



# Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:  
Foreign Policy in 2023: Clashing with Reality**  
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# Foreign Policy in 2023: Clashing with Reality

## Summary

*The briefing summarises the main developments in the Czech foreign policy in 2023. At first, attention is paid to the normative level which underwent considerable changes with a new security strategy, defence strategy and other related documents entering into force. The analysis of these normative documents shows the rethinking of the external environment and the country's role in international politics on the part of the political elites. The amendment of the central strategies is inquired into through the prism of securitisation. The briefing subsequently addresses the revision of relations with Russia and China and concludes that despite its programme agenda, the cabinet was capable of realist considerations to a certain extent.*

## Introduction

The Czech Republic revised its foreign policy and external behaviour in the course of the year in response to the developments in international politics. The ruling cabinet strengthened the country's value-based policy based on a close alignment with Washington and tried to carry out policies of "de-risking" and "friend-shoring" dictated by the security and geopolitical considerations emerging from the strategy of countering the world's "autocracies". Nonetheless, this move slightly weakened by the end of the year as a consequence of the intensifying communication between the United States and China. It shows a high degree of dependence on the interests of the leading country of the Atlantic community.

## Security strategy

The incumbent government adjusted external policies at both normative and practical levels, adopting several new strategic documents inclusive of the *Security Strategy*, *Defence Strategy*, *Export Strategy* and the *Czech Armed Forces Development Concept*. An updated version of the *Foreign Policy Concept* has not been finished yet but its content will be derived from the *Security Strategy*, relevant international documents such as the EU's *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* and NATO's *Strategic Concept* as well as the government

programme priorities including the revision of relations with China and Russia. Before the adoption of the new strategies, the government frequently acted against the priorities and policies set by the documents in force. The need for a multilayered revision of the documents emerged especially after the war in Ukraine broke out in early 2022 which provoked substantial, qualitative changes in international politics and the world economy.

The *Security Strategy* is a central normative document which describes the overall security environment both at home and abroad and puts forward concrete policies to cope with what is perceived as a risk or threat. It is worth noting that the Western community of liberal democracies is depicted as the protector of the status quo, which is seen in the “rules-based international order”, against a “joint anti-systemic drive” by China and Russia. In other words, the current government tended to interpret international politics through the prism of a clash between “democracies” and “autocracies” and countering “autocracy” and “revisionism”. The document envisages a stronger focus on the Indo-Pacific as well as the post-Soviet republics arguing in favour of an active engagement in those regions where the vital interests of China and Russia respectively are being affected. Instead of a pragmatic, multilateral and multivector foreign policy, the *Security Strategy* postulates a one-sided orientation to the US, NATO and EU, which undermines any attempts to conduct a balanced policy.<sup>1</sup>

### **Defence strategy**

The *Defence Strategy* develops the basic points of the above document and defines a whole-of-society approach to defence. According to the *Defence Strategy*, the principal threat is posed by Russia and the goal of comprehensive preparation for a protracted “defence war of high intensity” against Russia is being set. Furthermore, the government apparatus defines China as a less imminent security threat but refers, at the same time, to alleged hostile actions carried out by Beijing against the Czech Republic. From this perspective, the country is to divest itself of “dependence” on the Asian major power. In line with the strategy, the government accelerated its efforts to modernise the armed forces to increase the level of compatibility and interoperability with NATO, expand the military staff and abandon Soviet and Russian technologies and equipment. The ruling coalition claimed allegiance to the obligation of the minimum defence expenditure of 2 per cent of GDP. Despite the lack of complete data, this

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<sup>1</sup> Zemánek, L. (2023, July 25). *New Security Strategy Passed: A Content Analysis*. China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2023/07/25/czech-republic-political-briefing-new-security-strategy-passed-a-content-analysis/>

threshold was hardly overcome in 2023. But the goal can be fulfilled in the years to come given some strategic contracts which have been concluded or are expected to be signed soon. It applies, first of all, to Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II. The US fifth-generation fighter is to replace the Swedish Gripen aircraft.

The Czech Ministry of Defence deepened cooperation with their American counterparts in many respects including purchases of military equipment and the Defence Cooperation Agreement which was concluded in May 2023. The country had been one of the few NATO members without this bilateral treaty before. Even though the DCA does not entail the establishment of a US military base in the Czech Republic necessarily, it creates conditions for such an action. In general, the document regulates relations between the Czech bodies and American troops on the Czech territory. According to some experts, however, the agreement is too vague and unbalanced, being more favourable to the US side, especially as far as the exemption of the American troops from the Czech legal framework is concerned. It is worth noticing that the DCA does not set any limits for the number of foreign soldiers in the country and Prague gave up its right to control individual troops. The Czech side seemingly made many concessions in order to speed up the negotiation process to the detriment of the Czech interests. Nonetheless, the conclusion of the DCA is in line with NATO policies and the crucial role played by Washington in the alliance. The *Defence Strategy*, adopted in 2023, elaborates on NATO's provision regarding Host Nation Support which regards the country. From this perspective, Prague is to develop capabilities for hosting large numbers of allied troops and securing their needs during the prospective conflict with Russia. The NATO Force Model anticipates the mobilisation of up to 500,000 troops within the first 180 days of the war.<sup>2</sup>

### **Military strategy**

That is why the General Staff repeatedly emphasised that both the national armed forces and society as a whole had to be prepared for such scenarios. In December, the government approved the *Czech Armed Forces Development Concept* which describes the current situation as a “turning point” as Russia “destroyed the illusion of perpetual peace” in February 2022. The Ministry of Defence argues that the probability of aggression against the Czech Republic is highest since the end of the Cold War, warning time of the outbreak of a conflict is being

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<sup>2</sup> Zemánek, L. (2023, October 19). *The Defence Strategy and Challenges for the National Military*. China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2023/10/19/czech-republic-political-briefing-the-defence-strategy-and-challenges-for-the-national-military/>

shortened, the country's membership in NATO is vital, new and disruptive technologies are transforming the character of military conflicts and a competition for an international order is intensifying. As the document was passed only at the end of the year, it could not have been analysed in regular briefings. Therefore, some relevant aspects are inquired into below. The strong points of the armed forces can be identified as follows: (1) involvement in the collective military organisation, that is NATO, which guarantees a collective and shared defence; (2) experience from deployment in military missions abroad and growing interoperability with the allies; (3) motivated and trained cadres; (4) development of operational capabilities in land, air, space and cyber domains; (5) development of capabilities of the Active Reserve as an integral part of the armed forces; (6) involvement in international exercises; (7) reduced technical and material dependence on Russia; and (8) implementation of unified platform chassis in logistics.

In contrast, there are many weak points which make the military less operational and more vulnerable. These include (1) insufficient number of military personnel and its negative age structure; (2) limited air defence capabilities on the Czech territory as well as limited ability to conduct accurate fire on long distances; (3) limited ability to adopt disruptive and cutting-edge technologies flexibly; (4) insufficient level of digitalisation and integration of the whole system of command and management; (5) insufficient mobility and operational flexibility of reserves of material and ammunition; (6) limited capabilities of combat support and security including a low pace of material modernisation; (7) underdeveloped and outdated immovable property that fails to meet the goals defined by the status of NATO's Host Nation Support; (8) limited ability to repair specialised military equipment; (9) the lack of an interdepartmental attitude towards the armed forces and its obligations; and (10) insufficient reflection of the changing nature of military conflicts. Despite unprecedented financial as well as political support for the Ministry of Defence and the Czech Army, the *Development Concept* warns against the risk of underfinancing, lack of cadres and insufficient development of the defence system as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, it turned out that the problem is not a shortage of funds but the inability to invest them in a systematic and sustainable way on the part of the defence sector.

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<sup>3</sup> *Koncepce výstavby Armády České republiky 2035* (2023, December 20). Ministerstvo obrany. [https://mocr.army.cz/images/id\\_40001\\_50000/46088/KVA\\_R\\_2035\\_Final.pdf](https://mocr.army.cz/images/id_40001_50000/46088/KVA_R_2035_Final.pdf)

## **Risks of securitisation**

In the course of the year, the state authorities tried to accelerate securitisation tendencies in a wide array of fields of social life.<sup>4</sup> In response to the war in Ukraine, the operation of several dozens of online media was suspended and some of them have not been restored yet. Mainstream media have focused on investigating “malign influence” from abroad and those actors who have ties with “autocracies”. It applies to business as well as politicians, academicians and public figures as such. This tendency has been strengthened by repeated statements about alleged threats posed by Russia, China, Iran and other “hostile” actors which are spread by a part of the political elite and security bodies. At the end of the year, it was revealed that the government was preparing a revision of the Criminal Code and those provisions regarding espionage and “unwarranted cooperation with a foreign power”. Liberal politicians and security agencies argue that the present legal regulation is insufficient in fighting external influence and domestic “fifth column”. According to the current definition, espionage applies only to the disclosure of classified information to a foreign power. The Czech counterintelligence agency, which is one of the main engines of the amendment, and the ruling cabinet want to extend the scope of this criminal act so as to encompass any activities conducted in favour of a foreign power with the aim to “endanger or damage the constitutional order, sovereignty, territorial integrity, defence or security of the Czech Republic or defence and security of an organisation whose interests the Czech Republic is obliged to protect”. The security bodies warn against communication between foreign agents and representatives from business, politics, state administration and academia. From their perspective, the existing or prospective network can be used as a source of valuable information for a foreign power even without access to classified data. Therefore, the Criminal Code should also cover these practices of “soft espionage”.

Moreover, the Prosecutor General’s Office and some other authorities have urged the government to make another adjustment which would bring about a substantial change in the overall security environment and further weaken the protection of individuals. The point is that findings and information which are revealed by intelligence services cannot be used as evidence in court so they may serve only as supporting material for the police during the investigation process and possible pieces of evidence for the criminal prosecution have to be obtained by the police bodies themselves. Even though the advocates of this amendment argue that it would

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<sup>4</sup> Compare with Zemánek, L. (2022, January 11). *Securitisation of the Social Sphere: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspective*. China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2022/01/11/czech-republic-social-briefing-securitisation-of-the-social-sphere-synchronic-and-diachronic-perspective/>

apply merely to such crimes as espionage, organised crime and terrorism, experts and associations of lawyers have warned that it would be a “fundamental change in the use of information from the intelligence services which can get virtually anyone to prison”.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, there is not a consensus on the amendment in the coalition and the Ministry of Justice denied that it would be adopted in the near future. In any case, both advocates and opponents of this proposal are aware that the main target of such a measure is the Chinese and Russians and their contacts in the Czech Republic.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, an increasing number of individuals and organisations criticised the government and state authorities for pressure on fundamental rights and freedoms. The accelerating securitisation has imposed restrictions upon the public and political discourse as well as research. The Czech Free Speech Defence Society published an open letter in December which addressed one of the most controversial points inclusive of (1) monitoring of state employees’ opinions in order to identify potential “risks”; (2) criminalisation of alternative political attitudes and their persecution; (3) delegitimisation of alternative opinions by labelling them as “disinformation”; (4) attempts to block online sources; (5) policies and actions aimed at “countering disinformation” and “hybrid threats”. The letter was signed by many public figures. The problem of securitisation and the discourse based on the priority of national security has started to be critically analysed by some experts from leading universities and think tanks, which indicates that a larger and larger part of society has become afraid of the risk of censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech as such.<sup>7</sup>

## Revising relations with Russia

Securitisation and the shifts in both normative and practical levels of state policies entailed a wide array of actions and adjustments in foreign policy. A revision of relations with

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<sup>5</sup> Břešťan, R. (2023, December 9). *Vnitro a BIS varují před „měkkým“ vyzvědačstvím. Chystá se přísnější zákon.* HlídacíPes.org. <https://hlidacipes.org/vnitro-a-bis-varuji-pred-mekky-m-vyzvedacstvím-chysta-se-prisnejši-zakon/>

<sup>6</sup> Malecký, R. (2023, March 8). *Nebezpečný nápad pod pláštěm války. Policie chce (už zase) odposlechy tajných služeb.* HlídacíPes.org. <https://hlidacipes.org/nebezpecny-napad-pod-plastem-valky-policie-chce-uz-zase-odposlechy-tajnych-sluzeb/>

<sup>7</sup> *Otevřený dopis premiérovi podepsalo přes 50 osobností veřejného života* (2023, December 10). Společnost pro obranu svobody projevu. <https://www.sosp.cz/otevreny-dopis-premierovi/>. Zemánek, L. (2023, April 19). *Countering Disinformation and Hybrid Threats: Recent Policies & Measures.* China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2023/04/19/czech-republic-political-briefing-countering-disinformation-and-hybrid-threats-recent-policies-measures/>. Zemánek, L. (2023, March 29). *The Czechs Are Afraid of Censorship: Arguments & Facts.* China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2023/03/29/czech-republic-social-briefing-the-czechs-are-afraid-of-censorship-arguments-facts/>. Eberle, J., Daniel, J. (2023). *Politics of Hybrid Warfare. The Remaking of Security in Czechia after 2014.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Russia was concluded. Interestingly, the document was not made public so one can only speculate about the exact content. Nonetheless, some journalists were obviously provided with the text as basic points were referred to in media. The Czech policy towards Russia is now based on the assumption that the country is an enemy which carries out hostile actions against the Czech Republic with the aim of undermining the liberal democratic constitutional order. The government asserts that the pre-2022 relations will never be restored and the principal goals can be defined as follows: (1) to help Ukraine to defeat Russia militarily; (2) to cooperate with the EU and NATO to strengthen the rules-based international order; (3) to contribute to the international isolation of Russia; (4) to support post-Soviet countries' accession to the EU; (5) to minimise Russia's influence in the Czech Republic; (6) to decouple the country from imports, especially of raw materials, from Russia; (7) to enhance defence and resilience and actively counter Russia's hybrid operations against the Czech Republic; (8) to reduce any contacts with Russia to the necessary minimum while providing support to the opposition forces both in Russia and abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the ruling cabinet in general and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in particular paid strong attention to Russian affairs in 2023. After it withdrew from the International Investment Bank and International Bank for Economic Cooperation, it resorted to imposing sanctions upon Russian entities and subjects based on the introduction of the national version of the Magnitski Act. The number of Russian diplomats decreased substantially, the Czech ambassador to Moscow was recalled to Prague, academic cooperation was suspended and the Czech side ceased to issue visas to Russian nationals. Despite these strict measures and widespread Russophobia, the foreign minister managed to demonstrate a certain level of pragmatism when insisting on appointing a new ambassador to Russia contrary to the position of the president, speaker of the Chamber of Deputies and other government representatives. Similarly, despite the suspension of imports of Russian gas for many months of the year, the supplies were restored in October and they reached record levels in the last three years. Moreover, the EU prolonged an exemption from the ban on imports of Russian oil in December. The country increased the imports from Russia in comparison with the preceding years and its share in the overall imports of this commodity was highest since 2012, accounting for some 65 per cent of

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<sup>8</sup> Břesťan, R. (2023, July 4). *Ruská menšina v Česku může být nástrojem politiky Kremle, varuje ministr zahraničí*. HlídacíPes.org. <https://hlidacipes.org/ruska-mensina-v-cesku-muze-byt-nastrojem-politiky-kremle-varuje-ministr-zahranici/>



imported oil.<sup>9</sup> These data indicate that the government failed to implement the anti-Russian policies in its entirety.

### **Revising relations with China**

At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was preparing a revision of relations with China. The revision is being kept secret but it is clear that it has several dimensions. First, reversion of the pre-pandemic China policy which was based on the strategic partnership and strong interest in developing cooperation in all fields on the Czech part. The incumbent cabinet suspended any activities within the 14+1 cooperation mechanism, did not develop any direct political relations and, on the contrary, warned the public against cooperation with China. This shift had an impact on economic relations and also on the policies of the central bank. The institution sold its foreign exchange reserves in CNY which amounted to 1.9 per cent of all reserves in March.<sup>10</sup> Second, the development of political and other forms of relations with Taipei inclusive of the controversial visit paid by the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies to Taiwan in March 2023. This line coincided with other actions aimed at meddling in China's internal affairs.

The adoption of the discourse based upon the strategy of de-risking and friend-shoring entailed attempts to expand cooperation with other actors in Asia-Pacific, for instance, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam. These countries were visited by Prime Minister Petr Fiala in April. The mission could be seen as a certain counterbalance to the utterly controversial Taiwanese adventure, even though it was not free of anti-Chinese considerations either.<sup>11</sup> Aside from the trip to Asia-Pacific countries and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the prime minister paid a visit to Sub-Saharan Africa in November which was of strategic importance for the Czech Republic. The visit to Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast and Kenya was aimed at

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<sup>9</sup> Kovanda, L. (2023, December 4). *Tichý návrat plynu z Ruska. V listopadu jsme ho z „Putinovy země“ dovezli třetinu celkového množství.* Lidovky.cz. [https://www.lidovky.cz/nazory/rusko-plyn-cesko-vladimir-putin.A231204\\_145832\\_in\\_nazory\\_hud](https://www.lidovky.cz/nazory/rusko-plyn-cesko-vladimir-putin.A231204_145832_in_nazory_hud). *Česko může dál dovážet produkty z ruské ropy, výjimka EU je prodloužená* (2023, December 18). Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-cesko-muze-dal-dovazet-produkty-z-ruske-ropy-vyjimka-eu-je-prodlouzena-242027>. *Česko využívá stále více ruské ropy, její podíl je letos nejvyšší od roku 2012. Není však v Evropě výjimkou* (2023, September 11). iROZHLAS. [https://www.irozhlas.cz/ekonomika/ruska-ropa-cesko-vyuziti-narust\\_2309111243\\_har](https://www.irozhlas.cz/ekonomika/ruska-ropa-cesko-vyuziti-narust_2309111243_har)

<sup>10</sup> Krejčí, J. (2023, August 9). *ČNB se zbavila čínských dluhopisů za desítky miliard. Juany z devizových rezerv zcela zmizely.* E15. <https://www.e15.cz/byznys/finance-a-bankovnictvi/cnb-se-zbavila-cinskych-dluhopisu-za-desitky-miliard-juany-z-devizovych-rezerv-zcela-zmizely-1399824>

<sup>11</sup> Zemánek, L. (2023, June 13). *Petr Fiala's Tour to Asia: Political and Economic Cooperation.* China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2023/06/13/czech-republic-external-relations-briefing-petr-fialas-tour-to-asia-political-and-economic-cooperation/>

developing political relations with the region and helping the Czech businessmen to expand their activities to the African countries.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite its value-based foreign policy and controversial programme, the Czech government demonstrated the ability to take pragmatic and realist actions. Petr Fiala's trips to Africa, Asia-Pacific and Central Asia can bring long-term positive results and contribute to shaping a global dimension of the Czech foreign policy which, overall, remains imbalanced and West-centric. The Czech side also initiated constructive steps in relation to Beijing in November, which calls into question the very idea of the revision of relations with the Asian major power.<sup>13</sup> It indicates that the political consensus regarding foreign policy might be weaker than many expected. It is opening doors to searching for pragmatic policies instead of dogmatic idealism which has pushed the country to the international periphery.

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<sup>12</sup> *Cesta premiéra Fialy do subsaharské Afriky* (2023, November 10). Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky.

[https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti\\_a\\_media/tiskove\\_zpravy/cesta\\_premiera\\_fialy\\_do\\_subsaharske.html](https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/tiskove_zpravy/cesta_premiera_fialy_do_subsaharske.html)

<sup>13</sup> Zemánek, L. (2023, December 17). *Turning to Pragmatism? A New Impetus for the Czech-Chinese Relations*. China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2023/12/17/czech-republic-external-relations-briefing-turning-to-pragmatism-a-new-impetus-for-the-czech-chinese-relations/>