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The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on January 21, 2021. The symposium focused on lessons learned for alliance defense cooperation as a result of this case study, which is the subject of a recently published book by National Institute for Public Policy Research Scholar Michaela Dodge.

U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action

Dr. Michaela Dodge

Dr. Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy and received her Ph.D. from George Mason University in 2019

Thank you very much for joining us for this delightful event and thanks to my colleagues Michael and Peter for participating. And to Dave and the National Institute for supporting the book writing and research that went into it.

Even though it would make sense for me to give an overview of my book, I would like to speak on the topic that I personally had most fun with: Russia’s influence operations in the Czech Republic during the radar discussions and negotiations.

As far as I can see, there are five factors that make Russia’s influence operations in the present time more potent than allied efforts. Their long-term character; illegality; complexity;



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asymmetry; linkages and interchangeability. My broader goal is to illustrate what to me appear to be the most significant differences between Russian and U.S. approach to influence operations. Mind that these differences generate synergies, even if they may not be as pronounced on an each-by-each basis.

- **Long-Term Character.** Russia's influence operations are a long-term affair. Russia spent the 1990s sustaining and maintaining its intelligence networks. Russia's activities got further boost when President Putin came into power. Russia focused on developing a network of "influence agencies" through which the Russian Federation could impact the Czech government's decisions on a local level, spread disinformation, delegitimize the Czech government if needed. Russia did so by sowing mistrust in the Czech government's decisions among the Czechs, and making foreign allies and partners question the trustworthiness of the Czech Republic as an ally.

Another sign of Russia's long-term approach is its interest in Czech local and regional politics. Russian intelligence operatives reportedly cultivate relationships with local politicians. Russia also tries to obtain economic advantages by having its firms participate (and preferably secure) government contracts, e.g., in construction. The Russians are reportedly not shy of bribery and extortion. Which is extremely useful given that local politics feeds national-level politics overtime.

When the Czech Republic started to talk to the United States about missile defense cooperation in the early 2000s, Russia already had infrastructure to conduct influence operations. Just because the Cold War ended, it doesn't mean that relationships ended. U.S.-Czech early missile defense discussions were not known to the general public. During this timeframe, Russia rather focused on obtaining economic advantages for the Russian firms, particularly in the energy and heavy industry sector. But it is highly unlikely it didn't know about the Bush Administration's missile defense ideas and potential concepts.

In about 2006, U.S.-Czech radar discussions became public. That is when Russia really started to focus on influencing the Czech public opinion against the radar. Russia does not like missile defense. Period. It especially does not like missile defense on a territory of its former vassal state. So when the knowledge of the discussions became public, Russia started to organize. Its fingerprints are apparently on many anti-radar activities that went on between 2007 and 2009, although giving all the credit to Russia's intelligence services would not be accurate. After all, there is no shortage of unaware collaborators in the Czech Republic.

- **Illegality.** In the pursuit of its activities, Russia does not hesitate to draw on organized crime networks developed during the 1990s. It also does not hesitate to use illegal



means to achieve its goals. Obviously, there is a whole issue of not declaring Russia's intelligence operatives in the Czech Republic as such. Rather, Russia pretends they are diplomats, academics, and businessmen. But it is also a manner of tools Russia uses to compel individuals to do what Russia wants.

Bribes, corruption, violence are all a part of an acceptable repertoire to get the information or a contract Russia wants. Additionally, as Russia's connections to the Czech government deepen, it can use government's tools to make life unpleasant for those who do not comply, for example by threatening to have certain people audited or scrutinized for compliance with Czech laws. This particular tactic is specifically mentioned with regard to Russia trying to influence Russians living in the Czech Republic in the long-term.

During the radar debate, Russia wanted to undermine the Czechs' faith in the system itself, stir the public opposition against the radar, and question the Czech's government legitimacy to conduct diplomacy in such a manner. If you remember, the Topolánek government was not particularly strong during its two tenures and five or so no-confidence votes against it in the Chamber of Deputies. There were suspicions of the Russians funding at least some anti-radar activities on the Czech territory, although to my knowledge details were never made public.

- **Complexity.** The Americans try to assess their audience and then tailor the message to convince their audience. The Russians try to get into the decision-makers' heads before the decisions are made. It seems to me that the process of figuring out the latter is more difficult than the former. Although I will be the first one to admit that I am not entirely sure what the difference means exactly. One is sort of outside-in approach, the other inside-out. I am not saying that the United States never does the latter, but it sure does not look like our usual *modus operandi*.
- **Linkages.** Russia built its presence among the media, and in the Czech political sphere. These include Czech politicians, including Members of Parliament and their assistants. They include members of political parties responsible for their respective party's foreign policy and security agendas. Czech Foreign and Defense Ministries are obvious targets for Russia's intelligence activities.

What makes Russia's activities more difficult to understand is the fluidity of agencies that execute influence operations. In the pursuit of the common goal, Russia's intelligence agencies work in unison—Russia's Federal Security Service (that usually operates domestically) can operation on a foreign territory. Sometimes, it may look like a Russian operative is working to achieve a common goal, e.g., fight against terrorism, while in reality he is pursuing an entirely different malign goal.



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This approach creates obvious synergies. Now think about the U.S. government, our bureaucratic stove-piping and turf wars. These particular aspects of U.S. bureaucracy are not helped laws guiding U.S. intelligence agencies and law enforcement. Even as these laws exist for good reasons. But I think it is useful to recognize that in this particular area, synergies in terms of operations execution are not on our side.

- **Asymmetry.** The Czech Republic reportedly serves as a “testing laboratory” for influence operations. They are implemented throughout NATO when they prove effective. That makes it even more important to understand what it is that the Russian Federation is doing. And perhaps explains why Russia has such a significant intelligence presence in the Czech Republic.

About two thirds of the Russian embassy staff (which is somewhere around 140 people) are spies. This count does not include those intelligence operatives that are in the Czech Republic clandestinely. My understanding is we do not have a firm grip on that number. The Czech embassy in Moscow employs about 65 diplomats total—the number is lower than the number of Russian intelligence officers in the Czech Republic. And because Russia’s policy is tit-for-tat, meaning that it will kick out one Czech diplomat for each Russian diplomat expelled, kicking them all out is simply not a realistic option. And speaking of synergies, remember that a diplomatic immunity shields these intelligence operatives from accountability before Czech laws. This is of course in the context of the Russian intelligence services’ general propensity to use what we would consider illegal means if it serves their purposes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Most of my information comes from the Czech Security Service’s annual reports. All allied countries ought to prepare and publish annual counterintelligence reports mapping Russia’s (and other adversaries’) activities on their respective territories. Well done reports are indispensable to understand how the Russian intelligence services operate. This understanding is critical for countries with a different strategic culture. It is hard for an American to think like a Russian. A succinct clear report can do wonders to make their activities somewhat more comprehensible. And here I would like to praise Jakub Janda’s European Values think tank and indispensable work they do on this issue too.

Second, governments ought to invest in digital literacy campaigns. We need a plan to counter Russia’s narrative that truth is relative, that nobody is worth one’s trust, that it is not worth one’s time to engage, that disruptions to one’s truths come from the West, and that the innate need for truth can only be satisfied on the East. I am told Finland is doing some interesting



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things in this area but not being an expert in this particular area, I have to take other experts' word for it.

Third, one of the main differences between today and the radar debate is that the use of social media was not as prevalent as it is today. This creates a whole host of its own problems. I'll quote Dr. Pfaltzgraff and Dr. Davis: "Communications technologies have led to the empowerment of unprecedented number of people without necessarily creating a more informed population." The task of creating a more informed population includes supporting educational systems that produce critical thinkers with a solid background in logic and history. The system ought to be supported by quality media. To paraphrase a friend of mine, "At the front lines of this war are not paratroopers or fighter jets, but journalists." It pains me how much we are failing in these areas in the United States.

Fourth, allied cooperation is one of our main advantages. It is one of the main areas where we can generate synergies not available to the Russian Federation. For the Czech Republic, a small state with very limited resources, it is the only way to get as close to beating the Russians in their own game as it gets.

Fifth, we really have to be clear eyed about a threat to our interest. As Czech General Pavel said, the relativization of threat is one of the results of Russia's activities. If the people are told that Russia is not a threat, then people will believe it. And if we do not have sufficient arguments to show that they are being manipulated by Russia, then we can't be surprised that people don't see it as a threat.

Wounds can be self-inflicted. One of the failures of Russia's reset policy was the resultant pressure to not call spade to spade when it came to an articulation of Russia's threat, including in allied capitals.

Petr Suchý

Petr Suchý is Vice-Dean for Internationalization and Student Affairs, Masaryk University

In September 2009, the Obama administration significantly reconfigured the plans of the previous Bush administration to build a missile defense system in Europe. I would like to reflect upon the implications of the Czech–U.S. missile defense (non)cooperation, address the key factors that impacted it, and outline some of the lessons learned for future cooperative endeavors.

Following the Obama administration's decision, Jiří Paroubek, the then-Czech Prime Minister, called this moment "a victory of the Czech people." In my beloved Woody Allen movie, *Love*



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and Death, a Russian commander talks to his soldiers and defines the terms of victory and loss, stressing the importance of the more preferred outcome—a victory. The main character, private Boris Grushenko, a romantic coward and “the worst soldier to be ever seen,” suddenly asks: “What do we win?” Publication of Michaela Dodge’s new book on U.S. – Czech missile defense cooperation presents a perfect opportunity to ponder on this “victory.” It is thus in this spirit that I would also like to ask, more than eleven years later, “What did we win?” How has this “victory” affected Czech society and politics? What gains are there to value and appreciate?

In my opinion, and quite contrary to Paroubek’s, the only victory that the end of this missile defense episode brought was a Pyrrhic one. It was, indeed, a great defeat for which we are still paying a rather high price. Let me outline four key reasons why I think so.

- First of all, the missile defense issue symbolized the end of a broad consensus on Czech foreign and security policy. Prior to the missile defense debate, democratic parties across the political spectrum agreed on the main parameters, goals, priorities and direction(s) of the foreign and security policy and our strategic partnerships. Yet, the Social Democratic Party headed by Paroubek and the Green Party used the missile issue as a point of departure from that consensus, exploiting it for their own particular purposes. In my judgement, this wide consensus has not been renewed.
- Second, the issue made some policymakers – and by far not only Paroubek – realize that sensitive security issues might be successfully misused in a populist manner to help them generate some additional electoral support. Since then, this approach has been adopted very often and on a wide array of issues, both domestic and foreign.
- Third, the Social Democratic Party deliberately opened a window of opportunity for Russia (until then kept rather closed), thereby providing legitimization for Russian claims that they had a right to interfere in the U.S. – Czech negotiations. As a case in point, the Social Democrats organized their security conference featuring a Russian general, Evgeny Buzhinskyi, as a keynote speaker on the very same day as Condoleezza Rice was signing the agreement. This was just a prologue, though. Later, and particularly since 2013 when a strongly pro-Russian and pro-Chinese president – Zeman – entered the Prague Castle, Russia’s operating field has widened notably and is now in full swing. The President covers Russia’s back, relentlessly attacking and questioning the findings of our intelligence services. Those who fiercely fought against cooperation with the United States are now quietly standing aside or are actively servile to Russia and China.
- Fourth, and no less important, the significance of the transatlantic relationship was thrown into question and relativized. Current Czech leaders, the President and the



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Prime Minister, have pursued only a few goals vis-à-vis the United States, the most crucial of them being an invitation to the White House and a picture with the U.S. President. Transatlantic relations are nowadays only paid necessary lip service to help them make this dream come true.

Let me now turn to the key factors that impacted U.S. – Czech missile defense cooperation. To start with, domestic issues and factors were especially important vis-à-vis the political situation in the Czech Republic. At that time, the country was ruled by a weak, unstable minority government. The coalition was rather polarized, on missile defense in particular, and this was effectively utilized by parties that opposed this cooperation with the United States. By contrast, the parties in favor of cooperation with the United States were rather inactive, due to the lack of knowledge on missile defense issues in general, a number of myths surrounding the matter, and the lack of activity within their parties towards its members. In general, we may say that to fight against something rather unpopular is usually easier than to promote it.

Importantly, then-President Václav Klaus had generally no strong interest in security matters. With ease, he uncritically accepted Putin's interpretation of some particular security issues, for example the Euromissile crisis in the 1980s. Also, his team of advisors was divided over the issue and some of their argumentation was as pathetic as are the "analyses" produced by the Václav Klaus Institute nowadays. In comparison to former president Václav Havel, who did his utmost to garner wider support for the plan, the contrast between these two approaches is striking. Since then, Vaclav Klaus has moved even closer towards Putin's Russia.

In addition, the Czech government's style of communication with the public was reactive, rather than active, with practically zero public diplomacy on the missile defense issue. Sometimes contradictory and/or confusing statements from the government and ministries did not help the situation. And neither did narratives likening the U.S. military presence to the Nazi and/or Soviet occupation and loss of sovereignty and depicting the host nation as a primary target of potential adversaries. By contrast, anti-radar groups such as Ne základnám ("No to the bases"), were visible, loud and highly (pro)active.

Adding into this were Russian influence operations. But other Russian activities were interesting, too, as illustrated, for instance, by the involvement of Russian academics who took part in organized visits to universities, where they would threaten instead of discussing the issues.

The final factor pertains to the unpopularity of the Bush Administration in Europe. However, the significance of this aspect should not be exaggerated, as I do not suppose that a more popular president or administration would actually have made much of a difference.



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Finally, let me sketch some of the lessons learned (albeit the hard way) for future cooperative endeavors. First and foremost, efforts should be made to engage relevant political entities across the political spectrum. Also, enough attention should be paid to public diplomacy and information campaigns. Communication should be direct, clear and timely with no surprises (such as the announcement about the change of the missile defense plans made by the Obama administration on September 17, 2009). Equally important is the need to limit, to the greatest extent possible, the access Russian influencers have and to engage NATO partners (and NATO as such) much more.

Moreover, it is necessary to keep up frequent contact and communication – not only within the Alliance, but also at the national level. It is also essential to give heed to official visits, as NATO allies need to be reassured and get a feeling of importance, even when “nothing” is at stake. In this regard, one should not concentrate only on intra-agency communications. Naturally, education matters as well. And in these times of online education, it might be even easier to organize.

All this being said, let me conclude my thoughts by emphasizing the need to revitalize our efforts to renew a broader foreign and security policy consensus. In this context, two conditions are necessary – leadership based on democratic values and acknowledgement of the importance of Czech – U.S. ties and cooperation.

Michael Rühle

Michael Rühle is Head, Hybrid Challenges and Energy Security, in NATO's Emerging Security Challenges Division

The views expressed are the author's own.

The turbulent Czech-U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) episode offers many lessons – for NATO as well as for individual Allies. I will focus on what I believe to be the five most pertinent ones.

- The *first lesson* is quite banal, yet we tend to forget it all too often: *Governments need to bring their publics along.* In the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) debate of the early 1980s, for example, we had lost sight of this fact. We thought that we were strengthening deterrence, yet we almost lost the debate about reassuring our own population. In the Czech case, the Government also underestimated the public aversion towards a U.S. BMD deployment. Was this really a surprise? The system had a weak rationale, it was not going to protect the Czech Republic, while at the same time making that country seemingly more vulnerable to Russian threats. As Michaela shows, the



Czech Government had its own reasons for entering into discussions with the United States.¹ However, if both sides opt for the same thing, yet for entirely different motives, cognitive dissonance will eventually occur, and this will not go unnoticed.² Successive Czech Governments – some of them fragile coalition governments – were at great pains to come up with a plausible rationale and, arguably, they failed to convince. “Defense cooperation with the United States” or “good relations with the United States” – such rationales are too weak to legitimize the deployment of a system that for many if not most Czech citizens looked like a liability rather than an asset.³

- This brings me to my *second lesson: the need to look at the larger political context*. It is not sufficient to look at the merits of a BMD system in isolation. The “Safeguard” and “Sentinel” debates of the late 1960s might have taken a different turn if they hadn’t been conducted with the backdrop of the Vietnam War. With the Czech Republic’s BMD participation, it was no different. Even if that system had proven to be extraordinarily effective, it was proposed by the George W. Bush Administration – an Administration that was loathed by many Europeans, and not only in “old” Europe. The U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 and the U.S.-led war on Iraq in 2003 (which, to quote then U.S. NATO Ambassador Nick Burns, confronted NATO with a “near-death experience”) had both been deeply unpopular in Europe. In short, the political backdrop was not at all conducive to a BMD deployment, all the less so as there was no “clear and present danger” at that time by ICBMs from Iran or other Middle Eastern countries. Hence, a debate that should have focused on proliferation challenges in the Middle East quickly degenerated into a discussion on how to handle Russia.
- This brings me to my *third lesson: whether we like it or not, BMD in Europe is always somehow “about Russia”*. Granted, the U.S. BMD system was never intended against Russia. Granted, many Russian statements against that BMD system were outrageous propaganda. Granted, Russia sensed that public support among the Czech population was weak and thus could be easily exploited (see Michaela’s contribution). That said, however, Russia has tremendous respect for U.S. military technology and has long been concerned that its nuclear deterrent, which seems to have acquired an almost religious status in Russian strategic culture, could be undermined by new technical developments. One should also remember that the NATO enlargement process was still ongoing – a process that Russia has never perceived as anything but a Western encroachment into its erstwhile “zone of privileged interests” (Medvedev). In short, according to the saying that even paranoids have real enemies, Russia may indeed have interpreted U.S. missile defense plans as only the first stage of a growing strategic challenge, and thus mobilized its entire array of active measures to scuttle it. Most importantly, however, Russia’s vocal threats introduced military scenarios into the debate. And once that happens – witness the INF debate – a democratic government



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will find it difficult to reassure an increasingly nervous population that everything is still under control.

- *My fourth lesson: multinational solutions in NATO are preferable to bilateral deals.* This applies to BMD but also to other potentially controversial areas, such as nuclear weapons. It is moot to speculate—as some did at the time—whether the Obama Administration’s abrogation of the “third site” meant throwing Prague and Warsaw under the bus for the sake of the desired “reset” with Russia. Whatever its initial motivation, the new configuration of BMD allowed for the greater involvement of NATO Allies. And this, in turn, allowed the Allies to reciprocate by providing a political cover for the continued bilateralism of U.S. BMD policy. The “NATO-ization” of parts of BMD defused the controversy by turning the issue from a matter of principle to a matter of process, and from ideology to the pragmatic question of how best to organize “pooling and sharing” the missile defense mission among Allies. True, linking part of BMD to NATO’s efforts made mentioning specific countries of concern (e.g., Iran) impossible, but NATO’s comprehensive endorsement of missile defense, which even included a commitment to population defense (!), was remarkably smooth. Moreover, since NATO also had some rudimentary missile defense cooperation with Russia underway, as well as structures for dialogue, such as the NATO-Russia Council, the Russia factor lost some of its salience. In short, NATO saved the Czech Republic from being “singularized.”
- *My fifth and final lesson: For the United States, NATO remains the best device to “educate” the Allies regarding new challenges and responses.* Notwithstanding European talk about “strategic autonomy,” the United States continues to enjoy tremendous clout in shaping European strategic thinking. The Europeans may be slow in following the U.S. lead on many issues, but follow they do. Hence, U.S. persistence has turned NATO from a “eurocentric” Alliance into one that follows a functional notion of security, going “out-of-area” to Afghanistan, Libya, and the Horn of Africa. It was also the United States that persuaded the Allies to open up to building partnerships with likeminded countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Australia or Japan. Very recently, the United States managed to put China on NATO’s agenda. Allies collectively rejected the Nuclear Ban Treaty. And the United States remains the driving force for sensitizing its Allies to the dangers of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as well as delivery vehicles and, consequently, to the need for BMD. In short, NATO is the transmission belt for conveying U.S. strategic thinking to Allies. And only in Europe does the United States find the *milieu* that is geared towards collectively accepting U.S. leadership in security and defense. For an ambitious project such as BMD, which requires the cooperation of Allies, this U.S.-centric predisposition of NATO remains an invaluable asset.



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1. See Michaela Dodge, *U.S.-Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020).
2. In his memoirs, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates provides a bleak account of the entire affair: “Under both the Bush and Obama missile defense plans, I thought our goals and those of the Polish and Czech leaders were completely different, although no one ever had the audacity to say so publicly or even privately.” (Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage, 2015) p. 403.
3. In Gates’ words: “I was convinced the Russians would never embrace any kind of missile defense in Europe because they could see it only as a potential threat to themselves. What I hadn’t counted on was the political opposition to the missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. As early as January 2008, the new Polish center-right government led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk made clear they would not consider hosting the interceptors unless the United States agreed to an accompanying defense package of shorter-range missile defenses for Poland and made a greater commitment to come to Poland’s aid than provided under the NATO charter. In June 2008, Polish defense minister Bogdan Klich told me that to bring the negotiations to closure, it would be ‘important for President Bush to make a political declaration and commitment of assistance to Poland similar to those the United States provided to Jordan and Pakistan.’ For their part, the Czechs were making demands about bidding on our contracts associated with site construction and also letting us know that U.S. companies and citizens working on the project would be subject to Czech taxes. *Our presumptive partners for missile defense in Europe were stiff-arming us.*” Gates, op. cit., p. 167. (Emphasis added); for a comparison between the Czech and Polish approaches see Nik Hynek and Vit Stritecky, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Site of Ballistic Missile Defense*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 43 (2010), pp. 179-187; for a focus on the role of civic society see Yelena Biberman and Feryaz Ocakli, *One Shield, Two Responses: Anti-U.S. Missile Defense Shield Protests in the Czech Republic and Poland*, *Politics & Policy*, 43, 2 (2015), pp. 197-214.

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