

Central European Security: The Problem of Reassurance

Thursday, September 17, 2015

On September 17, 2015, the Institute of International Relations Prague organized a roundtable discussion titled “Central European Security: The Problem of Reassurance”. The discussion was moderated by Michael Kořan, Deputy Director of the Institute of International Relations Prague. Jan Ruzicka, based at the Institute as part of his Think Visegrad Fellowship and originally from the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University (UK) and Jiří Schneider, from the Prague Security Studies Institute, acted as the speakers. The roundtable was supported by the International Visegrad Fund.

After Mr. Kořan opened the discussion, Mr. Ruzicka started the discussion by arguing that trust in the NATO alliance is currently one of the most prominent security problems in Central and Eastern Europe. This is related to the changing security situation in the region, chiefly as a result of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine. Mr. Ruzicka emphasized that the problem of reassurance is a problem of trust. Without trust, reassurance is impossible. Since there is a risk of betrayal, trusting relationships are very rare in international politics.

However, no matter how rare it is, trust is still necessary. Mr. Ruzicka then highlighted that in alliances, states face two dilemmas. States face the risks of abandonment and entrapment. Central and Eastern European countries fear predominantly abandonment. There are at least three drivers of heightened security concerns: first, the external driver (such as Russian behavior in Eastern Europe); second, the change in threat perception; and third, the internal drivers, which can include action of allies as well as behavior of Central European countries themselves.

Mr. Ruzicka then explained that the cost of reassurance is in the hands of NATO, the US and its allies. Through NATO, for example, the US and its allies have been trying to increase the deterrence capacity in the Central and Eastern Europe. However, there is a fundamental problem of deterrence where the other side is will take its own measures to show that it has not been deterred. Mr. Ruzicka noted that the question of trust and reassurance has always been a crucial question within the NATO alliance. Finally, he questioned the readiness of Central European countries to carry the burden of their own defense, hence the calls for reassurance.

Mr. Schneider started his presentation by quoting one of his colleagues when they met during the Ambassadors’ Conference in the Czech Ministry of Foreign affairs who said that no matter what will happen to NATO, our neighbors will always stay with us. This kind of understanding, according to Mr. Schneider, seems to be slowly internalized through the establishment of Czech foreign policy, and manifests itself in Visegrad cooperation.

Looking at the Russian position in the case of Ukraine, Mr. Schneider believes that such actions undermine Central and Eastern European countries. He also noted that need of reassurance emerged from the period of Russo-Georgian War in 2008. During that period, NATO basically did not do anything although Georgia already had close ties with NATO. The emergence of war in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, however, acted as a new impulse to make reassurance real. This situation was followed up by reassurance provided by the US that was not only limited to planning, but also involved military exercises.

Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary) already have concrete actions such as military exercises, force integration units, and joint command structures. However, some problems still persist, like the balance of participation. Unfortunately, looking at the current situation in Europe which is heavily influenced by the refugee crisis, the defense and security agenda has been put aside.

During the discussion, one of the most debated subjects was the Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Mr. Ruzicka remarked that such a provision may serve as deterrence to potential aggressors. However, he also noted that deterrence measures will also carry a spin-off to security dilemma since they will lead to reaction from the aggressor. Deterrence itself is a signal, both for the internal and external actors.

Mr. Schneider directed the discussion towards the fact that the talk about Article 5 has always been about expectations of what others should do, but not about the members' commitment. Trust building should happen not only between the members of the organization, but also with external actors, such as with Russia. The cost of trust building with external actors, however, will come with a price. With Russia, for example, the price would be the recognition of Russian annexation over Crimea. This situation then requires the member states to find a proper balance, which is also a problem of statesmanship.

Moving further into the discussion, some of the audience were interested in the points presented by Mr. Ruzicka earlier. The questions posed by the audience were related to whether or not Mr. Ruzicka recognizes soft and hard reassurance. To answer these questions, Mr. Ruzicka made it clear that he did not want to draw such dichotomy (soft and hard) within the theory of reassurance. He admitted that both speech (declaration) and action play important roles in providing reassurance. Moreover, he also added that members of organization do owe something to the organization. Thus, free-riding may be considered as a form of suicide.

Along with the argument of Mr. Ruzicka, Mr. Schneider also said that words and actions do matter. He perceived the enlargement of NATO and the engagement with Russia as the way to increase reassurance. Again, he emphasized that the case of Georgia does play an important role in increasing the awareness about the need of reassurance.

Mr. Kořan suggested that the problem of reassurance stems not only from the difficulty of understanding opponents' intentions, but also from the difficulty of understanding our own intentions. In the final response Mr. Ruzicka remarked that it is important for states to recognize their own intentions before trying to understand those of opponents. The difficulty this presents should make us wary of reaching quick and rush judgments about opponents' intentions and ascribing clear cut strategies and motives to their actions.