

Beyond the Hangover: U.S.-Czech Relations in the Obama Administration

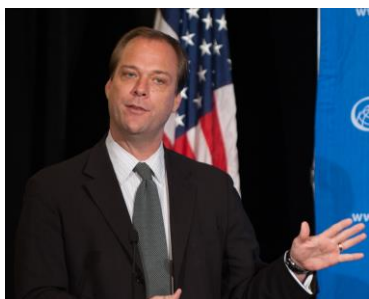
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Introduction

“Is the world falling apart?” a recent Carnegie Endowment study asked,¹ echoing many looking at a world where—at the time of writing—Russia continues to support cross-border attacks into eastern Ukraine, the Islamic terrorist group ISIS seeks to create a new caliphate in a swath of territory spanning Syria and Iraq amid continued killing, fighting between Israel and Gaza has left more than 2,200 people dead, a protracted presidential recount in Afghanistan lingers with evidence of fraud, Ebola rages in west Africa not far from where 200 schoolgirls remain missing after having been abducted by Boko Haram, and a Chinese military plane aggressively confronted an American plane in international airspace. Under these conditions, it is challenging to find the right perspective to ask, “What is the state of U.S.-Czech relations, and how can they be strengthened?”

It’s regrettably difficult to argue that U.S.-Czech strategic relations are as strong as they should be. In this paper, I will explore why this is the case and the “hangover” since 2008. I will review the debate in the recent symposium on the “Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and East Europe” released in 2009, as well as the impact of the crisis in Ukraine and Russia. I will suggest that

a renewed commitment to strengthening NATO and revisiting the notion of deterrence may offer a framework for the way forward.

Too often, I hear a conversation about U.S.-Czech relations premised on the idea that relations were strong under the George W. Bush administration until 2008, but have weakened since because the Barack Obama administration has withdrawn from Eastern Europe and from global leadership more broadly. I will aim to demonstrate that this is not an accurate picture of the recent past but a framing argument made by policy elites. This is not the place to engage in the current fractious and partisan debate at home about U.S. global leadership, but I will argue that this framing perspective can be detrimental to focusing on the shared challenges, values and interests at the heart of U.S.-Czech relations.

I’ve been asked to contribute to this seminar from the perspective of the Obama administration, but I must be clear that I can speak as a supporter and one who served as an advisor to the Obama campaign’s Europe and Eurasia working group in 2012, but not as someone who served in the administration and can report on its inner policy deliberations. My thoughts are most of all those of a long-term observer and friend of the Czech Republic concerned that our relations be strong, regardless of who leads the White House.

¹ Thomas Carothers et al., “Is the World Falling Apart?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 14, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/08/14/is-world-falling-apart/hkuw>.



Beyond the Hangover

After the attacks of 9/11, the Czech Republic was among the staunchest supporters of the Bush administration, seen as part of Donald Rumsfeld's "new Europe" that contributed in Afghanistan and Iraq in the global war on terror. Czech policymakers embraced President Bush's freedom agenda and were strong partners and thought leaders, perhaps above all in their work in Cuba. They eagerly sought to participate in the missile defense shield to address the threat of a potential nuclear Iran and Ground Based Interceptors based in Eastern Europe, all of which unfortunately led to the perception that Czech policymakers were close supporters of the Bush administration and the Republican Party.

In 2009, it wasn't difficult to conclude that U.S.-Czech relations were suffering from a hangover after the U.S. presidential election. Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek called President Obama's economic policies after the financial collapse "the road to hell" (startling and alarming his British and German counterparts who had taken different positions). A news story quoted a Prague bar owner as saying he wept on the night of Obama's election because "we don't want to be under the influence of Putin's Russia and we don't want socialism."² The reference to "socialism" neatly echoed the Republican critique of Obama during

the 2008 presidential campaign, but I confess I found it baffling—not for the Republican campaign advisers who were relying on the American public not knowing what socialism means, but for a country that experienced over 40 years of "really existing socialism."

In an unfortunate turn for U.S.-Czech relations, ten days before President Obama was to arrive in Prague for the U.S.-EU Summit in April, the Czech government collapsed due to internal intrigue, at the same time that it held the rotating presidency of the European Union (EU). Rather than the iconic image from the 1990s of President Bill Clinton playing a saxophone given to him by President Havel at the jazz club Reduta, President Obama dined alone in Prague with his wife. Unfortunately, Czech governments have tended to be unstable and inward-looking since that time. It's hard to argue that President Václav Klaus or President Miloš Zeman have sought to rebuild strained ties.

The Open Letter, Then and Now

The perception that East Europeans were wary of the Obama administration from the outset was crystallized by the "Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe" signed by 22 influential former leaders, including Václav Havel and Lech Walesa, only six months after Obama's inauguration in July 2009 (and supported by a grant from my employer at the time, the German Marshall Fund of the United States).³

The letter warned that, "as friends and allies of the United States," East Europeans were concerned about their security in the wake of the Russian invasion of Georgia. The signatories regretted the fact that "Central and Eastern European countries are no longer at the heart of American foreign policy." They warned that their countries were questioning NATO's ability and willingness to defend them from potential Russian aggression and cautioned that "support for a more global partnership with Washington in the region might wane over time."

While they said that they "welcome the reset" with Russia, the signatories also expressed concern that the Obama administration might be tempted to replace the current security architecture with a proposal for a "Concert of Powers" made at the time by Dmitri Medvedev. Finally, the letter called on the administration to "reaffirm its vocation as a European power" and to strengthen NATO's credibility with new contingency planning for possible new threats in their region. It warned the administration not to make policy decisions for the proposed missile defense program based in Eastern Europe on the basis of Russian opposition and to strengthen U.S.-European cooperation on energy security.

Recently, the Center for European Policy Analysis published a welcome symposium on the Open Letter five years after it was released, at which

² Dan Bilefsky, "That Big Moment for Czechs? Not So Big," *New York Times*, April 3, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/04/world/europe/04czech.html?fta=y&r=0>.

³ "An Open Letter To The Obama Administration From Central And Eastern Europe," *Gazeta*

Wyborcza, July 16, 2009, reprinted by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 06, 2014, http://www.rferl.org/content/An_Open_Letter_To_The_Obama_Administration_From_Central_And_Eastern_Europe/1778449.html.



Alexandr Vondra declared “time has proven us right.”⁴ In his essay, Vondra makes the argument I identified at the start of this paper: “Until 2008, the West under U.S. leadership was in an offensive posture, setting the agenda and delivering results...since 2008, the West has taken a rather defensive and reactive posture.” Vondra points to the worrying success of nationalist parties in recent EU parliamentary elections and “some statements from the new generation of politicians who incline to *realpolitik*” as evidence that the signatories’ warnings were prescient. Looking at Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, to take just one example, Vondra is clearly right that time has shown that a pro-Atlantic stand cannot be taken for granted in Eastern Europe. (This is not the place to review the divisions in Europe and the EU’s internal focus in recent years, but they are a critical part of the story.)

Vondra has long been one of the strongest Atlanticist and pro-American voices in the Czech Republic, and I’d like to respectfully reconsider this influential perspective in part by looking at public opinion data that suggest there is a gap between the framing arguments of policy elites and the views of the public. Perception is powerful, and framing arguments can have real-world consequences by shaping the perceptions and behavior of others. Just as things can improve through political leadership urging a positive focus on a collective

project, things can get worse when influential people argue they are declining.

Was U.S. leadership so strong and effective in 2008? My former colleague Ron Asmus, who helped lead the Open Letter, suggested otherwise at the time. In his response to a critique of the Letter, he argued that it actually was a “warning that America’s image in the region also needs repair” and that “much of the damage” had taken place in the years leading up to 2008.⁵ Public opinion data also suggest that there is a gap between the claim that relations were strong but have weakened and the views of the broader public.

Much has been made of the fact that George W. Bush was relatively more popular in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. A review of the German Marshall Fund’s Transatlantic Trends survey for 2013, however, shows that the standing of the United States has not declined since 2008, but instead that Obama and his leadership in world affairs are viewed more positively in Eastern Europe today than Bush was in 2008.⁶ For example, 44 percent of Poles approved of Bush’s handling of world affairs in 2008, while 60 percent approved of Obama’s handling of world affairs in 2013. President Obama’s popularity may have fallen from its nearly stratospheric ratings in 2009, but

recent Czech public opinion indicates, perhaps surprisingly, that Obama is the most popular U.S. president, more so even than Ronald Reagan.⁷

Did the Obama administration reaffirm its vocation as a European power as the Open Letter recommended? In his speech in Prague in his first year in office, President Obama noted the West’s inaction after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and declared that “the United States will never turn its back on the people of this nation.” He called for renewing NATO and for the need for “contingency plans in place to deal with new threats, wherever they may come from.” (Later in this paper I will review his recent renewal of commitments to Eastern Europe this year in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea.) Vice President Joe Biden visited Prague in 2009 and called for the Czech Republic and the countries in Eastern Europe to “become partners rather than protégés of the United States.” Former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, often noted as one of the policy architects of the rebalance to Asia, made 38 visits to Europe during her tenure and repeatedly called on the United States and Europe to strengthen their economic and security cooperation. Secretary John Kerry visited Europe on his first trip abroad and has been a strong supporter of U.S.-European ties as

⁴ “Atlantic Ties and the Late Great ‘Open Letter,’” *Central Europe Digest*, July 10, 2014, http://cepa.org/sites/default/files/Past_CED_Issues/Central%20Europe%20Digest%2C%20July%2010%2C%202014_-_0.pdf.

⁵ “Ron Asmus Responds to Heilbrunn,” August 29, 2009, Research and Analysis Archive, German Marshall Fund, <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/ron-asmus-responds-to-heilbrunn/>.

⁶ *Transatlantic Trends 2013*, German Marshall Fund and Compagnia de San Paolo, <http://trends.gmfus.org/transatlantic-trends/>.

⁷ Prague Centre for Transatlantic Relations, “Attitude of the Czech Citizens towards NATO and USA,” Report No. 5, 2014, http://cepa.org/sites/default/files/documents/Attitude%20of%20the%20Czech%20Citizens%20towards%20NATO%20and%20USA_ENG.pdf.



the foundation for a global order that advances both of our interests.

Much of the assertion that U.S. leadership has weakened in the region turns on missile defense and the Obama administration's decision to replace the original U.S. plan, which included radar defenses based in the Czech Republic (with one under the authority of NATO). Vondra does not say whether the Obama administration caved in to Russian concerns, as the Open Letter warned. Nor does Vondra engage with the assertion that the revised missile defense plans strengthen the administration's ability to address the actual nature of the Iranian ballistic missile threat. Let's concede, as there is widespread agreement that this decision was managed very poorly, but the challenge is the apparent disconnect between our countries. Whereas for Czechs missile defense appears to be about Russia, for the United States it is about Iran. Are we not both safer from a missile defense plan that is better able to defend Europe from a potential Iranian strike?

The missile defense debate also obscures at least a partial disconnect between the Czech policy elite and the Czech public, who according to public opinion may have been relieved rather than alarmed by the decision. Two-thirds of the Czech public opposed the missile defense plans at the time, saying they worried that it could lead to conflict or even an attack on their country.⁸

⁸ See Joshua Tucker, More on the Missile Shield: Why Many Czechs and Poles Won't be Nearly as Disappointed as the Media is Suggesting," *The Monkey Cage* (blog), September 17, 2009, http://themonkeycage.org/2009/09/17/more_on_the_missile_shield_why_1/.

I remember on a visit to Prague at the time seeing an enormous anti-radar poster draped down the front of a building directly across from the Czech Foreign Ministry and know how the debate polarized Czech society.

It should be clear by now that the reset policy did not lead the United States to embrace the Medvedev proposal (which was immediately dismissed by the Obama administration) or to abandon the Western security architecture or its commitment to NATO. The fact that Central and Eastern Europe are no longer at the heart of American foreign policy might even be taken as good news and as an accurate reflection of today's turbulent world.

The Challenge of Ukraine and Russia

The crisis in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea crystalized for some the sense that East Europeans were right in their concerns about Russia, which they felt had gone unheeded. As a Polish colleague said to me earlier this year, "We feel vindicated and it is a bitter feeling." Yet Obama administration officials have long challenged the claim that the "reset" represented a belief that Russia could be transformed into a natural and close ally simply through engagement, arguing it was a necessary strategic and diplomatic response to the poor state of U.S.-Russian relations in 2008. At first, it appeared to pay some dividends with the signing of a new nuclear arms treaty, support for increased UN sanctions on Iran and continued cooperation on Afghanistan. But after Vladimir Putin announced he would return to the Russian presidency in 2011 and all that

followed—his attacks on Russian civil society and domestic opposition, tirades against the West, the fraudulent election—the "reset" became obsolete and U.S. policy had to adapt to new circumstances.

How did the United States respond to the annexation of Crimea? Secretary of State Kerry was among the first Western leaders in Maidan Square in Kiev to express concern and demonstrate solidarity, and he warned that "Russia seeks to change the security landscape of Eastern and Central Europe."⁹ Vice President Biden and CIA Director John Brennan, as well as a senior U.S. Congressional delegation led by Senator John McCain, traveled to Ukraine early in the crisis to offer advice and demonstrate U.S. support for the new government. President Obama traveled to Warsaw for a meeting of East European leaders where he reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to the Eastern European members of NATO, saying "as allies, we have a solemn duty—a binding treaty obligation—to defend your territorial integrity. And we will."¹⁰

At the outset of the crisis, former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates warned that the United States had "very few tactical options"—none of which involved military intervention—to defuse Russian

⁹ Secretary of State John Kerry, "Remarks at the Atlantic Council's 'Toward a Europe Whole and Free' Conference," April 29, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/04/225380.htm>.

¹⁰ President Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at 25th Anniversary of Freedom Day— Warsaw, Poland," June 4, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/04/remarks-president-obama-25th-anniversary-freedom-day-warsaw-poland>.



policy toward Ukraine.¹¹ Yet the United States initiated diplomatic efforts to try to defuse the crisis, while the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations mobilized the General Assembly, which, somewhat surprisingly, condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea. NATO deployed an infantry brigade combat team to northwestern Poland, sent F-16s, tripled the number of surveillance planes along the Ukrainian border, and is planning a large military exercise in Poland this fall. The National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute—U.S. nongovernmental organizations—and the U.S. Agency for International Development were all on the ground in preparation for the presidential elections that led to President Petro Poroshenko's victory. The United States also sought to address the deeper underlying crises within Ukraine. The U.S. undersecretary for economic affairs led a mission to Ukraine to begin to help address its economic difficulties.

And Czech voices? The response to the crisis in Ukraine has seemed ambivalent, often characterized by a discussion of Czech sympathies for Russia. Czech leaders have condemned the violence in Ukraine, but President Zeman also surprised many in the midst of the crisis by talking about his hopes of bringing Russia into the EU in the future. Both he and Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka criticized the recent EU sanctions against Russia and raised the possibility that they may demand

compensation from Brussels for the impact on Czech business.

Has this been effective? The situation is far from being resolved. At the time of writing, Crimea remains (an illegitimate) part of Russia and eastern Ukrainian separatists, armed and supported by Russia, continue to control territory along Russia's border. In the wake of the crash of the Malaysian airliner in Ukraine, the United States mobilized European public opinion and the EU into imposing economic sanctions against Russia that some have called the most severe since the Cold War. To the surprise of many, even the German business lobby has backed sanctions against Russia.¹² Indeed, some analysts have already begun to warn not to box Putin into a corner from which he feels he has no option other than further aggression.¹³

Zbigniew Brzezinski said in April the problem is not President Obama's policies or actions, stating "I think he's moved intelligently," but that the president needed to engage the American people to build a consensus about the threat posed by the crisis.¹⁴ This continues to be true, amid competing

challenges around the world where questions about the efficacy of military force and diplomacy are hotly debated. Pointed questions deserve to be asked about how our policy deliberations shape the perceptions of rivals, as well as those of domestic audiences uncertain about the role of their countries in a turbulent world.

Making NATO Work Better

What is to be done? I'd like to suggest that Czech-U.S. relations should be strengthened by focusing on our long-term shared interests and renewing our commitment to strengthen NATO (as well as EU-U.S. security cooperation). Nearly 300 Czech troops continue to serve in Afghanistan, but Czech policymakers in recent years have often focused on smaller bilateral projects intended to keep the United States engaged in the region. These "niche" projects have not yielded results in part because they are a weak foundation for our security relationship. I see the basic tension in my friend Jiří Schneider's recent paper, where he says, on the one hand, that "there were no illusions that outside of NATO we could build a strategic relationship between a superpower and a small landlocked state in Central Europe,"¹⁵ while the recommendations nearly all focus on such efforts to create a sort of "special relationship."

¹² Derek Scally, "German business lobby backs Russian sanctions," *Irish Times*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/german-business-lobby-backs-russian-sanctions-1.1880956>.

¹³ Julia Ioffe, "The West Has Cornered Putin—and That's When He's Most Dangerous," *New Republic*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118890/european-sanctions-russia-putin-dangerous-corner>.

¹⁴ Atlantic Council, "Zbigniew Brzezinski: Obama Has Failed to Communicate Ukraine Crisis to Americans," April 29, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/events/past-events/the-eastern-edge-of-a-europe-whole-and-free>.

¹⁵ Jiri Schneider, "The U.S.-Czech Strategic Relationship: A Roadmap for the Future in Security and Defense," Prague Centre for Transatlantic Relations, Report No. 2, 2014, http://www.cevroinstitut.cz/upload/ck/files/PCTR/Publikace/Policy%20paper_Schneider.pdf.

¹¹ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, "Russian Control of Crimea 'Is a Done Deal,'" May 1, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/11/bo-b-gates-russia_n_5305500.html.



Poland has demonstrated that East European voices can be effective. Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski's speech calling for greater German leadership in the EU was, I think, one of the most positive contributions to transatlantic relations in the last decade. At the same time, Poland pursued better relations with Russia under Putin, while leading along with Sweden and the United Kingdom the EU's Eastern Partnership to shape the EU debate over Russia and former Soviet states. When violence broke out in Ukraine, former Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski and Minister Sikorski were at the forefront of efforts to mediate and address the crisis. Notably, Poland also has increased its military spending in recent years, currently spending just below the 2 percent of GDP commitment of NATO members. Some might say that Poland is different and able to have a more influential voice within the EU and on the world stage, but I would suggest that the influence of former Czech President Václav Havel long ago demonstrated otherwise.

Public opinion in the Czech Republic suggests there could be a reasonably strong foundation for such efforts. Support for NATO remains high, with 70 percent "satisfied" with the accession to NATO, and approximately the same percentage believe that NATO should be actively involved in the fight against global terrorism.¹⁶ Nearly two-thirds

(65 percent) believe that the alliance with the United States is important for ensuring their safety.

Yet the voices of current Czech leaders offer caution to those who would hope for renewed cooperation on strengthening NATO. Following President Obama's visit to Warsaw earlier this year where he promised new commitments to Eastern Europe, Prime Minister Sobotka said that he would not support more NATO troops in Europe, appearing to contradict his East European allies and sparking a debate in Prague. Revisiting missile defense does not appear to be the answer—when Senator John McCain recently floated the idea of strengthening the missile defense plans for Eastern Europe, President Zeman demurred.

The Czech Republic has cut military spending in recent years so that it spends just over 1 percent of its GDP on defense today. This prompted NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to express concern this summer, saying "it is a problem that the Czech Republic spends too little on future-oriented modern military capabilities."¹⁷ In response, Czech Minister of Defense Martin Stropnický suggested the Ukraine crisis highlights the need for the country's military budget to increase, proposing an additional 0.1 percent of GDP annually starting in 2015. While recognizing the challenge of proposing any increase in difficult economic times, this figure may raise questions for some

observers about the Czech Republic's actual perception of today's security threats.

Revisiting "Deterrence"

Making NATO work better will require stronger American and Czech political leadership, but it also raises the question of deterrence in today's world. Is NATO a credible deterrent against Russian military intervention in the Baltic States, for example? Some experts have warned recently that "if President Vladimir V. Putin doesn't believe that Mr. Obama would actually use nuclear weapons in an escalating war, then the Cold War model of deterrence could fail."¹⁸

NATO recognized the need to revisit the issue at its Lisbon Summit in 2010 when it adopted a new Strategic Concept that stated "deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of [the Alliance's] overall strategy."¹⁹ But the question is even starker in advance of this year's NATO Summit in Newport with Russian intervention destabilizing eastern Ukraine. Clearly political leadership and diplomacy to sustain a common front are critical, as dividing the United States and Europe can only play into Putin's hands, but how can NATO be

¹⁶ PCTR, "Attitude of the Czech Citizens towards NATO and USA," http://cepa.org/sites/default/files/documents/Attitude%20of%20the%20Czech%20Citizens%20towards%20NATO%20and%20USA_ENG.pdf.

¹⁷ Ian Willoughby, "Military spending must rise in wake of Ukraine crisis, says defence minister," Radio Prague, May 30, 2014, <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/curaffrs/military-spending-must-rise-in-wake-of-ukraine-crisis-says-defence-minister>

¹⁸ Paul J. Saunders, "When Sanctions Lead to War," *New York Times*, op-ed, August 21, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/22/opinion/when-sanctions-lead-to-war.html?ref=opinion&_r=1.

¹⁹ "Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, adopted by the NATO Summit, Lisbon, November 19-20, 2010, http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf.



an effective deterrent against challenges to the Western political order?

NATO Secretary General Rasmussen recently announced that NATO will increase its presence at new bases in Eastern Europe so that “any potential aggressor should know that if they were to even think of an attack against a NATO ally they will meet not only soldiers from that specific country but they will meet NATO troops.”²⁰ President Obama pointedly visited Estonia in advance of the Newport Summit in a demonstration of solidarity with NATO members formerly part of the Soviet Union. The development of new contingency plans in recent years, as called for in the Open Letter, represents a commitment to deterrence, as does the missile defense system now under NATO control.

Most agree that deterrence will require balancing military and diplomatic tools of national security, as well as new military tools. As former U.S. senior diplomat Nicholas Burns recently asked, “How can we deter Putin from further aggression in Ukraine and drive up the costs to him while, at the same time, keep[ing] the lines open to him on nuclear security, proliferation and Iran?”²¹ Former Supreme Allied

²⁰ Ian Traynor, “Ukraine crisis: Nato plans east European bases to counter Russia,” *Guardian*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/26/nato-east-european-bases-counter-russian-threat>.

²¹ Quoted in David Ignatius, “Crafting a strategy for deterring Putin,” *Washington Post*, op-ed, August 19, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-strategies-for-deterring-putin-from-ukraine/2014/08/19/9d9084d2-27c2-11e4-86ca-6f03cbd15c1a_story.html.

Commander Admiral James Stavridis recently called on NATO allies to provide Special Forces troops to assist the United States in the Middle East and to “recognize that the overflow of two or three different civil wars in Syria and Iraq should ultimately mean violent extremists coming back to Europe, and that means a threat to the alliance.”²²

“Pooling and sharing” of resources among members, sometimes called smart defense, is the focus of much of the policy debate, but the results are still preliminary given the unequal capabilities among NATO members and questions of sovereignty. Still, there have been some positive steps. Notably, the first new NATO Smart Defense Program the United States signed was for a multilateral aviation center in the Czech Republic, which has been a leader in the operation, training and maintenance of helicopters. The Czech Republic also hosts NATO’s Joint Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Center of Excellence in Vyškov and contributes to NATO initiatives like the Alliance Ground Surveillance program.

The contrast between the Ukraine crisis today and war in Georgia in 2008 highlights the challenges. While Russia invaded Georgia with conventional forces, it did not do so in Ukraine but has relied on a limited number of Special Forces that some

²² Gordon Lubold, John Hudson, and David Francis, “U.S. Attempts to Build Coalition of the Willing in Iraq Begin to Pay Off,” *Foreign Policy*, August 12, 2014, http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/08/12/us_attempts_to_build_coalition_of_the_willing_for_iraq.

have estimated at only 1,000 and that pose a different challenge to deterrence. Georgia reminds us that tough words are not enough to deter aggression (although NATO Secretary General Rasmussen and Supreme Allied Commander General Philip Breedlove have been among the strongest critics of Russia’s intervention in Ukraine). In Georgia, there was a country that desperately wanted to join NATO and a pro-American president ready to fight for his country, yet the West neither deterred Putin nor changed the facts on the ground after the invasion.

The fact remains that Ukraine is not a NATO country with whom the United States and the Czech Republic have a shared commitment to common defense. What the United States and the Czech Republic should insist for Ukraine is the freedom to choose its future. That may sound banal, but it differs from recommendations made by some like John Bolton (and some Czechs) calling for “fast-track” NATO membership for Ukraine, when in opinion polls a majority of Ukrainians have not said that they want to join NATO. And despite the powerful images of the protests in the Maidan, Ukraine is not united: analysts like Balazs Jarabik remind us of the complications from the competing factions inside Ukraine, regardless of what the United States, EU or Russia do.²³

²³ Balazs Jarabik, “It’s Not All Russia’s Fault,” *Politico*, April 28, 2014, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/04/a-tangled-web-in-eastern-ukraine-106110.html#.U_Sc_LQXihc.





Conclusion

This paper is based on the idea that perception and leadership matter in U.S.-Czech relations, and we are best served by focusing on our long-term shared security interests. President Bill Clinton famously advised British Prime Minister Tony Blair to pursue close ties with George W. Bush after the 2000 U.S. presidential election regardless of their ideological differences because the interests of a close “special relationship” between the United States and Great Britain transcended party. That is a lesson that might be reinforced today for U.S.-Czech relations.

We could start by encouraging both sides of the Atlantic to renew their commitment to our shared interests and values as the basis for strengthening our security relationship through NATO. Brzezinski’s observation earlier in this paper about the need to engage the American people on the Ukraine crisis is surely true for the U.S.-Czech relationship. Like Ukraine, the answer is not a narrative, which will be effective only when accompanied by policies that strengthen our commitment to bolster NATO’s ability to deter aggression, but it matters as it sends signals that shape the perceptions of others.

The United States knows that it cannot address global problems alone and seeks European allies like the Czech Republic, perhaps especially when it comes to sanctions against Russia, which has far greater economic ties with Europe than the United States does. Yet departing U.S. secretaries of defense have long led a chorus of concerns about Euro-

pean contributions to our collective global challenges. Former Ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder has said, “Europe is our most important strategic partner. They are the countries that...when the matter is at hand, will be on our side, but a Europe that isn’t capable to be there isn’t very useful to us.” While some might hear that and bemoan the question of whether our long-standing allies in Europe are “useful,” it is a necessary part of the conversation about the problems we face today.

Let’s commit ourselves to the Czech-U.S. relationship being part of the solution.

The views expressed here are those of the author alone. Comments are welcome and can be sent to the author at iglenn@usqlc.org.

