



## INFORMATION SERIES

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Issue No. 445

September 24, 2019

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### **U.S. Czech Ballistic Missile Defense Cooperation: Policy Implications**

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#### **Introduction**

In 2001, the United States announced its decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty). Six months later, the treaty-imposed constraints on U.S. ballistic missile defense development, testing, and deployment were gone. Because of ballistic missile proliferation and the increasing sophistication of ballistic missiles, the United States has sought to protect its population “against limited ballistic missile attack (whether accidental, unauthorized, or deliberate).”<sup>1</sup>

The Czech Republic emerged as a key partner state in these early post-ABM Treaty ballistic missile defense efforts. Initially a curious ally interested in contributing to U.S. efforts to protect the U.S. homeland and allies, the Czech Republic negotiated to host an X-band radar, one of the critical components of a U.S. ballistic missile defense system, in 2007 and 2008. After U.S. missile defense plans changed in 2009 and the Obama Administration cancelled the deployment of an X-band radar to Europe, the Czech Republic rejected an opportunity to host an early warning ballistic missile defense data center in 2011. The Czech Republic also became



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an important diplomatic partner in getting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to acknowledge the critical role that ballistic missile defenses play in allied security.

The experience of U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation offers several important lessons for alliance cooperation and management as well as for the way governments discuss complex national security issues with their populations. First, while U.S. and Czech threat perceptions differed, their cooperation proceeded as if they did not differ. That is a significant finding because international relations literature on alliance management makes an implicit assumption that threat perceptions ought to be shared for alliances to work. Second, economic benefits of cooperation are not the primary driver of defense cooperation, although governments may try to utilize economic incentives to attempt to obtain the population's support for their preferred foreign policy choices. Third, governments must be extremely careful with respect to the timing of discussions about complex national security issues. In an era of social media and its sophisticated use by adversaries, getting behind the communications curve may put a government on the defensive with little prospect of shaping the narrative favorably once the issue is framed in a negative light. The following sections elaborate on each of these points in more detail.

### **Threat Perceptions and International Cooperation**

Neorealism, one of the most prominent international relations theories, argues that external threats to states are one of the most powerful deciding factors in whether countries will ally.<sup>2</sup> This theory operates under an implicit assumption that countries must share threat perceptions, otherwise they would not ally. The case of U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation illustrates that this is not so. Countries can not only have divergent threat perceptions, they can have other salient motives for cooperating.

The Czech 2003 National Security Strategy noted the proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction as a threat to Czech interests, but the document did not mention the United States or potential ballistic missile defense cooperation with it.<sup>3</sup> The document did, however, suggest ballistic missile defenses as a means to counter ballistic missile threats. In the fall of 2003, the United States provided the Czech Ministry of Defense technical requirements for a potential ballistic missile defense site. That exchange started extensive expert-level discussions that continued into 2004. The discussions stalled during 2005 when the Czech government was involved in a domestic scandal and the United States was in the process of analyzing its own ballistic missile defense options. In January 2007, the United States officially asked the Czech Republic to host an X-band radar (and Poland to host Ground-Based Midcourse Defense interceptors). A final site selection for this radar was announced in June 2007.<sup>4</sup> With a concrete location in mind, negotiations proceeded on the Broader Missile Defense Agreement (BMDA) and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) guiding a U.S. military



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presence on Czech territory. At the same time, more involved preparatory and survey work began on the presumed future site of the U.S. X-band radar in the Czech Republic.

From the beginning of discussions between the two countries, the United States was interested in deploying ballistic missile defense systems in order to counter the North Korean and Iranian ballistic missile threats.<sup>5</sup> Officially, Czech government officials adopted the U.S. threat interpretation.<sup>6</sup> The Czech political goals for ballistic missile defense, however, “had everything to do with Russia.”<sup>7</sup> Those Czechs who were in favor of ballistic missile defense cooperation with the United States saw it as a hedge against Russia’s political influence and as a way to signal that the days when the country was in Russia’s sphere of influence were gone.

Hosting a U.S. X-band radar was also seen as a way to embed the country more firmly in Western political and military structures, an aspect particularly relevant in the context of the Czech Republic’s relative newness as a NATO member. Iran and North Korea were not seen as credible threats by the Czech public, which dismissed as unrealistic the idea that an Iranian or North Korean ballistic missile would land on the Prague Castle (or on some other target in Europe).<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning, the Czech government did not emphasize the political value of hosting a U.S. X-band radar as a hedge against Russia’s influence, because it did not want to alienate neighbors and allies opposed to U.S. missile defense plans in Europe (like Germany, France, and Austria) or antagonize and provoke Russia. That restraint eventually subsided in response to Russia’s diplomatic and economic actions against the Czech Republic and Czech government officials became more vocal about the purpose of a U.S. presence on Czech territory as a hedge against Russia’s political influence.<sup>9</sup>

The United States understood Czech political concerns but did not share them. Then the Obama Administration cancelled a plan to place an X-band radar on Czech territory in 2009 as part of a broader realignment of U.S. ballistic missile defense policy prioritizing intermediate-range over long-range ballistic missile threats.<sup>10</sup> The Czech Republic turned down the Administration’s offer to host an early warning data center in 2011 because the data center would not make any real contribution to U.S. or NATO missile defense efforts and would be costly for the Czech Republic.

### **The Role of Economic Considerations**

While economic considerations did not play a significant role in the Czech government’s decision to host a U.S. radar on Czech territory, they played an important role at the local level. The Czech government tried to leverage the promise of funding for infrastructure improvements and economic opportunities as a way to obtain the cooperation and support of the many small villages in the vicinity of where the X-band radar would be built. The Czech



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government used the promise of economic assistance as both a carrot and a stick. For example, in the summer of 2008, the Czech government approved the lowest amount of infrastructure development money of all the villages in the region for Trokavec village, where the mayor was one of the most outspoken opponents of hosting a U.S. X-band radar.<sup>11</sup> After the U.S. cancelled the plan, these resources for economic development projects for the region were not provided.

The Czech government also tried to leverage the radar issue to increase opportunities for high-tech defense cooperation with the United States. Despite U.S. promises and some limited efforts, practical obstacles regarding Czech firms' participation in U.S. defense contracts (e.g. the need for U.S. security clearances for Czech personnel that would participate in such contracts) made such cooperative efforts challenging.

Focusing only on dollar contributions omits important ways in which smaller allies can contribute to allied security. It is true that had the United States not developed a missile defense system and an X-band radar, there would be nothing to negotiate about. The Czech economy is too small to support comprehensive ballistic missile defense research and development efforts. But the Czech government proceeded with negotiations despite the Czech public's opposition to the plan and spent a lot of political and diplomatic capital in advancing the issue. That was an important contribution of its own and one that cannot be measured by dollar figures.<sup>12</sup>

### **Lessons for Communications Strategies in the Digital Age**

Public reports about initial ballistic missile defense discussions between the Czech Republic and the United States were limited to a few basic news stories. The issue did not attract significant attention outside of a small Czech expert community. This was partly due to the secrecy with which successive Czech Social Democratic Party-led governments approached these discussions between 2002 and 2006. Even those involved in these initial discussions could hardly imagine how important the topic was to become for Czech foreign and defense policy just a few years later.

By the summer of 2006, U.S. interest in the Czech Republic as a potential host nation for a component of its ballistic missile defense system became public. That knowledge prompted the founding of the No Bases Initiative, a civic movement aimed at protesting any potential U.S. deployments. It also led to more intense public discussions about the extent of potential Czech involvement in U.S. ballistic missile defense plans. The Czech government missed an opportunity to effectively participate in these discussions.

Even as official negotiations proceeded apace after January 2007, the Czech government, this time led by the Civic Democratic Party, lacked a competent orchestrated and sustained public relations campaign that would inform the general public and counter misperceptions



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surrounding the issue. The Czech government argued it was premature to spend taxpayers' dollars on a public relations campaign because there were no finalized agreements with the United States to be discussed yet.<sup>13</sup> This short-sighted delay cost the Czech government an opportunity to shape its message and put it on the defensive from the outset. The Czech government's communications efforts were late, inefficient, and ultimately unsuccessful.

Complex national security issues do not lend themselves to easy Twitter-length explanations. The Czech public's general unfamiliarity with ballistic missile defense issues made it more difficult to counter misinformation, fueled primarily by the Russian Federation, about the U.S. X-band radar. This case illustrates the difficulties that democratic governments face when they publicly discuss complex technical issues that the public often does not fully understand and highlights the importance of general education on these difficult matters before they become prominent in the news.

Throughout the negotiations, the perception of U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation among the Czech population was overwhelmingly negative.<sup>14</sup> Some U.S. policy-makers tended to use public opinion polls as a barometer for evaluating whether the agreements had a chance to get through the Czech Parliament, for example as memoirs by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates show.<sup>15</sup> However, that is an inadequate metric for assessing these prospects. The Czech government was not hyper sensitive to the level of public opposition. If it was, it would not have participated in negotiations with the United States at all or would have ceased all cooperative efforts sooner.

The domestic opposition to a U.S. radar site on Czech territory stemmed from a set of unique historical experiences rather than from a categorical opposition to U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation. Generally, as a consequence of 40 years of Soviet occupation, Czechs are rather skeptical of any sort of foreign military presence on their territory. The increased visibility of U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation was the result of a unique post-2006 election situation that led to an extremely fragile coalition government in which every vote mattered for its continued stay in power. Understanding the strength of the ruling coalition supporting the government was just as important as whether the government as a whole supported U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation.

The Czech government hoped to improve the negative perception by framing U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation in a NATO context because NATO was viewed more favorably by the populace.<sup>16</sup> But describing U.S.-Czech missile defense negotiations and X-band radar deployment plans in the context of their NATO contribution led to confusion about the role of an X-band radar in NATO's ballistic missile defense architecture and future command and control arrangements. This confusion made it even more difficult for the Czech government to counter negative public reaction and the Russia-inspired misinformation campaign surrounding the issue.



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At the political level, the Czech government worked to get NATO to acknowledge the security benefits to the alliance of U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation. NATO's decision to do so was an important outcome of Czech diplomatic efforts and perhaps the most important legacy of U.S.-Czech missile defense cooperation.<sup>17</sup> As NATO member states accepted the importance of ballistic missile defense systems to alliance security, they raised fewer objections to U.S.-Czech cooperation in this area. The Czech government was quick to rebut any complaints by noting that such cooperation was consistent with the NATO goals to which their governments agreed. The consequences of this important effort transcend U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation because this effort opened the door for other NATO countries to play a more active role in U.S. ballistic missile defense plans. Some of them continue to play this role today with much less controversy than otherwise would be the case.

### Conclusion

The lessons outlined above are instructive given U.S. ballistic missile defense cooperation with many different countries in the world, including in regions as diverse as Japan and Romania. They underscore the need for a proactive educational communications campaign to counter misinformation likely to be promulgated by adversaries, particularly on highly technical topics and in countries with populations generally predisposed to see military cooperation with the United States negatively. They also illustrate that threat perceptions do not have to be perfectly shared in order to have a productive bilateral cooperative relationship, including on matters as sensitive as defense cooperation. Lastly, this case study underscores the importance of understanding the domestic politics of another country. The United States paid close attention to Czech domestic politics but had difficulties interpreting its nuances and what they meant for the prospects of U.S.-Czech ballistic missile defense cooperation. Mitigating such misunderstanding increases chances that cooperative efforts will be successful.

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9. See for example "Zahraniční politika České republiky data 3/2007," March 2007, [https://www.mzv.cz/public/e5/87/1/73316\\_491961\\_Data\\_mesicniku\\_ZP2007\\_03.pdf](https://www.mzv.cz/public/e5/87/1/73316_491961_Data_mesicniku_ZP2007_03.pdf); Miroslav Topolánek, "Projev Předsedy Vlády ČR Mirka Topolánka Na U.S. Missile Defence in Europe: Consequences for the Transatlantic Relations Konané Na MZV 31.5.2007" (May 31, 2007), <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/vyznamne-projevy/projev-predsedy-vlady-cr-mirka-topolanka-na-u-s--missile-defence-in-europe-consequences-for-the-transatlantic-relations-konane-na-mzv-31-5-2007-23163/>.
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