







Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic political briefing:
Going to the Indo-Pacific:
Geopolitical Motives Behind the Czech Strategy
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Going to the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Motives Behind the Czech Strategy

Summary

The briefing investigates the policies of the Czech Republic toward the Indo-Pacific region. First of all, the current government strategy is analysed to identify normative principles, priorities, and goals before inquiry into practical political actions. It turns out that Prague's position is shaped by US discourse and interests, subordinating cooperative and mutually beneficial relations to geopolitical, security, and ideological imperatives. Attention is paid to the trips of the prime minister and foreign minister to Australia, India, and Japan, as well as the Philippine president's visit to the Czech Republic this year. These interactions are put into a broader politico-economic context.

Introduction

The Czech government places an increasingly strong emphasis on engagement in Asia-Pacific. However, this promising and rapidly developing region is often perceived through the prism of countering China and building coalitions of “like-minded countries” against “autocracies”. Such a geopolitical perspective and bloc thinking undermines the potential of any political initiative and contributes to creating or deepening divisions instead of building bridges, understanding, and mutually beneficial solutions. The geopolitical nature of the Czech initiatives in the region tells on the use of the concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” that has become a keystone of the US strategy in this part of the world. Concrete political actions are based on the Indo-Pacific strategy, which was approved by the government in September 2022.

Czech Indo-Pacific strategy

The Indo-Pacific strategy was drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs together with a strategy regarding Africa. Both Africa and Indo-Pacific have been presented as one of the foreign policy priorities of the incumbent cabinet, being a part of the Presidency of the Czech Republic in the Council of the EU in the second half of 2022. From the government's point of view, Indo-Pacific is important in strategic, economic, demographic, political, and security

terms, being a hub of world trade and economic development. The strategic document argues that the region is crucial for energy security and the production of raw materials. The securitisation-based perspective affects the strategy as a whole, for the latter puts emphasis on value and power conflicts between a wide array of actors from the region and beyond, defining Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea as key like-minded partners for the Czech Republic as well as NATO (AP4 platform). Not by coincidence, Prague highlights the need for closer multilateral cooperation between EU and NATO on one hand and the Indo-Pacific countries on the other, presenting itself as a reliable partner in the military and security fields, research and development, human rights protection and strengthening the rule of law. Advocating the cooperation with regional actors, the strategy envisages its limits referring to the risk of external interference into internal affairs, influence and information operations, cyber threats, creating economic dependencies, and leverages as well as the use of academic cooperation in favour of external powers.

The Czech side considers US its natural partner and a close ally in the region. In line with the American narrative, the strategic document speaks about China's "assertive and even confrontational attitude", while describing the socialist major power as a partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival at the same time in accordance with the official EU posture. Beijing is implicitly accused of undermining the "rules-based international order", violating human rights and efforts of revising the global conception of human rights. The document sets a "value framework" based on the country's membership in EU, NATO, UN, and WTO, and insistence on the "rules-based order". Prague defines four priorities of cooperation with Indo-Pacific, that is, partnership, security, prosperity, and sustainability, and 17 specific goals. First, the partnership is to be based on bilateral and multilateral relationships, support for "good governance" and human rights, and enhancement of rules, international law, and free trade. It is worth noticing that the MFA mentions Taiwan as an independent entity beside China and other countries of the region. It indicates the ambiguous position on Taiwan and the One China principle on the Czech part. It is accompanied by an explicit reference to the cooperation with AUKUS and QUAD whose role is expected to rise. Second, the security is to be based on cooperation in the field of cyber security, resilience-building, countering hybrid threats and terrorism, on security dialogue and prevention of catastrophes as well as conflicts. Importantly, security dialogue and cooperation will be largely limited to like-minded countries in light of the security interests of the Czech Republic.

Third, the prosperity pillar is based on promotion of the country in the region, expansion of Czech business activities, academic and scientific cooperation, and people-to-people

interaction as well as larger participation in the trade and supply chains. Fourth and last, sustainability has the following goals: sustainable agriculture, circular and green economy, labour mobility, environmental protection and green development, active diplomacy in the field of raw materials, support for regional cooperation and connectivity and last but not least construction of medical facilities. Addressing the connectivity issues, the national strategy refers to the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy and the EU Global Gateway while ignoring the Belt and Road Initiative and other high-profile projects of regional actors despite their prominent relevance and significance for all parties.¹

The EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, introduced in 2019, focuses on transport, energy, digital, and people-to-people connectivity. The strategy's aim is to contribute to efficient cross-border connections and establishing networks in the abovementioned areas, to strengthen bilateral, regional and international partnerships based on agreed rules and standards, and achieve sustainable financing for projects.² The Global Gateway initiative, in turn, was launched in 2021 with the aim to promote "green, democratic and secure economic development and partnership" through investment in and realisation of infrastructural projects. At the moment, the European Commission presents 35 flagship projects in Indo-Pacific within the Global Gateway, including but not limited to the construction of energy infrastructure in Bhutan, Mongolia, and Nepal, solar and wind energy facilities in Bangladesh, hydropower and irrigation systems in Pakistan, modernisation of a highway linking Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, urban infrastructure in India, critical energy infrastructure in Thailand, upgrading a hydropower plant in Vietnam, development of smart city connectivity in Indonesia and harbours in Malaysia and finally participation in the Far North Fiber project, that is, the implementation of a submarine fiber-optic cable connecting Japan and Europe through the Canadian Arctic and supplementing the FLAG and SEA-ME-WE 3 telecommunications cables.³ However, the actual realisation of set projects is doubtful and no tangible progress has been reached so far. The Global Gateway can be interpreted as an attempt of an autonomous global project on the part of the EU, besides such initiatives as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), launched in Tokyo in May 2022, or the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and

¹ *Vláda schválila Strategie pro působení Česka v Africe a pro spolupráci s Indo-Pacifikem* (2022, September 27). Ministerstvo zahraničí ČR.

https://mzv.gov.cz/seoul/cz/zpravy_a_udalosti/archiv2022/vlada_schvalila_strategie_pro_pusobeni.html

² *Connecting Europe & Asia: The EU Strategy* (2019, September 26). The Diplomatic Service of the European Union. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/connecting-europe-asia-eu-strategy_en

³ *Global Gateway - flagship projects* (2024). European Commission. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/global-gateway-flagship-projects_en

Investment (PGII), put forward in Japan a year later and drawing upon the Build Back Better Plan from 2021.⁴ However, these initiatives lag far behind the Belt and Road Initiative.

The prime minister in India

Following the introduction of the national strategy on Indo-Pacific, the government actors took active steps in this regard. In February-March 2023, Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský visited India, emphasising the country's importance for economic, security and scientific development.⁵ In April 2023, Prime Minister Petr Fiala paid an official visit to the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam and two Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) which are also considered a part of the Indo-Pacific region.⁶ These last year's visits were followed by both political representatives' recent trips to Indo-Pacific.

Petr Fiala visited India in January 2024, meeting his counterpart Narandra Modi (and Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi) and attending several related events. The Czech and Indian leaders discussed different aspects of bilateral cooperation including but not limited to nuclear energy, research and development, and trade. The prime minister took part in Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit which has been held biannually since 2003. This year, the Czech Republic has been one of the official partners. During the visit, Petr Fiala highlighted the significance of India for Prague in developing partnerships with democratic countries. Both sides addressed the security aspects of economic cooperation and the Indian representative expressed interest in cooperating in the field of small modular reactors.⁷ The Czech export to India hit its peak last year and the government is prepared to provide national businesses such as Škoda, Tatra and Baťa with further political support. From the Czech point of view, automotive industry,

⁴ *In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity* (2022, May 23). The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-in-asia-president-biden-and-a-dozen-indo-pacific-partners-launch-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity/>. *Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment at the G7 Summit* (2023, May 20). The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/fact-sheet-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment-at-the-g7-summit/>

⁵ *Ministr zahraničních věcí Jan Lipavský jednal v Indii o inovacích a ekonomické spolupráci* (2023, March 1). Ministerstvo zahraničí ČR.

https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/tiskove_zpravy/ministr_zahranicnich_veci_jan_lipavsky_3.html

⁶ 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/>

⁷ *Fiala se v Indii sešel s Mórdím, jednali mimo jiné o jaderné energetice* (2024, January 10). ČTK. <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2462421>

transportation, aviation, defence, as well as mining industry are promising areas in terms of future cooperation.⁸

In addition, the prime ministers issued a Joint Statement for Strategic Partnership on Innovation, declaring the will to upgrade bilateral relations to a new level based on shared values and approaches towards both the Indo-Pacific region (“free and open Indo-Pacific”) and the international order (“effective rules-based multilateralism”). The Joint Statement identifies several priority areas for further cooperation, that is, science, research and technology, innovation, trade, defence industry and cyber security, health sector, green energy, smart transport and smart cities, agriculture and people-to-people interaction.⁹ During his visit, Petr Fiala visited the National Institute of Medical Sciences and Research at University Jaipur as well as the construction site of the Marik Institute of the Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Cybernetics which is named after a Czech scientist from the Czech Technical University in Prague and is to be inaugurated this year.¹⁰ One can expect that bilateral relations will be deepening irrespective of prospective political changes in the Czech Republic for India will remain an important partner in the region who does not arouse political and ideological controversies and attracts attention due to its large market and demographic potential.

The foreign minister in India

The prime minister’s Indian tour was followed by Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský’s visit in February. This destination was part of a trip to the Indo-Pacific region including Australia and Japan. In India, the head of the Czech diplomacy met his counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, with whom Lipavský held six meetings over the last two years. The Czech representative took part in the Raisina Dialogue, India’s prominent conference on international relations and geopolitics. Interestingly, no representative of China appeared among this year’s speakers. Instead, some participants used the opportunity for spreading the securitisation narrative about decoupling and de-risking in relation to China. In this regard, Jan Lipavský emphasised the need for establishing new partnerships to mitigate interdependence with the

⁸ *Premiéři ČR a Indie se dohodli na strategickém partnerství se zaměřením na oblast inovací* (2024, January 10). Vláda ČR. <https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/premieri-cr-a-indie-se-dohodli-na-strategickem-partnerstvi-se-zamerenim-na-oblast-inovaci-211372/>

⁹ *Česko a Indie přijaly strategické partnerství v oblasti inovací* (2024, January 10). Ministerstvo zahraničí ČR. https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/tiskove_zpravy/cesko_a_indie_prijaly_strategicke.html

¹⁰ *V Indii vzniká centrum pro AI a robotiku nazvané po českém vědci Maříkovi* (2024, January 12). Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/zahranicni-svet-v-indii-vznika-centrum-pro-ai-a-robotiku-nazvane-po-ceskem-vedci-marikovi-40457075>

socialist major power. The top Czech diplomat is convinced that the country is excessively dependent on China, and Prague thus must diversify its suppliers in a wide array of fields including but not limited to chips and pharmaceutical products. Speaking at the conference, he admitted that, despite its capabilities and potential, India cannot replace China in these areas. Noteworthy were Lipavský's remarks about New Delhi's position on Russia and ongoing cooperation with Moscow. According to the foreign minister, India's stance is "still very sovereign", whereby avowing that the Czech Republic and a vast majority of the countries of the political West are not sovereign anymore.¹¹ On the sidelines of the Raisina Dialogue, Lipavský also met Tanzanian Foreign Minister January Makamba, proposing a bilateral cooperation in agriculture, health care, security and defence. Even though the Czech side weakened the former emphasis on economic diplomacy and pragmatic relations, which was typical of President Miloš Zeman as well as the government headed by Andrej Babiš, the ruling coalition continues this line in a limited form. Therefore, the foreign minister held talks with the Confederation of Indian Industry to promote Czech companies in IT, robotics, marketing, and food industry. Finally, he met the management of Škoda Auto India.¹²

The flagship car manufacturer entered the Indian market in 2006. The company considers the country crucial for its global expansion. Business in India has been developing successfully. A new distribution centre was inaugurated last year and a new car model will have been sold by 2025. The Indian facilities will be interconnected with those in Vietnam, which are under construction upon Škoda Auto entering the Vietnamese market in 2023. A new business plan based on a focus on ASEAN and post-Soviet countries as well as the Middle East is a reaction to the recent withdrawal from Russia and a decline in sales in China. Prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia was the second most important market for the company.¹³ The Chinese market, in turn, was in the first place in terms of sales. The record figure was hit in 2018 when the company succeeded in selling some 341.000 cars in the country. The figure decreased to 282.000 in 2019 in contrast to 191.000 and 94.000 in Germany and the Czech Republic, respectively, but China remained to be the largest selling market. Amid the pandemic in 2020, Škoda Auto sold 173.000 cars, experiencing a further decline in the following year (71.000 cars) when the sales in China were surpassed by Germany (137.000), Russia (90.000) and the Czech Republic (80.000). At

¹¹ Menšík, J. (2024, February 24). *Někde jsme až moc závislí na Číně, řekl Lipavský v Indii*. Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-nekde-jsme-az-moc-zavisli-na-cine-rekl-lipavsky-v-indii-40461880>

¹² *Ministr Lipavský zahájil v Dillí cestu po Indo-Pacifiku* (2024, February 23). Ministerstvo zahraničí ČR. https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/tiskove_zpravy/ministr_lipavsky_zahajil_v_dilli_cestu.html

¹³ *Škoda hledá náhradu za Rusko a Čínu. Zvažuje vstup do Thajska nebo Malajsie* (2023, September 25). Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/auto-skoda-hleda-nahradu-za-rusko-a-cinu-zvazuje-vstup-do-thajska-nebo-malajsie-40444652>

the same time, sales soared by 109 per cent year-on-year in India, even though the total number remained comparatively low, amounting to less than 23.000 cars. This trend is going on, being accelerated by Volkswagen's decision to merge three daughter companies of the German concern into a single enterprise controlled by Škoda Auto in 2019.¹⁴ Škoda Auto has the ambition to become a leader among the European car manufacturers in India by 2030 and control 5 per cent of the local market. It is worth noting that the company sold 100.000 cars over the last two years, which confirms the rapid growth.¹⁵

The foreign minister in Australia and Japan

The second destination of Lipavský's Indo-Pacific tour was Australia. During the talks with Governor-General David Hurley, Minister for Home Affairs and Cyber Security Clare O'Neil and Minister for Defence Richard Marles, priority was given to security and military issues inclusive of countering cyber attacks and hybrid threats. Referring to China, the Czech foreign minister warned against external interference in the internal affairs of "democratic countries" and appreciated Australia's experience and policies in the field. The government considers Australia one of the key security partners in Indo-Pacific, which manifested itself in the establishment of the position of cyber attaché in Canberra last year. The positions are set up by the National Cyber and Information Security Agency at the embassies. The Czech Republic has only five cyber attachés at present. These are based in Brussels (responsibility for cooperation with the EU and NATO), Canberra (Indo-Pacific), Tel Aviv (Israel), and Washington (US and Canada), and are authorised to exchange information with foreign actors and develop relevant contacts in the field of cybersecurity.¹⁶ The Czech side is also interested in military cooperation including possible purchase of military items from Australia.¹⁷

The security cooperation was one of the main topics of Lipavský's visit to Japan where his Indo-Pacific mission ended. Security was on the agenda during his talks with Minister of

¹⁴ Bednář, M., Lažanský, M. (2022, December 13). *Co stojí za poklesem prodeje Škody v Číně? Začal dřív než covid*. Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/auto-co-stoji-za-poklesem-prodeju-skody-v-cine-zacal-driv-nez-covid-40417198>. *Škoda hledá náhradu za Rusko a Čínu. Zvažuje vstup do Thajska nebo Malajsie* (2023, September 25). Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/auto-skoda-hleda-nahradu-za-rusko-a-cinu-zvazuje-vstup-do-thajska-nebo-malajsie-40444652>

¹⁵ *Škoda Auto vyvinula třetí vůz pro Indii. Malé SUV vyjede příští rok* (2024, February 27). E15. <https://www.e15.cz/byznys/doprava-a-logistika/skoda-auto-vyvinula-treti-vuz-pro-indii-male-suv-vyjede-pristi-rok-1413894>

¹⁶ *Cyber Attaché* (2024). NÚKIB. <https://nukib.gov.cz/en/contacts/cyber-attache/>

¹⁷ *Lipavský hledá v Austrálii spojence, jednal o kyberbezpečnosti nebo o vojenském materiálu* (2024, February 26). ČT24. <https://ct24.ceska televize.cz/clanek/domaci/lipavsky-hleda-v-australii-spojence-jednal-o-kyberbezpecnosti-nebo-o-vojenskem-materialu-346483>

Foreign Affairs Yōko Kamikawa, Speaker of the House of Representatives Fukushima Nukaga, and representatives of the Ministry of Defence. The Czech diplomat reiterated his appeal to actively counter Russia and reduce ties between “democracies” and China. In this regard, he appreciated the construction of TSMC’s first factory in Japan, which was finished in February 2024 with an active support of the country’s government. The negotiations show that both Japan and the Czech Republic share a similar stance on China and adhere to the discourse which sets de-risking and containing the socialist major power the top priority. Aside from the security issues, the Czech foreign minister gave a new impetus to the development of bilateral economic relations for both sides preliminarily agreed on launching a direct flight connection. In addition, Jan Lipavský inaugurated the 4th Czech Republic–Japan Business and Investment Forum, which is to accelerate Japanese business activities in the Central European country and vice versa. At the moment, Japan is the second largest foreign investor in the Czech Republic.¹⁸

Czech-Philippine relations

In March 2024, President of the Philippines Ferdinand Marcos Jr. paid an official visit to Prague, following Fiala’s 2023 trip. The president was received by all highest constitutional representatives, that is, President Petr Pavel, Speaker of the Senate Miloš Vystrčil, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Markéta Pekarová Adamová and Prime Minister Petr Fiala. It demonstrates the high priority given to the event by the Czech part. Both sides discussed a wide array of topics starting from defence and military and ending with agriculture and import of the Philippine labour force. The Czech Republic is in need of an additional labour force given the chronic full employment (de facto). The Philippine citizens represent the fastest growing group of foreign workers besides those coming from the EU countries and Ukraine. Furthermore, the Asian country belongs to important economic partners. In 2023, the Czech export increased by almost one-third compared to the previous year. Special attention was paid to cooperation in trade, investment, agriculture, energy, aviation, defence, and cyber security. Not by coincidence, the Prague bilateral negotiations were followed by a visit of the Czech Minister of Agriculture to Manila (and Hanoi).

More importantly, the Czech and Philippine leaders addressed geopolitical issues and highlighted agreement on the interpretation of international politics. Prague backs Manila’s

¹⁸ Lipavský v Japonsku podepsal dohodu, jež vytváří předpoklady pro přímé lety (2024, February 29). ČTK. <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2486238>. Lipavský jednal v Japonsku o bezpečnosti. Tokio se obává čínské rozpínivosti (2024, March 2). ČT24. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/svet/lipavsky-jednal-v-japonsku-o-bezpecnosti-tokio-se-obava-cinske-rozpínivosti-346696>

position on the South China Sea, aimed against Beijing's interests in the territory, and warns of the alleged Chinese threat to the freedom of navigation and trade routes in the South China Sea. President Pavel and Prime Minister Fiala, in turn, promoted Czech defence industry and its products which could be purchased by the Philippine side within the ongoing modernisation of the local armed forces. The Czech side is prepared to provide Manila with aircraft, radars, armoured personnel carriers, know-how, and technology transfers for the development of aircraft industry.¹⁹

Conclusion

Bilateral relations between the Czech Republic and the countries of what is conceptualised as Indo-Pacific have been intensifying at different levels. Prague's geopolitical considerations are the main engine behind these initiatives, being based on the idea of promoting the partnership of like-minded countries against alleged threats, especially China and Russia. Even though the incumbent government is trying to reduce "dependence" on the socialist major power in many fields, they are aware of the objective impossibility of "perfect de-risking". Nevertheless, ideology- and security-driven foreign policy goes against true multilateralism, creates divisions, and accelerates protectionist tendencies.

¹⁹ *Pavel s filipínským protějškem jednali o rozšíření spolupráce v mnoha odvětvích* (2024, March 14). <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2491762>