



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic political briefing:
The Defence Strategy and Challenges for the National Military
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The Defence Strategy and Challenges for the National Military

Summary

The briefing conducts an analysis of the 2023 Defence Strategy. At first, attention is paid to related strategic documents at both national and supranational levels. The analysis then goes on to the individual sections of the Defence Strategy with a focus on the following aspects: purpose and goals of the Defence Strategy, security environment and its impacts on defence, principles and prerequisites of the defence of the Czech territory and demands on the national defence system. The research includes relevant contexts inclusive of comparisons with other NATO armies in the region, diachronic perspective on the number of troops as well as debates about the re-introduction of military service.

Introduction

The government approved a new Defence Strategy on October 4 with the aim to set due course in the field with respect to the changes in the external environment.¹ Overall, the document is considerably more explicit in the identification of security threats, defines the need for comprehensive preparations for a protracted defence war of high-intensity with Russia and addresses the task of a whole-of-society approach to the defence and military issues to expand their relevance beyond the realm of the armed forces themselves. In all these regards the 2023 Defence Strategy goes further compared to the preceding documents issued in 2012 and 2017.

The strategy and the security environment

The Defence Strategy is related and subordinate to the Security Strategy which was passed in June this year and which redefines the security environment in the Czech Republic as a whole. Besides that, the new Defence Strategy builds on supranational documents, first of all, the EU 2022 Strategic Compass for Security, Defence NATO 2022 Strategic Concept and the classified Political Guidance for Defence Planning which was adopted in February 2023. The new national strategy in the field is composed of six sections defining the purpose and goals of the Defence Strategy, security environment and its impacts on defence, principles and prerequisites of the defence of the Czech territory, demands on the national defence system, the

¹ *Obranná strategie České republiky* (2023). Ministerstvo obrany České republiky. https://mocr.army.cz/images/id_40001_50000/46088/Obranna_strategie_C_R_2023_final.pdf

implementation of defence capabilities and, last but not least, the implementation of the Defence Strategy itself. Unlike in the past, the adoption of the document attracted attention on the part of the domestic media and commentators, which is undoubtedly connected with the high priority that military and security issues nowadays have. Representatives of the Ministry of Defence welcomed this interest because the actual implementation of the Strategy requires cooperation and familiarity on the part of the public.

The discourse on the external security environment puts emphasis on the definition and identification of threats. Even though the risk of direct aggression against the Czech Republic remains to be perceived as low, such an assessment does not apply to the overall probability of an attack against one of NATO or EU member states, which is, on the contrary, seen as a real scenario. Not surprisingly, Russia is identified as the principal threat to the country, including the military integration of Belarus and Russia. In this regard, the document reiterates the demand for a restoration of the Ukrainian territory in its pre-2014 borders as a basic condition for the security and resilience of Europe as a whole. China is in second place on the list of security threats and risks. The Security Strategy asserts that Beijing has taken actions against the security interests of both the Czech Republic and its allies in such fields as cyber attacks, hybrid influence, misuse of technological and material dependencies, space activities and, last but not least, cooperation with Russia. Both China and Russia are considered revisionist actors who strive for a change in the international order. From this perspective, however, the only possible solution for China to show the opposite is cutting from Moscow and joining Western sanctions against Russia, which is hardly acceptable. It is worth noting that the document reflects scepticism towards the UN and other multilateral institutions which is widespread among the government politicians, and concludes that Prague cannot rely on those structures in security anymore. It indicates growing mistrust of the central bodies of the international system established by the end of World War II, whose role is, on the contrary, emphasised by China and Russia. Furthermore, it indicates growing leanings towards unilateralism or “limited multilateralism”, based on friendshoring, decoupling and de-risking and cooperation with like-minded actors only. Aside from the two major powers, the Defence Strategy addresses the threat posed by international terrorism, instability in near regions such as North Africa, Sahel and the Middle East and, generally, systematic hybrid influence inclusive of cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns as well as economic pressure and sabotage, subversive and intelligence activities, for these undermine stability, social resilience and defensive capacity of

the country. Needless to say, the authors of the document had particularly China and Russia in mind in this regard.

The basic prerequisite of successful defence of the Czech territory is correctly seen in the country's membership in NATO, for the national armed forces are not capable of securing the defence of the territory separately. Even though the chief goal of the collective defence is to discourage and deter external actors, preventing them from attacking, the Defence Strategy outlines the principal task in terms of an "all-encompassing preparation for a protracted defence war of high intensity against the technologically advanced enemy, having nuclear weapons". In line with the NATO military discourse, the Czech side highlights the concept of war in a wide array of domains including the land, air, sea, cyber and space ones. The national strategic document reflects NATO's transition from the NATO Response Force to the NATO Force Model which is to mobilise up to 300,000 troops within 30 days and up to 500,000 troops within 180 days in contrast to some 40,000 troops within 15 days in the former model. From this perspective, the Czech Republic has to create conditions and capabilities for hosting large numbers of allied troops and providing for their needs in accordance with NATO's provision regarding Host Nation Support. This commitment emerging from the membership in the North Atlantic Alliance requires the participation of many state bodies and actors inclusive of individual ministries, security and intelligence agencies and others.

The tasks related to the Host Nation Support are also connected with the possible presence of US troops on the Czech territory. This specific issue is addressed by the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) which has been concluded this year as one of the priorities of the incumbent cabinet.² Washington has signed the DCA with 24 NATO member states including Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia. Concrete provisions and wording, nevertheless, vary from one case to another. An important point is that the DCA does not entail the establishment of an American military base in the Czech Republic and any presence of US soldiers is conditioned by the consent of the Parliament. At the same time, Prague negotiated worse conditions compared to Budapest. Unlike Hungary, the Czech Republic will not keep control over the joint military bases. Another controversial point is that Petr Fiala's cabinet is in favour of a constitutional amendment according to which the power to decide on the presence of foreign troops would be in the government's hands under certain circumstances. Such a

² *Defence Minister Jana Černočová signed the Defense Cooperation Agreement in the Pentagon* (2023, May 23). Ministry of Defence & Armed Forces. <https://www.army.cz/en/ministry-of-defence/newsroom/news/defence-minister-jana-cernochova-signed-the-defense-cooperation-agreement-in-the-pentagon-244300/>

provision would weaken the role of the Parliament substantially.³ Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Cyril Svoboda, in turn, criticises that the DCA grants the American side large discretion and a considerable degree of exemption of the US troops from the Czech legal framework. It can be said that the agreement has weak points, especially in case of mutual controversies, for it does not define how these shall be solved. Last but not least, the DCA does not set any limits as far as the number of foreign soldiers is concerned and the Czech side will not be authorised to decide who can enter the Czech territory and, similarly, will not be allowed to expel anybody from the country.⁴ Therefore, it seems that the government made a variety of concessions, whereby it weakened the Czech position in the bilateral relationship.

One of the typical features of the Defence Strategy is its focus on interoperability and complementarity with NATO allies in general and several countries in particular (first of all, the US, Britain, Germany, Poland and Slovakia) on one hand and stress on the comprehensive conception of defence on the other. The latter is conceptualised in terms of the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches which is seen as an elementary condition of the national defensive capacity. The document thus addresses the need for active cooperation and synergy between state/public and private sectors inclusive of the development of the domestic defence industry. It is beyond any doubt that the Czech state's military assistance to Ukraine would have been impossible to such an extent without close cooperation with the domestic defence industry and its production capacity. At the same time, the development of this sector is structurally limited by the lack of access to important sources of external funding, particularly, bank credits. The regulation and internal rules of financial institutions usually forbid the provision of credits and other services to entities operating in the defence industry. According to data from the Defence and Security Industry Association of the Czech Republic, up to 70 per cent of companies have faced obstacles when it comes to funding export, which is connected with ESG criteria set by the European Commission. The EU taxonomy categorises the defence industry as a group of socially unsustainable industries (together with tobacco, for instance). The European Commission, nevertheless, has already begun to prepare a due

³ Fujáček, J. (2023, May 24). *O jaderných zbraních ani slovo. Co vadí kritikům kontroverzní dohody s USA*. Echo24.cz. <https://echo24.cz/a/HNhms/zpravy-domaci-cernochova-usa-vojaci-dohoda-o-obranne-spolupraci-dca-armada-nato-pentagon-spd-ano>

⁴ *Pokud se obrannou smlouvu s USA nepodaří ratifikovat... Exministr má jasno (2023, May 23). Pokud se obrannou smlouvu s USA nepodaří ratifikovat... Exministr má jasno*. Parlamentnílisty.cz. <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Pokud-se-obrannou-smlouvu-s-USA-nepodari-ratifikovat-Exministr-ma-jasno-736681>

amendment to provide the defence industry with more favourable conditions.⁵ Such a change would be welcomed by the Czech government.

Regular army and the Active Reserve

Aside from the cooperation between the state and the defence industry, the government emphasises the expansion of the Active Reserve. The latter was set up in 2005 as a supplement to the regular armed forces. As of 2022, the Active Reserve had more than 4,000 members. The Ministry of Defence as well as the General Staff are looking for new ways to include citizens in the defence. Minister Jana Černochová has recently admitted that a reform of the Active Reserve is prepared inclusive of a higher age limit for the members, different funding and the possibility for the citizens of Slovakia to join this armed service. The Active Reserve as well as the armed forces as a whole has become more popular after the war in Ukraine broke out. Despite that, the recruitment is slower in comparison with the set goals. As of mid-September 2023, the recruitment target was fulfilled at 73 per cent in the case of the regular armed forces and only 50 per cent as far as the Active Reserve is concerned.⁶ The government has recently expanded the instruments of the possible participation for citizens in defence. Apart from the regular army and Active Reserve which entail a wide array of obligations and require regular participation in set tasks, there is also the institute of “voluntary military drills” and “voluntary predetermination”. The latter has been introduced this year. It enables Czech citizens to register with the Ministry of Defence as a volunteer. In case of a serious deterioration of the security situation in the country, the state bodies are authorised to send these volunteers to military exercises.

Even though the country cannot afford to build a regular army which would be able to defend the Czech territory on its own, the demand for the expansion of military capabilities has been rising. The main question is how to design sustainable and reasonable armed forces which would balance the demand for defensive capacity on one hand and economic sustainability on the other. It seems that the instruments and forms will have to be more flexible and efficient and might include the re-introduction of military service. The latter was abolished after in 2004 in connection with the transition to a fully professional army. The then plans anticipated that

⁵ *Zbrojařské firmy narážejí na potíže s půjčkami u bank. Kvůli válce přitom potřebují přidat* (2023, March 26). ČT24. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/ekonomika/3574419-zbrojarske-firmy-narazeji-na-potize-s-pujckami-u-bank-kvuli-valce-pritom-potrebuji>

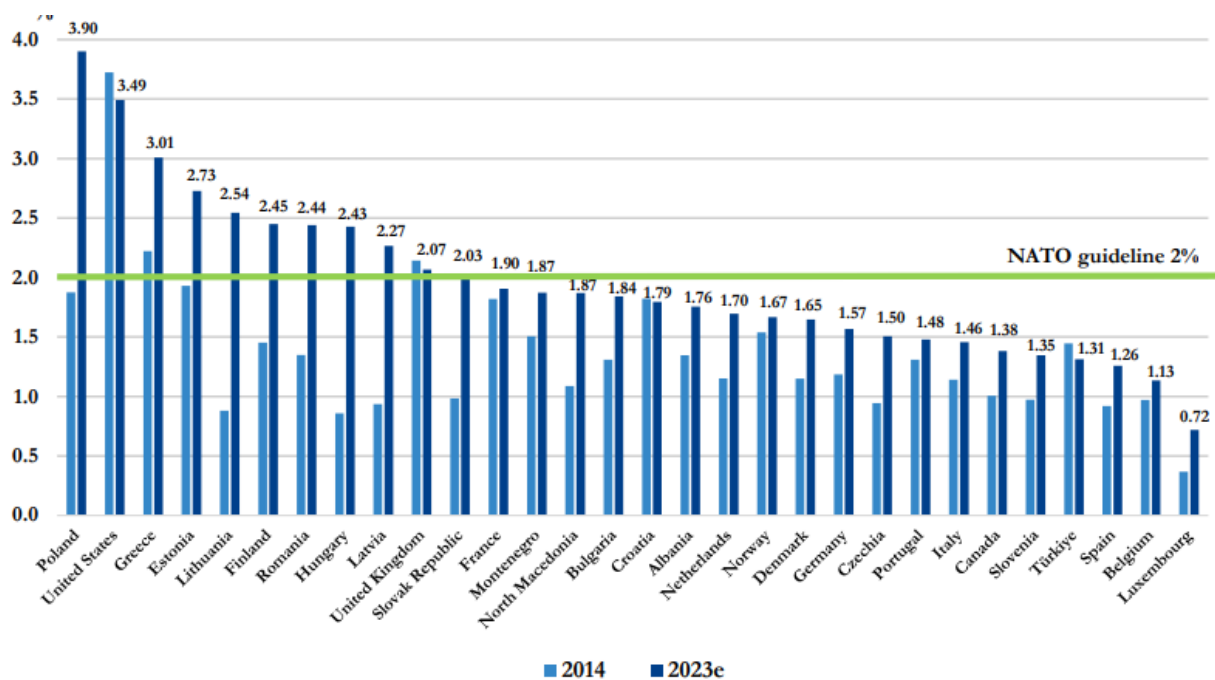
⁶ Fujáček, J. (2023, September 12). *Do aktivních záloh by mohli vstoupit i Slováci nebo lidé nad 60 let, řekla Černochová*. Echo24.cz. <https://echo24.cz/a/Him6x/zpravy-domaci-virtualni-naborove-stredisko-pro-zajemce-o-vstup-do-armady-ministryne-obrany-cernochova-rehka-aktivni-zaloha>

the armed forces would have 35,000 servants including slightly more than 26,000 soldiers. As of 2022, the Czech military was composed of 27,197 professional troops, 8,192 other employees and 4,191 members of the Active Reserves. The following table sums up the numbers of professional soldiers, other employees of the Ministry of Defence and members of the Active Reserves (AR) from a diachronic perspective in 2005–2022.⁷

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Soldiers	23,110	24,229	24,334	24,103	23,136	22,261	21,751	21,733	21,011
Employees	14,971	13,358	11,946	10,575	9,017	8,303	8,248	8,288	7,530
AR	1,312	1,112	1,101	1,087	1,041	1,098	1,093	1,128	1,214
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Soldiers	20,864	21,970	23,184	24,251	25,105	25,899	26,621	26,928	27,197
Employees	7,487	6,411	6,515	6,691	6,796	6,896	7,017	7,090	7,096
AR	1,237	1,259	1,488	2,270	2,853	3,236	3,440	3,615	4,191

These official data show that a new impetus to the development of the armed forces was given by the military conflict in Ukraine which erupted in 2014. While the number of professional soldiers was stagnating for several years, the subjective sense of threat provoked by the conflict in Eastern Europe paired with rising pressure on Russia resulted in a shift in the Czech military. Between 2014 and 2022, the number of troops increased by 6,333 in contrast to a decrease compared to the same period after 2005. A similar dynamic applied to the Active Reserves as well. Undoubtedly, this trend will continue in the years to come all the more so that the updated Defence Strategy anticipates additional investment in and funding of this sector. The ruling cabinet set the goal of reaching the threshold of 2 per cent of expenditures on defence in relation to GDP no later than 2024. Authors of the document, moreover, admit that the share of defence expenditures may be higher.

⁷ *Vývoj skutečných počtů osob v resortu MO ČR v letech 1992–2022* (2023, January 11). Ministerstvo obrany. <https://mocr.army.cz/scripts/detail.php?id=129653>



The statistics published by NATO demonstrate that the Czech Republic remains below the 2-per cent benchmark despite the efforts on the part of the government. The expenditures are expected to amount to 1.50 per cent of GDP this year, which is similar to the adjacent Germany but much less compared with Slovakia (2.03 per cent) and Hungary (2.43 per cent), not to speak about Poland with its 3.90 per cent. As far as the structure of defence expenditures is concerned, up to 40.5 per cent is allocated to wages for personnel in contrast to 25.5 per cent related to major equipment, research and development, 18.7 per cent—to operations and maintenance and 15.2 per cent—to infrastructure. Interestingly, the structure of expenditures is different in all other V4 countries. For instance, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary spend 37.5, 26.7 and 22.9 per cent respectively on personnel. The expenditures on infrastructure also differ from those in the Czech Republic, for they amount to 4.1 per cent in Hungary and Poland alike and a mere 2.9 per cent in Slovakia.⁸

Face to face with the comparatively lower share of the Czech defence expenditures, the Ministry of Defence has accelerated the modernisation of the armed forces with the aim to secure as high compatibility and interoperability with NATO forces as possible. It presupposes the substitution of Soviet and Russian equipment for that coming from allied countries. The most prominent projects include the purchase of American F-35 Lightning aircraft instead of

⁸ *Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2014-2023)* (2023, July 7). NATO. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230707-def-exp-2023-en.pdf

the JAS 39 Gripen fighters, CV-90 infantry fighting vehicles and Leopard tanks. In September the cabinet approved the purchase of 24 F-35s worth 150 billion CZK (more than 6.1 billion EUR), which makes it the most expensive military purchase in Czech history. The American fifth-generation fighters are expected to remain operational up until 2082. The Chief of the General Staff Karel Řehka argues that the F-35s will gradually replace not only the Swedish Gripens but also the Czech-manufactured Aero L-159 ALCA light combat aircraft, which will improve the combat efficiency and enable the quantitative reduction of the air fleet.⁹

In connection with a rethinking of warfare as such, the material modernisation and the expansion of the national armed forces, different scenarios of further development have been discussed in public. A consensus emerged that the primary goal of the Czech military is to deter an enemy and stop any possible aggression once it happens in close cooperation with the allies. Some experts and politicians have spoken out in favour of the military service which would need not be obligatory in general but selective. The latter can be based on quotas for individual years of birth supplemented with positive motivation, for instance, extra social benefits, tax concessions, free services and so on. Former Deputy Minister of Defence Daniel Koštoval believes that the goal should be the mobilisation of up to 150,000 professional and semiprofessional soldiers and trained volunteers in land, air, cyber and space domains within four months. From his perspective, the regular army is to be composed of at least 35,000 troops and supplemented by the Active Reserve with at least 40,000 men.¹⁰ Such an increase in professional soldiers is feasible but the recruitment of more than 35,000 members of the Active Reserve seem hardly possible in the foreseeable future. The problem need not rest in funding but in human resources. The 2023 recruitment data show obvious difficulties with the process, which is connected not only with the insufficient interest on the part of the public but also with the poor shape of an overwhelming majority of the population. The development of the national armed forces along this line would take decades.

⁹ *Největší zakázka v historii armády. Vláda schválila nákup letounů F-35 za 150 miliard* (2023, September 27). E15.cz. <https://www.e15.cz/byznys/nejvetsi-zakazka-v-historii-armady-vlada-schvalila-nakup-letounu-f-35-za-150-miliard-1410748>

¹⁰ Gavenda, J. (2023, May 2). *Česko by mělo zavést dílčí vojenskou službu, navrhuje expert*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-zivot-v-cesku-analytik-cesko-by-melo-mit-v-krizi-k-dispozici-150tisicovou-armadu-230133>

Conclusion

The 2023 Defence Strategy defines a strategic framework whose implementation is to guarantee the following basic points: (1) efficient deterrence and defence of the Czech Republic and its allies in all domains; (2) development of the armed forces to make them capable of conducting long-term war with enemy in collaboration with other NATO members; (3) creating conditions for meeting these tasks on the domestic territory; (4) sufficient capabilities of both ground-based air defence and supersonic aircraft; (5) the ability to conduct military operations beyond the Czech Republic without weakening defensive power of the country; (6) the ability to carry out rescue operations both at home and abroad; and (7) strengthening security and defence capabilities of friendly, non-NATO countries.