



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:  
Turning to Pragmatism?  
A New Impetus for the Czech-Chinese Relations  
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# **Turning to Pragmatism?**

## **A New Impetus for the Czech-Chinese Relations**

### **Summary**

*The briefing presents recent moves and adjustments in the Czech Republic's policy on China. The main attention is paid to a visit made by the national security adviser to Beijing in November, subsequent reactions from media, political as well as business circles and also to the international context of the mission. The analysis argues that the position of hardliners within the political administration has slightly weakened as they are under pressure from more realist and pragmatic actors. Tomáš Pojar's trip to China is supplemented with a summary of former Defence Minister Jaroslav Tvrdík's November visit to the country and former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek's participation in the Third Belt and Road Forum.*

### **Introduction**

The incumbent Czech government set the goal of revision of relations with China as one of its priorities at the very beginning of its tenure after it assumed power in December 2021. Given the composition of the coalition, which included prominent opponents of the strategic partnership between both countries, the serious deterioration of the external environment and the grave security crisis in Eastern Europe after February 24, 2022, it was more than clear that the flourishing Sino-Czech relations would be put in danger. The following period was typical of the decline in the partnership, growing divergences and non-friendly actions on the part of the Czech Republic inclusive of the suspension of activities in the 14+1 mechanism, development of political relations with Taipei, withdrawal of Czech businesses from the huge Chinese market and increasingly widespread suspicion of any forms of cooperation with the Chinese side. As a result, the image and reputation of the Central European country were seriously damaged and the Czech Republic started to be perceived as a problematic and unreliable actor. A recent development, nonetheless, indicates that the negative trajectory could be stopped and normal, pragmatic relations revived.

## **The national security adviser in Beijing**

On November 2, a high-level Czech official and influential member of Prime Minister Petr Fiala's team paid a visit to Beijing following an official request from the Czech side. National Security Adviser Tomáš Pojar held talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi and was accompanied by Director of the Office for Foreign Relations and Information Vladimír Posolda as well as Director of Asia-Pacific Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Marek Libřícký. The diplomatic mission was organised by the Office of the Government and the Foreign Ministry with the prime minister's knowledge. Discussing with Wang Yi, Tomáš Pojar declared that the Czech Republic was interested in promoting pragmatic bilateral relations, strengthening cooperation, carrying out more exchanges at different levels and contributing to mutual understanding. The national security adviser later admitted that the delegation discussed the possibility of increasing Czech exports to the Asian country, a prospective restoration of a direct flight and several security-related issues such as countering terrorism and the war in Ukraine.

Indeed, the absence of a direct air connection between the Czech Republic and China undermines the potential of bilateral exchanges and symbolises the decline of the relationship. The first direct flight was launched between both capital cities in 2015 and was operated by Hainan Airlines. It was followed by flights to Chengdu (Sichuan Airlines), Shanghai and Xi'an (China Eastern Airlines). However, the Prague-Beijing flight was cancelled by the Chinese company at the beginning of 2020 before the global outbreak of the pandemic in relation to anti-Chinese actions conducted by the local government in Prague. Other flights were suspended because of the unfavourable pandemic situation but they were not restored even once the pandemic was over. Even though a restoration of the flights between Prague and Chengdu was announced in late 2022, the plan was put aside due to the official parliamentary visit to Taiwan in the spring of 2023. The connection with the Czech revision of relations with China inclusive of the closure of the consulate in Chengdu is obvious. The latter was officially explained by the poor profitability of the office but some experts observe that such an argument was incorrect because the Chengdu consulate generated sufficient revenues to cover its operation. It follows that the actual motivation was political.<sup>1</sup>

Both the suspension of direct flights and the closure of the consulate weakened the potential of tourist exchanges. Before the pandemic, Chinese tourists accounted for a growing

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<sup>1</sup> Vojta, V. (2023, November 14). Usiluje česká vláda o narovnění vztahů s Čínou? Asiaskop. <https://www.asiaskop.cz/analyzy-komentare/usiluje-ceska-vlada-o-narovnani-vztahu-s-cinou>

group of foreign visitors and an important source of income for Czech businesses and municipalities, especially after a decline in the number of tourists from Russia. CzechTourism, the state agency focused on the promotion of tourism, argues that the existence of direct flights is one of the most important factors in attracting visitors from abroad. The Prague airport has recently confirmed that negotiations about the re-introduction of direct flights are going on with Chinese airlines irrespective of the political interactions.<sup>2</sup> These, however, can give a decisive impetus to the plans so one can expect that people from both countries will live to see the direct flights next year.

### **Washington–Prague–Beijing**

The security aspects of Tomáš Pojar's November visit to Beijing are even more interesting. As has been mentioned above, the meeting with Wang Yi was attended by the head of the Office for Foreign Relations and Information, that is, the foreign intelligence service. His participation contrasts with a visit to Taiwan paid by directors of the Security Information Service (the counter-intelligence agency) and the National Cyber and Information Security Agency in March 2023 when they joined several events organised within the controversial parliamentary visit led by the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Markéta Pekarová Adamová.<sup>3</sup> In an annual report published in October, the Security Information Service describes China as an “all-encompassing threat” for the Czech Republic and its interests.<sup>4</sup> Against this background, the trip made by prominent security actors to China seems very important and can be linked to an effort to open direct communication channels including in the field of intelligence. Furthermore, Pojar has revealed that one of the objectives of the meeting was to discuss the conflict in Ukraine and motivate Beijing not to deepen its relationship with Russia. In other words, some realist-leaning Czech actors have begun to rethink international politics, becoming interested in cooperation with China against Russia which is perceived as “the most imminent security threat”.

The failure of the military offensive against Russia in Ukraine has obviously had an impact on (geo)political consideration on the part of the Western actors, being inclined to think

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<sup>2</sup> Očadlý, V. (2023, November 24). Pražské letiště jedná o obnovení linek do Číny, zapojil se i Tvrdík.

Zdopravy.cz. <https://zdopravy.cz/prazske-letiste-jedna-o-obnoveni-linek-do-ciny-zapojil-se-i-tvrdik-185286/>

<sup>3</sup> Sedlák, J. (2023, March 23). Čině navzdory. Ředitel BIS Koudelka míří na Tchaj-wan, kam dorazí i šéf úřadu NÚKIB Kintr. E15. <https://www.e15.cz/zahranicni/cine-navzdory-reditel-bis-koudelka-miri-na-tchaj-wan-kam-dorazi-i-sef-uradu-nukib-kintr-1397267>

<sup>4</sup> Výroční zpráva Bezpečnostní informační služby za rok 2022 (2023, October 26). Bezpečnostní informační služba. <https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocní-zpravy/2022-vz-cj.pdf>

that positive signals to China can prepare the ground for undermining Moscow's position. At the Aspen Annual Conference in Prague in mid-November, Pojar stated that the West had to develop communication with Beijing in order to prevent the Chinese side from "getting closer to Russia" as it was a matter of fact that China could provide Russia with more assistance which would be in breach of the interests of the West. He added that China was capable of influencing many other countries, thus contributing to the prevention of possible conflicts which would further deteriorate the position of the Western countries. Pojar concluded that a majority of the international community was not "on our side", which made some kind of cooperation with China necessary. This statement was evidently supported by the Czech ambassador to NATO Jakub Landovský who participated in the same panel discussion.<sup>5</sup> It follows that the move on the part of the Czech and some other members of the Atlantic community is primarily a realism-based tactic aimed to mitigate the effects of the failure of the military, political and economic campaign against Russia and to manage growing risks emerging from other conflicts in the world that has the potential to accelerate the power decline of the political West. In any case, if the Czech national security adviser argues that the country's interest is to trade with China, cooperate to strengthen stability, avoid the imposition of sanctions against each other and seek common interests and topics, it is a shift in a positive direction. Similarly, his stronger emphasis on *interests* rather than *values* could contribute to weakening the excessive moralism and idealism of the current Czech Republic's foreign policy which goes against pragmatic cooperation with many countries of the international community including China.<sup>6</sup>

Tomáš Pojar's mission in Beijing was preceded by his visit to Washington in October where he met National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, his two deputies and several congressmen (interestingly, Sullivan arrived in China and met Wang Yi only several days before Pojar's trip to the Asian country). Such meetings between two counterparts are a common matter. But unlike the last year, the US side has not published any information about the talks. In October 2022, both high-level officials discussed the support for Ukraine, deepening defence cooperation between Prague and Washington, the Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union and issues related to energy security and Indo-Pacific.<sup>7</sup> Details

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<sup>5</sup> Aspen Annual Conference 2023 (2023, November 16). YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTNXNVCLRPE>

<sup>6</sup> Boubínová, M. (2023, November 6). Nechceme, aby se Čína dál sblížovala s Ruskem. Snad jsme k tomu přispěli, říká Pojar po návštěvě Peking. Deník N. <https://denikn.cz/1276524/nehceme-aby-se-cina-dal-sblizovala-s-ruskem-snad-jsme-k-tomu-prispeli-rika-pojar-po-navsteve-pekingu/>. Pojar v Pekingu jednal o exportu či obnovení přímé letecké linky (2023, November 3). ČTK.

<https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2435511>. Top Chinese diplomat meets senior Czech official (2023, November 2). Xinhua. <https://english.news.cn/20231102/0c5de06bf07f49209e0749ba3c258d6c/c.html>

<sup>7</sup> Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Meeting with Tomas Pojar, National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic (2022, October 14). The White House.

about the recent meeting have been revealed only by Pojar himself. The officials addressed the bilateral defence and military cooperation and war in Ukraine and Palestine.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it is very probable that Pojar and Sullivan discussed their stance on China and coordinated their agendas. The recent developments in Prague's China policy can hardly be separated from the intensifying communication between Beijing and Washington which culminated in the meeting between Xi Jinping and Joe Biden in San Francisco on November 15. If the Sino-US relations get warmer, one can expect a similar move from many other American allies inclusive of the Czech Republic.

### **In favour of restoring normal relations**

As far as the media coverage of and political reactions to Tomáš Pojar's meeting with Wang Yi are concerned, a noteworthy change has occurred. The initial reporting was marginal, following the information published by Chinese media and limiting itself to a short description of the national security adviser's trip without further analysing or criticising. A new wave of interest was provoked after the public television broadcaster spread speculation on November 19 that Prime Minister Petr Fiala was about to pay an official visit to China next year. Both Pojar and Fiala denied that such a visit was being prepared and the latter implicitly criticised the Czech Television for spreading disinformation. At the same time, nevertheless, the prime minister highlighted that the Czech Republic wanted to maintain "normal relations" with China as the allies did, adding that even if he went to Beijing in the future, it would not be anything unusual.<sup>9</sup> Such a statement, in turn, can be interpreted as cautious admission of the possibility of an official visit to the Asian country which contrasts with the downswing over the last two years. One can also speculate that the (dis)information about Fiala's future trip has been released deliberately with the aim to discredit the national security adviser and thwart any attempts to reestablish cooperative bilateral relations. Indeed, media attention to the topic rose after the speculation released by the Czech Television and journalists started to search for details of Pojar's mission to both Washington and Beijing as well as try to get opinions from politicians, businessmen and experts. But, overall, no anti-Chinese campaign has been

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<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/14/readout-of-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-meeting-with-tomas-pojar-national-security-advisor-to-the-prime-minister-of-the-czech-republic/>

<sup>8</sup> Prchal, L., Boubínová, M. (2023, November 6). Pojarova americká mise: v Bílém domě navštívil Bidenova klíčového poradce. Deník N. <https://denikn.cz/1276599/pojarova-americka-mise-v-bilem-dome-navstivil-bidenova-klicoveho-poradce/>

<sup>9</sup> Perknerová, K. (2023, November 23). Do Číny se nechystám, je to dezinformace, řekl premiér Fiala v debatě Deníku. Deník.cz. [https://www.denik.cz/z\\_domova/debata-premier-petr-fiala-cina-lekari-stavka-fico-20231123.html](https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/debata-premier-petr-fiala-cina-lekari-stavka-fico-20231123.html)

launched, which is also likely connected with very moderate and cautious statements made even by some hardliners.

In a flagship political discussion broadcast on the Czech Television, representatives of several parliamentary parties commented on the recent developments in the Czech China policy and speculations about Petr Fiala's trip to Beijing. Politicians from both opposition parties, that is, ANO and SPD, would welcome such a mission. More surprising, however, were the reactions of the representatives of the Pirates and ODS who did not oppose the idea. The head of the Pirate group in the Chamber of Deputies Jakub Michálek declared that they were in favour of the restoration of "normal relations" with China while Marek Benda (ODS) would appreciate it if the prime minister paid a visit to the country.<sup>10</sup> Benda's statement worth noticing for he belongs to the "hawks" in relation to China, being involved in activities aimed against China's interests for decades. Not by coincidence, the Czech deputy was awarded the Friendship Medal of Diplomacy by Joseph Wu in 2018. Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Markéta Pekarová Adamová, who has been granted the Medal of Honour for Parliamentary Diplomacy by You Si-kun this year, has not criticised such interactions with China either, considering it a "standard diplomatic communication". At the same time, she has emphasised the importance of political relations with Taipei, warning against the alleged threat posed by China. The most critical attitude has been adopted by Pavel Fischer, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security and co-chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC). In a recent interview, he warned against possible rapprochement between both countries, highlighting that the Asian country "is taking actions against democratic countries systematically" and that cooperation with Beijing would "put national security in danger". Fischer has expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that he was not informed about Tomáš Pojar's mission beforehand and afterwards either.<sup>11</sup> It can indicate that the position of hardliners within the political administration has slightly weakened, being under pressure from more realist and pragmatic actors.

Representatives of the Czech business have welcomed the signals of the normalisation on the Czech side. Entrepreneurs who have been interested in doing business with the Chinese have been under pressure so far and have not enjoyed any political support, quite the contrary. It has told on partial withdrawal from the Chinese market and more or less involuntary shift to

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<sup>10</sup> Otázky Václava Moravce (2023, November 19). Česká televize.

<https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/1126672097-otazky-vaclava-moravce/223411030501119/>

<sup>11</sup> Shabu, M. (2023, November 23). Čína utahuje šrouby. Ministr zahraničí by měl vysvětlit, co ve vztazích s Pekingem chystají, říká senátor Fischer. Lidovky.cz. [https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/cesko-cina-senat-rozhovor-pavel-fischer-si-tin-pching.A231123\\_114110\\_ln\\_domov\\_rkj](https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/cesko-cina-senat-rozhovor-pavel-fischer-si-tin-pching.A231123_114110_ln_domov_rkj)

other markets, for example, the Vietnamese one. It applies even to the most important actors such as Škoda and PPF (Home Credit). The decline in Czech business in China can also be demonstrated in the participation in the China International Import Expo (CIIE) where the Czech Republic has been very underrepresented this year for only several companies have taken part in the event. In response to Pojar's mission to Beijing and rising calls for restoring pragmatic bilateral relations, Vice President of the Confederation of Industry Radek Špicar expressed his support for these efforts, considering a dismissive attitude towards China "unhappy" because the Asian country was a key geopolitical actor whose role would be increasing.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from the official government initiative, former prominent politicians have also visited China recently. Former Minister of Defence (2001–2003) and Adviser to Prime Minister on China Jaroslav Tvrdík arrived in China in November together with former deputy chairman of the Social Democratic Party Jan Birke and other members of the Czech China Chamber of Collaboration which is headed by Tvrdík. According to his statement, Tvrdík had the opportunity to meet Premier Li Qiang to discuss Czech-Chinese relations inclusive of the prospective restoration of direct flights between both countries, trade and investment, cooperation possibilities at the local level and experience with the fight against the pandemic. The meeting was of unofficial character but the Czech representatives had informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the trip in advance and offered the state bodies that their visit could be instrumental in normalising the relations. Besides the meeting with Li Qiang, Jaroslav Tvrdík held talks with the representatives of the Ministry of Commerce, Province of Zhejiang, China Chamber of Commerce for Import & Export of Medicines & Health Products as well as CITIC Group. Commenting on Tvrdík's trip to China, National Security Adviser Tomáš Pojar observed that the state authorities were interested in greater details and welcomed the constructive attitude.<sup>13</sup>

Last but not least, former Prime Minister (2005–2006), Chairman of the Social Democratic Party (2006–2010) and long-term Deputy of the Czech Parliament (2006–2013) Jiří Paroubek took part in the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in

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<sup>12</sup> Koutník, O., Šídlová, T. (2023, November 30). Česko mění diplomatický přístup k Číně. Ústřední postavou bude Fialův muž. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-cesko-se-zase-zkousi-bavit-s-cinou-fialuv-muz-nehce-podlezat-jako-zeman-240651>

<sup>13</sup> Koutník, O. (2023, November 23). Tvrdík se setkal s čínským premiérem. „Víme o tom,“ říká Černínský palác. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-tvrdik-se-setkal-s-cinskym-premierem-vime-o-tom-rika-cerninsky-palac-240222>. Koutník, O. (2023, November 23). Tvrdík po schůzce s čínským premiérem: Požádal jsem o přímé spojení s Prahou. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-tvrdik-po-schuzce-s-cinskym-premierem-pozadal-jsem-o-prime-spojzeni-s-prahou-240252>



Beijing on October 17–18. The Czech government refused to join the Forum in line with its overall position on the 14+1 mechanism where Prague has suspended any activities even though, at the same time, it has not gone so far as to withdraw from the initiative. It is, therefore, positive that the Czech Republic could have been represented at least by its former prime minister. In an interview, Jiří Paroubek appreciated the attendance of Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin and highlighted the importance of mutual communication with all sides and peace talks on the Ukrainian question.<sup>14</sup> Paroubek participated in all three Belt and Road Forums so he is very competent to make comparisons and draw conclusions about achievements made within the BRI which was launched just ten years ago. Delivering a speech at the high-level event, the Czech representative highlighted the positive effects for the developing countries including the construction of key infrastructure, rise in living standards, new jobs and expansion of trade and business as a whole, which made the BRI “the most important economic project on a global scale at present”. In addition, Paroubek commented on the key foreign policy document “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions” which was issued in September. He welcomed such a strategy and emphasised China’s role in the developing world. Moreover, the former prime minister declared that he would wish the developing countries they follow the Chinese path of development and modernisation.<sup>15</sup> This focus on the non-Western countries on the part of a politician from the Atlantic community is undoubtedly worth appreciating because it helps to overcome Orientalist and West-centric bias which are still dominating in the hegemonic discourse in liberal democracies.

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<sup>14</sup> Laštovka, D. (2023, October 18). Válka na Ukrajině brzy skončí a Fiala přijde k rozumu, říká Paroubek ze summitu v Pekingu. CNN Prima News. <https://cnn.iprima.cz/projevu-putina-vsichni-tleskali-zadna-delegace-neodesla-vzkazuje-z-ciny-jiri-paroubek-415230>

<sup>15</sup> Projev Jiřího Paroubka na světovém fóru Belt and Road v Pekingu (2023, October 18). Vaševěc.cz. <https://www.vasevec.info/komentare/projev-jiriho-paroubka-na-svetovem-foru-belt-and-road-v-pekingu>

## **Conclusion**

The recent developments in the field of Czech-Chinese relations or—more precisely—the Czech position on China indicate that at least some influential actors of the current administration have started to be aware of the unsustainability of the country's foreign policy whose excessive value-based nature is bringing tangible negative effects. Nevertheless, one may argue that the decisive impetus to certain rethinking of Prague's staunch attitudes has come from abroad. The intensifying communication between Washington and Beijing is placing domestic "hawks" in an uncomfortable and vulnerable position. If both the US and China are able to seek common interests and a new *modus vivendi* under the changing circumstances characterised by the transition to polycentrism, it will strengthen those who understand the need for a cooperative relationship with China.