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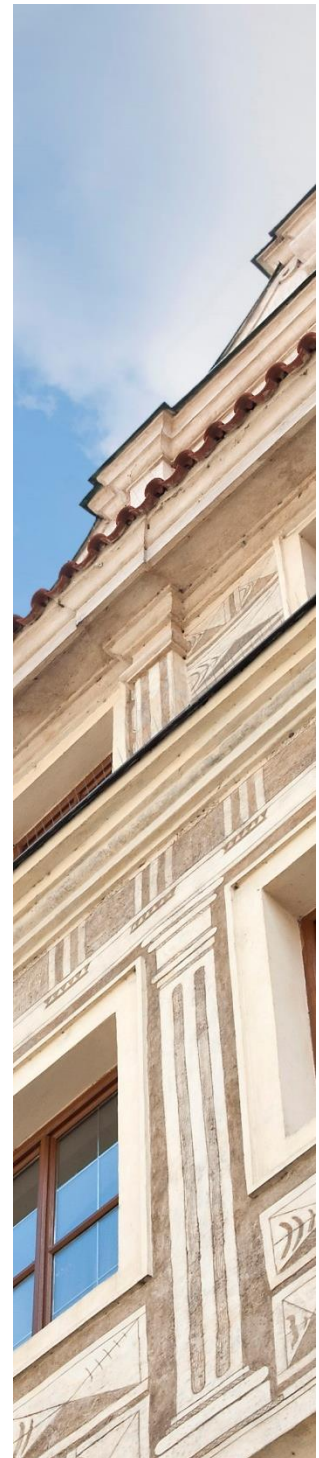
# The Czech-German Strategic Dialogue: Assessment of Current State and Future Prospects

## ABSTRACT

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This discussion paper seeks to examine such **competing evaluations of the current state and future prospects of the CGSD**. Partly this focus on the future is due to the ongoing nature of the work in the various working groups of the CGSD, which it is difficult or too soon to judge but also because of the predominance of underlying and overarching issues that will continue to affect the success- or otherwise – of the dialogue regardless of the specific decisions made by the working groups and the eventual review of their work that will be conducted in 2017. Also in keeping with the terms of the project, the discussion paper does not provide historical background to, nor a legal overview of the dialogue, but instead examines the current state and future potential of the dialogue to serve and fulfil the common values and interests of the partners in both bilateral and regional terms.

This assessment is informed by the conceptual framework for evaluating the strategic partnerships of the Czech Republic that was devised in an earlier report



(on conceptualising strategic partnerships in general). The current discussion paper draws on this framework – and presents relevant aspects of it in Chapter 2, adapted for the specific purpose of this discussion paper – but also contextualises the present and future of this specific partnership and its new expression in the CGSD in light of a variety of issues that arose in the course of the research conducted on Czech-German relations but which also have wider and deeper impacts and implications for Czech (and German) domestic, European and foreign policy. This approach allows for an in-depth look not only at the relationship itself but its present contingencies and conditions of possibly and how these may need to be changed or challenged if the CGSD is to deliver on its potential and the Czech Republic and Germany are to truly become strategic partners. **The discussion paper also recognises that the focus on ‘strategy’ is not the sole concern in Czech-German relations and that the CGSD has had positive impacts on these relations in more general terms. However, given the very branding of this dialogue as ‘Strategic’, the dialogue must either be evaluated on these terms or will force a re-think what is considered strategic in and by the two countries.**

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# 1. Introduction: A New Hope or A Paper Tiger?

Despite Germany being one of seven countries identified as strategic partners of the Czech Republic, and having been first labelled as such in 2011<sup>1</sup> there was, until recently, no contractual document governing bilateral relations between the two countries that could be considered strategic. Nonetheless, as a recent report on conceptualising Czech strategic partnerships in general noted, “Germany is considered the quintessential strategic partner of the Czech Republic”.<sup>2</sup> This status – and an intensification of bilateral relations, which several observers have attributed to a positive shift in the Czech Republic (CR)’s attitude towards the EU – was reflected in the June 2015 launch of the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue (CGSD). The CGSD represents the second-highest level of relations that Germany has with another state<sup>3</sup> (below only Government-Government [G2G]) and, as this status is unique, has been heralded as a major stepping-up of the strategic character of the Czech-German strategic relations. As the aforementioned report claimed, “the dialogue’s breadth, ambition and innovative character testify to the strategic and forward-looking quality of the relationship as perceived by both partners”.<sup>4</sup>

However, while the CGSD certainly represents a **declarative upgrading of relations** between the countries, whether it can actually deliver on the strategic level is a matter of some contention among experts in the field and observers of and participants in the process. Some point to strategic differences or to imbalanced expectations and other asymmetries that have hindered the dialogue from the outset and which will prevent it from fulfilling its potential in future. Others see a lack of political commitment or even a void in Czech strategic and foreign policy thinking that will prevent the CGSD from fostering a truly strategic relationship. However, many observers and participants are willing to give the new format the benefit of the doubt as a **politics of possibility** – a clever device to **allow a strategic dimension to emerge over time**, or which can **provide a platform to protect the relationship between the two countries in turbulent times**. They point to the inclusion of discussion of the migration crisis in the CGSD, despite serious divergence in the two countries’ approaches to this issue, as evidence of the value of the dialogue in this regard. This may, however, indicate that, in the absence of

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Czech Republic* (Prague, 2011), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Michal Šimečka and Benjamin Tallis, “Strategická Partnerství v Zahraniční politice České republiky,” *TAČR TB940MZV003/MP04*, 2016, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Interview by the Authors, representative of the German Embassy in Prague.

<sup>4</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”, p. 8.

greater possibilities for genuinely strategic cooperation, **for the time being at least the dialogue itself is the strategy.**

In keeping with the remit outlined in the terms of the project of which it is a part, this discussion paper seeks to examine such **competing evaluations of the current state and future prospects of the CGSD.** Partly this focus on the future is due to the ongoing nature of the work in the various working groups of the CGSD, which it is difficult or too soon to judge but also because of the predominance of underlying and overarching issues that will continue to affect the success- or otherwise – of the dialogue regardless of the specific decisions made by the working groups and the eventual review of their work that will be conducted in 2017. Also in keeping with the terms of the project, the discussion paper does not provide historical background to, nor a legal overview of the dialogue, but instead examines the current state and future potential of the dialogue to serve and fulfil the common values and interests of the partners in both bilateral and regional terms.

This assessment is informed by the conceptual framework for evaluating the strategic partnerships of the Czech Republic that was devised in an earlier report (on conceptualising strategic partnerships in general)<sup>5</sup>. The current discussion paper draws on this framework – and presents relevant aspects of it in Chapter 2, adapted for the specific purpose of this discussion paper – but also contextualises the present and future of this specific partnership and its new expression in the CGSD in light of a variety of issues that arose in the course of the research conducted on Czech-German relations but which also have wider and deeper impacts and implications for Czech (and German) domestic, European and foreign policy. This approach allows for an in-depth look not only at the relationship itself but its present contingencies and conditions of possibly and how these may need to be changed or challenged if the CGSD is to deliver on its potential and the Czech Republic and Germany are to truly become strategic partners. **The discussion paper also recognises that the focus on ‘strategy’ is not the sole concern in Czech-German relations and that the CGSD has had positive impacts on these relations in more general terms. However, given the very branding of this dialogue as ‘Strategic’, the dialogue must either be evaluated on these terms or will force a re-think what is considered strategic in and by the two countries.**

### **Outline**

Recognising that this discussion paper will have a different, if overlapping readership than the general conceptual report on strategic partnerships, the next chapter (2) integrates and summarises the relevant aspects of the framework that

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

was produced for analysing and conceptualising strategic partnerships in general and adapts them to the Czech-German case. This is useful in setting the scene for the evaluation and assessment that follows but also for refining the framework and focusing it on the matter at hand, while retaining its transferable analytical comparability to other relationships and partnerships. The framework, which draws on a variety of ways of understanding strategic partnerships, their features and purposes, is then employed in chapter 3 which provides an assessment of the CGSD in its current form but also looks at its future prospects. This analytical section assesses the origins, purposes, manifestations and prospects of the CGSD and draws upon plural approaches to international relations to evaluate the CGSD on its own terms and in relation to broader and deeper criteria. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes by drawing these analyses together and identifying key strengths and weaknesses of as well as opportunities and threats to the dialogue. Recommendations are then provided that seek to capitalise on the positives and mitigate the negatives of current arrangements and to improve the strategic character of the relationship between the Czech Republic and Germany, while taking into account the political implications and impacts of such strategic work.

## 2. Framework for Analysing & Assessing Czech-German Strategic Relations

The notion of strategic partnerships (of which the CGSD is considered a variant, given that Germany was previously identified as a strategic partner) is, perhaps surprisingly, an underexplored concept in both the practice and academic study of international relations. This chapter briefly reviews some of the extant literature in the field and presents a framework that has been recently developed specifically for the purpose of evaluating strategic partnerships in the Czech context. The first section introduces different ways of looking at the *purposes or functions* of strategic partnerships, before the second section explores the concept of strategic partnership from the *perspectives* of different schools of thought. The third section then introduces the key *elements* of the conceptual framework for evaluating strategic partnerships that was developed from this background material and which will be used to assess the current state and future prospects of the CGSD. Finally, some additional – and deeper and broader – *evaluative* points are highlighted in order to set the scene for the specific assessment of the CGSD that follows in Chapter 3. The highlights of the literature review in relation to purposes and perspectives of strategic partnerships are presented here in addition to the key elements of the conceptual framework in order to provide the foundation for the assessment in Chapter 3 and to explain the reasoning behind it as well as to elaborate on some of the aspects of it that are of greatest relevance and significance for evaluating the CGSD.

### 2.1. Purposes and Functions of Strategic Partnerships

The first question that it is necessary to ask in evaluating or assessing a strategic partnership – and the CGSD – is what is the point of it? What is the purpose or intended function of elevating this particular bilateral relation to a higher status than relations with other states? Drawing on the existing literature on strategic partnerships and on examples of their use in practice<sup>6</sup>, identify three key purposes of strategic partnerships: I) To enhance the relationship between the two countries for its own sake – for the value or potential value that the relationship itself is seen to hold; II) To order and discern the foreign policy priorities of the states in the partnership; III) To produce or cultivate a particular foreign policy identity for the states in the partnership.

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<sup>6</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”.

- i) In the first view, the main reason for pursuing and implementing a strategic partnership is relational – **to invest into the relationship itself** through a (semi-)formalised partnership. There are a variety of formats that this could take, with greater or lesser flexibility and institutionalisation, but the purpose is clear – to either firm up a nascent relationship, safeguard or develop an existent relationship or invest into the future of the partnership between the states or entities in question. This understanding of partnership goes beyond tactical or transactional concerns which would rather be an instrumental use of partnership for a short-term or particular gain (such as a particular arms deal, investment opportunity or trade concession), but rather looks at the relationship as having the potential to deliver strategic value. This strategic value may stem from having, e.g., similar worldviews, common global or regional goals, harmonious normative approaches and aims, shared security assessments or long term congruence in social, cultural or economic affairs. Thus closer cooperation, in the form of partnership, should serve the realisation of national interests or the affirmation of core values and formalising this relationship can help to divert political capital and attention to the relationship. The agreement of shared goals and the formalisation of methods of pursuing them, as well as e.g. formats for dialogue, can help bring greater depth and rootedness (to the relationship but can also be accompanied by the broadening of cooperation from the area of key initial shared interest or value to other areas where this is either seen to potentially make sense or which comes to make sense as the relationship intensifies. The entrenching of bilateral relations in a fuller institutional framework can help spur intensified interaction but also heightened trust between the partners who become more closely socialised to each other. This in turn helps to foster stakeholders and guardians of the relationship who are invested in making the partnership work. All of this strengthens the partnership and gives it the potential to overcome difficult times or challenges as well as to cope with misunderstandings and manage disagreements constructively.
- ii) A second function of strategic partnership is to help **order and discern the foreign policy priorities** of the partners through the very act of partnering. The logics of partnership noted above (i) mean that by taking the agglomeration of a country's strategic relations, its geographic, thematic or normative strategic objectives should be clear and should form some sort of hierarchical order. These objectives may (also) be laid out in documents such as a Security or Competitiveness Strategy or a Foreign Policy Concept which should be coherent with and complement rather than contradict the country's choice of strategic partners. Both partnerships and objectives are subject to – and influenced by – the defined and declared – as well as implicit – national or state values and interests but also by material and resource constraints, legal commitments and multilateral obligations such as membership of particular institutions or organisations. Nonetheless, by choosing some countries to be strategic partners and therefore elevating relations with them above those countries that are not chosen as partners,

national strategic priorities and objectives are reinforced, altered or clarified. These choices are signs to other external actors but also to domestic actors as they should foster enhanced coordination between ministries and government agencies. As the previous report put it “in sum, strategic partnerships provide a platform – alongside strategic planning documents – for instilling structure into a country’s foreign policy”<sup>7</sup>.

- iii) Thirdly, strategic partnerships can help a country to **produce and/or cultivate a particular foreign policy identity**. This is clearly – and closely – connected to the first two functions but rather than being about specific relationships or strategic objectives, it concerns what kind of actor the country sees itself as being but also how it is seen by others. It may be that a country seeks to play – such as a ‘regional hegemon’, a ‘bridge-builder’, a ‘global player’, a ‘responsible ally’ or to be known for a particular facet of its policy – for example as a champion of human and fundamental rights or of free trade. A country’s commitment to and ability to fulfil its role – and be seen to fulfil its role – will depend on many things, but one aspect of this will its strategic partnerships, seen in the *gesamt*, but also, potentially, individually. For example those that champion human rights are likely to be able to do so more effectively if they do not partner with well-known violators of human rights but with other defenders of such. However, conversely they may be able to engage violators of rights, through partnership, to change their behaviour. This indicates the dynamism of identity through partnership but also the potential for plural interpretations and thus the politics of such relationships, which require vigilance and reflection as well as commitment. Nonetheless, the sum of a country’s strategic partnerships can serve as a partial marker of values as well as interests and which norms the country adheres to (or purports to adhere to) and how it goes about pursuing them in and through international society.

There are potential drawbacks to each of these purposes or functional logics of partnership: they can tie countries in to relations that become unsuitable for the purpose or fail to deliver on their potential (I), become contradictory to each other in terms of strategic objectives (II) or create tensions in foreign policy identity (III) – which may point in the latter two cases to confusion in foreign policy thinking or strategic culture. Some partner countries may be alienated by other subsequent partnerings that go against their own values, interests or norms. Internally, irritation may ensue from slow progress or unmet expectations, which may be exacerbated by “overly ambitious declarations” that seek to declaratively kick-start relations but fail to provide substantive follow-up. Such false starts may also serve to create doubt as to the value of such strategic partnerships, particularly if the

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<sup>7</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”, p. 14.



term is used to describe a wide of variety of very different relations with different objectives.<sup>8</sup>

**With regard to the CGSD, this discussion paper will evaluate (In chapter 3) the extent to which it is driven by or reflects each of the three logics noted above and thus assessed on the extent to which it i) consolidates relations with Germany and elevates them to the strategic level in practice; ii) Clarifies Czech Foreign Policy Aims; and iii) Projects and Performs a Particular Identity for Czech Foreign Policy.** According to various experts and participants interviewed in the course of research conducted for this project, the CGSD is intended – or should be intended – to serve each of these purposes to some extent. The assessment that is provided also takes account of the issues raised in the preceding paragraph regarding conflicting goals and the coherence of the CGSD in relation other Czech partnerships and Czech foreign policy more widely. **The previous, conceptual report sees the Strategic Dialogue as “an exemplary case” in principle, but further research has questioned and problematized this claim in practice.**

## 2.2. Perspectives on Strategic Partnerships

In addition to being somewhat underexplored conceptually, strategic partnerships are also shrouded in ambiguity and used in a variety of ways by different actors but also in different ways by single actors and there is no agreed upon definition.<sup>9</sup> The term has been used to (try to) characterise diverse relations such as US-Soviet, US-China, EU-Russia and Czech Republic-Azerbaijan. Before outlining the conceptual criteria for evaluating the CGSD it is therefore useful therefore to shed light on this concept by exploring it, briefly, from a variety of *perspectives*, which complement the various *purposes* or functions of strategic partnership outlined above. These perspectives will also be used to pluralise the evaluation of the relationship – the implications of which will be discussed in the conclusion (4). The perspectives that are introduced below are: a) Neo-realism; b) Liberal Institutionalism; c) English School/Constructivism (focus on identity and ordering); d) Constructivism (focus on normative identity building).<sup>10</sup>

- a. ***Neo-Realism: Tactical Partnerships in Disguise?*** Exemplified by Sean Kay’s account of US strategic partnerships, this perspective sees a strategic partnership as an arrangement that “enhances or justifies a close relationship between two states that seek mutual gains but whose interests may be competitive rather than shared”.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the ‘strategic’ element

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> “EU Strategic Partnerships with Third Countries”, European Parliamentary Research Service Blog, last modified October 2, 2012, <http://epthinktank.eu/2012/10/02/eu-strategic-partnerships-with-third-countries/>.

<sup>10</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”.

<sup>11</sup> Sean Kay, “What Is a Strategic Partnership?”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47:3 (2000): 15–24.

works in tension against and potentially undermines the ‘partnership’ – means and ends calculations trump friendship, sharing or principled commitment. Congruence of norms and values is superfluous in this view and partnership is merely an instrument for the pursuit of interests. “The adjective ‘strategic’ denotes – but is simultaneously designed to obscure – an ambivalent, transactional or even latently conflictual nature of the ‘partnership’.” This neo-realist view sees partnership as a function of relative power in the international system: offensive realists see powerful states using partnerships as “tools” to “maximize political, economic and military dominance”, and, by extension, to shape the international environment to suit a state’s vital interest; defensive realists see partnerships as vehicles for “enhancing a state’s capacity for self-preservation via defensive measures to balance against perceived threats.”<sup>12</sup> More broadly, asymmetrical relations or misaligned interpretations of the concept are key to understanding both the formation of strategic partnerships but also their success or failure. Crucially, it can be seen that declaratory agreements on strategic partnerships – or dialogues – amount to a concession by the partner that stands to gain less to the partner that stands to gain more be this in terms of e.g. trade benefits or perceived political influence. **The key insights from this approach for the CGSD can be summarised in the notion that strategic partnerships are in fact tactical partnerships in disguise and that asymmetrical (power) relations matter. However, what can also be seen is that if the aims of the partners are in fact tactical rather than strategic then a strategic relationship of the kind embodied in the Strategic Dialogue is likely to fail. Having raised expectations, this would then potentially hinder the relationship in future.**

**b. Liberal Institutionalism: A Unique Mode of Inter-state Relations.** Liberal approaches to strategic partnerships, such as that of Wilkins,<sup>13</sup> first distinguish these relationships from others such as alliances (more permanent and treaty based) and coalitions (more temporary and ephemeral). Rather than the realist view that sees them as empty and misleading rhetoric, Liberal institutionalists argue that strategic partnerships should be seen as a unique, substantive mode of inter-state relations. Wilkins argues that SPs tend to be organised “around a general (security) purpose known as a systems principle (such as championship of a multipolar world), rather than a specific task, such as deterring or fighting a hostile state”.<sup>14</sup> Unlike coalitions, strategic partnerships presuppose common interests, albeit, unlike more durable alliances and security communities

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<sup>12</sup> Kay, “What Is a Strategic Partnership?”, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins, “Russo–Chinese Strategic Partnership: A New Form of Security Cooperation?”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 29:2 (2008): 358–383.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

such as NATO, they need not entail commonality of values. With regard to partnership liberals such as Emerson & Tocci, et al<sup>15</sup> see similar ‘size’ and ‘power’ being advantageous as partnership should entail common capability to act in common. Also in contrast to the realist approach, Wilkins and others see the adjective ‘strategic’ in positive terms as it gives substance to the partnership in terms of long-term goal-orientation that both partners perceive *as* strategic and can better achieve together – or, in fact, cannot achieve alone. As Grevi put it, “strategic partnerships are those that both parties regard as essential to achieve their basic goals”<sup>16</sup> leading to either win-win or lose-lose scenarios. Although bilateral co-operation is seen to develop along multiple functional lines, to be strategic it should always be traceable back to a common strategic purpose that can ‘solidify’ over time into a “system principle”.<sup>17</sup> **The key insight here is that strategic partnerships, in the liberal view need a *raison d’être*, a reason to exist, which assumes a degree of interest overlap and potentially a congruence of values in order to be sustained over time in the absence of treaties of other formalised commitments. The system principle that could arise effectively amounts to a shared vision of the international order or, in the case of Czech-German relations, a common approach to European integration or common vision for the future of the European Union.**

- c. English School/Soft Constructivism – Transformative Potential:** Both of the perspectives introduced above take a positivist – and somewhat static – view of strategic partnerships carrying stable definitions and fixed properties, which fails to capture the dynamism of real-world bilateral relations, which are, after all, social in nature. As Grevi notes “partnerships do not become strategic by virtue of defining them as such”.<sup>18</sup> Indeed many partnerships have developed strategic characteristics without being designated as such, while others that have been designated as strategic have failed to develop in this way. Perspectives such as that of Blanco<sup>19</sup> combine this performative approach with taking account of the way that partnerships are framed – implicitly as well as explicitly – in the context of a state’s wider foreign policy positioning and relate this to the ordering of foreign policy priorities (2-1-ii) and identity building (2-1-ii). This brings back in the declarative importance of labelling a partnership strategic – which can have a galvanising effect and can create the potential for the partners to become strategic partners bound by new rules of a new game they jointly

<sup>15</sup> Michael Emerson, Nathalie Tocci, Marius Vahl and Nicholas Whyte, *The Elephant and the Bear: the European Union, Russia and their Near Abroads* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2001), p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni Grevi, “Making EU partnerships effective”, *FRIDE Working Paper No. 150* (Madrid: FRIDE, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkins, “Russo-Chinese Strategic Partnership”, p. 369.

<sup>18</sup> Giovanni Grevi, “Why strategic partnerships matter” *FRIDE Working Paper*, 2012, p. 6.

See also Giovanni Grevi, “Strategic partnerships: smart grid or talking shops?” in Giovanni Grevi (ed.) and Gauri Khandekar, *Mapping EU Strategic Partnerships* (Madrid: FRIDE, 2010), p. 5–7.

<sup>19</sup> Luis Fernando Blanco, “The functions of ‘strategic partnership’ in European Union foreign policy discourse”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 29:1 (2016), p. 36–54.

play. For this transformation to take place however, both sides must attach significance to this relation (as one of the highest forms of bilateral engagement) and this must be inherently valued by both. This increases incentives for compliance but also potentially fosters bureaucratic structures and practices<sup>20</sup> which can increase socialisation and trust and create common logics of appropriateness.<sup>21</sup> **Notably, from this perspective, the relation between Germany and the Czech Republic is labelled as a strategic dialogue rather than a partnership, but clearly has the potential, however uncertain, to create such a partnership by making partners of the two countries. The intensive interaction that the dialogue foresees has exactly this potential if both sides take the endeavour seriously and act as strategic partners who both value the partnership and can avoid contradictory wider foreign policy positioning.**

- d. Constructivism – Normative Identity Building:** Building on, but also going beyond the previous perspective, more thoroughgoing constructivist perspectives see that strategic partnerships can be used to assert, nurture or even re-invent the foreign policy identity of actors who pursue them. The EU is often used as the paradigmatic example of these processes, given its self-image as a ‘normative power’<sup>22</sup> and understanding of external action as the projection and diffusion of its own norms and governance structures beyond its immediate borders.<sup>23</sup> Such an approach was simultaneously assumed to uphold the pursuit of EU interests – security and prosperity – with the EU’s international role linked to “the nature of the polity itself”,<sup>24</sup> so that, in Manners’ words, the most important factor shaping EU external conduct is not “what it does or what it says, but what it is.” By the same logic, EU’s approach to strategic partnering – as an instrument of such a proselytizing external action – came to reflect and assert the EU’s normative actorness. **In the case of the CGSD, this may apply most to what kind of EU member state (and Foreign Policy actor in general) each of the actors ‘are’, how they act, how they see themselves as being and acting and are seen to be and to act – by each other but also more widely. To some extent this will determine the compatibility of the levels of ambition that the partners have and the value that they place on the partnership, which will be crucial for the type of transformative and normative identity effects that could turn dialogue into effective partnership.**

These insights, from a variety of perspectives, offer various possibilities for evaluating and assessing the CGSD, which will be followed up on in the next Chapter (3). To summarise, they require that issues of **power relations** between the

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<sup>20</sup> Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory: New Perspectives*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change”, *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), p. 887–917.

<sup>22</sup> Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:2 (2002), p. 235–258.

<sup>23</sup> Stephan Keukeleire, “The European Union as a Diplomatic Actor: Internal, Traditional and Structural Diplomacy”, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 14:3 (2003), p. 31–56.

<sup>24</sup> Helene Sjursen, “What kind of power?”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), p. 169.

partners, as well as other **asymmetries** be considered, but also that the issues of **tactics** and **strategy** be distinguished – with disguised tactical partnerships requiring a different frame of evaluation than genuinely strategic relations between countries. In this reading strategic is seen to imply something beyond transactional, short-term, ephemeral and temporary, but something less than a treaty based alliance. Furthermore, such strategic relations imply a common *raison d’etre* that may imply shared **values** – to some extent at least – as well as the shared pursuit of common **interests** or interests best pursued together. Crucially, perspectives b-d effectively require that strategic partnerships have some degree of **shared vision** between the partners about how the world, or at least the region – in this case, Europe – should look and a potentially shared commitment to how the actors can act in **normative** accordance with that. The potential for **transformation** to come through partnership is also held out by the latter two perspectives, although both partners need to be committed to the process for its own transformative logic to act, which may have unintended as well as intended **identity** effects.

While some of these perspectives imply conflicting views of the international system/society, the actors and structures that constitute the system/society and the motivations, constraints and consequences this implies, it is possible to synthesise the various insights in evaluating the CGSD with adherence to or deviation from the requirements for a strategic partnership in each case having particular contingencies and consequences. The next section lays out specific criteria or elements for conceptualising strategic partnerships and thus for evaluating the CGSD.

### **2.3. Principles: Conceptualising and Evaluating Strategic Partnerships**

Drawing on and synthesising some of the insights from the purposes and perspectives presented above, as well as additional academic literature on strategic partnerships, this section introduces the “elements or qualities” that were identified as accounting for the added value stemming from the Czech Republic’s existing or future strategic relations. In identifying such criteria, the conceptual report in strategic partnerships in effect created a loose set of criteria for what constitutes strategic relations, which, if fulfilled, will add value to Czech foreign policy.<sup>25</sup> They are presented here as useful criteria against which to evaluate the current implementation and future prospects of the CGSD.

These elements refine and develop academic work on the characteristics of strategic partnerships. For example, Vahl lists common values; common interests;

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<sup>25</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”.

mutual understanding; and equality of size.<sup>26</sup> Holstag identifies: a global range; explicitly identified common interests and expectations; goals formulated for the long term, which are also multidimensional and operationalized in the economic, political and military areas; and the use of the partnership to achieve the goals set.<sup>27</sup> Renard's criteria are similar: comprehensiveness of relations; reciprocity; common understanding of mutual values and objectives; long-term orientation; and an ambition to jointly tackle regional and global challenges.<sup>28</sup>

However, while many of these criteria or features (and the ways in which they are refined below) are highly pertinent to understanding both the CGSD and Czech Strategic Partnerships more widely, they should not be seen as either necessary or sufficient conditions for a partnership being either strategic or serving its intended purpose(s). Before introducing the elements as refined for the conceptualisation of Czech Strategic Partnerships, a further caveat is in order (one that will be returned to in the concluding section of this chapter and in the analytical chapter that follows). Evaluating the 'strategicness' as well as the success (or otherwise) of strategic relations, such as the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue comes back to the purpose(s) that have been ascribed to them. Generic frameworks for analysis must be harnessed to this condition in each particular case but also then evaluated in relation to the other strategic relations of the state in question – in this case the Czech Republic – and in the context of that country's foreign and domestic policy more generally. Strategic relations may be particular but they do not exist in isolation, despite academic attempts to 'isolate' criteria for 'truly' or 'genuinely' strategic partnerships.<sup>29</sup>

While this caveat makes clear that the formulation and imposition of rigorous and universal definitions of strategic partnerships or strategic relations, there are, nonetheless, certain elements that when they exist in constellation point not only to a relationship or partnership having strategic character but to its purpose(s) as identified in section 2-1. The five elements that are introduced here will be used in the next chapter (3) to analyse and evaluate the CGSD – in conjunction with and the insights gleaned from the various purposes and perspectives outlined earlier – but also in light of the caveat noted above. They should perhaps be considered as principles for strategic partnerships, which do not necessarily need to be adhered to but, if they are will increase the chances of both success and strategic-ness.

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<sup>26</sup> Marius, Vahl, "Just Good Friends? The EU-Russian 'Strategic Partnership' and the Northern Dimension", *CEPS Working Document*, no. 166 (2001), p. 1–55.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan, Holslag, "The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44:2 (2011), p. 293–313.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas, Renard, *The EU and the Strategic Partnerships: Searching for a Strategic Meaning – How the EU is Looking for Strategic Guidance for itself and for its partnerships*, Paper submitted to the 12<sup>th</sup> biennial conference of the European Union Studies Association (EUSA) (Massachusetts, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, "Strategická partnerství", p. 34.

## Elements of/ Principles for (Successful) Strategic Partnerships

- 1. Common purpose.** This element reflects the need for strategic partnerships to be underpinned by what Liberal Institutionalists call a 'systems principle' and what may be more generally understood as a shared vision for how the world or the region should look and work. This should be grounded in compatible interests and values. This is, in effect, a common understanding of both the fundamental purpose of enhanced bilateral cooperation, but must also go beyond the bilateral dimension to address the wider foreign policy priorities and indeed identities of the partners and, as such, reflect this common vision of international affairs at the level in question, but also should not be contradictory on other levels. As noted above, the key aspect of this element for the CGSD is policy towards, vision for and behaviour as a member state of the European Union. Nonetheless, there are also wider dimensions of common purpose that need to be considered with regard to international relations and global affairs (as individual states but also as part of the EU, NATO and e.g. OSCE), views on international order and commitment to addressing key global challenges.
- 2. Reciprocity.** Rather than a particular normative orientation (which can be evaluated separately), a key element in the strategic-ness and success of a strategic partnership is the co-operative pursuit of broad, agreed upon objectives (whether e.g. political, economic or security focused) that are derived from the common purpose noted above. This requires reciprocity of purpose but also reciprocity in the commitment and engagement to achieve these objectives as well as devoting the necessary resources and capacities to do so. Crucially, mutual cooperation must be seen as essential to achieving these objectives and the partners must act in this way through the partnership, which gives it the chance to have the transformative and identity effects discussed by constructivist and English school scholars. This understanding of reciprocity departs from some academic work on strategic partnerships as it does not require symmetries of 'power' or 'size' (whether geographic, demographic or economic) – which would rule out the CGSD as strategic – but symmetry of commitment and vision, which can be evaluated in this case.
- 3. Comprehensiveness.** Building on the notion of broad shared objectives derived from common purpose and which transcend the transactional, instrumental or particular, strategic partnerships should be (relatively) comprehensive. Often strategy is assumed to necessitate a security or military dimension, but this need not be the case – even if it clearly is in the case of Czech-German relations, albeit not specifically or primarily in the CGSD. Comprehensiveness allows for functional spillover and the productive

coordination and cooperation horizontally between actors in various thematic areas and across ministries and agencies, but also vertically between different levels of government. Comprehensiveness – or the potential for such – bolsters the strategic dimension and also enhances the prospect of transformation through partnership as it increases socialisation.

4. **Contextual Coherence.** Strategic partnerships do not only have to be developed with like-minded partners or with countries that are a near-exact match in terms of values as well as interests. However, each strategic partnership should make for a good contextual fit with the overall foreign policy priorities of the country – in this case the Czech Republic and Germany. In the context of this discussion paper the focus is on the former and so the Czech strategic partnerships – including the strategic dialogue should fit with the Czech Republic’s overall foreign policy priorities, with existing regional (e.g. Visegrad, EU, NATO) and multilateral (e.g. UN, OSCE.) engagements, with international legal commitments – as well as with the other Czech strategic partnerships. Each strategic partnership should cohere with and reinforce the existing priorities and partnerships – or, at minimum, not contradict them. Overall coherence is particularly important when it comes to the positional or identity-building function of strategic partnerships.<sup>30</sup> Crucially, this coherence matters in relation to the **common purpose** identified above as another key element as it speaks to how the partners see and pursue their values and interests outside of the partnership as well as their identity as a foreign policy actor.
  
5. **Domestic Consensus.** Strategic partnerships should, ideally, be founded on the basis – and stem from – broad and general internal consensus (rather than agreement on all specifics) of all relevant foreign policy constituencies within the partner countries and should not thus be subject to change or challenge in the event of a change of administration or alteration of the governing coalition. Strategic partnerships and relations should therefore reflect the (e.g. Czech and German) societies’ fundamental values and core national interests that transcend political contestation and which are coherent with deep senses of identity, belonging, and understandings of both history and the future. While full agreement on all of these issues is not only unlikely but also assumes a de-politicised or incontestable understanding of these issues that is not only unrealistic but also undesirable. However, there should be, at a minimum, the basis of consensus on the desirability of sustaining the relationship – and its strategicness – in the long-term.

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<sup>30</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”, p. 52–53.



## 2.4. Summarising the Framework for Assessment and Evaluation of the CGSD

In order to assess the current state and future prospects of the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue, this discussion paper will draw on the various *purposes*, *perspectives* and *principles* outlines above. These are briefly summarised here.

### ***Purposes***

- I) Investing in and intensifying the bilateral relationship itself
- II) Ordering and Differentiating Foreign Policy Priorities
- III) Producing or Cultivating Identity as a (Foreign Policy) Actor

### ***Perspectives***

- i. Neo-Realism – Tactical Partnerships in Disguise
- ii. Liberal Institutionalism – A Unique Mode of Inter-State Relations
- iii. English School/ Soft Constructivism – Transformative Power of Partnership
- iv. Constructivism – Performative Construction of Normative Identity

### ***Principles***

1. Common Purpose
2. Reciprocity
3. Comprehensiveness
4. Contextual Coherence
5. Domestic Consensus

The analysis presented below (In Chapter 3) is primarily organised around assessment of the CGSD in relation to the five principles, but will be repeatedly drawn back to examination and evaluation in relation to both its purpose(s) and to analysis of the political context in which it is embedded and upon which its future prospects depend. As noted above, the perspectives inform both the identification and delineation of the principles, but also shed light on how the partnership is seen by the parties or how it can be assessed and evaluated. This will affect the yardsticks against which it can be assessed as well as what its future prospects are. Additional evaluation and assessment of relevant issues that also impact on the strategic-ness, success and normative implications of the partnership and dialogue will also be provided.

### 3. Assessment and Evaluation of Current State and Future Prospects of the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue in the context of wider Czech-German Relations

Utilising the framework for analysis presented above (Chapter 2), this chapter now presents the substantive assessment of the current state and future prospects of Czech-German cooperation through the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue (CGSD) as well as evaluating its political and normative implications. The assessment and evaluation are then drawn together in the concluding chapter (4) where recommendations are then provided for enhancing the cooperation in light of this analysis contained in this discussion paper.

The analysis in this section is organised around the five principles of strategic partnerships and strategic relationships that were outlined in Chapter 2. The Czech-German Strategic Dialogue is assessed against these principles, on its own terms – to the extent that they are apparent at this stage of the dialogue – but also in the political context in which it is embedded and which will, to a significant extent, determine or influence its future development, but which may well also be influenced by the existence and development of the dialogue. In relation to each principle, assessment is provided of the current state of affairs but also about the future prospects for cooperation in this format.

This chapter thus looks at the purpose(s) of the partnership in the dialogue and to what extent these can be considered to be **common purposes (3-1)** but also how they relate to the various **strategic purposes** identified above. The analysis then moves on to look at the degree of **reciprocity (3-2)** in the dialogue before looking at its **comprehensiveness (3-3)**. The final two sections of the chapter examine, respectively, the **contextual coherence (3-4)** of the partnership in relation to the other partnerships, commitments and foreign policy priorities and actions of the Czech Republic and, to a lesser extent, of Germany, before looking at the degree of **domestic consensus** about the strategic dialogue and strategic relations between the two countries, focusing on the Czech side. In each case the aim is not to provide a comprehensive stocktaking or audit of the specifics of the dialogue but to identify key issues that affect its current state and future prospects – positively or negatively. This is then used to produce an overall assessment of the present and potential future of the relationship which, working on the assumption that the

relationship is desirable and potentially brings benefit, is used to drive recommendations for how its prospects can be improved.

### 3.1. Common (Strategic) Purpose: Potential Trouble Ahead

This section looks at the ‘purpose’ of the CGSD in two related ways. Firstly, in terms of the purposes or functions of the partnership or, put another way, the reasons that the parties entered into the partnership – in this case the reasons that the Czech Republic and Germany chose to declare that they were upgrading their relations to the level of a ‘strategic dialogue’. The second, related way of looking at purpose is whether the strategic dialogue is underpinned by the kind of ‘common purpose’ that Liberal institutionalists refer to as a ‘systems principle’, a vision that goes beyond the bilateral relations itself and is grounded in common values and interests and a shared vision for global or regional affairs.

Interviews with experts on Czech-German relations and with participants in the CGSD showed that the clearest strategic ‘purpose’ behind the intended upgrading of relations is to **invest in the relationship itself**. Both Czech and German officials agreed that the goal was partly to capitalise on the good practical cooperation that existed in a number of fields and to identify where potential strategic level opportunities exist and could be productively pursued.<sup>31</sup> Thus far there has been little in the way of ordering and defining or differentiating Czech (or German) foreign policy priorities through the partnership, although as will be discussed below, the dialogue touches on issues of relevance for this purpose. Neither experts nor officials thus far saw much evidence of – or desire for – foreign policy identity production or cultivation through the enhancement of the relation to that of a strategic dialogue.

These motivations are both related to what is described by experts as a **complete lack of “strategic vision” and “political substance” from the policymaking or political level**.<sup>32</sup> Credit is nonetheless claimed – and given by officials from both sides – by individuals in the Czech MFA and Office of the Government and indeed to the Czech Prime Minister as well as to the German ambassador in Prague (for respectively pushing for the dialogue and helping to get it off the ground).<sup>33</sup> However, the experts on Czech-German relations still see the CGSD as largely a future **damage limitation exercise and a piece of bureaucratic entrepreneurship, that was later convenient to be claimed politically**, rather than part of a coherent vision for Czech-German relations or indeed for Czech foreign policy more widely.

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<sup>31</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague, with officials from the Czech MFA and German embassy in Prague and with German MFA officials in Berlin.

<sup>32</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author with Czech and German MFA officials in Prague and Berlin.

Given that the initiative came largely from the Czech side – although it was eagerly seized upon by the German embassy in Prague – the German motivation for acquiescing to this is perhaps even less clear but after much persuasion it was accepted. Experts and officials variously ascribed this to a desire to experiment (with little perceived risk) with a new format of cooperation<sup>34</sup> to a desire to ‘tidy’ and ‘bundle’ up existing practical cooperative endeavours<sup>35</sup> or to a pushback against perceived marginalisation by the German (and Czech) MFAs – by gaining formal control over the management of the relationship.<sup>36</sup> The use that has been made of the format for managing potentially significant differences between the countries on how to handle the migration crisis has perhaps transformed attitudes in Berlin, as both experts and officials noted the German side are now “very happy” that they have this format.<sup>37</sup> Similarly it has been very useful for Czech policymakers to point to the strategic dialogue to distract attention from the serious differences over migration and refugee policy and the possibility of a European level solution to these issues.<sup>38</sup> Another Czech motivation was also claimed – to have an ‘early warning’ system for future developments in, e.g., migration policy so as not to be surprised by unilateral German action in future.

However, these instrumental approaches to the strategic dialogue perhaps suggest that at the moment there is a danger that the neo-realist critique – that it is **actually a tactical partnership in disguise** and thus of greater fragility and less value – is in danger of being made legitimate in this instance. The lack of a genuine strategic dimension could potentially be addressed once the key elements of potential cooperation have been firmed up and the next stage of the dialogue kicks into gear. Moreover, the investment in the relationship and the enhanced levels of resource and intensified socialisation it should bring **may indeed have transformative effects on Czech and German priorities in the medium-long term** but that remains to be seen and will only take place, if the commitment to treating the relationship as strategic and acting as if it were strategic is upheld.

**Treating the relationship as if it were strategic** depends in turn on the type of broad, underlying common purpose borne of common values and shared interests and, crucially, shared vision for the wider world that would not only empower but transcend the bilateral relationship (2-1; 2-3). The declaration that marked the launch of the dialogue seemed ostensibly to deliver on this front by framing it as a

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<sup>34</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with experts in Berlin.

<sup>35</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with German MFA officials in Berlin.

<sup>36</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague and with German MFA officials in Berlin.

<sup>38</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague.

“platform for both countries ‘jointly shaping the future of the European Union’.”<sup>39</sup> Experts in both Prague and Berlin are, however, sceptical of this because despite the common values and shared interests that EU membership implies (as well as NATO membership). As one Berlin-based expert put it: “[t]his is always my question: What does the Czech Republic want in the EU? When the Czech Republic knows what it wants then [we] will have a partner to cooperate with.” Prague based experts were even more direct: **“There is no vision for Europe in the Czech Republic. Absolutely none.”**

Indeed, apart from a shared commitment to the type of ordo-liberalism that is becoming increasingly unfashionable in as well as beyond Europe, the Prague-based experts saw little in common in visionary terms of the kind that would undergird a strategic relationship of the type that the CGSD claims to be. This challenges the ostensible and largely declarative commitment to a systems principle that could hold the strategic dialogue together in order to let this framing take effect in practice and let the socialisation of key figures in the process bring performative substance to these declarations of common vision. These issues raise serious questions not only about the current state of Czech-German relations, which are not yet strategic in the sense of common purpose, but also about their likelihood of achieving such a status in future. The potential is undoubtedly there, but without political leadership and direction, it is unlikely to be fulfilled. This is a theme that will be returned to throughout this analysis, including in the next section on reciprocity in the relationship, that relates strongly to questions that one of the Berlin-based experts saw as “depend[ing] on one’s identity in the EU.” What had been hoped for in terms of the ‘Re-Europeanisation’ of the relationship, which is seen by experts as key to any strategic pretensions the Czech republic has in this format, has failed to deliver in practice what it promised in theory with the change of government away from Eurosceptic parties after 2013.

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<sup>39</sup> “A Common Declaration on the Strategic Dialogue between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic and the Federal Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany As a new Framework for Czech-German Relations”, [“Společné prohlášení ke strategickému dialogu mezi Ministerstvem zahraničních věcí České republiky a Ministerstvem zahraničních věcí Spolkové republiky Německo jako novém rámci pro česko-německé vztahy”], Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Prague, (Berlin, 2015), [http://www.prag.diplo.de/contentblob/4562604/Daten/5624383/download\\_GemeinsameErklaerung\\_SD\\_cz.pdf](http://www.prag.diplo.de/contentblob/4562604/Daten/5624383/download_GemeinsameErklaerung_SD_cz.pdf).

### 3.2. Reciprocity: Latent Potential, Little Progress

As noted above, a key element in the development of strategic qualities in a relationship and the successful evolution of strategic partnership – or dialogue in this case – is the co-operative pursuit of broad, agreed upon objectives that derive from common purpose. Given the previous section concluded that common purpose extending beyond the bilateral relation – apart from in terms so broad as to be of limited significance – are largely lacking, it is little wonder that the reciprocal pursuit of such goals is also rather limited. However, there are different reasons for and manifestations of these shortcomings compared to those noted above. Again, as above, there would be reason to be hopeful in the medium to long-term if this was merely a question of the technical or professional cooperation between the civil servants and officials involved, but without political vision and direction, there is an imbalance in the relationship that will prevent the reciprocal and mutual pursuit of key shared objectives.

As a previous report on Czech-German (and Czech-German-Polish trilateral) co-operation noted, the **asymmetries in the relationship** should be taken account of: the scale of the German economy (the 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the world, 18 times greater than the Czech economy in terms of GDP); the status as Germany as a global player (the ‘strongest’ state in the EU a member of both the G7 and G20 with designs on a UN Security Council seat) while the Czech Republic is a medium sized regional player. The report however noted that another significant asymmetry was the performance of politicians in the two countries seeing strong personalities who attain credibility on the world stage going hand in hand with foreign policy consensus in Germany contrasting with “inconsistent and quarrelsome” policy accompanying changing personnel with little in the way of meaningful international presence. Despite the hopes expressed in that report, little has changed in this regard with the rise of the new, post-2013 coalition government that has seen policy and personality clashes within the main governing party, little of note on foreign affairs from the second largest party and clashes in tone and substance between the government and the President.<sup>40</sup>

However, as one of the experts interviewed for this project put it, these asymmetries, even the political performance ones, are less significant than the “**asymmetry of expectations**” that continues to characterise and constrain the Czech-German relationship. This asymmetry centres around the unclear ideas that the Czech side has for a special relationship with Germany, despite having little vision for what this might be for or how they might contribute to a bigger picture (3-1). This position contrasts with the German desire for and expectation that **the**

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<sup>40</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”.

**Czech Republic should become not a special, but a “normal’ European partner”** that could be counted upon for candid criticism and openness but could ultimately be trusted to maintain the European project based on mutual trust and contribution.<sup>41</sup> This recalls the point made by one of the Berlin-based expert’s above regarding the Czech role in and desires for the EU that, the expert added cast doubt on the Czech Republic’s “identity” as an EU member state and asking whether it could be considered to “matter in terms of European affairs” or, to put it another way, **what can the Czech republic be counted on for as a partner?**

The Prague based experts concurred that presently “the problem is that” **while the Czech Republic “can do these neighbourly or friendly relations, [it] doesn't have and hasn't ever had any answers to the big questions of German politics” including foreign policy issues but also issues related to the EU itself.** One of the experts elaborated on this point: “what have we done in the Euro crisis apart from saying it’s not our problem and refusing to guarantee even a tiny bit of Greek debt? What have we done in the refugee crisis? What positive steps have we offered? **We don't have any positive agendas.**” As the expert went on to note, this lack of strategic thinking on the big issues for the Czech Republic’s most important European partner let down the good work that the country does on “e.g. border management issues, Schengen issues” excluding those related to the refugee crisis.

Nonetheless, the hope remains on the German side that the Czechs can become a ‘normal’ partner and they are certainly considered currently the most ‘normal’ of the Visegrad countries and thus a valuable partner to have in troubled times as the recent period has undoubtedly been. As one of the Berlin-based experts noted, “the Czech Republic is seen to be pragmatic and balanced in its relation to Russia” and that the German side “would seek Czech support or **want the Czechs to take more leadership.**”

While it may be hoped that taking such responsibility may come from greater exposure to and understanding of key German concerns that would stem from the increased socialisation between state officials that the strategic dialogue will undoubtedly facilitate, the Prague-based experts were not hopeful that this would be sufficient to drive the transition from a tactical partnership with vague strategic ambitions to a genuinely strategic partnership. As one of them put it: “there is a huge difference between pragmatic daily cooperation and [...] strategic vision” which is “lack[ing] on both sides but the German side doesn’t need a vision – we bloody well do! We should be having a vision – Germany doesn’t need a special policy and politics for the Czech Republic” but vice versa there is a clear need if the partnership is to become strategic.

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<sup>41</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague.

However, **the key way to achieve this does not require a grand vision to be created from scratch but rather to find a way to channel the Czech Republic's orientation and action as an EU member into a more constructive approach that would contribute to addressing the key questions that Germany and the wider EU faces.** Before going on to examine the comprehensiveness – or otherwise – of the relationship – it is worth noting that finding reciprocity in this does not mean simply submitting or becoming subservient to the German view on particular issues, but rather to fulfilling the role as an EUMS that is seen to constructively give to as well as take from the EU – something that has not always been the case with the Czech Republic in recent times. As noted in section 3-5, this may however require a concerted effort to change Czech political culture in particular relation to foreign policy.

### **3.3. Comprehensiveness: A Broad Bureaucratic Base in Need of Political Vision**

A key principle of strategicness, as defined in the analytical framework developed for the analysis of Czech strategic partnerships, is that of comprehensiveness of the relationship between the partners. Comprehensiveness is seen to stem from the broadness of shared objectives and the common purpose that gives the rationale to a relationship that the partners aspire to have strategic character. Comprehensiveness allows for the identification and development of cooperative activity based on mutual interest and shared values, with the overall logic of the partnership driving and being reinforced through mutual engagement across functional or thematic areas that go beyond the purview of particular ministries or agencies. Such comprehensive cooperation is also seen to help transcend the transactional and instrumental relations that would characterise a tactical rather than strategic relationship and which would imply a more temporary and disposable cooperation than that which is ostensibly aspired to by both parties to the CGSD. **Significantly, comprehensiveness is a principle which the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue scores well on in the present, even if the future is less certain in this regard.**

The German embassy in Prague lists the following areas as of relevance to the CGSD: Science, Research, Innovation, Development of Shared Infrastructure, the fight against cross-border crime, cooperation in education and culture, health and EU Policy. The official documentation of the dialogue lists nine initial working groups that correspond – to a reasonable extent – to these areas:

1. "Foreign and European Policy"
2. "Culture, Language and Youth"
3. "Labour Market and dual education"



4. "Science and Research"
5. "Energy, climate and environment"
6. "Transport"
7. "Health and Safety"
8. "Security and Defence policy"
9. "Agriculture"

To this list, a tenth working group on 'justice' and home affairs, largely involving the interior ministries of the two countries can be added.<sup>42</sup> **Of even greater significance in this regard is the inclusion of issues relating to the migration crisis into working group 1 on 'Foreign and European Policy' which not only recognised the political – and strategic – significance of these topics but also that they would be handled by the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs rather than Ministries of Interior.** Both Czech and German officials trumpet the importance of the inclusion of a seriously controversial issue, which has met with divergent approaches from the two governments, into the strategic dialogue as proof of its value. The Strategic Dialogue, they argue, provides the forum for which to deal constructively with issues that could otherwise be have significant potential for antagonism. **It should be recognised that ostensibly at least, this is indeed a meaningful demonstration of the value of strategic rather than tactical relations, formalised through a structure such as the dialogue.** The efficacy of this format in actually contributing to constructive European-level action on this matter remains to be seen.

The comprehensiveness of the strategic dialogue is, in many ways, a function of the way in which it was developed and its origins in bureaucratic or pragmatic cooperation. The initial process involved a review of all cooperative activities between the two countries with each ministry then able to suggest or highlight areas that seemed germane for elevation to a strategic level. This process is now in its second stage – in the working groups – and although the next review – planned for 2017 – will likely trim some of these areas, it nonetheless has great advantages not only in terms of comprehensiveness but in **letting the strategic arise from practice rather than imposing strategy on practice. This has the advantage of ensuring that there is substance potential for cooperation, although bureaucratic entrepreneurship in favouring particular issues may well mean that while the cooperation is unlikely to lack *substance as such*, it may still lack *real strategic substance*.** The wide-ranging process in which all ministries which had cooperative activities with their Czech or German counterparts could suggest elements of their work that would benefit from attempted elevation from the level of the practical, the quotidian, to the strategic guaranteed a broad and thematically comprehensive

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<sup>42</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, with German MFA officials in Berlin.

character for the dialogue from the start.<sup>43</sup> However, as both Prague-based experts and German officials agreed, the focus of the dialogue will probably need to be narrowed to at least some extent in order to prevent the dilution of the dialogue's strategic ambition by issues that do not merit strategic consideration.

Also reflecting its origins in previous practices of Czech-German cooperation, the strategic dialogue is also relatively comprehensive in vertical terms. The inclusion of several key German federal states that border the Czech Republic – Bavaria and Saxony – adds an additional and interesting dimension of comprehensiveness, giving the possibility for action at a variety of levels as befits cooperation with a federally structured partner such as Germany. The German MFA see flourishing cooperation that they are happy to take a hands off stance from.<sup>44</sup> The prompting of the Czech side to include Munich and Dresden, as well as Berlin, in the working groups affirms this commitment to vertical comprehensiveness. However, it also entails something of a balancing act as both federal states have several key axes of tension with the federal government of Angela Merkel – notably over refugees and migration. Indeed, one German expert warned that the Czech side risks being drawn into internal German political tensions by partners – in Bavaria and Saxony – that seek to use their participation for domestic tactical purpose only, with little genuine intent of developing strategic relations.<sup>45</sup>

There are also, however, limits to the efficacy of vertical comprehensiveness as, despite the greater political – rather than bureaucratic – engagement of Dresden and Munich, the competences of the Federal States are limited. For example, cooperation on 'internal security' and policing issues has been improved through Hof dialogue and measures to ensure free movement while bolstering security and actively countering threats from e.g. cross border drug-trafficking and can be counted as one of the functional successes of enhanced cooperation<sup>46</sup>. However, the Federal States cannot participate in external security or foreign policy matters. In other issues too, such as environment and transport, the dialogue runs up against the limits of the shared desires of the Czech Republic and the Federal states, which run counter to the overall German government strategy on these issues.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, comprehensiveness is an area that the CGSD scores well in currently, even if it the potential to actually elevate many of the issues involved to the strategic level – as well as the desirability of doing so – remains uncertain. Nonetheless, the broad base for an integrated approach to cooperation and the possibility for

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<sup>43</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague, with officials from the Czech MFA and German embassy in Prague and with German MFA officials in Berlin.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, with German MFA official in Berlin

<sup>45</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, with expert in Berlin.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g. Benjamin Tallis, "A Moveable East: Identities, Borders and Orders in the Enlarged EU and Its Eastern Neighbourhood", Doctoral Thesis (Manchester: University of Manchester, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague.

momentum and functional spillover that this comprehensive approach provides is one of the most promising aspects of the CGSD thus far. However, as noted in sections 3-1 and 3-2, as well as earlier in this section, the pragmatic and bureaucratic approach to developing cooperation has limits due to the political parameters that they must operate within. The Prague-based experts noted that the strategic dialogue is indicative of a “bureaucratisation of foreign policy [...] at some point the politics have to come back in and the politicians have to take over this agenda for themselves.”<sup>48</sup> They noted that clashes in socio-political culture could not be resolved through bureaucratic cooperation and that while such dialogue could help lay the groundwork for political change, it would be unlikely to deliver the kind of vision that is needed to satisfy the conditions outlined in 3-1 (common purpose) and 3-2 (reciprocity). **Although the CGSD is promisingly comprehensive at the moment it risks being comprehensively un-strategic unless political will and vision are used to harness the burgeoning practical, quotidian cooperation that the dialogue has fostered.**

### 3.4. Contextual Coherence: Possibilities and Pitfalls

The question of coherence with other Czech strategic partnerships is not a particularly problematic one where the CGSD is concerned. As a fellow EU and NATO member – and an increasingly influential one – Germany makes very good sense as a strategic partner in this context. As noted above (3-1; 3-2) the positive potential of this partnership are limited – and will be limited – as long as the Czech Republic lacks vision and strategy in its foreign policy and a clear sense of how it sees itself contributing to the EU and NATO in particular. **The Czech approach to strategic partnerships was described in a recent policy paper as ‘A Practice in Need of a Vision,’ which could also apply to the CGSD.** Nonetheless, there remains some hope that the dialogue with Germany will at least make this lack more clearly apparent and will increase the incentive to address it. At most it could lay the groundwork for or spur the development of such strategic vision, although as mentioned in the previous section (3-3) this will require political engagement rather than a reliance on practical cooperation alone.

In terms of coherence with the Czech Republic’s other strategic partnerships and strategic relations, there is a mixed picture, with some mild cause for concern but also a sense of possibility. The Czech Republic’s strategic partnerships with Poland, the United States, Israel and South are, notwithstanding particular problematic issues (In Israel), recent trends with regard to the EU (Poland) and uncertainty created by the outcome of recent elections (United States), in general completely compatible with the partnership with Germany which is also allied with or heavily

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<sup>48</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague.

engaged with these countries and with whom both the Czech Republic and Germany share a significant overlap in worldview, values and interests. Moreover, the concerns of both countries in relation to the issues noted are in many ways similar and so further reinforce the logic of partnership and dialogue on the strategic level.

However, as the overall conceptual report on Czech strategic partnerships observed “[t]he absence of a strong sense of direction or identity-building rationale is most evident in the case of new strategic partnerships with China and Azerbaijan.”<sup>49</sup> That report claimed that as “neither country is a democracy – which sets them apart from the other established strategic partners – and each has a record of gross human rights violation [...] the Czech Republic can no longer claim [credibly] that its policy of strategic partnering is determined by shared values.” This was highlighted as a major concern in the partnership that was concluded in 2015 with Azerbaijan that was seen to focus “narrowly on energy and commercial gains.”<sup>50</sup> The partnership with China – agreed in 2016 – added another partner whose “global interests and outlook on key international dossiers may not necessarily align with those of the Czech Republic.”<sup>51</sup> These partnerships thus raise concerns about the contextual coherence with the strategic dialogue with Germany.

However, this need not necessarily be the case and, **in the case of China at least could be transformed into a positive quality.** Germany also has a strategic partnership with China and is even more heavily involved and invested in symbiotic economic ties with the country. However, as a Berlin-based expert noted: “We have found our way how to be humanitarian, so [President Joachim] Gauck he has this speech, the Chinese they know it, so we have this game but it doesn’t really harm our interest.”<sup>52</sup> This approach shows the potential gains of strategic partnership with Germany *and* China – rather than the pitfalls that this seems to present with regard to contextual coherence. One of the ostensible reasons for partnering with China was, alongside the pursuit of economic interest, the efficacy of engagement as a way of increasing influence over issues such as human rights, in preference to the finger-wagging rejection and condemnation that had characterised previous Czech-Chinese relations. This has thus far yielded little appreciable change in Chinese policy or position, but allied to German critiques of shortcomings in human rights and democracy it would carry greater weight and **would also bolster the German position by adding another state’s voice to the calls for respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.**

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<sup>49</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”, p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, expert in Berlin.

**Taking this positive opportunity rests, however, on the will and desire of Czech political leaders to pursue this course, which is not currently apparent. The vacuum created by the retreat from previous explicit commitments to human rights, needs to be filled with *effective* principled policy and practice if this opportunity is to be taken.** Without the addition of change through engagement to the naked pursuit of interest, the partnership with China may indeed be problematic and may come to seem similar to the partnership with Azerbaijan. It is important to note however that the Czech Republic is not alone in pursuing such a partnership – 7 other EU member states also partner with Azerbaijan. Similarly, “the EU, the most the most explicitly normative actor on the world stage – has established strategic partnerships with China and Russia”<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, the point remains, notionally and partly at least, to influence these countries in the direction of upholding European values. **Without this component, such partnering becomes part of – and encourages – an unseemly race to the bottom that will eventually become incoherent in the EU context.**

A final issue that pertains to the contextual coherence of the CGSD relates to the Czech Republic’s membership of the Visegrad group. While it might seem that the ‘illiberal’ turn that is explicitly being pursued by Hungary and Poland, not to mention the position of all four of the group on the migration crisis may threaten the contextual coherence – and common purpose – of the Czech strategic dialogue with Germany, experts (both German and Czech) and officials disagree. There is seen to be value in having a structured and explicitly strategic relationship with the Visegrad country perceived as being the most reasonable of the group and potentially able to act as a bridge to the others. The effect of this on the policy of the other V4 members remains to be seen but it could either continue to be an asset or, if the illiberal turn intensifies and the strategic interests of the Czech Republic and its Visegrad partners continue to diverge significantly then it could become a liability. As the German MFA explicitly stated, the CGSD assumed greater importance not only in light of the divergence over migration but in light of the election of the PiS government in Warsaw, with the dialogue thus seen to serve Germany’s tactical interests in the region (although also the longer term strategic goal of trying to keep the EU together – a point that will be returned to in the conclusion).

**In strategic terms, rather than simply considering Germany’s tactical interest, however, maintaining membership of Visegrad in light of the illiberal turn as well as the increasing – and increasingly explicit – anti-EU attitude in Budapest and Warsaw, potentially threatens the development of Czech foreign policy and its identity building as an EU member state as pursuing shared interests and values**

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<sup>53</sup> Šimečka and Tallis, “Strategická partnerství”, p. 18.

**with both Germany and the V4 become mutually exclusive.**<sup>54</sup> Another key element of such identity building, which, as noted above is key to the development of strategic common purpose (3-1) and strategic reciprocity (3-2), which will ultimately play a highly significant role in determining the success or failure of the CGSD, is domestic consensus, which is discussed in the following, final section of this analytical chapter (3-5).

### **3.5. Domestic Consensus: A Potentially Dangerous Strategic Deficit**

Domestic consensus is an important element in both elevating a relationship to the strategic level and in making it work successfully, whatever the particular institutional structure employed to give formal expression to that relationship. The explicitly strategic ambitions of the CGSD imply the need to take a long-term view, which domestic consensus can help to underpin by insuring the relationship against changes in government or the configuration or preferences of coalitions. In some ways this consensus should be automatic as strategic relationships should reflect societies' core values and interests that transcend partisan politics or the vagaries of political fad and fashion.

To some degree, the notion that the Czech Republic's relations with Germany are of strategic importance, in the broadest sense, is a matter of consensus. What to do about this is not. There is little in the way of consensus on the way that this key relationship should be expressed and institutionalised (if at all), nor about the potential value of investing in the intensification of the relationship, the willingness to commit the necessary resources – both specific to the relationship and more generally to ensure the kind of reciprocity, common purpose and coherence that are key to making the relationship work. Nor, therefore, is there a clear and harmonious view of where and how the relationship fits into the wider scheme of Czech foreign policy priorities – and there is little common ground as to the type of identity as a foreign and domestic actor that the Czech Republic should (seek to) enact and become. **The largely bureaucratic and practical nature of the strategic dialogue thus far may show the value of and specific possibilities for cooperation more clearly, but is unlikely to compensate in the long run for this lack of political consensus, which will remain a significant obstacle to the development of sustainable strategic relations.**

Experts offer several reasons for this lack of consensus. The lack is seen partly to reflect **deep and fundamental divisions or differences in Czech society over the**

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 52–53; this point was also discussed frankly at the 8<sup>th</sup> Czech Foreign Policy Symposium at the Czech MFA in September 2016.

**identity of the Czech Republic as a foreign policy actor and as an EU – and NATO – member state.** As one Czech expert argued at a recent event in Warsaw on German relations with Central European states and German leadership in the EU, “due to deep societal and political division, Czech policies toward Germany are inconsistent and hard to predict.”<sup>55</sup> There are specific reasons for this division in relation to Germany in particular, stemming from a cynical use of historical troubles in the relationship by politicians— especially relating to the Nazi period and the occupation of the Czech lands – which can be seen in **the stirring up of “popular resentment” against Germany in the context of the refugee crisis “and fears of economic dependence.”**<sup>56</sup> Another expert referred to the “absolutely insane public discourse on Germany”<sup>57</sup> in the Czech public sphere, which is yet another reflection of the abject lack of moral leadership in both domestic and foreign policy in recent times, allowing nativists and xenophobes to fill the void. That ‘the German issue’ still carries currency was evidenced by its cynical use by now-President Miloš Zeman against rival Karel Schwarzenberg (during the 2013 Presidential election campaign in relation to the still ongoing controversy over the Beneš decrees). It has also been seen in the recent deeply flawed and morally bankrupt analogy that was drawn between the Dalai Lama and Sudeten German Nazi leader Konrad Henlein.

However, this alone does not explain what is seen by the experts as the **lack of the consensus needed to take the CGSD beyond the pragmatic level and into the realm of successful and sustainable strategy.** They also see the **strategic deficit** in domestic consensus as a problem of passivity rather than active disagreement, ascribing it to the low profile of and lack of interest in foreign policy – among the general public but also among the political class. This is seen to be related to a generally introverted political culture that strives to “keep the delusion that you are somehow locked away from and guarded from the world – you can keep the notion of being a periphery because we are to some extent – you can keep this small-town mentality that everything is coming from the world is bad so lock yourself away.”

The strategic deficit is, according to other experts, a result of the **low profile of and lack of interest in foreign policy among both much of the public and much of the political class.** This is a dangerous combination, with leading to a vacuum in foreign policy – due to the alleged intractability of pleasing both international partners (abiding by international and European responsibilities) and doing so in a way that is acceptable to the assumed opinions of the domestic electorate. Where action is taken, it is too often cynically instrumentalised to – or abused for – domestic, partisan, intra-party or even personal purposes rather than serving the strategic

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<sup>55</sup> Dr. Michal Kořan, Senior Researcher at the IIR Prague, speaking at the ECFR event in Warsaw on “How is Berlin Leading Europe: German Dilemmas and Fears from Central Europe” and discussing the report “Leading from the centre: Germany’s new role in Europe”, published by ECFR, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague.

interests of the country as a whole (however imperfectly and contentiously such a goal may be achieved).

While it may be convenient for the Czech political class to be able to focus inward rather than outward, given the undeniable importance of foreign and particularly European policy to a country geographically situated where the Czech Republic is – and with the history it has known – this is not a sustainable position in the long-term. While many Czech politicians – and much of the Czech public – may not care about international politics, international politics cares about them, as has been shown in the past and will be shown again.<sup>58</sup> Trying to hide from this only delays the eventual reckoning that will come in this regard and is a failure of political leadership and responsibility to not realise the need to be part of potential solutions rather than simply waiting for problems to strike.

The idea that senior, political level MFA staff were unable to find any single EU issue that they thought that they could present in a way that appeals to social democratic constituencies speaks to an intellectual and moral void at the heart of Czech foreign and European policy as well as a worrying lack of self-confidence on behalf of those involved to actually do their job as politicians and make arguments in the public sphere.<sup>59</sup> This is particularly the case given the hopes that were raised by this coalition for the ‘re-Europeanisation’<sup>60</sup> of Czech-German relations after previous de-Europeanisations.

**It was noted with incredulity by several experts that while the Czech Republic would undoubtedly be the partner to gain most from the enhancing of relations with Germany to the strategic level, it is the Czech side that seems to wait for Germany to come to them with the substantive strategy – seemingly expecting special treatment but with little reason to do so.** It may be argued that the Czech side pushing for the strategic dialogue is evidence to the contrary but doing so with a largely bureaucratic and practical, rather than political visionary approach (by choice)<sup>61</sup> of e.g. the Czech strategic contribution on key issues of common purpose and reciprocity amounts to the same thing. **The Czech Republic (potentially) has much to offer as a strategic partner to Germany but, at the moment, it seems strategically incapable and unwilling to do so.** Overcoming ongoing collective psycho-social issues relating to the country’s place in the world and willingness to engage with others, rather than either continue to play the victim and expect special treatment or to naively (and irresponsibly) lack interest entirely, is a pre-

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example Derek Sayer, *Prague: Capital of the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015) and Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>59</sup> Comments by sources close to the MFA, made to the author on condition of anonymity.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague; see also Vladimír Handl, „Spolková republika Německo v české zahraniční politice.“ In Kořan, Michal a Ondřej Ditrych, eds., *Česká zahraniční politika v roce 2011. Analýza ÚMV*. Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Feedback on an early draft of this discussion paper provided by the Czech MFA.



requisite for establishing proper strategic relations with key partners such as Germany.

Unfortunately, according to experts, even when there is a degree of consensus in Czech policy, it can clash with German strategy – on issues such as the environment (a basic culture clash about seeing [or not in the German case] the world as a resource to be exploited – according to one expert) and transport where shared priorities are in short supply. In the latter case, it is not difficult to see the problems when the Czech side expresses a desire for high-speed rail connections but even the basic highway connection has seen a decade-long construction delay on the Czech side. This may, sadly, be an appropriate metaphor for the strategic dialogue as a whole – the intended connection is clear, there is some practical foundation in place, but the ability to follow through on and complete the process seems lacking, despite the obvious benefit of doing so. The current pragmatic-based cooperation will not transcend these constraints, nor will it overcome the apathy and antipathy of large parts of the Czech political class if the status quo endures. This would be a waste of a significant opportunity and would greatly set back the chance of genuinely strategic rather than disguised tactical relations with the Czech Republic's most important neighbour and most significant (potential) partner.

## 4. Conclusion & Recommendations: A Dialogue in Place of Strategy, in Hope of Strategy and in Need of Strategy

The Czech-German Strategic Dialogue undoubtedly constitutes a stepping-up of relations between the two countries that is highly valued by several key actors on both sides particularly, but not exclusively, in the respective ministries of foreign affairs.<sup>62</sup> The dialogue should be considered as an innovative mechanism to try to stimulate strategic cooperation between the Czech Republic and its most important partner. Despite the political initiative that was shown to initiate the dialogue (on the Czech side), the bureaucratic and pragmatic focus of its implementation so far, as well as the lack of key elements of strategic confluence (identified above) mean that it is, in effect, **a dialogue in place of strategy**, rather than one that reflects genuinely strategic partnership between the two countries for the time being. This is, in part, a choice on the Czech side<sup>63</sup> that reflects perceived asymmetries between the two countries, but also reflects a more general – and commonly acknowledged – strategic deficit<sup>64</sup> on the Czech side with regard to foreign policy identity and the countries identity and positioning as an EU and NATO member state.

This choice is, therefore, to be commended as making the best of a bad situation, although it should still be recognised *as* a bad situation that needs to be addressed. It is far from certain that the choice to pursue ‘strategy from the bottom-up’ through the CGSD will help do so in the medium or long-term. Nonetheless, the dialogue is conducted **in the hope of strategy emerging** from intensified practical cooperation and, as noted above, this performative notion of strategy has many commendable aspects. Crucially, the CGSD has already proved to be useful for officials from both countries in directing resources and organisational capital towards cooperative projects in a variety of fields – the ‘Czech-German Spring’ cultural programme for 2017 would be just one good example in this regard.<sup>65</sup> On the German side, the possibilities in this regard are even more highly evaluated, with a well-placed MFA official pointed to the acceptance of the Strategic Dialogue as an accepted part of the practice of relations between the two countries that is now consistently asked about, referred to and reported on, which has helped to drive progress and spur additional initiatives in exactly the way that was hoped for

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<sup>62</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with officials from the Czech MFA and German embassy in Prague and with German MFA officials in Berlin.

<sup>63</sup> Feedback received from Czech MFA on a previous draft of this discussion paper.

<sup>64</sup> Feedback received from Czech MFA on a previous draft of this discussion paper.

<sup>65</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, with a Czech official in Berlin.

at the outset, working on a model of functional spillover and socialisation leading to opportunities being identified and acted upon.<sup>66</sup>

As noted above, the dialogue also has the potential to help nurture the next generation of people – particularly officials – in both countries who would act as guardians of the relationship. This pragmatic circumventing of unfavourable political conditions (notwithstanding the democratic issues that arise in this regard and will need to be dealt with at some point), demonstrate the **politics of possibility** that are the biggest single advantage of the CGSD. The same official in the German MFA also noted that the strategic dialogue has the possibility to become a model for German cooperation with other neighbouring countries and mid-size EU members (although this may of course reduce the current exclusivity felt by the Czech side).

From the analysis presented above, however, it is clear that in the terms laid out in the framework for analysis that was created specifically for the purpose of conceptualising and evaluating Czech strategic relations (presented above and employed in this discussion paper), the dialogue remains **in need of strategy** if it is to elevate Czech-German relation to the strategic level. The key arguments behind this claim will be briefly reprised here before a counter-argument is presented but neither make for happy reading from the perspective of ‘fulfilling the common values and interests of the partners in bilateral and regional terms’, the potential for which this project was designed to investigate.

It is argued above that the relationship between the Czech Republic and Germany lacks truly strategic common purpose and reciprocity and that this will not be addressed until the Czech side can formulate and implement a coherent foreign policy vision that transcends its domestic political divisions, in the process developing a clear foreign policy identity that is compatible with the German identity as an actor in the EU in particular. In effect this would require the Czech Republic to become a reliable, reasonable and responsible partner on issues that go beyond bilateral relations. According to experts, on many of the key issues of German foreign and European policy this has not always been the case in recent times. Moreover, while the Czech side seem to expect Germany to absolutely defend their interests with any divergence in search of compromise and consensus is seen as something of a betrayal.<sup>67</sup>

### ***Questioning the Need for Strategy***

In the absence of a continued lack of strategic foreign policy vision and consistent behaviour leading to the development of a recognisably reliable partner identity within the EU, then Czech-German relations risk becoming increasingly

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<sup>66</sup> Interview, conducted by the author, with German MFA official in Berlin.

<sup>67</sup> Interviews, conducted by the author, with academic experts in Prague and experts in Berlin.

comprehensive but comprehensively un-strategic. Whether this matters or not is an interesting and important question. It would perhaps be more accurate – and less problematic, although lower profile and less politically meaningful – to simply refer to a Czech-German Dialogue. although obviously it runs counter to the declaration and nomenclature of the *Strategic Dialogue*. It can be clearly seen that the Czech-German strategic dialogue has provided a general boost to relations between the two countries that will yield many practical benefits although it is highly uncertain as to whether this will foster the development of strategic cooperation in the absence of political leadership and with the continued obstacles to this and divergences between the two countries that noted in Chapter 3.

The lack of Czech domestic political consensus, the strategic incompatibility of the direction and values of the V4 countries from those of Germany and strategic-cultural divergence on e.g. environmental policy are only three such examples that point to the challenges that lie ahead in this regard. These challenges will not be overcome by intensified practical cooperation and cultural or educational exchanges alone, although these activities should help create more favourable conditions for doing so in future. In summary, the achievements of the CGSD are not thus far strategic in nature but should nonetheless be highly valued in their own terms. They could help create the conditions for strategic cooperation in future but need political leadership and vision as well as bureaucratic competence to do so. It may be hoped that increased interaction between the two sides will help such vision and leadership to emerge and also provide channels for cajoling and encouraging key figures, but other tendencies in Czech domestic politics mitigate against this (3-5).

However, the need for strategy can also be questioned in another way. In discussions with the German MFA a negative or defensive, rather than positive, vision of strategy emerged. Rather than help in supporting a positive vision for the future of the EU, its very preservation and the prevention of further European disintegration as well as limiting further damage to NATO and the wider, rules-based ‘liberal’ international order seemed to emerge as a priority. In this sense then the CGSD makes more sense in strategic terms, as well as in emerging as a model for German relations with other countries, as strategic damage limitation mechanisms and efforts to continue to bind Germany together with its neighbours and with other mid-sized EU member states. While this could be seen as a justification for the dialogue on strategic terms, there are larger considerations that again need to be taken into account.

While Germany may ‘need’ the Czech Republic in this regard, this role as a merely a non-destructive partner at the strategic level will not help in addressing underlying structural problems in Czech Foreign Policy that prevent the country from fully upholding its values and pursuing its strategic interests through the development of

a more productive identity as an EU member state. Moreover, without the development of such identities not only in the Czech Republic but elsewhere, this defensive and minimal vision may not be enough to defend the EU from the forces that threaten its very existence. While both the Czech Republic and Germany would lose out substantially from such a development the Czech side, as the smaller and less globally influential player, probably stands to lose more from any further European disintegration and the deterioration of the rules-based order. **While the CGSD is a valuable format, which has already delivered some practical gains, it could be so much ambitious and effective for both partners, if the political will can be found to endow it with truly strategic, but also positive, vision.**

***Key Recommendations.***<sup>68</sup>

1. In the context of the CGSD to identify what the ‘big questions of German foreign policy’ are and what the current Czech answers to them, but also what they can be and how they could be made more productive in future. It would be productive if the German side could engage in a reciprocal exercise, which would lead to the identification of genuinely strategic aspects of the current CGSD – and the exercise should be partly undertaken in the working groups (notably working group 1 on foreign and European policy).
2. To consider keeping only these ‘genuinely strategic’ issues as part of an ongoing Czech-German Strategic Dialogue, while moving other practical issues of cooperation to a separate format – e.g. ‘The Czech-German Partnership’. This would mitigate the reputation (and therefore sustainability) risk that being insufficiently strategic poses for the CGSD.
3. To begin to address the lack of positive Czech identity in foreign policy and as an EU member by **identifying areas** of both values and interest based politics – ideally combining the two – where the Czech Republic can show **leadership at the European level**. These policy areas should be selected to enhance the country’s capacity and ability to develop common purpose and reciprocity in its key strategic relations including with Germany, its key partner. The recent initiative shown in relation to European defence was a good start in this regard but must be built on, replicated in other areas and, crucially, followed through in practice.
4. To move from being a passive to an active defender of the EU – the flourishing of which is central to the upholding of Czech values and the pursuit of Czech interests – and to mount a full-scale publicity campaign in this regard. This will take on additional significance in the context of the Czech Republic becoming a net-contributor to the EU which will require a significant public diplomacy investment to show the benefits of membership beyond transfer payments.
5. To use this publicity effort - and the campaign for Czech leadership - to spark a wider public, political and partisan debate on Czech foreign policy vision involving all political parties, societal stakeholder groups and communities

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<sup>68</sup> To the Czech MFA and other Czech actors as this discussion paper was commissioned by and produced for the Czech MFA.

around the country. This would not only raise the profile of foreign policy issues but would also help to identify key areas of dissonance, resonance and even domestic consensus.

6. To seriously consider the compatibility of Czech strategic relations in the V4 – but also with e.g. Azerbaijan – with the aspiration to strategic relations with Germany in the context of a liberal EU of the type that Germany apparently seeks to preserve.

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## Interviews

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