



Small States and Worthless Allies

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Earlier this summer in an unguarded moment, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski characterized his country's alliance with the United States as "worthless" and the relationship between Poland and the United States as "bullshit." There was the expected handwringing about the tenor of the minister's remarks and his graphic Elizabethan vocabulary, but no one quarreled with the truth of what he said. As is frequently the case with the brilliant Sikorski, he was completely right about the value of the American alliance to Poland.

From the perspective of Poland, the United States defaulted on its obligation to help develop the militaries of new NATO members and contingency plans for their defense, reneged on its commitment to deploy strategic defenses, paid scant attention to any country in Central Europe and dithered for years with Russia. Judging from the current situation in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus and America's drift toward the Pacific Ocean, independent Poland's security situation has not been this bad since the late 1930s. And, as if to rub salt into Warsaw's wounds, the U.S. State Department has made no secret of its opposition to the candidacy of senior Polish officials for leadership positions in NATO and the European Union. Given the facts, Minister Sikorski's comments are remarkably restrained.

Setting the Polish complaint aside, whether the United States is indeed a worthless ally and the implications of this state of affairs are important questions for countries like the Czech Republic whose foreign policy

emphasizes the importance of close military and economic ties with the United States. In the next few pages, I would like to address several parts of this question:

- What is the basis for the belief that a natural alliance does and should exist between the Czech Republic and the United States?
- Is the Czech strategy of enhancing its military and trade relations with the United States likely to be successful?
- If not the United States, what alternatives exist for the Czech Republic to achieve the same objectives that are currently being pursued by Czech foreign policy in Washington?

But before turning to the issues specific to the Czech Republic, I would like to make some general comments about the problem of small states seeking alliances.

The Small-State Problem:

As a general rule, smaller states prefer a security relationship with a distant power over the much more problematic relations that come with larger neighbors. As Mexico's geographical problem is often described, "So far from God, so close to the United States." Something along the same lines could be said about the Czech Republic (perhaps, "So close to Russia, so far from Western Europe").

Small states tend to seek the affection of distant powers to balance or offset the unwanted affections of their immediate neighbors, but this balancing game works best in an international system of many roughly equal powers. In the early 20th century, the great powers



followed events in Agadir and China closely for fear that their peers might gain advantage. For the same reason, during the Cold War, the post-colonial wars of Southeast Asia mattered greatly to the United States, the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China. Today, with a single dominant power, the Great Game is harder to play for smaller states, as Georgia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Armenia, the Baltic States and most of Central Europe have discovered. There is no great risk for the United States in ignoring distant problems because there is no obvious rival that could exploit our inattention (at least up to the moment).

In addition to the inequality of power between the small state and the distant power, there are also asymmetries of interests, which are magnified by different geographical realities. The Czech Republic might see a powerful ally as useful in controlling passions within Central Europe and in restraining the power of Russia, Germany and conceivably Turkey. By contrast, the United States might see all of Mitteleuropa as either a bridge to or a barrier against Russia depending on the policy du jour. Many Czechs might think that this is a distinction without a difference. But in the case where the United States loses all interest in what happens to Russia, then the United States has no strategic interest in Central Europe whatsoever without a Russian or Eastern rationale.

In short, small states are often frustrated in their search for a distant but reliable ally, beyond the obvious problem that "distant" and "effective" don't normally come in the same package. First, Great Powers are far more likely to respond to the threat of a rival than

to an alliance with a friend. Secondly, it is highly improbable that two states in different hemispheres will find identical geopolitical interests. The illegal immigration of Roma might be an existential threat in Paris and a National Geographic cover story in Washington. The only possible exception to the Iron Law of geography could be terrorism, which countries perceive in the same way across great distances, but even here capitals will differ on whether and when to fight in Syria, Somalia or Mali. Suffice to say, there are good reasons why the Czech Republic and Central Europe never found a permanent ally in their history and why most of Central Europe found an uneasy refuge in the Austro-Hungarian Empire as an alternative.

A Short History of Czech Relations with America: Proponents of closer ties between the Czech Republic and the United States cite what could be thought of as the Natural Law of alliances between like-minded democracies. This axiom holds that adherence to a common set of broad political values will engender in both democracies a shared responsibility for the defense of these values from which will naturally spring increased trade and various cultural affinities. In keeping with vintage Enlightenment thinking, Natural Law dictates this original state of intimacy, alliance and equality between democracies. But is this true and does it apply to the Czech-American relationship since the end of the Cold War?

Empirically, it should be quite easy to assess the foundation for and extent of the relationship over the past 25 years. For the purposes of simplicity and concision, I have divided the modern history of the Czech Republic into four

arbitrary periods in order to illustrate the salient characteristics of each.

1. The Camelot of Václav Havel: At the end of the Cold War, both parties embraced a shared set of values, but these were predominantly cultural values, which could be summarized as beer, blue jeans and rock 'n' roll and in the person of Václav Havel. Americans and Czechs could agree that 1968 was a big year for both the United States and the Czech Republic. That the Americans thought of 1968 as Woodstock and the summer of love and the Czechs thought of Soviet tanks troubled no one. Somehow, belonging to the same generation made these two disparate experiences analogous or even equivalent. The reasoning behind this cultural connection remains obscure. In any event, Americans embraced Havel as a secular saint, and the Czechs embraced America as a symbol of all the culture and consumerism that had been denied to them by communism and misrule. It would be hard to argue that this cultural comity was the product of closely reasoned political thought. The questions posed to this romantic alliance were surprisingly easy, and the answers were painless: Russia bad; Aung San Suu Kyi good; Europe Whole and Free; and Cuba Libre. In truth, these slogans can barely be considered as political values. Certainly, the presidency of Václav Havel accomplished a great deal in the development of a human rights agenda and NATO expansion, but there remains the question of whether shared values alone constitute a political alliance in foreign policy. Anne Applebaum has written critically on what she calls the "McDonald's Theory of



International Relations,” which holds that the feeling of interconnectedness will bring peace to the world. It is a longer subject than this paper allows, but it is worth asking if a shared opposition to anti-Semitism and recognition of the rights of the LGBT community and other minorities are the hidden structure of international politics or the export version of societal preferences. In any case, one could be forgiven for thinking that the romance of the Czech-American honeymoon could not possibly last.

2. The Frustrations of Alexandr Vondra: And, indeed, the relationship did not fare well in its first contact with reality. Nothing illustrates better how reality painfully intruded than the trials and tribulations of Alexandr Vondra in his repeated attempts to translate wonderful sentiments into concrete achievements. There was never any suggestion that Ambassador/Minister Vondra and his counterparts in Washington did not share and profess the same political values. But whether we are speaking of strategic defense, the visa waiver program or joint educational centers, things did not get done. The frustration of this period probably proves that political values cannot exist in the abstract; politics must be rendered in practice and in institutions to have a reality. Merely liking the Rolling Stones or admiring the dazzling president of the Czech Republic in themselves do not provide a reliable foundation for a far more demanding bilateral alliance. I suspect that this second period proves that Americans and Czechs share many cultural values but these values are not so detailed or developed as to provide a guide to the conduct of statecraft. This causes one to wonder what use

political values have if they do not lead to political outcomes, as the shared values between the United States and Czech Republic did not in this period.

3. The Arguments of Václav Klaus: In the third period, frustration deteriorated into argument. President Václav Klaus believed that he understood the political values of the United States better than the United States did, and he had a different interpretation of what these values called for. We thought that the values invested in a Europe Whole and Free meant more Europe, which was what we thought was the whole point. By contrast, Klaus thought a Free Europe could best be realized by less Brussels. And on and on. For the most part, Americans and Czechs never discussed the underlying political values in this period because it had been agreed previously that we shared these values, whatever the hell they were. Prague and Washington just came to diametrically opposed conclusions about what those values demanded.

4. The Return of Old School Social Democracy and Ordinary Populism: Finally, in the present day, neither Washington nor Prague makes any effort to pay lip service to putatively common values and our ever-strengthening alliance. President Miroslav Zeman may not be aware of these historical artifacts at all. Without favoring either foreign policy, if one placed Czech and American statements on Ukraine over the past year side by side, one would be hard pressed to recognize a common thread let alone a common alliance. It is certainly not the case that President Barack Obama considers the views of the Czech Republic before making a decision, and I doubt President Zeman loses any sleep worrying

about America's interests. In many ways, the absence of interlocking interests is a relief. In some ways, the current period is the happiest since the days of Camelot and Havel. At least neither side is forced to fake something that may no longer exist and may never have existed.

The foregoing argument does not prove that an alliance or closer relations between the United States and the Czech Republic cannot exist. It only proves that the case made for such an alliance—on the basis of a post-Cold War Enlightenment—that alliance is the natural state of democracies and has always existed in some form or another between the United States and the Czech Republic is false. To the contrary, political cooperation between these countries has been iffy and problematic for the past 20 years and has tended to see the Czech Government move from an adoration of U.S. President Ronald Reagan to the grudging acceptance of President Zeman. As predicted at the time, 20 years after entering NATO even the most enthusiastically pro-American country in Central Europe will be indistinguishable politically speaking from “normal,” inward-looking EU member states. Expressed as U.S. Secretary Donald Rumsfeld might have, from the perspective of U.S. interests, New Europe will be undetectable in one generation. Of course, the eastern states of Europe will retain their historical views of Russia for centuries, but the claim that New Europe will have an enduring relationship with the United States and a distinct voting pattern within the European Union (derived from its positive experience of NATO expansion) will have to be abandoned. The case of Robert Fico's Slovakia should cause us to be skeptical about



the claim that the United States and Central and Eastern Europe are destined to be allies. Just as Viktor Orbán's Hungary has laid waste to the idea that 1989 ushered in a New Europe in sync with American liberal democracy.

The Limits of the Possible: Not everything in the affairs of states can be inferred from past performances. With mostly unpleasant changes sweeping the international system, states will adapt to their circumstances in unique ways that will affect their disposition toward future actions and relations. For instance, the foreign policies of the United States have been profoundly altered during the Obama presidency. The pressures of an extended recession and jobless recovery have turned a domestically focused president into a functional isolationist insofar as Europe is concerned. As the Czechs know far better than most Europeans do, President Obama is not likely to support an expanded engagement with Central and Eastern Europe. His reluctance will only grow more pronounced if the Democrats lose the Senate in the November mid-term elections.

In terms of force structure and military aid, President Obama is most unlikely to stop the decline of military spending or take any action to offset the expected declines in European defense budgets. Even the deteriorating situation in Russia and the potential for a real war in Ukraine will not reverse the decline in U.S. defense spending and America's strategic shift to Asia. It is worth remembering that the United States has gone through the last year of Ukrainian crises without recourse to military measures. Indeed, President Obama announced on the first day of

Crimea's annexation that the United States had no plans or intention to fight for Ukraine or the return of Crimea. It is quite likely that the White House will conclude from the Ukrainian crisis and Russian aggression that sanctions and "soft power" are more than enough to deter aggression by Russia.

In these circumstances, proposals that require a foreign policy activism by the United States or military spending and security commitments are unlikely to be taken seriously or even read until there is a new administration in Washington in mid-summer 2017. Improved trade relations are governed by slightly different factors, but here too improvements in bilateral trade are held hostage to the successful conclusion of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations, which does not look possible until the first years of the next administration or around 2018. Foreign direct investment, on the other hand, is not limited by the political calendar, but neither can it be directed politically. American investors are wary of investing in Europe for three reasons: (1) the U.S. economy is recovering faster than Europe's and the dollar is strengthening, (2) political leadership across Europe, including in Brussels, is viewed as weak and indecisive and ready to pander to populists on higher taxes and penalties to business and (3) growing instability in Russia and the Middle East are seen as a negative for European economies over the long-term.

Thus, the three high-profile areas wherein liberal democracies collaborate (military cooperation, liberalized trade and cross-border investment) would seem to be difficult-to-impossible to improve in the current geopolitical context.

Nevertheless, there are a wide range of lower-profile relationships that are not affected by the negative economic and security outlook, such as cultural, educational, NGO joint ventures and exchanges, cooperative humanitarian projects, etc. Admittedly the avenues between democracies that are relatively open tend to be people-to-people relationships, which are rewarding but which don't have the same kind of payoffs for political leaders that state-to-state initiatives sometimes have.

The point remains that there is a wide range of potential projects that could strengthen relations between the United States and the Czech Republic and that vary in probability of success and difficulty of execution. If the past is any guide, the Czech Republic like most other small states most often aims for the project least likely to succeed and of the least long-term value. The time and political effort that the Czech Republic invested in the doomed strategic defense project is an excellent example of being punished by what one wished for. This outcome should not be a problem at the moment. While the United States has been maddeningly vague about what it will do in foreign affairs, it has been depressingly clear on the many things it will refuse to do, some of which have been discussed above.

What the Czech Republic Should Do

First: As the previous discussion suggests, the Czech Republic has often found itself the supplicant in an unequal relationship with Washington, and like all unrequited lovers suffers the pangs of regret and anger. The search of smaller European states for great-power protectors has a long and undistinguished history in the 20th





century. German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg phrased it bluntly during World War I when he observed, "The times are no longer for annexation, but rather for the cuddling up of smaller state-entities to the great powers for mutual benefit." The same might have been said at the end of the Cold War.

And herein lies the problem. Czech foreign policy vis-à-vis America has always been unabashedly reactive, retrospective and nostalgic and not always in a particularly attractive way. As the famous *cri du coeur* of 2009 phrased it, "Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, Central and Eastern European countries are no longer at the heart of American foreign policy."

Why should they be? Twenty years after anything, the world is rarely the same. Czech foreign policy has spent too much time trying to recover their pre-lapsarian state at the expense of a concerted effort to create the conditions that would lead to a new and more modern relationship with the United States. Rather than lay the predicate, Prague spent the last 20 years grieving for the lost past when Central Europe was at the heart of things. By contrast, during these 20 years Warsaw jettisoned its romantic ideas about the United States and hammered out a new relationship with Germany, while building an effective coordination within the Weimar Group, a robust economy and an activist foreign policy. As a consequence, Poland is today a de facto Quad Power whose opinion matters on virtually all European and Euro-Atlantic issues. By contrast, the Czech Republic's influence in Washington and presumably in Brussels has declined continuously since its high-water mark when Havel was president.

As Warsaw has done successfully, Prague should have directed its attention toward building the influence it wished to have in the future along the following lines:

1. Regional Organization: The Czechs seem to have an aversion to the messy business of developing regional partners and to prefer a kind of go-it-alone Czech exceptionalism. Great powers tend to notice groups and coalitions in much the same way that rivals command their attention. The rudimentary Baltic-Nordic coordination certainly got the attention of Washington, and the current Polish-Baltic lobbying efforts have had an impact in Brussels. On the negative side, the fact that Bulgaria, Hungary and Serbia can create a cartel in support of South Stream is something that all Euro-Atlantic powers have to take note of. From a political perspective, one could say that Europe functions more as a system of regional blocs than as an organization of member states. The tragic weakness of Central European states is their inability to build cultural, historical and geographic coalitions. In the not-so-distant past, the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Croatia were part of the same political unit. This is not to suggest the resurrection of a Viennese monarchy, but only to emphasize that a way to coordinate Central Europe from Warsaw to Budapest is missing in today's Europe. Prague, Bratislava and Budapest often still cancel out their votes on EU posts, budgets and foreign policy choices. From the perspective of Washington, allies who can bring blocs of votes to the UN, EU, WTO, or NATO councils get all the attention.

2. Strategic Leadership Positions: The Czech Republic has not worked

particularly hard to get its rising stars into key EU, NATO and IMF positions. Despite the excellent work of Štefan Füle at the European Commission, there is not the sense that the Czech Republic is aggressively competing for every open position in Euro-Atlantic institutions. The reason institutions matter is that the good words of the Czech Foreign Ministry on Cuba will be remembered at the State Department for an afternoon, but if a Czech were EU Commissioner for Competition that would be remembered for far longer. Of course, I am not suggesting that the Czech Republic threaten to have the Competition Commission sue Microsoft for \$100 billion. But if this groundless concern were to cross the mind of the White House and result in greater military assistance, how would that be a bad thing? The reality of politics is that decision-making is often opaque, and Great Powers will tend to seek relations with states and people who are in a position to further their national interests.

3. Comparative Advantage: The Czech Republic has an extremely odd habit of promoting its least-attractive attributes at the expense of qualities at which the Czechs truly excel. History does not offer us many examples of countries that have sought a closer alliance with the Czech military, including the Czech people themselves. Why would Prague propose its struggling and controversial Ministry of Defense as the flagship of an upgraded relationship with the United States? Of course, the Czech military has made significant contributions in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq, but this "volunteerism" has not resulted in the upgraded relationship with the United States that the Czech Republic seems to have sought. Not only does this emphasis on the military misread the



United States, it also repeats a common mistake of small states. Ironically, countries with the highest level of “volunteerism” in U.S.-led international operations, such as Georgia, Montenegro and Albania, seem to get short shrift in their relations with the United States and cannot escape their “small-state” status. For the Czechs to overvalue the significance of their military is all the more baffling considering that the Czech Republic has other areas of policy that set the standard for European states. The success of the Czech Republic in diversifying its energy supplies and vastly improving its energy independence comes immediately to mind. Not to put too fine a point on the subject, but when Sweden held the EU presidency Sweden had to retain Václav Bartuška to advise the presidency and EU member states on energy security. Considering that energy security after, perhaps, terrorism is the most significant long-term challenge for Europe, why wouldn't the Czech Republic emphasize its comparative advantage in this critical area. Why does Prague insist on military cooperation when it has world-class expertise in a multitrillion dollar industry of great national security interest to the United States and the European Union?

The comments above are intended to illustrate the conceptual problems of the Czech approach to strengthening ties to the United States. It is impossible to improve relations between hemispheres unless a country has established itself as a regional leader. It is a waste of time to adjust national policy to please a distant power if the aspiring republic has not placed its citizens at the top of the institutions that make future policy. And it is futile to try to build a relationship on an erroneous assumption about what

the other party wants. Relationships can only be built on qualities that the first party already possesses. Homely girls who are great cooks should avoid the swimsuit competition. So too should the Czech Republic avoid hard-power topics where its advantages cannot be brought to bear. To paraphrase Bethmann-Hollweg, although “cuddling up” is clearly preferable to annexation, in the 21st century it is better still to build a relationship on reciprocal strengths.

The Nordic region offers three examples of small states that have pursued an independent course and achieved outsized influence by making smart choices about geography, regional strategy and comparative advantage. Norway has maximized its geographical position and natural resources to carve out a significant trade relationship with continental Europe while maximizing its role in NATO and minimizing the encumbrance of the EU. Sweden has built on its central location and the talent of Foreign Minister Carl Bildt to become the regional coalition-builder and the arbiter of the foreign policy from the Balkans to Ukraine to the Middle East. And Finland has taken the weakness of its geographical position and created a major trade route between the European Union and Russia. In all three cases, closely reasoned and well-executed choices, grounded in individual geography, comparative advantage, regional cooperation and profit, have solved the small-state problem. Today, Norway, Sweden and Finland have influence beyond their size across Europe and the Atlantic, and the names of their senior officials are routinely on the short list for the highest international positions.

Conclusions: As I have argued, there are ample grounds to be skeptical about the chances of a significant improvement in Czech-U.S. relations. Among these reasons, the timing of a Czech overture is questionable. No president in American history has so repeatedly and publicly dismissed and downplayed the interest of the Czech Republic in returning to the center of U.S. foreign policy. President Obama's “pivot to Asia” is as categorical a rejection of the marriage proposal of Central Europe as one can imagine. The president's adamant view of the relative importance of Europe and Asia has been further reinforced by a global recession, declining U.S. Government budgets, the rise of revisionist Russia, the alarming spread of war and disorder, and the president's declining political mandate. Even if the president were inclined to revisit the relationship with the Czech Republic (which he is not) he could not.

Secondly, the hidden assumption that closer ties with the United States are little more than a restoration of the status quo ante is also hard to support. Apart from the admiration, high regard and, in many cases, personal affection Americans hold for the members of Charter 77 and the freedom fighters who ushered Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic to freedom, democracy and European institutions, we are all guilty of airbrushing our memories of the past. The early 1990s was an exceptional period, created by the sterling personal character of Václav Havel and his close associates, and as such is a misleading benchmark for the country's political development. As the glory days faded into the past and the Czech Republic returned to European daily life, as often



as not, the Czech people rejected at the ballot box the very people Americans admired in favor of some post-Communist hack or garden-variety populist. It is perhaps true that the Czech political class has never been as loathsome as Viktor Orbán can be when he puts his mind to it or as mad as the Kaczyński brothers have been after a few drinks, but Mirek Topolánek, Petr Nečas and Miroslav Zeman did not make much of a mark as European statesmen. If we examine the record of the last 20 years closely—apart from strong cultural ties and enduring personal friendships—relations between Prague and Washington have been up and down, by which I mean normal in the Central European sense of “mediocre.” This is not to say relations cannot be improved but it is to say relations have not fallen from some Olympian heights.

Thirdly, this deliberate misremembering of the past has blinded us to the truth of Radosław Sikorski’s criticism. The United States is indeed a “worthless ally” at the moment. Some of this is due to compelling structural reasons: the geography of Central Europe, the asymmetry of power, and the shifting correlation of power and interest worldwide. There are also a range of coincidental factors, such as recession, party preferences and demographics, which cause the United States to have entered into an extended period of functional isolationism. Isolationism and Democratic presidents are much like the common cold; there is nothing to do except wait until it’s over. In this sense, the Czech Republic would have been better advised to follow a course broadly independent of U.S. foreign policy earlier and more aggressively, as suggested by

the example of Poland, in an effort to strengthen its standing and attractiveness in international politics. As was once said of NATO membership, “You get it when you no longer need it.”

Apart from the facts that the Czech Republic never had such a great relationship with the United States in the past, that President Obama has already rejected closer relations, and that the United States is a worthless ally anyway, there is the problem of what a closer relationship the Czech Republic could hope to achieve. As I have argued, the high-profile subjects of international cooperation (military alliance and liberalized trade) are severely constrained by budgets and both are market-weary. Either would require expenditures of cash and political capital beyond the capacity of the Czech Republic for an uncertain result. In this situation, the Czech Republic faces a multiyear effort to reinvent the idea of a unified Central Europe, to build a team within Euro-Atlantic institutions, and to develop an area of cooperation in which the Czech Republic excels and which will resonant with the broader European public. In short, there has to be a clear and quantifiable payoff. In my view, if the Czech Republic intends to court an America ally that sees “soft power” as central to its future relationship with Europe, then energy security is possibly the most powerful of the “soft powers” and has the added benefit of being profitable.

The best and possibly only way for the Czech Republic to command the attention of the United States and other allies is to provide a solution or part of a solution to a problem that the United States and the European Union have not been able to fix. The Czech model of energy diversity

and security is one example of a partial solution. We already know that the next president of the United States will find a file on the vexing problem of Europe’s energy security when he or she reaches his or her desk at the White House. That would be the time to introduce new ideas from Prague.

