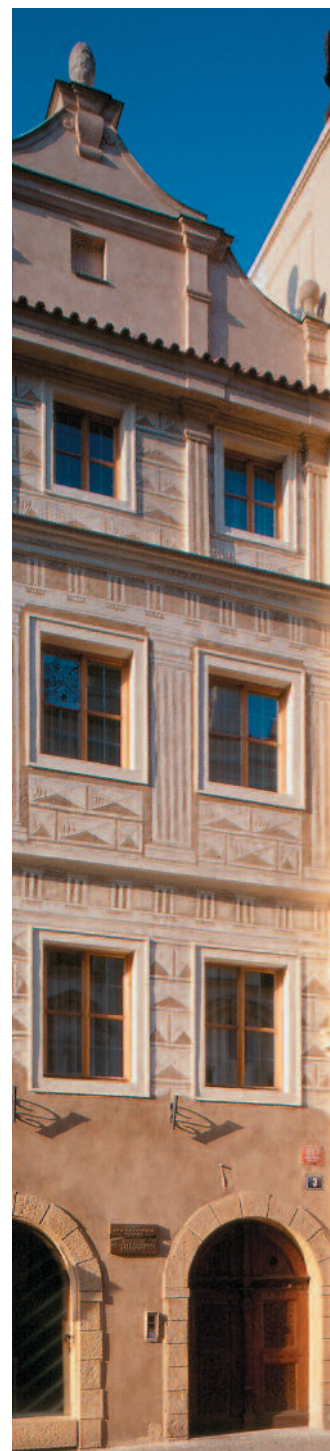


Michal Šimečka, Benjamin Tallis

# Czech Strategic Partnerships: A Practice in Need of a Vision

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The concept of a strategic partnership is gaining prominence in Czech diplomatic practice, but its meaning and implications remain inadequately understood. The policy paper seeks to redress the situation by unpacking the concept and building a framework for understanding strategic partnerships in the Czech context. It argues that while it is not necessary to construct a rigorous definition, more coherence and clarity is needed for strategic partnerships to serve as a meaningful instrument of Czech foreign policy.



# Introduction: A Promising but Unclear Concept

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The notion of strategic partnerships, implying the deepest and most comprehensive framework of bilateral relations, has become increasingly prominent in Czech foreign policy discourse and diplomatic practice. The 2015 Foreign Policy Concept singles out Poland, Israel, South Korea and France as strategic partners. Germany falls into the same category, as expressed through the launch of the Strategic Dialogue in 2015. The United States is also referred to as a strategic partner, most recently in the Security Strategy. The past two years have seen a steady expansion of Czech strategic partnerships – both in numbers and scope – as well as a drive toward their institutionalization. It culminated – rather controversially – in the establishment of formal strategic partnerships with Azerbaijan in September 2015, and with China in March 2016.

However, the endeavour has not been matched by attempts to clarify its purpose: in other words, why elevate some bilateral relations by pinning a ‘strategic’ label to them? What criteria, if any, should apply to the selection of strategic partners? Neither the Foreign Policy Concept nor other policy documents provide a definition of the concept. This policy paper partially redresses this situation by unpacking the notion of strategic partnership and sketching a conceptual framework for their use in the Czech context.

Investment into strategic partnerships holds considerable promise, in at least three respects: first, as an instrument for deepening and transforming select bilateral relationships, and for sustaining them in difficult times; second, as a tool of differentiation and ordering of Czech strategic priorities through choice of partners; and third, as a way of cultivating a distinct foreign policy identity, whereby the collection of partnerships signify a particular vision of the international order.

Needless to say, the exercise also involves potential risks: enhanced formats and over-ambitious declarations of cooperation may breed frustration if expectations are not met, or if partners espouse positions incompatible with Czech norms and interests. Furthermore, elevating the status of some partnerships may alienate and complicate relations with remaining partners: countries that failed to attain the status, but also existing strategic partners who may feel uncomfortable finding themselves in the same group.

The list of Czech strategic partners reveals some common attributes. With the exception of China and Azerbaijan, they are democracies with a broadly compatible outlook on the norms and principles governing international relations; in all partnerships (with the possible and partial exception of Israel), Czech Republic is the junior partner whose gains from the partnership are potentially greater than the other way around;

all partnerships (with the partial exception of South Korea) have a strong security component.

There is, however, considerable variation in terms of substantive remits, institutional arrangements, and formal designations. Some relationships are comprehensive and anchored in decentralized institutions of perpetual exchange at all levels of government and civil society mutual dialogue (Germany, Poland) whereas others are largely sustained mainly through regular (Israel, South Korea) or irregular high-level dialogue (US). Some strategic partnerships are inscribed in explicit contractual or formal political agreements (with Germany, South Korea, France, and China), whereas others (with Poland, Israel, the US) are based on implicit understandings. Some bear directly on vital Czech interests or issues of regional and pan-European importance (US, Germany, Poland) whereas others (Israel, South Korea, China, Azerbaijan) do not. Some bilateral relations are firmly embedded in and enacted through Czech Republic's membership in the EU and NATO (Germany, Poland, US), whereas others are not (Israel, South Korea, China, Azerbaijan); partnerships with bigger neighbours (Germany, Poland) are (to some extent) strategic by default (and the partnership with the US by historical default), whereas others, with countries further afield (Israel, South Korea), are so by choice whether economically or historically inflected.

In short, if all are strategic partners, they are so for different reasons, with different pedigrees, and in pursuit of different ends. Czech strategic partnerships are largely a

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## Different Understandings of Strategic Partnerships

The Czech Republic is far from alone in making extensive use of the instrument without imposing a definition, let alone integrated institutional shape, upon it. The label is as ubiquitous as it is ambiguous. It was first explicitly used to frame the shift in US–Soviet relationship (and later US–Chinese) away from ideological binaries and adversarial relations. The EU first employed in 1998 it to affirm “Russia’s importance as a strategic part-

ner to the Union".<sup>1</sup> From a systemic perspective, the proliferation of strategic partnerships (or similar designations) is a testament to the uncertainty and complexity of international diplomacy in the post-Cold war era: with so many global relationships being constituted and re-constituted, simple vocabulary – that of cooperation, partnership, alliance, friendship, rivalry or enmity – is no longer sufficient.<sup>2</sup> Strategic partnerships are becoming a new 'joker' of international diplomatic parlance.<sup>3</sup>

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There are at least three ways of thinking about the concept. First, the adjective 'strategic' could be understood as debasing the noun 'partnership', the latter connoting friendship, exclusivity, which in

turn derive from shared legacies and cultural affinities. Hence, the qualifier of 'strategic' – evoking pragmatic calculation of means and ends – signifies the partnership's incompleteness and diminished character. It denotes – but is simultaneously designed to obscure – a transactional or even latently conflictual nature of the 'partnership'. From this perspective, strategic partnerships are expedient precisely because of their ambiguity and joker-like quality: they are 'tactical' partnerships in disguise.

The second approach is taking the concept at face value: not as a mere camouflage of divergent interests or values, but as a *sui generis* mode of inter-state alignment. Strategic partnerships thus occupy a middle ground between coalitions, which are more ephemeral and temporary, and alliances, which tend to be more permanent.<sup>4</sup> Strategic partnerships are thus distinguished by a sense of common purpose: geared toward a common strategic objective that neither partner can effectively realize on its own.

The third approach is to consider strategic partnerships as a transformative endeavour, with independent effects on bilateral relations. The act of establishing a strategic partnership endows both partners with a new identity vis-a-vis each other and commits them to new "rules of the game", thus reconfiguring the political opportunities and institutional forms of a particular bilateral engagement. It begets additional political attention and creates new bureaucratic structures, complete with specific time-bound targets for cooperation. Thicker dialogue increases the likelihood of gradual convergence of strategic partners' perceptions through peer socialization, or, at minimum, elicits higher levels of mutual trust and militates against the risks of future alienation.

<sup>1</sup> European Council (1998). Presidency Conclusions Vienna, retrieved from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/wie1\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/wie1_en.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew C. Kuchins (2001). Russia's Relations with China and India: Strategic Partnerships, Yes; Strategic Alliances, No. *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Blanco, Luis Fernando (2016). The functions of 'strategic partnership' in European Union foreign policy discourse. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2016). p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins (2008). Russo–Chinese Strategic Partnership: A New Form of Security Cooperation?, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 29:2, 358–383.

In the latter perspective, strategic partnerships are not just a label to depict reality – whether accurately or instrumentally – but carry a constitutive function, reflecting and shaping the hierarchy of states’ strategic objectives and actor-identities. This is how they came to be used by the European Union. The launch of EU’s strategic partnerships in September 2010 – and selection of the US, Japan, Canada, China, Russia, India, South Korea Mexico, South Africa and Brazil – amounted to conscious act of geopolitical positioning and identity-formation on the part of the EU, in that it solidified EU’s self-perception as a key global actor that projects its norms and practices into every corner of the world. In many instances, however, this merely highlighted the gap between rhetoric and reality, and risks thereof.

The EU’s practice sparked a debate on the thorny issue on the role of shared values in strategic partnerships. Some observers and Member States called for a clear distinction

between value-based partnerships (such as with the US) and interest-based ones (such as with China). However, such a binary categorization is neither practical nor helpful in conceptual terms. After all, strategic partnerships are also – at least for the EU – a tool of shaping the rules of the international system. Partners’ failure to adhere to the EU’s fundamental values does not pose an insurmountable obstacle to collective action at the multilateral level. Therefore, when judged against the benchmark of effecting cooperative multilateral solutions – an eminently normative objective – the real measure of a strategic partnership would not be full normative alignment but reciprocity.<sup>5</sup>

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## A Conceptual Framework for Czech Strategic Partnerships

The above discussion yields useful pointers for building a conceptual framework in which Czech strategic partnerships can be pursued. The framework should be flexible enough to maximize the instrument’s potential for deepening bilateral relations, yet rigorous enough to serve the purposes of identity-building and creating hierarchies among foreign policy priorities.

<sup>5</sup> Grevi, Giovanni (2012). Why strategic partnerships matter. *FRIDE Working Paper*, p. 6.

A rigid or generic definition is neither necessary nor desirable. Nonetheless, it is useful to isolate five elements or qualities that account for the added value of Czech Republic's

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existing or future strategic relations, individually as well as collectively:

- a. Common purpose.** Strategic partnerships should be undergirded by a common understanding of the fundamental (strategic) rationale for bilateral cooperation, which should be future-oriented, broadly conceived, and should transcend a simple bilateral dimension. It assumes a measure of compatibility of partners' interests, values, or (ideally) both. It should point towards a shared vision of a regional (European) architecture or convergent views of the international order and joint commitment to work toward addressing key global challenges.
- b. Reciprocity.** While strategic partnerships need not necessarily be geared toward the enactment of shared democratic values, they must entail the cooperative pursuit of agreed-upon objectives in a reciprocal fashion. This requires partners' mutual recognition of their partnership as being of strategic value to each other. Reciprocity also implies that partners possess both the commitment and the resources (capacity to deliver) to meaningfully contribute towards common objectives, in the sense that mutual cooperation is indispensable to their attainment.
- c. Comprehensiveness.** Strategic partnerships are not coterminous with military alliances or security partnerships, but should be multidimensional and comprehensive, covering all levels of interaction (multilateral, inter-state, sub-state, civil society, people-to-people contacts) and substantive areas (regional and global challenges, trade and investments, education and culture, education, science and technology, etc).
- d. Contextual Coherence.** Strategic partnerships need not be developed with like-minded partners only. However, each should make for a contextual fit with 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 remaining Czech strategic partnerships. Each strategic partnership should cohere with and reinforce the existing priorities, vectors and partnerships – or, at minimum, not contradict them.
- e. Domestic Consensus.** Strategic partnerships should be anchored in an internal consensus of all relevant constituencies as regards their strategic value, reflecting the Czech society's sense of belonging, identity and historical narratives. Broad-based domestic consensus is essential if strategic partnerships are to be durable – which they should, as their objectives are invariably long-term – and if they are to exist independently of the make-up of government coalitions or short-term political agendas.

Excluding China and Azerbaijan, the existing Czech partnerships exhibit most of these qualities of 'strategic-ness'. On paper at least, they are organized around a wider purpose or set of objectives that transcends bilateral issues (such as developing a strong EU, regional security, or rules-based global order); they are reciprocal, comprehensive, and contextually coherent or even mutually reinforcing. Partnerships with Germany, Poland, the US, Israel and South Korea are broadly accepted by relevant Czech stakeholders as strategic, notwithstanding internal disagreements over partners' specific policies or Czech responses thereto, such as in the case of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories, US foreign and security policy, Polish government's alleged violation of the rule of law, or Germany's approach to the refugee crisis and EU migration framework. What is more, it would seem that internalization of the 'strategic partnership' discourse proved helpful in mitigating or at least managing the political differences that arise in bilateral relations.

The strategic partnership with Azerbaijan is more problematic, and not merely because of Baku's poor human rights record. As Czech Republic's strategic partner, Azerbaijan is an outlier, and clearly of a different (lower) order than Poland, Germany or even China. In addition to lacking in broad-based public support, it clearly fails the principle of contextual coherence: its inclusion among strategic partners is difficult to interpret as a derivative (and realization) of the country's strategic interests, and is both indicative of and compounds the confusion over Czech foreign policy identity.

The case of China is different in many respects: there are strong grounds to justify a strategic partnership with Beijing, which is also why many EU Member States – and the EU itself – chose to pursue it. The Czech case is somewhat more controversial given the country's identity in relation to human rights. More generally, the potential of Czech–Chinese strategic partnership remains hindered by the lack of strong internal consensus as well as a narrow framing of bilateral relations as primarily a commercial opportunity, rather than inscribing them in the wider context of international security, global governance or EU–Chinese relations.

## Recommendations

With that in mind, five recommendations can be put forward on the future development of Czech strategic partnerships:

- Let foreign policy vision guide strategic partnerships, rather than letting pragmatic or instrumental choices of strategic partners determine foreign policy vision and identity by default.

- Consolidate the existing strategic partnership by retaining the extant institutional mechanisms of dialogue with each partner. Attempts to impose uniformity would likely prove counterproductive, with the possible exception of the US, where deeper institutionalization of exchange is needed.
- Strive for greater political coherence among the strategic partners, *inter alia* by refraining from establishing new partnerships with countries that do not satisfy the five elements mentioned above, lest this would undermine the instrument as such.
- Consider distinguishing between comprehensive strategic partnerships and sectoral partnerships.
- Consider new strategic partnerships that would cohere and reinforce Czech foreign policy priorities and identity as an actor in development and/or transition assistance and human rights advocacy, and champion of EU integration and reform process in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership (EaP). A strategic partnership with either of the EaP countries (e.g. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) or Western Balkan EU candidates (e.g. Serbia, Montenegro or Albania) would also be a welcome corrective to the current practice whereby the Czech Republic is always the junior partner.

*Michal Šimečka is a Researcher of the Centre for European Security of the Institute of International Relations Prague.*

*E-mail: simecka@iir.cz*

*Benjamin Tallis is a Researcher and Coordinator of the Centre for European Security of the Institute of International Relations Prague.*

*E-mail: tallis@iir.cz*

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