

## THE LION AND THE EAGLE

For the past century Czech-American relations have been marked by dramatic and often historic bursts of intensity, alternating with long periods of inertia, indifference and official hostility. The crucial role of the United States at the birth of Czechoslovakia was followed by two decades of American isolationism. The return of the United States to Europe at the end of World War II, the direct involvement of American troops in the liberation of the western part of the country and the generous offer of the Marshall plan to Czechoslovakia were abruptly cut off by the fall of the Iron Curtain. In 1968, the brief thaw of the bilateral relationship was reversed by the cold steel of the Russian tanks even before it could have had a visible effect. From this perspective, the period immediately before, during and following the Velvet Revolution of 1989 has been probably the longest time of a sustained American interest in matters Czech, and of a reciprocal Czech enthusiasm for things American. During this time the United States played an indispensable role in supporting the process of democratization and reintegration of the Czech Republic in the Western structures, the Atlantic Alliance first and foremost. This period now seems to be drawing to a close, although in a somewhat less dramatic manner than in the previous instances.

This very rough historical outline begs the question of whether there exist any lasting American interests in Central Europe in general and the Czech Republic in particular and Czech interests in maintaining a close relationship with the United States.

The explanations that have been offered, at one time or another, to account for to argue for, a strong bilateral relationship between the two countries fall into three categories. The first, usually the least durable, consists of factors of sentimental nature drawn from the histories of the two countries. The role of the United States and President Wilson at the birth of Czechoslovakia at the end of World War I, the strong American ties and leanings of President Masaryk, the presence of the American troops as liberators on the territory of Czechoslovakia at the end of World War II, the American sympathies for the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution, the American empathy for and the support of Czechoslovak democratic opposition during the bleak years of “normalization” the contributions of Americans of Czech origin to American culture, academia, industry and politics are some of the factors that come to mind.

The second category consists of value-based interests the two countries have in common. This category is obviously also subject to change as the values in question may themselves change although the points of inflection are relatively infrequent and far in between. The crucial points in this respect are the establishment of a democratic government in pre-war Czechoslovakia, its demise in the wake of a totalitarian onslaught and the subsequent half a century of autocratic, foreign-based, semi-democratic and totalitarian governments, and the restoration of democracy in 1989. Other, less conspicuous factors have also played a role. The modest but unmistakable

value-based exceptionalism of Czechoslovak and Czech foreign policy, in particular under Presidents Masaryk and Havel, its vocal advocacy of democracy and human rights in other parts of the world based on moral or even religious precepts, its tendency to the “Czech question” as a European or global question, is distinctly reminiscent of “the city on the hill” rhetoric of some of the founders of the American republic.

Finally, there are the “hard” factors of geography and geopolitics. Throughout the last century, it has been a shared interest of the two countries to prevent the domination of Europe by a single power, which could then act as a hegemon with respect to its neighbors on the continent and as a major aggressive power with respect to the rest of the world. In the case of the Czechs, it has been an existential interest for much of this time. The American presence in Europe and the emergence of a system of collective defense and collective security in NATO and OSCE, of which both countries are members, is an expression of this interest, which however may be gradually losing in weight and importance as other threats and would-be hegemons emerge in other parts of the world. However, as these new large players in international politics may also offer different social models, political systems and value hierarchies, there will still exist between the two countries a shared interest to nurture, develop and protect the way of life we sometimes think of as our civilization. This kind of value-based geopolitics is in the end as real and rational as the geopolitics based on balance-of-power, access to resources or military considerations.

The financial crisis in Europe, the gradual weakening of NATO and the new perspectives in the US foreign policy, exemplified by the “reset” and “pivot” initiatives give rise to the question whether the whole Atlantic relationship is in crisis and whether the “Western” civilization itself is in crisis as a result. This is a complex issue, which will take years to unfold and which requires a thorough rational debate. One thing, however, that is certain even now is that it is in the fundamental interest of the Czech Republic to do everything in its power to prevent this crucial existential bond from unraveling.