behind the expectations, thereby challenging the advantageousness of the Czech-Chinese cooperation. Not by coincidence, the supporters of the Vystrčil's „Taiwan adventure“ pointed to the Czech President's promises regarding the Chinese investment which have not been delivered on yet. (3) During the Donald Trump's presidency, the official US policy towards China has become increasingly confrontational as a result of the obvious fading of the US global power, accusing the Chinese ruling party of a „decades-long desire for global hegemony“.<sup>4</sup> In consequence of the US-China rivalry and US efforts to establish a global anti-Chinese front, the question of the Czech-Chinese cooperation itself has become more and more politicised and ideologised, being embroiled in the US-led campaign against Beijing. Vystrčil's trip to Taiwan was appreciated by the US leadership and Mike Pompeo openly supported it during his August visit to the Czech Republic.<sup>5</sup> It demonstrates and proves that the Senate Chairman has followed the US policy with its confrontational narrative.

Such a position is in breach with not only the Czech Republic's but also European Union's official policy. Nowadays, both the EU and China are committed to a comprehensive strategic partnership based on the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation. Even though both sides occupy their own perspective with different accents, there is a broad consensus on

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<sup>4</sup> A representative example of this discourse and narrative can be found in a speech delivered by the US State Secretary Mike Pompeo in the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in July 2020. The abovementioned quotation comes from this speech. See more at <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>.

<sup>5</sup> I analysed the Pompeo's visit and its background in a separate briefing: <https://china-cee.eu/2020/10/05/czech-republic-external-relations-briefing-mike-pompeos-czech-mission-surprise-and-disappointment/>.

priorities and future prospects, the efforts to reach and deepen mutual understanding being strong. The very same stance is held by the highest political representatives of the Czech Republic – President, Prime Minister and Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies. Our two countries established strategic partnership in March 2016 which was confirmed by the then four highest constitutional representatives in October that year who emphasised that the Czech Republic followed the One China policy, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the PRC. This declaration was made in response to the Minister of Culture’s statements in support of the Tibetan separatism. The declaration stated that such behaviour does not represent the official state policy.<sup>6</sup>

The same applies to the “Taiwan adventure” of the incumbent Senate Chairman who supported Taiwanese separatists, thus interfering into the China’s internal affairs and violating its sovereignty as well as principles of the international relations. No matter it is committed by the Senate Chairman, it is merely a manifestation of his personal views and domestic political ambitions, encouraged by the anti-Chinese clique in the upper chamber and similarly orientated elements in the civil society, supported significantly by the US funds. The most important is that the other constitutional representatives have already confirmed commitments stemming from the bilateral agreements and partnership. President together with the PM have strong democratic legitimacy and mandate based on the people’s vote, whereas Miloš Vystrčil heads a body, the existence of which has been challenged from the very beginning and the members of which are frequently elected only by thousands of voters.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding the formal position, his influence and relevance are very low. From this perspective, the Vystrčil’s trip is only a negligible, ephemeral episode.

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<sup>6</sup> The full wording available at <https://www.hrad.cz/cs/pro-media/tiskove-zpravy/aktualni-tiskove-zpravy/spolecne-prohlaseni-nejvyšších-ústavních-cinitelů-česke-republiky-12953> (in Czech).

<sup>7</sup> In 2016 Vystrčil won gaining mere 8.144 votes. The real role of the Senate and its Chairman on the Czech political scene in connection with the “Taiwan adventure” was properly commented by Marek Hrubec at the CCTV: <http://m.news.cctv.com/2020/09/09/ARTISs55tfolJ5PGRcIsc2UZ200909.shtml>.