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# Between *Defender of Values* and *Faithful Ally*: Czech Approaches to China in the Prism of Role Theory Approach\*

Alžběta Bajerová and Richard Q. Turcsányi

*Abstract* For two decades after 1989, the Czech Republic has been one of the most energetic campaigners of human rights internationally and in particular concerning China. Political reshuffling in 2012–2013, however, led to a U-turn in foreign policy on China and suddenly the Czech Republic counted as one of the most pro-China countries regionally. A few years later, little economic results, and another domestic political reshuffling, the Czech approach towards China changed again. President and the government, however, maintain different views of what the Czech position towards China should be. The paper puts these dynamic changes in the Czech positioning vis-à-vis China in a framework using the »role theory« perspective, focusing on the policy-making process and discourse. Official statements of the Czech president, prime minister, and minister of foreign affairs are used as the data. It is shown, that the Czech dominant role changed from a *Defender of Values* (before 2012) to the one of a *Faithful Ally* of China (during 2013–2017). The situation since 2018 shows an open spectrum—while the government might be trying to build the position of an *Internal Developer*, the polarized nature of the Czech discussion of China make it difficult to defend.

*Keywords* China, Czech Republic · policy-making process, foreign policy

## *Introduction*

After 1989, the Czech Republic (before 1993 Czechoslovakia) took a critical path in its foreign policy approach towards China, at least rhetorically. The newly

\* This work was supported by European Regional Development Fund Project »Sinophone Borderlands—Interaction at the Edges«, CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000791.

democratic country led by anti-communist revolutionary leader-turned president Vaclav Havel looked at China through distinct ideological lenses.<sup>1</sup> Human rights, Tibet, and the government based on Taiwan became the symbols of the Czech position vis-à-vis China for more than two decades and they won high appeal among elite, civil society groups, media, and large sections of public.<sup>2</sup> Havel, for instance, never visited China or met with a high representative of the Chinese government; instead, he formed a personal friendship with the Dalai Lama. The similar direction was sustained after Havel's retirement, most notably in the person of Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, in office for most of the period of 2007–2013. By the end of the 2000s, the Czech Republic, with its negative ideological attitude towards China, was standing out within Europe.<sup>3</sup>

The idealistic and, probably prevailing, view among politicians, media and public had it that Czechs are experienced in the struggle against communism and they are able—or even morally obliged—to contribute to freedom in the world by offering know-how.<sup>4</sup> More critical interpretations of the Czech inclination

- 1 It is fair to add that China looked back to the Czech Republic in a similar black-and-white way and at least during the 1990s it regarded the Czech Republic as a traitor of communism. The Chinese media generally presented the transformation of the country as unsuccessful, for a superb study see Czeslaw Tubilewicz, »Chinese Press Coverage of Political and Economic Restructuring of East Central Europe«, *Asian Survey* 37,10 (1997), 927–943.
- 2 Ondřej Ditrych, Vladimír Handl, Nik Hynek and Vít Strítěcký, »Understanding Havel?«, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, September, 46,3, (2013), 407–417.
- 3 François Godemont and John Fox, *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2009), <[ecfr.3cdn.net/532cd91dob5c9699ad\\_ozm6b9bz4.pdf](http://ecfr.3cdn.net/532cd91dob5c9699ad_ozm6b9bz4.pdf)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017). See also François Godemont, Jonas Parello-Plesner and Alice Richard, *The Scramble for Europe* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2012), <[http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR37\\_Scramble\\_For\\_Europe\\_AW\\_v4.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR37_Scramble_For_Europe_AW_v4.pdf)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017); Rudolf Fürst, »Dálný východ v české zahraniční politice« [Far East in Czech Foreign Policy], in *Česká zahraniční politika v roce 2012: Analýza ÚMV* [Czech Foreign Policy in the Year 2012: Analyses of IIR], ed. by Michal Kořan (Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2013), 214–221.
- 4 See for example Olga Lomová, »Občanská práva v ČLR v době výročí Charty 77« [Civic Rights in

towards human rights protection in Tibet point out, that the fight against communism in Czechoslovakia was the domain of a relatively small group of intellectuals and dissidents, with most citizens passively giving in the political reality. Hence, it is allegedly this lack of struggle against own authoritarian regime which creates a feeling of »guilt« among people which they want to suppress by projecting a desired own position on a similar struggle elsewhere, in this case, China.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, some analysts still criticized the Czech foreign policy for lacking a coherent direction, a definition of fundamental norms, and strategic priorities.<sup>6</sup> Since 1989 the only somewhat unifying narratives of the Czech foreign policy were the human rights protection and post-communist transition experience. However, these have never been elaborated into any official strategy defining how to act on them in practice. Indeed, it is difficult to talk about any practical »support« for these ideals in practice. The best examples concerning China are numerous visits of the Dalai Lama in the Czech Republic, annual Tibet-day flag events, vocal support for the UN membership of Taiwan, and other

PRC at the Time of Anniversary of Charter 77], *Aktuálně* 10 January 2017, <<http://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/olga-lomova.php?itemid=28654>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017), »Otevřený dopis signatářů Charty 77 premiéru Sobotkovi« [Open Letter of Charter 77 Signatories to Premier Sobotka], *Sinopsis* 20 January 2017, <<https://sinopsis.cz/otevreny-dopis-signataru-charty-77-premieru-sobotkovi>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017), see also public campaign »Nepodbízejte se diktátorům aneb Demokratovo desatero« [Do not Undersell Yourself to Dictators or Ten Principles of a Democrato], <<http://www.nediktatorum.cz>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

- 5 Rudolf Fürst, »Podpora Tibetu, Tchaj-wanu a lidských práv v Číně: Evropská avantgarda nebo český kýč?« [Support of Tibet, Taiwan and Human Rights in China: European Avant-garde or the Czech Kitsch?], in *Hledání českých zájmů: Obchod, lidská práva a mezinárodní rozvoj*. [Looking for Czech National Interest: Trade, Human Rights and International Development], ed. by Petr Drulák and Ondřej Horký (Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2010), 80–101.
- 6 Vladimír Handl and Otto Pick, *Česká zahraniční politika 1993–2005: Od "návratu do Evropy" k evropeizaci* [Czech Foreign Policy 1993–2005: From "Return to Europe" to Europeanization] (Prague, Institute of International Relations, 2005); Michal Kořan, »The Political Context and the Making of Czech Foreign Policy in 2013« in *Czech Foreign Policy in 2013: Analysis*, ed. by Michal Kořan *et al.* (Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2014), 17–28.

rhetorical expressions.<sup>7</sup> Hence, it can be argued, that the »pro-Tibet«, »pro-Taiwan«, and »anti-China« orientations served more as the symbols of the Czech foreign policy orientation, to a considerable extent resulting from the domestic political milieu, rather than a substantial foreign policy program.<sup>8</sup>

The China-related discourse of Czech political leaders changed significantly from very negative to exceedingly positive during 2013.<sup>9</sup> Although some of the leaders tried to frame their positions as not being in opposition to the previous policies, our account will show that the Czech approach towards China during the period of 2013–2017 indeed differed significantly from the previous period. Given the fact that the former role was perceived by many as emerging from historical experience and fundamental values, the policy shift was followed by a vivid political, public and media discussion.

Eventually, the new position vis-à-vis China did not take hold—after the perceived lack of economic results, series of hiccups of Chinese businesses in the Czech Republic, growing security preoccupations of Huawei and other controversies, the new Babiš government effectively abandoned the pro-China positioning. However, this leaves the country without a foreign policy consensus among its leaders. President Zeman continues in his friendly rhetoric towards China, new foreign minister Petříček mentions human rights and values, while

7 »Vlajka pro Tibet« [Flag for Tibet], *Lungta*, 2017, <<http://www.lungta.cz/projekty/vlajka-pro-tibet/>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

8 Rudolf Fürst, »Co počít s negativní českou konstrukcí zlé Číny?« [What to do with the Negative Czech Construction of Bad China? ], in *Mezi politickým (ne)zájmem a byrokratickou efektivitou* [Between Political Disinterest and Bureaucratic Effectivity], ed. by Vít Střítecký *et al.* (Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2011), 115–125.

9 Rudolf Fürst, »Česká politika na Dálném východě« [Czech Foreign Policy in Far East], in *Česká zahraniční politika v roce 2013. Analýza ÚMV* [Czech Foreign Policy in the Year 2013. Analysis of IIR], ed. by Michal Kořan (Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2014), 236–247; Richard Turcsányi, Tamás Matura and Rudolf Fürst, »The Visegrad Countries' Political Relations with China: Goals, Results and Prospects«, in *Chinese Investments and Economic Engagement in Visegrad Countries: Myth or Reality?*, ed. by Ágnes Szunomár (Budapest: Institute of World Economics, 2014), 127–143.

Babiš largely overlooks China and occasionally points out the lack of economic results.

The foreign policy of a state can be viewed as being constituted in two dimensions: a structure of the policy and the process of policymaking.<sup>10</sup> The main focus of this text lies in the latter. To be able to conceptualize the issue on the rhetorical/symbolic level, we have chosen the »role theory« approach<sup>11</sup> examining roles states assume internationally. Role theory provides a progressive analytical framework composed of various concepts that are designed to be filled with qualitative data and interpreted uniquely based on particular findings.<sup>12</sup> A »role« may be defined as a social position constituted by inner and external expectations from the performance of the actor within an organized group or towards another actor.<sup>13</sup> Its purpose is to provide actors with a sense of identity, which is crucial for the actor's self-awareness as a political entity within the international system.<sup>14</sup> Most often, the roles are being formulated by political leaders to create reliable political and public support for their positions, without the need for repeated

10 Laura Neack, *The New Foreign Policy. Power Seeking in a Globalized Era* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Marijke Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis. A Comparative Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

11 See, for example, Sebastian Harnish, »Conceptualizing in the minefield: role theory and foreign policy learning« *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8, 1 (2012), 47–71. <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00155.x/full>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017); Leslie Wehner and Cameron G. Thies, »Role Theory, Narratives, and Interpretation: The Domestic Contestation of Roles«, *International Studies Review*, 16,1 (2014), 411–436; Kalevi J. Holsti, »National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy«, *International Studies Quarterly* 14,3 (1970), 233–309.

12 Vít Beneš, »Teorie rolí: Konceptuální rámec pro konstruktivistickou analýzu zahraniční politiky« [Role Theory: Conceptual Framework for Constructivist Analysis of Foreign Policy], *Mezinárodní vztahy* 45,4 (2010), 72–87.

13 Kalevi J. Holsti, »National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy«, *International Studies Quarterly* 14,3 (1970), 233–309.

14 Ibid.

elaboration and defence in every particular situation.<sup>15</sup> For assigning the roles, we will use a list of 15 possible roles that a state can assume created by Kalevi Holsti.<sup>16</sup>

This text aims to contextualize and systematically interpret changes in Czech foreign policy approach towards China. Through the role theory lenses, the paper will investigate what roles did the Czech Republic adopted via its three leading foreign policy representatives (president, prime minister, minister of foreign affairs) during the final era of the »anti-China« period, how these roles reversed in the »pro-China« period, and what has been the most recent development under the Babiš government. The paper will answer how and why the Czech Republic has been changing its approach towards China in the rhetorical dimension.

### I *The Final Era of »Anti-China« Period (2008–2012)*

In 2008, China became a focal point of the world's attention due to the Olympic Games in Beijing, but it was also facing criticism over issues related to Tibet, Darfur, and generally human rights.<sup>17</sup> Internationally the question appeared in front of the states' representatives whether to attend the event—and this was a burning issue for the Czech leaders as well. The historical heritage of the communist regime, combined with the proclaimed endeavour to stand up for human rights in Tibet, created broad public and media expectations for Czech politicians to boycott the Games.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the Czech Republic was

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Allision Welch, »Human Rights in China: 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics«, *Human Rights and Human Welfare*, (2008), 211–220. <[www.du.edu/korbel/hrhw/researchdigest/china/OlympicsChina.pdf](http://www.du.edu/korbel/hrhw/researchdigest/china/OlympicsChina.pdf)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

18 »Politici odmítli jet na olympiádu. Teď posílají náměstky« [Politicians Refuse to Go to the Olympic Games. Now They Are Sending Their Deputies], <[www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/politici-odmitli-jet-na-olympiadu-ted-posilaji-namestky.A080804\\_210310\\_domaci\\_dp](http://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/politici-odmitli-jet-na-olympiadu-ted-posilaji-namestky.A080804_210310_domaci_dp)> (last retrieval July 22, 2019).

about to take over the presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2009, which created a pressure to take a more diplomatic approach towards China. Former President Václav Klaus later became known for taking pro-China positions. However, during his tenure in the office, his views remained economy-related without clear opinion on China. He alleged that he did not attend the Beijing Olympics due to a planned surgery. Nevertheless, that did not stop the world press from interpreting it as a stance against China and human rights abuse.<sup>19</sup>

The Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg took a strong position against China. He was depicting China as a dictatorship that uses the Olympic Games for propaganda and legitimization purposes, just like Hitler's Germany did in 1936.<sup>20</sup> The MFA issued a manifesto that proclaimed the Czech government to be putting a »traditionally great emphasis on human rights« and demanded their respect from the Chinese government.<sup>21</sup> The ministry's steps adhere to the role of a *Defender of Values* in the relationship with China. What these values stand for can be extracted from the discourse of Prime Minister Miroslav Topolánek. Even though he was not as critical as Schwarzenberg, the concept of devotion to the society's virtues was present in a large number of his speeches. In the interview during the Olympics, he said: »Due to our history, we cannot remain silent on some issues, because we know about them much more than others. For example, human right«.<sup>22</sup> Eight from eleven government ministers

19 »Merkel says she will not attend opening of Beijing Olympics« <[www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/29/germany.olympicgames2008](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/29/germany.olympicgames2008)> (last retrieval July 25, 2019); »Polish PM's No to Olympic opening« <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7316477.stm>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

20 »Schwarzenberg chce bojkotovat zahájení olympiády« [Schwarzenberg Wants to Boycott Olympic Opening], *iHned* (April 9, 2008), <[zahranicni.ihned.cz/evropa-slovensko/c1-23906840-schwarzenberg-chcebojkotovat-zahajeni-olympiady#rehor](http://zahranicni.ihned.cz/evropa-slovensko/c1-23906840-schwarzenberg-chcebojkotovat-zahajeni-olympiady#rehor)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

21 »Ministerstvo zahraničí k situaci v Tibetu: Odsuzujeme násilí na pokojných a neozbrojených demonstrantech« [Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Situation in Tibet: We Condemn Violence at Peaceful and Unarmed Demonstrators], Government of the Czech Republic, March 17, 2008, <[www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/ministerstvo-zahranici-k-situaciv-tibetu-odsuzujeme-nasiliv-pokojnych-a-neozbrojenych-demonstrantech-32749/](http://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/ministerstvo-zahranici-k-situaciv-tibetu-odsuzujeme-nasiliv-pokojnych-a-neozbrojenych-demonstrantech-32749/)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

22 »Topolánek: Vyšponovaná atmosféra v Číně je nezdravá« [Topolánek: Tightened Situation in



expressed they did not want the prime minister to attend the Olympics, yet Topolánek eventually decided to go.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, he did not attend the opening ceremony, leaving the following comment: »When a Prime Minister of a small country doesn't attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, he expresses a certain position, even though it might not have a great impact. The Czech Republic is not a world power. However, it is important not to be afraid and speak up«. <sup>24</sup>

During the Czech Presidency in the EU in 2009, Jan Fischer, a successor of Miroslav Topolánek in the office of Prime Minister, brought up a human rights issue during his meeting with the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, allegedly speaking on behalf of both the Czech Republic and the European Union.<sup>25</sup> The human rights-related discourse endured in the Czech politics within two following years, although the role of a *Defender of Values* was continuously fading away. Besides the verbal and largely symbolic critique of China, the Czech Republic did not exercise any concrete diplomatic efforts in this regard.

In 2012, the long-standing narrative began to change. The impulse was given firstly by China that started to approach Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) more actively than before. In 2011, China signed a strategic partnership with Poland,

China is Unhealthy], *iDnes* (August 15, 2015), <[http://zpravy.idnes.cz/topolane-k-vysponovana-atmosfera-v-cine-je-nezdrava-fxs-/domaci.aspx?c=A080815\\_142635\\_domaci\\_ban](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/topolane-k-vysponovana-atmosfera-v-cine-je-nezdrava-fxs-/domaci.aspx?c=A080815_142635_domaci_ban)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

23 »Topolánek nakonec do Pekingu vyrazí, chce podpořit české sportovce« [Topolánek Will Eventually Go to Beijing, He Wants to Support Czech Sportsmen], *iDnes*, July 5, 2008, <[http://zpravy.idnes.cz/topolane-k-nakonec-do-pekingu-vyrazi-chce-podporit-ceske-sportovce-idx-/domaci.aspx?c=A080715\\_142346\\_olympiada-pekings\\_ber](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/topolane-k-nakonec-do-pekingu-vyrazi-chce-podporit-ceske-sportovce-idx-/domaci.aspx?c=A080715_142346_olympiada-pekings_ber)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

24 »Na zahájení olympiády raději ne, myslí si Topolánek« [Better Not to the Olympic Opening, Topolánek Thinks], *iDnes* (April 11, 2008), <[http://zpravy.idnes.cz/na-zahajeni-olympiady-radeji-ne-mysli-si-topolane-k-fwk-/domaci.aspx?c=A080411\\_194733\\_domaci\\_jte](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/na-zahajeni-olympiady-radeji-ne-mysli-si-topolane-k-fwk-/domaci.aspx?c=A080411_194733_domaci_jte)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

25 »Jan Fischer se setkal s čínským premiérem« [Jan Fischer Met with the Chinese Premier], Government of the Czech Republic (May 22, 2009), <http://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/jan-fischerse-setkal-s-cinsky-m-premierem-57798/> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

and Premier Wen Jiabao visited Hungary.<sup>26</sup> The year later, Chinese Premier met in Warsaw with 16 CEE Prime Ministers in the first summit of the 16+1 platform, offered the CEE countries 10 billion USD credit line for infrastructure projects, and announced that China wants to double trade with CEE by 2015.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime, the U.S. did not show much interest in the region after the project of the anti-ballistic umbrella was dropped by the Obama administration in 2009, while the idea behind the European integration was losing its mobilizing power in the region after the 2008 crisis. Central European states found themselves (again) in a role of the periphery, hanging between Russia and the (true) West. The ideological emptiness of this position made the postmodern values to turn into a more economical approach in policy-making and opened a space for China to fill in.

The herald of the change emerged in the Czech Republic first in September 2012. The Prime Minister Petr Nečas delivered a speech where he labelled the Czech traditional value-oriented narrative derogatively as »dalailamism«, called it a »false and fake adoration« and »simply just a trend«.<sup>28</sup> His disapproval stemmed from the alleged export losses due to the negative approach towards China. According to Nečas, the Czech Republic should be pragmatic in its relationship towards China, abandon the Tibet issue (even at the rhetorical level), and focus on the economic opportunities provided by China.

Nečas was criticized for the speech, amongst others, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Schwarzenberg who dismissed Nečas' opinion as an »ominous

26 »China, Poland establish strategic partnership«, Xinhua News (December 20, 2011), <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2011-12/20/c\\_131317763.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2011-12/20/c_131317763.htm)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

27 Kong Tianping, »The 16+1 Framework and Economic Relations Between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries«, in: *A Forum for Research and Commentary on Europe* (December 14, 2015), <[councilforeuropeanstudies.org/critcom/161-framework-and-economic-relations-between-china-and-ceec/](http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/critcom/161-framework-and-economic-relations-between-china-and-ceec/)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

28 Government of the Czech Republic, »Premiér: Dokončení Temelína bude významným impulsem pro český průmysl« [Premier: Finalizing of Temelín Will be an Important Impulse for Czech Industry], September 10, 2012, <<http://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/vyznamne-projevy/premier-dokoncenitemelina-bude-vyznamnym-impulsem-pro-cesky-prumysl-98892/>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

madness« and »communicating the Chinese propaganda«. <sup>29</sup> Moreover, shortly before the speech, the Czech Ambassador in London Michael Žantovský officially met with the Dalai Lama during his visit to London.<sup>30</sup> President Klaus allegedly criticized the ambassador's meeting,<sup>31</sup> while he did not directly comment on the Prime Minister's speech. However, he later attended the celebrations at the Embassy of the Peoples' Republic of China, where he officially stated: »We need to open the relations between our countries and stop bringing in obstacles«. <sup>32</sup> From the perspective of what came after, we may label Klaus and Nečas as suggesting to assume the role of the *Internal Developer*, with Schwarzenberg sticking to the previous role of a *Defender of Values*.

## 2 The »Pro-China« Period (2013–2017)

In 2013, the Czech Republic held a presidential election in which it chose the left-wing candidate Miloš Zeman after eight years of the presidency of Václav Klaus from the right wing. Coincidentally, Prime Minister Nečas and his right-wing government resigned the same year due to a corruption scandal, and the new president appointed a temporary cabinet. The new administration was showing

29 »Schwarzenberg vyčítá Nečasovi úlet. Politici se prou o „dalajlamismus“« [Schwarzenber Criticizes Nečas for a Step Out. Politicians Argue over “Dalailamism“], *iDnes* (September 11, 2012), <[http://zpravy.idnes.cz/top-09-stoji-za-schwarzenbergovou-kritikou-necase-f7w-/domaci.aspx?c=A120911\\_120033\\_domaci\\_kop](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/top-09-stoji-za-schwarzenbergovou-kritikou-necase-f7w-/domaci.aspx?c=A120911_120033_domaci_kop)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

30 »Aféru s dalajámou spískal Žantovský a dostal za to kartáč« [Žantovský Was Behind the Incident with Dalai Lama and Got Punished for It], *Česká Pozice* (September 15, 2012), <[http://ceskapozice.lidovky.cz/tema/aferu-s-dalajlamou-spiskal-zantovsky-a-dostal-za-to-kartac.A120912\\_045448\\_pozice\\_76960](http://ceskapozice.lidovky.cz/tema/aferu-s-dalajlamou-spiskal-zantovsky-a-dostal-za-to-kartac.A120912_045448_pozice_76960)> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

31 Ibid.

32 »Klaus vyzval k přátelství s komunistickou Čínou, mění se prý k lepšímu« [Klaus Called for Friendship with Communist China, It is Allegedly Changing for Better], *iDnes* (September 27, 2012), <[http://zpravy.idnes.cz/vaclav-klaus-c9e-/domaci.aspx?c=A120927\\_213218\\_domaci\\_zt](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/vaclav-klaus-c9e-/domaci.aspx?c=A120927_213218_domaci_zt)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

sympathy for China; however, it lost a confidence vote in a few months and had to step down as well. The early legislative election was held afterwards, giving rise to a new left-wing government of social democrats, complemented by an entrepreneur-led party with an unspecified position on the left-right political axis (ANO) and a Christian conservative party (KDU-ČSL). This political turmoil caused an exchange amongst Czech political leaders, leaving the traditional right-wing parties powerless in the opposition, or at least in the position of minor government partners without a direct effect on foreign policy. Both the new government and president showed almost immediately that they are much more prone to cooperation with China than the previous leaders.

Soon after entering the office, President Miloš Zeman received and accepted the offer from the Chinese President Xi Jinping to pay a state visit in China in the following year.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Prime Minister Jiří Rusnok kicked-off a process of »restarting« the Czech–China relations. He attended the 16+1 summit in Bucharest, where he met with his Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang and described Czech–Chinese ties as a »deep, long-term friendship«. He then continued: »I am convinced that our country has learned a lesson from our previous bilateral relations and that development of healthy, stable development emerging from mutual respect and equal treatment«. <sup>34</sup> The distinction from the discourse of former Czech representatives was tremendous, and Rusnok was first to show signs of putting the Czech Republic into the role of a *Faithful Ally* of China.

Simultaneously, the Czech Republic was seeking a better position within the quickly developing 16+1 format of cooperation with China. Although being passive in 2012, the Czech government increased ambitions in the next year and announced the interest to be the host of the next summit in 2014. However, the

33 »Prezident Zeman obdržel oficiální pozvání k návštěvě Číny« [President Zeman Received Official Invitation to Visit China], *EuroZprávy* (November 13, 2013), <<http://domaci.eurozpravy.cz/politika/81561-prezidentzeman-obdrzel-oficialni-pozvani-k-navsteve-ciny>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

34 Government of the Czech Republic, »Premiér: Věřím v dlouhodobé strategické partnerství mezi Čínou a Evropou« [Premier: I Believe in Long Term Strategic Partnership between China and Europe], (November 13, 2013), <<http://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/projevy/premier-osobne-verim-vdlouhodobem-strategicke-partnerstvi-mezi-cinou-a-evropou-113340/>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

Chinese side declined the request, stipulating that the bilateral relations are not on a sufficiently high level in comparison to other European states.<sup>35</sup> In following months, both new Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and new Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek widely articulated the negatives of lagging in relations with China. The narrative of »back to normal«, which referred to the abandoned values-oriented and China-critical policy as a malign deflection from the perceived European pragmatic standard, dominated the Czech political discourse in 2014. It also backed up the bilateral meeting of Minister Zaorálek with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. Zaorálek was the first Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs to visit China after 15 years: »It is an attempt to approximate the relationship with China to the level of other European countries [...] we attempt to have normal relations«.<sup>36</sup>

However, the foreign minister found that visiting China and not mentioning the human rights on behalf of the Czech Republic would not come unnoticed by the opposition, media, and public, who got accustomed to the role of a *Defender of Values*. Both Minister Zaorálek and Prime Minister Sobotka hesitated in response that the Czech Republic in their opinion still fulfils the previous role, but in the name of a cultivated debate, they moved the human rights talk into private conversations with Chinese officials. »It is not true that we do not carry out the human rights policy. It remains the fundamental principle of Czech foreign policy«, articulated Zaorálek.<sup>37</sup>

35 »Na lidská práva v Číně nerezignujeme, slibuje Zaorálek« [We don't Abandon Human Rights in China, Promises Zaorálek] *Aktuálně* (April 4, 2014), <zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/politika/zaoralek-nerezignujeme-naobhajovu-lidskych-prav-v-cine/r-c78a82a0cb8e11e3a09e0025900fea04/> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

36 »Zaorálek: Česko nerezignovalo na obhajobu lidských práv v Číně« [The Czech Republic Did Not Abandon Advocacy of Human Rights in China], *Týden* (April 24, 2014), <http://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/politika/zaoralek-ceskonerezignovalo-na-obhajobu-lidskych-prav-v-cine\_305024.html> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

37 »Lubomír Zaorálek v Číně zlepšuje vztahy mezi Prahou a Pekingem« [In China, Lubomir Zaoralek Is Improving Relations between Prague and Beijing], *Deník* (April 28, 2014),

The Czech president Zeman approached this dichotomy with a different strategy—to separate the topic of Tibet from the values to be defended. He repeatedly described in media the punishment practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tibet, describing the practises before the Chinese »liberation« as barbaric and savage, subsequently pointing out the improvements China has made in the region: »If you say that this (savage punishments in free Tibet) is a democracy, then I correct you and say that this is merely feudal and slave society.«<sup>38</sup> The position of criticism of Tibet rather than the pro-Tibet sentiments took hold in some parts of the society, while opponents of the President and the general change of the foreign policy role only strengthened their view of Tibet as a symbolic issue.

In 2014, the Czech Republic sealed the transition from a pro-Tibet critic through signing the following clause: »The Czech Republic is fully aware of the importance and sensitivity of the Tibet issue and reaffirms that Tibet is an integral part of Chinese territory. Czech Republic [...] does not support any form of independence of Tibet.«<sup>39</sup> At the following press conference, Minister Zaorálek supplemented the statement with the comment: »Our position is clear, and we do not intend to »surprise« China on this matter in any way«. According to Zaorálek, signing the partnership, including this particular clause, was fulfilling the terms of approximating the relations with China to the European level.<sup>40</sup>

Taking a closer look at this statement, it is worth mentioning that the Czech Republic has always officially abided the principle of »One China«. On the other hand, it was an extraordinary move for the Czech Republic to condemn the long-promoted support for Tibet so explicitly in an official commentary. In the

<[http://www.denik.cz/ze\\_sveta/lubomir-zaoralek-v-cine-zlepsuje-vztahy-mezi-prahou-a-pekingem-20140428.html](http://www.denik.cz/ze_sveta/lubomir-zaoralek-v-cine-zlepsuje-vztahy-mezi-prahou-a-pekingem-20140428.html)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

38 »Lepší současný stav než teokracie s vylupováním očí, řekl Zeman o Tibetu« [Better Today's Situation than a Theocracy with Scaling off Eyes, Said Zeman about Tibet], *Novinky* (November 11, 2014), <[www.novinky.cz/domaci/353209-lepsisoucasny-stav-nez-teokracie-s-vylupovanim-oci-rekl-zeman-o-tibetu.html](http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/353209-lepsisoucasny-stav-nez-teokracie-s-vylupovanim-oci-rekl-zeman-o-tibetu.html)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

39 »Nechceme samostatný Tibet, podepsal Číně za Čechy Zaorálek« [We Do Not Want Independent Tibet, Signed in China Zaorálek for the Czechs], *Aktuálně* (April 29, 2014), <<https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/zahranici/nehceme-samostatny-tibet-podepsal-cine-za-cechy-zaoralek/r-c2fa4f8ccf6611e3b3cbo02590604f2e/>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

40 Ibid.

strategic partnership documents with China, for instance, the UK used a more subtle formulation of the »One China« principle regarding Tibet<sup>41</sup> while France, Germany, and Poland did not mention Tibet in their strategic documents with China at all.<sup>42</sup> The condemnation of the support for Tibet is also not mentioned in the EU–China Strategic Agenda 2013, or in the EU–China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 2015.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, all of the mentioned documents include a somewhat stronger message about human rights protection than the Czech–Chinese Partnership document did.

The analysis draws a picture of the Czech Republic’s position towards China as an atypically friendly stance in comparison to other European states in the second period. Miloš Zeman backed and deepened these assumptions during his

41 »Parliament, “Written Ministerial Statements”« (October 29, 2008), <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm081029/wmstext/81029m0001.htm>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

42 »Déclaration conjointe entre la République populaire de Chine et la République française adoptée par le président Xi Jinping et le président François Hollande« [Joint Declaration between People’s Republic of China and Republic of France Adopted by President Xi Jinping and President François Hollande], *Élysée-Présidence de la République française* (2015), <<http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/declaration-conjointe-entre-la-republiquepopulaire-de-chine-et-la-republique-francaise-adoptee-par-le-president-xi-jinping-et-le-president-francois-hollande/>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017); »Joint Declaration between Germany and China« *Die Bundesregierung* (March 28, 2014), <[www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2014/2014-03-28-china-declaration.html](http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2014/2014-03-28-china-declaration.html)>, (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017); »Polska i Chiny podpisały oświadczenie o strategicznym partnerstwie« [Poland and China Signed Strategic Partnership Document], *Onet Wiadomości* (May 14, 2014), <<http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/polska-i-chiny-podpisyly-oswiadczenie-o-strategicznym-partnerstwie/gf4kv>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

43 »EU-China Strategic Agenda for Cooperation«, *European External Action Service* (2013), <[http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/20131123\\_agenda\\_2020\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/20131123_agenda_2020_en.pdf)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017); »EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership«. European Commission (2015), <<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/06/150629-EU-China-Joint-Statement/>> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

visits to China. In his speeches, Zeman used uncommonly familiar rhetoric and took his time to reassure Chinese officials again that not just him, but also »the whole government of the Czech Republic have made it clear that we do respect the territorial integrity of China«.44 The overall discourse of the president can be perceived as indicating submissiveness: »We are not here to teach you the market economy or human rights, we are here to learn from you. [...] I am here in China to learn how to speed up the economic growth and how to stabilize the society«.45 The second claim, in particular, sparked outrage within the Czech political and public sphere as some of the practices commonly used to stabilize the society in China are not complementary with the Czech democratic constitution and legal system. Moreover, the comment was uttered in the echo of the suppression of protests in Hong Kong, which put the human rights record of China again on the Czech media spotlight. Miloš Zeman with his comments confirmed the role of the Czech Republic as a *Faithful Ally* of China.

Shortly after that, in September 2015, president Zeman visited China for the second time. As the only Western leader, he was attending a military parade to mark the anniversary of the end of World War II.; hence the visit became surrounded by controversy—and again confirmed the Czech role of China's *Faithful Ally* within Europe. To make the visit happen, the Czech Republic vetoed an EU proposal that the political leaders of the EU countries will skip the event.46 »I fail to see what's wrong with (Zeman's visit to China). To compare this visit with its recent visit to Moscow does not make any sense, EU has not imposed any

44 »Česko uznává celistvost Číny, řekl Zeman. Včetně Tibetu a Tchaj-wanu« [The Czech Republic Recognizes Integrity of China, Said Zeman. Including Tibet and Taiwan], *iDnes* (October 27, 2014), <[http://zpravy.idnes.cz/cesko-uznava-celistvost-ciny-tibet-zeman-ftrk-zahranicni.aspx?c=A141027\\_120243\\_zahranicni\\_bse](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/cesko-uznava-celistvost-ciny-tibet-zeman-ftrk-zahranicni.aspx?c=A141027_120243_zahranicni_bse)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

45 »Nepřijel jsem vás učit lidská práva, řekl Zeman v čínské televizi« [I Did Not Come to Teach You about Human Rights, Said Zeman in Chinese Television], *iDnes* (September 30, 2014), <[http://zpravy.idnes.cz/zeman-rozhovor-cinska-televize-d3h-domaci.aspx?c=A141030\\_180201\\_zahranicni\\_mlb](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/zeman-rozhovor-cinska-televize-d3h-domaci.aspx?c=A141030_180201_zahranicni_mlb)> (last retrieval Jan 15, 2017).

46 »Zeman pojedí do Číny, Česko se kvůli tomu postavilo celé Unii« [Zeman Goes to China, Czech Republic Stood up to the Entire EU for That], *Novinky* (4 August 2015), <<https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/376708-zeman-pojede-do-ciny-cesko-se-kvuli-tomu-postavilo-cele-unii.html>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).



sanctions on China«, Sobotka defended Zeman's decision, explaining that the president is committed to »improving Czech-China relations that represent an important priority of the government«. <sup>47</sup> Sobotka cited exports to China and Chinese investments as a positive consequence of the relationship.

The year 2016 was the highpoint in Czech-China relations, dominated by the state visit of Xi Jinping to the Czech Republic—the first-ever of China's president to the country. »It's a new beginning (for the Czech-China relationship). The previous government was succumbing to pressure from the United States and the EU. Now, we are an independent country again, and we form our own foreign policy based on our own interests«, Zeman commented on the visit in March 2016 interview for the CCTV, prior to the Xi's visit, <sup>48</sup> seemingly framing the Czech Republic into a role where it does not abide by external pressures. However, given the international context in which the Czech Republic is part of both NATO and the EU, Zeman's efforts distances himself (rhetorically) from the country's legal allies (EU and NATO) created the impression of moving towards China as an alternative.

Xi Jinping's visit to Prague was surrounded by multiple controversies that turned the diplomatic event of the year into an unpleasant domestic political issue. The main media topic was the clashes between pro-Tibet protesters that showed up upon president Xi's arrival, and ethnic-Chinese, who came to welcome their leader in a group organized by the Chinese embassy. Besides, the two countries signed multiple memoranda, including the Strategic partnership between China and the Czech Republic and the twinning agreement between Prague and Beijing. The latter document would then become a source of another controversy as it

47 »Zeman v Číně? Nevidím na tom nic špatného, míní Sobotka« [Zeman in China? I Don't See Anything Bad About It, Says Sobotka], *Novinky* (August 4, 2015), <<https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/376766-zeman-v-cine-nevidim-na-tom-nic-spatneho-mini-sobotka.html>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

48 »«Je to nový začátek», komentoval Zeman vztahy s Čínou a kritizoval bývalou vládu« [«It's a New Beginning», Zeman Commented on Relations with China and Criticized the Former Government], <[https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/je-to-novy-zacatek-komentoval-zeman-vztahy-s-cinou-a-kritizoval-byvalou-vladu.A160328\\_103647\\_In\\_domov\\_ELE](https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/je-to-novy-zacatek-komentoval-zeman-vztahy-s-cinou-a-kritizoval-byvalou-vladu.A160328_103647_In_domov_ELE)> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

explicitly acknowledged »One China Policy«, which is rare when compared with the rest of Europe. Forced to defend the circumstances of the visit on the parliamentary floor, Premier Sobotka described the visit alongside the narrative of normalizing the Czech–China Relations. »Czech Republic was an exception within Europe, since many countries were aiming for more intense political and economic relations with China, for instance, Poland or Hungary, but also Great Britain, France, or Germany. [...] We are trying to heighten the dialogue and to make up for the delay that the Czech Republic has had,« Sobotka explained when asked about the aim of Czech foreign policy towards China.<sup>49</sup>

In October 2016, the minister of culture Daniel Herman of the junior government party of the Christian conservatives met with the Dalai Lama, who arrived in Prague to attend the Forum 2000 conference. To immediately reassure Beijing about Czech Republic's political adherence to »One China Policy«, the four highest officials of the Czech Republic—president, prime minister, and the speakers of the two houses of the parliament—issued together the so-called »Statement of Four«, where they all dissociated themselves from Herman's actions and promised »no changes to the politics of the respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China, of which Tibet is a part«. In reaction, Beijing recommended the government to »match their words with actions«.<sup>50</sup>

The document drew widespread condemnation as it was seen as a humiliating gesture. Besides, Minister Herman claimed he was hassled by president Zeman, who allegedly leveraged a state award for a member of Herman's family against the minister's meeting with the Dalai Lama.<sup>51</sup> Then Minister of Finance Andrej Babiš,

49 Bohuslav Sobotka, »Parliament of the Czech Republic« (April 14, 2016), <<http://www.psp.cz/eknih/2013ps/stenprot/044schuz/so44104.htm>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

50 »Politici se hádají nad reakcí Číny na české ujištění o přátelství« [Politicians Are Arguing Over Reaction of China to Czech Assurance About Friendship], *Novinky* (October 26, 2016), <<https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/418765-politici-se-hadaji-nad-reakci-ciny-na-ceske-ujisteni-o-pratelstvi.html>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

51 »Herman: Zeman mi pohrozil, že jestli se sejdu s dalajlamou, neudělí strýci vyznamenání« [Herman: Zeman Threatened to Me that if I Meet Dalai Lama, My Uncle Will Not Receive the State Honors], *Lidovky* (October 21, 2016),

who would later become the Prime Minister, expressed his support to minister Herman in the case, foreshadowing his reserved approach towards China.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of the opposition, Premier Sobotka was determined to get the Czech-China partnership to another level and feared that Herman's actions were hindering Czech business opportunities. »The intense political relationships on the highest level (were to) help to grow business contacts and will heighten Czech investment to China«, explained Sobotka on the parliamentary floor.<sup>53</sup>

To sum up, the primary identified motivation of the Czech leaders' approach towards China during the period 2013–2016 was the economy, and this might suggest the role of »Internal developer«, i.e. overlooking international issues (including tensions and human rights) for the sake of own material benefit. However, the Czech leaders went quite far in their attempts to build positive relations with China, overshadowing the role of »Internal developer«. In particular, President Zeman went as far as offering his country to serve as a Chinese »unsinkable aircraft carrier«, fulfilling the criteria of the role of a Faithful Ally of China. Premier Sobotka and his Foreign Minister Zaorálek were comparably less pro-China, yet also they went further in accommodating China than the role of Internal developer would require and as most other European countries found necessary, effectively positioning the Czech Republic into the role of a Bridge/Gateway between China and Europe.<sup>54</sup>

<[https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/herman-z-hradu-mi-vzkazali-ze-jestli-se-sejdu-s-dalajlamou-neudeli-stryci-vyznamenani.A161021\\_172506\\_ln\\_domov\\_mpr](https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/herman-z-hradu-mi-vzkazali-ze-jestli-se-sejdu-s-dalajlamou-neudeli-stryci-vyznamenani.A161021_172506_ln_domov_mpr)> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

52 »Vážím si Vás, pane ministře«, napsal Babiš po schůzce Hermana s dalajlamou« [»I Respect You, Sir«, Wrote Babiš after the Meeting between Herman and Dalai Lama], *Týden* (October 19, 2016), <[https://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/politika/vazim-si-vas-pane-ministre-napsal-babis-po-schuzce-hermana-s-dalajlamou\\_402281.html](https://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/politika/vazim-si-vas-pane-ministre-napsal-babis-po-schuzce-hermana-s-dalajlamou_402281.html)> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

53 »Zeman se Si Ťin-pchingem zasadili v Lánech pamětní strom, odpůrci v Praze věšeli tibetské prapory« [Zeman and Xi Jinping Planted a Memorial Tree in Lány, Demonstrators in Prague Hung Tibetan Flags], *Česká televize* (March 23, 2016), <<https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/1737387-zeman-se-si-tin-pchingem-zasadili-v-lanech-pametni-strom-odpurci-v-praze-veseli>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

54 »Z Prahy se má pro Čínu stát brána do střední Evropy, míní Sobotka« [Prague Shall Become

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The »China dream« of the leading Czech politicians started to vanish in 2017. From the announced investments and deals during the Xi's visit, only the already standing acquisitions of the CEFC materialized with no more greenfield investments or even other acquisitions taking place. This fell far short from what was generally perceived as sufficient »payback« for the pro-China political turn in the Czech Republic. Moreover, even the CEFC itself got into troubles, putting a shadow over the idea of Chinese investments altogether. First, the CEFC was blocked from acquiring 50 % shares of the J&T Financial Group by the Czech Central Bank, which claimed that the financial background of the Chinese company was not transparent. Second, it turned out that the CEFC expansion was based on unsustainable debt-financing and the company eventually saw all its assets in the Czech Republic taken over by the Chinese state-owned vehicle CITIC. Third, as the problems of CEFC surfaced, the company's chairman Ye Jianming, who was also appointed by the president Zeman to act as his advisor, »disappeared« in China, most probably to be arrested due to his company's activities.

All of this notwithstanding, President Zeman seemed determined to continue in the same direction concerning China, even though there was evidence that his supporters, too, did not find his Chinese endeavours positively.<sup>55</sup> In May 2017, amid the CEFC crisis, Zeman visited China for the third time to attend the first Belt and Road Forum. He met with Xi Jinping on bilateral level and was actively presenting the Czech Republic as a potential partner of the initiative, allegedly bringing 38 concrete projects how the Czech Republic could participate in the Belt and Road.<sup>56</sup> Zeman's fourth visit followed in 2018, as he flew to China

a Gateway to Central Europe, Says Sobotka], *Novinky* (September 22, 2015), <<https://www.novinky.cz/zahranicni/svet/clanek/z-prahy-se-ma-pro-cinu-stat-brana-do-stredni-evropy-mini-sobotka-332879>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> See for example Lubomír Kopeček, *Miloš Zeman—příběh talentovaného pragmatika: Intelektuál válčí s intelektuály* [Miloš Zeman—A Story of a Talented Pragmatist: The Intellectual Is at War with the Intellectuals] (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2017).

<sup>56</sup> »Zeman přiletěl do Číny kvůli Hedvábné stezce. Sám překonal obtíže na schodech« [Zeman Flew to China because of the Belt and Road Initiative. He Overcome Difficulties on Steps], *Blesk* (May

International Import Expo in Shanghai. The Czech president said in the opening speech that he »feels like a friend« when in China, confirming once again his desire to position his country as a *Faithful Ally* of China. The visit produced a few memoranda, most notably one between the company PPF and Huawei, as well as PPF and CITIC Group.<sup>57</sup> Zeman also met with Xi Jinping again, praising the alleged rise in Czech exports to China and booming cooperation between the countries.

In April 2019, president Zeman visited China for the fifth time to attend the second Belt and Road Forum. At that time, Czech–Chinese relations already showed visible signs of deteriorations due to the CEFC fiasco and generally due to the absence of Chinese investments, unflattering trade balance, and most recent controversies surrounding Huawei. For the first time, Zeman acknowledged the absence of any big Chinese investors in the Czech Republic and dubbed it a »stain on the Czech–China relationship«. He also expressed his discontent over the Czech Republic being effectively left out of the Belt and Road loop in spite of his multiple attempts to include it.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, during an interview for CCTV, Zeman also described the Czech Republic as an »angry red piece inside of Europe, a country that stands against Huawei«.<sup>59</sup> This criticism of own country abroad signals well that the Czech Republic's role towards China

12, 2017), <<https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/zpravy-politika/468635/zeman-priletel-do-ciny-kvuli-hedvabne-vezce-sam-prekonal-obtize-na-schodech.html>> (last retrieval July 25, 2018).

57 »Zeman vyzýval podnikatele v Číně k větší odvaze« [Zeman Prompted Businessmen in China to Be More Courageous], *Novinky* (September 6, 2018), <<https://www.novinky.cz/ekonomika/488279-zeman-vyzval-podnikatele-v-cine-k-vecsi-odvaze.html>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

58 »Nejsem spokojen, investujte v Česku víc, řekl Zeman v čínské televizi« [I am not Content, Invest More in the Czech Republic, Said Zeman in CCTV], *iDNES* (April 23, 2019), <[https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/zeman-cina-investice-rozhovor-kritika.A190423\\_173856\\_domaci\\_zaz](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/zeman-cina-investice-rozhovor-kritika.A190423_173856_domaci_zaz)> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

59 »Miloš Zeman návštěvou v Číně opět oživil, proč na něj senátoři chystají žalobu« [By Visiting China Miloš Zeman Reminded Us Again Why the Senate is Looking to Sue Him], *Seznam* (April 29, 2019), <[www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/milos-zeman-svym-chovanim-v-cine-opet-pripomnel-proc-na-nej-senatori-chystaji-zalobu-71205](http://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/milos-zeman-svym-chovanim-v-cine-opet-pripomnel-proc-na-nej-senatori-chystaji-zalobu-71205)> (last retrieval Apr 29, 2019).

was coming along differently than Zeman would like. Most notably, it also put under the spotlight the lack of consensus between Czech leaders on what role to assume vis-à-vis China.

Indeed, Zeman was left alone in his struggle to lure China by this time. The new Czech government stemming from the elections at the end of 2017 did not share the president's and former government's flare for China. The social democrats lost the Prime Minister seat and became a junior government partner in the coalition led by ANO. The new prime minister, billionaire Andrej Babiš, already signalled his open but pragmatic approach to China which, however, has never been an important topic for him. When he does talk about China, he expresses discontent with the current setting of the Czech-China economic relations: »In the past, many politicians went there, but any result hasn't been seen«, said Babiš prior to 16+1 summit in July 2018 and criticised China's prioritizing of acquisitions over greenfield investments.<sup>60</sup> In April 2018, he criticised the »numerous trips to China« that have brought little of what was promised<sup>61</sup>, and asserted that Czech exports to China rose just by 160 million dollars between 2017 and 2018, while China has increased its imports to the Czech Republic by 6 billion dollars. On the other hand, Babiš also invited his Chinese counterpart over to Prague.

Towards the end of 2018, Babiš was confronted with a crisis surrounding the National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NCISA) warning against future use of Huawei and ZTE technologies. On that account, he met with the new Chinese ambassador Zhang Jianmin, who later commented on Facebook that the prime minister apologized and promised »not to repeat similar mistakes

60 »Andrej Babiš: Do Číny jezdilo hodně politiků, ale výsledek se zatím neprojevil. Teď se to chystá změnit« [Andrej Babiš: A lot of Politicians Were Visiting China, But We Have Seen No Results. That's About to Change], *Parlamentní listy* (July 07, 2018), <<https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Andrej-Babis-Do-Ciny-jezdilo-hodne-politiku-ale-vysledek-se-zatim-neprojevil-Teď-se-to-chysta-zmenit-542957>> (last retrieval July 25, 2019).

61 »Byznys se pohnul hlavně ve prospěch Číny, řekl Babiš po jednání s čínským premiérem« [Business is Moving in the Direction of China's Profits, Said Babiš after Meeting Chinese Prime Minister], *Aktuálně* (April 11, 2019), <<https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/cinske-investice-nejsou-uspokojive-bezporocetne-navstevy-se-mu/r-95252d805c7811e9b2a00cc47ab5f122/>> (last retrieval July 20, 2019).

again«. <sup>62</sup>Apparently, this was not how Babiš saw the meeting going, and he pointed that out publicly. »What he wrote is nonsense. It's a lie, it's not true«, said Babiš very openly on Czech TV concerning the Chinese Ambassador. <sup>63</sup> »We are an independent, sovereign state, there's nothing to apologize for«, added the prime minister, striking unusually assertive tone. But at the same time, Babiš subsequently downplayed the Huawei issue due to lack of physical evidence. <sup>64</sup>

The prime minister's critique of China alongside his neutral, business-oriented approach signals again the role of Internal Developer, yet this time backed with the recognition of the limited economic benefits to striving for and, therefore, also much less political effort and friendly positioning in the process. This adjusted role acknowledges the discrepancy between the pro-China position that former Sobotka government sought to adopt and the reality in which the Czech Republic has not visibly benefitted from this role. <sup>65</sup>

New Minister of Foreign Affairs in Babiš's government, Tomáš Petříček, also does not share the China-friendly approach of his predecessor Lubomír Zaorálek,

62 »Předseda vlády ČR Andrej Babiš se setkal s velvyslancem Zhangem Jianminem« [The Prime Minister Andrej Babiš Met with Chinese Ambassador Zhang Jianmin], *Chinese Embassy in Prague*. Facebook (December 24, 2018), <[www.facebook.com/chinaembassy.cz/posts/2205660102812630](https://www.facebook.com/chinaembassy.cz/posts/2205660102812630)> (last retrieval July 24, 2019).

63 »"Je to lež a nesmysl." Babiš odmítl čínské prohlášení o společné schůzce k Huawei« ["It's a Lie, It's Nonsense." Babiš Denied Alleged Commentary about His Meeting about Huawei], *Česká televize* (January 6, 2019), <[ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/2697848-spor-o-huawei-pokracuje-podle-babise-cinsky-velvyslanec-o-spolecne-schuzce-lhal](https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/2697848-spor-o-huawei-pokracuje-podle-babise-cinsky-velvyslanec-o-spolecne-schuzce-lhal)> (last retrieval Aug 5, 2019).

64 »Ohledně Huawei není co řešit, řekl Babiš po schůzce se Zemanem. Hájí justice« [There's Nothing to Talk about Regarding Huawei, Said Babiš after Meeting Zeman], *Aktuálně* (January 28, 2019), <<https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/ohledne-huawei-neni-co-resit-rekl-babis-po-schuzce-se-zemane/r-f732b2de233b11e9a0090cc47ab5f122/>> (last retrieval Aug 5, 2019).

65 »Premiér Babiš se zúčastnil summitu zemí 16+1 a jednal s čínským premiérem Li Kche-čchiangem« [PM Babiš Attended the 16+1 Meeting after Talks with Chinese PM Li Keqiang], *Vláda České republiky* [Government of The Czech Republic] (July 7, 2018), <<https://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/premier-babis-se-zucastnil-summitu-zemi-161-a-jednal-s-cinsky-premierem-li-kche-cchiangem-167401/>> (last retrieval Aug 5, 2019).

even though he is from the same social democratic party. He tackled the question during his first trip to China: »I see China as a vital partner, with whom we need to lead an open pragmatic dialogue about all aspects of our relationship«, he said and included human rights in the list of the aspects.<sup>66</sup> Petříček strives to maintain good and strong ties with China established in prior years, but approaches the country with more confidence and realism in expectations. The minister also openly mentioned his willingness to continue the Czech tradition of human rights agenda in foreign policy.<sup>67</sup> Overall, Petříček shares much of the *Internal Developer* role which the Prime Minister Babiš adopted, while also adding a pinch of the *Defender of Values* role.

The discrepancy between Zeman's upkeep of the role of *Faithful Ally* and the government's generally preferred role of *Internal Developer* and even signs of a *Defender of Values* became evident during a diplomatic hassle between Beijing and Prague's City Hall over the sister city agreement signed by the previous City administration during the Xi's visit which included explicit stipulations about the »One China Policy«. The new mayor of Prague Zdeněk Hřib decided to take an article recognizing the »One China Policy« out of the twinning agreement between Beijing and Prague due to its "redundancy". Minister Petříček denounced the step, however, he backed rhetorically yet mildly the mayor when Beijing decided to retaliate by cancelling an entire tour of the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra in China: »It's an unfortunate decision to constrain the cultural community because

66 »S Čínou je třeba vést pragmatický dialog, patří tam i lidská práva, řekl Petříček v Šanghaji« [It's Necessary to Lead a Pragmatic Dialogue with China, Including Human Rights Talks, Said Petříček in Shanghai], *iRozhlas* (November 4, 2018), <[https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/tomas-Petrichcek-cina-milos-zeman-lidska-prava-ekonomicka-diplomacie\\_1811041247\\_och](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/tomas-Petrichcek-cina-milos-zeman-lidska-prava-ekonomicka-diplomacie_1811041247_och)> (last retrieval Aug 1, 2019).

67 »Proč ministr Petříček couvl a nepodepsal kritiku Vondráčka za cestu do Ruska? ,Nejprve se s ním setkám« [Why Minister Petříček Backed off from Signing a Document Criticising Vondráček's Journey to Russia? I'll Meet Him First], *iRozhlas* (October 19, 2018), <[https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/ministr-zahranicnich-veci-tomas-Petrichcek-radek-vondracek-v-rusku-poche-zeman\\_1810191316\\_rak](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/ministr-zahranicnich-veci-tomas-Petrichcek-radek-vondracek-v-rusku-poche-zeman_1810191316_rak)> (last retrieval Aug 10, 2019). »Lidská práva se vrátí mezi priority české diplomacie« [Human Rights Are Back among the Priorities of the Czech Diplomacy], *Hospodářské noviny* (Oct 18, 2018), <<https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66296030-lidska-prava-se-vrati-mez-priority-ceske-diplomacie>> (last retrieval Aug 1, 2019).



of some discrepancies in politics«. Petříček and Babiš reminded China that the Czech Republic is a democratic country, where the City Hall has its autonomous voice. Babiš then finished off with his by now signature critique: »I still hold my opinion that China has to catch up in the trade balance and open up its trade to our export«.

In stark contrast, Zeman's spokesperson expressed his understanding of Beijing's step to cancel the Philharmonic Tour by labelling mayor's Hřib decision a »dishonour« to China: »[Hřib and his party] are harming national interests by striving to exclude the Czech Republic from cooperation with PRC.«<sup>68</sup> But it seems like Zeman is becoming lonely with his friendship towards China (with the notable exception of the Communist Party). After Beijing upped its pressure to Hřib in July and publicly asked him to »stop damaging Czech–Chinese relations«, the MFA issued a statement, effectively summarizing the new attitude towards China: »The (ministry) leads a dialogue with China in many areas of common interest [...]. But we certainly do not avoid sensitive issues, such as the protection of human rights. We are open towards China, but also realistic. The Czech Republic is interested in developing quality relations with China, and we are ready to continue fulfilling the strategic partnership signed by both countries in 2016.«<sup>69</sup>

68 »Nechtění "pražští" umělci v Číně: Ovčáček štvě "zneuctění", Petříček odmítl tresty« [Unwanted "Prague" Artists in China: Ovčáček Is Mad over "Dgradation", Petříček Denounced the Punishment], *Blesk* (May 12, 2017), <<https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/zpravy-politika/604906/nechteni-prazsti-umelci-v-cine-ovcacka-stve-zneucteni-Petrickek-odmitl-tresty.html>> (last retrieval Aug 2, 2019).

69 Mnísterstvo zahaničí České republiky, »Prohlášení MZV k česko-čínským vztahům« [Statement of the MFA in Reference to Czech-China Relations] (July 18, 2019), <[https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti\\_a\\_media/prohlaseni\\_a\\_stanoviska/x2019\\_07\\_18\\_prohlaseni\\_mzv\\_k\\_cesko\\_cinskym\\_vztahum.html](https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/prohlaseni_a_stanoviska/x2019_07_18_prohlaseni_mzv_k_cesko_cinskym_vztahum.html)> (last retrieval Aug 3, 2019).

*Conclusion: Assessment of Changing Czech Roles vis-à-vis China*

The article has reviewed three distinct periods of the Czech foreign policy approach towards China since 2008. In this concluding section, we will first sum up the rich empirical material presented in the main body of the text, before explaining the frequent and significant changes in Czech foreign policy approach towards China. Eventually, a few broader implications will be drawn for the Czech foreign policy approach towards China based on the insights of this article.

Between 2008 and 2012, the Czech Republic assumed mainly the role of a *Defender of Values*, although it was already fading away compared to previous years. The specific values Czech politicians aimed to support were human rights, particularly in the countries experiencing Communist rule. China became a potent symbol of this approach, also as a result of Vaclav Havel's steps and legacy. In the analysed period, the Czech leaders felt compelled to express their views, such as during the Olympic Games or the Czech presidency in the EU. However, during 2012, some Czech politicians started to criticize the overall focus on human rights in general and concerning China in particular allegedly for missing out on economic opportunities. These steps suggested to adopt the role of an *Internal Developer*, yet the role was not accepted at the time.

Interestingly, the political reshuffling in the country in 2013 moved the Czech approach towards China much further away. President Zeman made China one of his signature policies, and he went all the way to assume the role of a *Faithful Ally* of China. The position of government differed to some extent, yet even though government representatives tried to paint their steps as »normal« in the European context, they went in fact further than that assuming the role of *Bridge/Gateway* between China and Europe. In reality, although the economic logic was presented as the main reason behind the U-turn in policy on China, the concrete steps and the rhetoric of the government, and especially the president, positioned the country predominantly as a *Faithful Ally* of China.

The Czech approach towards China changed again in 2018. Most importantly, the mood spread that the economic results of the whole effort were disappointing and with no better future prospects, there were no reasons to continue focusing on China. Hence, the new Prime Minister Andrej Babiš pragmatically adopted the role of an *Internal Developer* by downgrading the overall attention paid towards China and focusing solely on the economic benefits of the Czech-China

relations—or rather lack of thereof. He attempted to preserve functional relations with Beijing but acted more assertively and confidently. Minister Petříček did not differ much from this position, yet he did add a bit of human rights rhetoric, in reminiscence of the older *Defender of Values* role. However, the political spectrum is currently fragmented, with President Zeman keeping his previous China-friendly direction and going as far as criticizing his own country while in China.

The account presented here highlights the frequent and significant changes in Czech roles towards China during the ten years after 2008. The main question in the debate has seemed to be for much of the time economic benefits vs focus on the values. While in the first period, the consensus of leaders was to emphasize the values, the consensus underwent a U-turn in the second period towards economic benefits. Interestingly, the experience proved correct those who had claimed that there is no clear link between the friendly political relations with China and related economic interests—the pro-China stances of the Czech Republic brought little economic results. Following this perspective, the third period adjusted the approach, and while it continued focusing on the material benefits, it recognized the limited impact of the previous China policies, and perhaps even delinked the quality of political relations with the economic exchanges.<sup>70</sup>

The most crucial factor behind the changes over the ten years seems to be the perception of expected economic benefits. The positive impressions at the end of the first period brought the shift towards more friendly stances vis-à-vis China, while the adjusted attitudes at the end of the second period moved the approach towards more realistic one. Another important factor seems to be the position of major Czech partners, such as neighbours and leading European powers. In the situation where the countries around were seen as being »ahead« of the Czech Republic when it came to relations with China, it created a sense of despair and pressure to compete, catch up, and not miss out on the opportunity among the Czech leaders. By the end of the second period, however, most of the Czech neighbours adjusted their expectations towards more realistic (or sceptical), and

70 Tamas Matura, »China–CEE Trade, Investment and Politics«, *Europe–Asia Studies* 71,3 (2019), 388–407.

this perhaps influenced the Czech leaders to be comfortable when making a similar decision. Chinese policies were obviously an important factor behind. It was the Chinese »diplomatic offensive« in the form of the 16+1 platform and the Belt and Road Initiative which created much of the positive perception of growing economic opportunities both in the Czech Republic and among other European countries, persuading them to interact with China more. And it is also China, who—by not delivering on its promises while creating security concerns—might be driving the countries away again.

On the other hand, the impact of political development in China on the Czech (and European) approaches towards China should not be exaggerated. Even though Chinese human rights issues are often discussed, they did not seem to have any immediate impact on the changes in the Czech role-taking. As a matter of fact, the Chinese political situation has been getting tighter since 2012—precisely the time when the Czech Republic started its pro-China turn. The perception of the growing economic opportunities seemed to trump worries about political development in China.

The period since 2018 might be the time of reckoning for the Czech approach towards China. The economic opportunities turned out to be illusionary or at least exaggerated, while growing political assertiveness of China made it a »systematic rival« and not just an economic opportunity, as an EC document put it.<sup>71</sup> The recent positions taken by the Czech government might be seen as balancing between these differing pressures—trying to preserve working relation with the growing superpower, being more confident about own perspectives, and being more realistic about possible benefits while also conscious about risks and own interests.

It remains to be seen whether this new Czech approach to China sticks with the political spectrum, media, and the public. For one, President Zeman will present one obstacle as he would likely continue to push for more China-friendly approach in line with the role of a *Faithfull Ally*. However, his second term is ending in 2023 and there seems to be no one in the Czech political scene to take the lead in this role after him. On the other side is Zeman's opposition, backed by

71 »European Commission, EU-China—A strategic outlook« (March 12, 2019), <[ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf)> (last retrieval March 12, 2019).

the media and parts of public, which continues to prefer the *Defender of Values* role, as was seen recently during the incident of the Prague City Hall. However, the role government has taken is executed with a lot more pragmatism in comparison to years prior to 2013 and leans towards the *Internal Developer* role. The Babiš government appears more successful in adopting the pragmatic yet somewhat assertive role of *Internal Developer* than the Sobotka administration who has eventually shifted further away or than Nečas who failed to get even his own minister of foreign affairs behind. In the end, it seems that the current government is somewhat finding its balance between the historically endorsed defence of human rights and most recently promoted pragmatism.

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