

# Deterring Russia by US Followership?

## Decomposing The Czech Participation in Afghanistan

*Nik Hynek*

Deconstructing and explaining the Czech involvement in Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction are the key roles of this study. The notion of strategic narrative has recently been gaining popularity with security analysts. This work considers the applicability of this concept and its links to the genuine motives for the Czech presence in the ISAF mission. State-building efforts in Afghanistan have come increasingly to reflect a war of attrition and the political need to justify these unpopular activities has grown. This analysis of the Czech engagement in Afghanistan is the first of its kind: it draws systematically on primary data – particularly opinion polls - to link domestic political and public preferences to the country's participation in the ISAF mission and NATO more generally. The analysis takes in Czech activities in Afghanistan, public opinion and the contestation of the country's involvement by its political elite. It shows that there is a disconnection between official decision-making processes and popular beliefs as well as between the government and the political opposition.

*Keywords: ISAF, NATO, security, Afghanistan, the Czech Republic, post-war reconstruction, US, Russia*



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### Introduction

This work explains the Czech involvement in Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction. Its main consideration is the applicability of the notion of strategic narrative and its links to the actual reasons for the Czech

presence in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. In recent times, the concept of strategic narrative has been applied increasingly in security analyses. As allied state-building efforts in Afghanistan have come more and more to resemble a war of attrition, the political need to justify these unpopular activities has risen. Weary publics have been targeted by more or less sophisticated narratives explaining why their government has participated in something so distant and even nebulous. Many commentators have openly talked about information warfare in this context. The hazy line between what NATO has called 'strategic communication' and propaganda has become ever fuzzier according to one top NATO official.<sup>1</sup> Political interpretations of supposedly impartial security reports have also varied greatly depending on both the time and place. Strategic narratives have once again assumed the central position. Nor has the Ivory Tower lagged far behind. While some academic analyses have focused on identifying these narratives and attempting to discern patterns in how they function, others have sometimes made normative cases for their construction. This study falls in the first category.

Analyses of strategic narratives suffer from an obvious limitation when it comes to explaining the possible political/security motives for coalition burden-sharing. This analysis of the Czech engagement in Afghanistan is, however, the first investigation of its kind: it draws systematically on primary data, especially opinion polls, to connect Czech political and societal attitudes with the country's presence in the ISAF mission and NATO more generally. As it turns out, these actual attitudes point to strong links between a perceived Russian threat, Czech NATO membership and participation in the ISAF mission and the potential provision of US security guarantees.

This work approaches its subject matter as follows: first, the conceptual and empirical specificities of the Czech case are outlined and their implications discussed. This includes addressing the leader-follower relationship that exists between the Czech Republic and the United States. This normative bond has served as the referential framework against which the Czech governmental elite makes security policy decisions, including those pursuing Afghanistan's reconstruction. A brief overview of Czech activities in Afghanistan is also given. Second, I describe the features of the Czech strategic narrative and compare them with the expectations in the general literature. This is a vital inductive step that is essential for establishing the positive heuristics of the concept.

Finally, the potential limits of strategic narratives are demonstrated in the Czech case. This is achieved in two moves: I present an analysis of public opinion and then discuss the elite political contestation of the country's involvement in Afghanistan. This reveals the gaps between official decision-making processes and popular beliefs as well as between the government and its political opposition. It also refutes the popular belief that the only reason why allied states continued their support for an utterly unpopular mission was the presence of a domestic political consensus.<sup>2</sup>

### Contextual Considerations

An adequate understanding of the Czech strategic narrative requires an outline of existing dependencies between the Czech Republic and the United States, often mediated through NATO. This is what the relationship between a leader and a follower encapsulates. Since the end of the Cold War, the Czech Republic's position vis-à-vis the United States has been that of a normatively-oriented follower. This strategic reorientation from the Soviet Union to the United States was seen as natural after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Key political discussions in the country reflected this, and the issue was not whether to support the US but rather in what form and to what degree. The course was set by Czechoslovak participation in the First Gulf War (1990-1991). The event became a symbolic milestone in the Czechoslovak reintegration into the West. The early – some would say the only – success of the New World Order led to greatly enhanced cooperation between the Czech Republic and NATO. In terms of institutionalisation, the Partnership for Peace programme and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council paved the way for the country's accession to NATO in 1999.

Using the First Gulf War specifically as empirical background, Cooper, Higgot and Nossal have analysed the leader-follower nexus.<sup>3</sup> They argue that the desire to follow is crucial. In their words:

[W]hat appears to be the critical element [of followership is] ... the degree to which the follower regards the leader and the leader's "vision" (the goal that the leader seeks for the collective or the group) as worthy of active and concrete support; and [this follows] from the degree to which the follower willingly

trust[s] the leader - in other words, accords the leader the right to make decisions on behalf of the group to achieve those goals ... Followers need to be convinced that ... the goals being embraced by the leader embody some notion of a “greater good,” rather than just happening to be in the obvious parochial interests of the leader.<sup>4</sup>

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Reasons for accepting the role of follower vary. Ikenberry and Kupchan distinguish between pragmatic and normative acceptance of followership.<sup>5</sup> Followership can also be considered a form of political clientelism.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, the follower’s clientelism is perceived by either side as beneficial so far as its own political interests are concerned: support from client states helps the leader avoid the risk of abandonment at peak moments in unilateral foreign and security policy<sup>7</sup> while also providing access to forward-deployed military bases; the clients, in turn, hope their support of the leader will give deeper sense to their political actions and elicit further security guarantees from the leader. The guarantees often comprise a combination of symbolic gestures, strategic references to the transatlantic family of states and practical steps, which may relate to the provision of training, material goods and/or physical protection of the followers’ territories.<sup>8</sup>

For the Czech political elite, the primary reason for followership has been normative or ideologically-based, albeit with pragmatic elements. Such pragmatism has had a lot to do with a widely perceived Russian threat. The best hopes were said to lie to the country’s participation in the transatlantic security architecture. It is important to keep in mind that within the realm of foreign and security policy, a broad Atlantist orientation represents - above all - a set of shared beliefs condensed into a fairly coherent and persuasive political world view. In the existing literature, the Atlantism of Central European (CE) countries has been linked to US neo-conservatism. This has served as an example and inspiration. Specifically, it has connected with the CE states’ sizable policy-making community made up of former dissidents ‘whose political leanings are in part informed by the American anti-communist, [and] pro-democracy policies of the 1970s and 1980s.’<sup>9</sup> This is so despite the fact that US neo-conservatism was originally framed in exclusivist terms, with Europe being singled out as an ‘inhospitable environment.’<sup>10</sup> Atlantism can, thus, be assumed to represent a form of political hegemony. Culturally and

ideologically, it binds together countries that are otherwise disparate geographically and economically as well as in terms of their size, political power and place in international perceptions.<sup>11</sup>

Czech political discussions about the country's entry into NATO juxtaposed normative and strategic considerations. The historical telos was taken for granted. Cooperation with the US was said to be vital so the historical lessons of 1938, 1948, and 1968 did not repeat themselves. References to the continuity between the unfinished project of the first democratic Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), post-Cold War Czechoslovakia - and from 1993, the Czech Republic - were widespread. When it came to forms of partnership, the Czech political elite always preferred broader transatlantic security cooperation. This meant strong support for security multilateralism as practised in NATO. While many post-communist countries embraced transatlantic security cooperation and fashioned an Atlantist world view around this, notable differences remained among these states. The implications for Czech participation in Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction are palpable and will be returned to later in this study.

The Czech preference for multilateral Atlantism stemmed from several factors. One of them was certainly the country's perception of its own limited size politically. Security bandwagoning and alliance burden-sharing were deemed important. So were normative factors - namely normative beliefs in Atlantist ideology and the liberal internationalism of the 1990s - very much in line with the depiction by Cooper, Higgot and Nossal. In addition, respect for multilateral cooperation with the US through NATO was seen as the politically safer option. This marked a notable difference when compared to Poland. The latter championed a far more direct and special relationship with the United States, often bypassing NATO. The reason for the more circumspect Czech approach to US support lay in the far greater polarisation of attitudes in Czech society. This was linked too to the limited popular support for the Czechoslovak dissident movement during the 1980s. The attitudes of Polish citizens were more accommodating to the US than those of their Czech counterparts. Poland's US-oriented pre-1989 domestic dissent had been a mass concern through the Solidarity movement. It had the active support of ordinary citizens. In contrast, pre-1989 Czechoslovak society remained quite distant from the United States and was largely oblivious to the domestic activities of several dozen elite dissidents.<sup>12</sup>

Czech Atlantism, thus, emerged as an elitist world view and was repeatedly contested at the societal level.

The main purveyors of strong Atlantist convictions – and simultaneous Euro-scepticism – were the Civic Democrats (ODS), a neo-conservative party that was politically dominant (it would lose this status in the 2013 general elections). It governed the country for most of the 1990s and held power again between 2006 and 2013: first, in a monochrome ODS minority government (2006-2007); then in a centre-right cabinet in coalition with the Green Party and the Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (2007-2009); then in an indirect way by backing up the supposedly apolitical (and in fact centre-right) caretaker government of PM Jan Fischer; and most recently, as the strongest political party in a governmental coalition formed with TOP 09 (itself created by renegades of the Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party and early sympathisers/members of the Green Party and Civic Democrats) and the right-wing and populist party-cum-cartel Public Affairs.

The Czech government's fastening to the United States, which was ideological in nature, resulted in something which the academic literature identifies as a *reactive state*. The phrase was coined in the late 1980s by Kent Calder, who used it to explain both the discursive and the practical dependence of the Japanese decision-making process on the United States. Calder's depiction was of a state which formulates policies and launches initiatives in response to external developments and pressures.<sup>13</sup> In particular, this was a state that 'responds to outside pressures for change, albeit erratically, unsystematically, and often incompletely.'<sup>14</sup> While the structural positions of Japan and the Czech Republic in their responses to US policy preferences are not directly comparable – Japan, after all, enjoys greater resources and potential scope for independent foreign policy action – Yasutomo discusses key facets of the Japanese context<sup>15</sup> that can clearly be recognised in the case of the Czech Republic. These are (i) the external origin of the reactivity; (ii) the fact that the United States is the source of this reactivity (linked to the leader-follower relationship); (iii) an at least partially paralysed and/or dysfunctional policy-making process; and (iv) the significant scope of the reactivity, which engulfs foreign, security and economic policy as well as the broader strategic and diplomatic orientation of the country. According to Blaker, such behaviour is based on the essential strategy of "coping" (with events and demands from the leader country,

here the United States) and may be characterised by minimal policy innovation, passive diplomacy and risk aversion in decision-making.<sup>16</sup> These structural characteristics provide the essential context for the strategic narrative which the Czech Republic has used to legitimise its presence in Afghanistan.

In the politico-economic literature, the notion of a reactive state has often been linked to processes in the late development and consolidation of political authority. Traditionally this has meant the economic development and modernisation efforts in the 19th century, with countries such as Italy, Germany and Japan serving as examples. Arguably, the concept of late development can be extended to describe the period following the political hiatus caused by the descent of the Iron Curtain and the ensuing reality of forty years of Communist rule in the former Czechoslovakia. Indeed, the end of this era brought about a major recalibration of the country's politico-strategic orientation, a process in which the United States historically replaced the former Soviet Union in the position of intellectual - or to be more precise, ideological - leader. This process was completed in 1999 with the Czech Republic's entry into NATO despite the fact that the early post-Cold War positions of the Czechoslovak and subsequently Czech political elite had been provisional neutrality and support for NATO's dissolution.<sup>17</sup> Earlier Czech internationalist commitments based on a deeply institutionalised multilateralism in the United Nations were replaced by attitudes originating in the United States, thus paving the way for Czech reactivity. After the country joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004, the intellectual hollowness of the Czech governmental elite was clearly exposed. The means became the end goal: just being inside the club sufficed. Czech interests in the NATO policy cycle came to be seen as redundant when the country could simply react.

The political entrenchment of the Atlantist world view was aided by the nature of Czech bureaucracy. Contrary to the classical Weberian assumption which sees the political and bureaucratic spheres as separated and driven by different logics of action, many post-communist countries - including the Czech Republic - proved that the separation of these spheres was rather incomplete. The view that top political incumbents change according to the electoral cycle and popular preferences while a politically neutral bureaucracy ensures continuity, technocratic skills and institutional memory, was shown to be problematic at best. This was mainly due to the intensive politicisation of the bureaucratic

layer of the country's ministries (for our purposes, chiefly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence). The politically-motivated parachuting of politicians into the ranks of career diplomatic corps became the norm. A neo-conservative world view penetrated all diplomatic and bureaucratic levels. Its targets ranged from ambassadors to the very junior staff who had just completed their formal training at the Czech Diplomatic Academy. These individuals were frequently employed within those ministries as "regular" (if senior) clerks. The outcome was clear: bureaucratic coalitions in the Czech Republic held explicit ideological beliefs and biases, thereby creating a fecund substrate for the politico-bureaucratic use of strategic narratives.

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### **Afghanistan and the "Czech" Strategic Narrative**

The Czech Republic has generally been known as a country which promotes human rights, international peace and democratisation while supporting related UN activities. The unflinching Czech support for peace operations with a UN mandate can be seen in government documents and speeches. 'The Concept of Czech Foreign Policy,' approved by the government in 2011, put it, 'the Czech Republic considers the UN the backbone of international relations and international law ... [the country] will actively contribute to UN peace operations ... support democracy promotion and human rights, mainly within the UN Commission on Human Rights, ... and continue to support the effectiveness of the system of international law, including the system of international crime and justice.'<sup>18</sup>As far as the general official discourse was concerned, the Czech Republic could be understood as a country committed to defending the work of the UN, international law and its legitimacy and universal norms. Practically speaking, however, the Czech Atlantist world view was what mattered when it came to Afghanistan. This view was mainly cultivated through NATO's out-of-area operations. The difference between general internationalist narratives and ideologically driven political action can be observed in the selectiveness of the Czech out-of-area involvement. While the Czech engagement in UN-led missions consisted of a meagre nine personnel,<sup>19</sup> Czech right-wing governments were eager to burnish their Atlantist credentials. Although they also occasionally supported controversial ad-hoc security projects such as the Third Pillar of us Ballistic Missile Defense, the crux of their activities took place through

NATO. The most important of these engagements to date has been the Czech participation in Afghanistan's reconstruction. At its peak, the ISAF mission included 626 contributing troops from the Czech Republic.<sup>20</sup>

Turning to the form of engagement, Czech armed forces have taken part in multinational operations in Afghanistan since April 2002. Back then, the Czech involvement consisted of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> field hospitals and the provision of bomb disposal experts and other military specialists. Furthermore, from September 2004 until March 2007, a contingent of the Czech meteorological service operated at Kabul International Airport, and from 2007 until the first half of 2009, a special unit of the Czech military police was active in the southern part of Afghanistan. Between 2011 and 2013, Czech military police trained Afghani policemen and "meta-trained" Afghani police instructors in the police academy with a view to building up the Afghan national police force in Wardak province. The Czech army also operated a mentoring and liaison team at the Carville base in the southern part of Wardak province where it trained, mentored and assisted a battalion-sized Afghan rifle unit. Some Czech armed forces were involved in combat operations. Between 2004 and 2006, a Czech Special Forces team of 120 was deployed in the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF): the unit participated in military operations targeting al-Qaida and the Taliban leadership though it took rather auxiliary roles.

The first entirely Czech provincial reconstruction team (PRT) was sent to Afghanistan in March 2008. Located in Logar province near Kabul, it operated from the US Shank base until July 2013. This team put greater emphasis on peace-building than on military stabilisation. Its derivative form was especially clear from its division into military and civilian parts, the nature of the cooperation between the two (CIMIC) and their overall organisation and location. The military component greatly outnumbered the civilian part for reasons of security and protection. Three types of reconstruction projects were set as priorities for the Czech PRT mission: it was active in the reform of the security sector (mostly by training the Afghan national army and the Afghan national police); it worked on economic and social development (mainly through social and technical projects focused on education, infrastructure and agriculture projects and the development of radio broadcasting); and it strived to contribute to governance, the rule of law and human rights reforms. Special attention was paid to the promotion of gender equality.

These orientating values were seen as the continuation of Vaclav Havel's liberal internationalist ethos in foreign and security policy.

NATO's dynamics confirm that shared perceptions of threats – and the shared political construction of these threats – are important phenomena for strategic narratives. Though subsequent developments suggested a growing rift between the United States and Western Europe in this regard, a strong ideological convergence prevailed between CE countries and the United States. Within this ideological core of the North Atlantic security community,<sup>21</sup> an intensive and sustained argumentative practice developed. Its main aim was to convince the target audience – decision makers, key thinkers, opinion makers and the general public in the new CE member countries – to accept and share the political and security threats defined by the United States.

These social constructions of security threats – and especially of Us vs. Them categories – can be seen as the extension of a long tradition of us danger production.<sup>22</sup> To paraphrase the founding father of modern us geo-strategy, George Kennan, if no danger exists, one must be created.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Johnson underlines that in the us security tradition, the world is full of enemies and evil, resulting in the conviction that the United States needs to remain vigilant.<sup>24</sup> If the idea that we are living in a dangerous world is constantly repeated, this leads over time to a genuine belief that the surrounding environment is indeed dangerous and is therefore a key challenge to the vital interests of the United States and its allies. This has been particularly true for ideological follower states such as the Czech Republic. If a threat is portrayed as imminent, then the political response may be a military campaign whose aim is to overthrow a dangerous regime and replace it with a more benign and cooperative one.<sup>25</sup>

The main development in the post-9/11 strategic narrative consisted of the us concluding that a specific terrorist organisation (al-Qaida) and Afghanistan under Taliban rule represented the gravest threats to international peace and stability and that it was necessary to act against them. Leader-follower relationships are reinforced through a discursive mechanism which Thierry Balzacq calls 'cascade argumentation,' meaning that 'persuasive arguments operate in cascade (e.g. people are convinced because friends of a friend are convinced, etc.).'<sup>26</sup> This is the key socio-political mechanism of a successful strategic narrative since it concerns its salience, transposition and reception. While the leader

makes the arguments, the followers serve as the principal target audience. The tighter the ideological bond between the leader and the follower, the more automated and uncritical the follower's acceptance of the leader's convictions and perceptions will be. The process of "mental preparing" the Czech target audience for the regime change in Afghanistan was based on claims of the danger of the Islamic world and the use of heuristic artefacts. This narrative was rich in its imaginings as Rumsfeldian metaphors about Islamo-fascism, Blair's references to Saddam's ability to attack any place in Europe with WMD within 45 minutes and Bush's Manichean waging of a global war against Islamic terror showed.<sup>27</sup>

The use of cascade argumentation was also evident in the justifications for both the OEF and ISAF missions in Afghanistan. For the Bush and Obama administrations, interventions were said to be necessary to prevent terrorists from coming to New York, Paris, Brussels, Prague, Warsaw and other places. US opinion makers such as Ronald Asmus – who had been instrumental in the earlier NATO enlargement process in his then position of US deputy secretary of state for European affairs – played a crucial role in this discursive process.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, NATO's decision to create the ISAF mission in Afghanistan arose from such a perceived threat (and related US diplomatic pressure). The former NATO secretary-general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer invoked this narrative in his speeches after 2004 with the ostensible aim of increasing the allied presence in Afghanistan in light of the relocation of most US forces to Iraq. Consequently, he helped to increase the Czech Republic's engagement in Afghanistan. Such cascade argumentation had an important aim: to persuade the target audience in the Czech Republic to see the Islamic world in an alarmist way, having reasoned there was no solution other than military overthrow of the anti-US regime in Afghanistan and subsequent stabilisation of the country.

The Czech government's own motivation for going into Afghanistan highlights the importance of cascade argumentation for strategic narratives. The government successfully internalised first the US and then the NATO strategic narratives about the need for an allied reconstruction of Afghanistan. This can be seen in a statement made by Karel Schwarzenberg, the then Czech minister of foreign affairs before the parliamentary vote on extending the mandate for the Czech PRT in Logar: 'the seriousness of the Czech Republic in the world, its allied commitments, and the safety of both the Czech Republic and our allies should be matters that are neither subject to arguments between

opposition and government parties nor partially subject to intraparty skirmishes.<sup>29</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, such reasoning is an example of *post-decisional politics* in which the national parliament is relegated to the role of an automatic rubber stamp in the name of a “more important” transnational ideological solidarity – here the solidarity between the United States-as-a-leader and the Czech Republic-as-a-follower.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, that solidarity is contingent on the existence of an internalised strategic narrative.

Over time, the US and NATO narratives were accepted by consecutive Czech governments and then passed off discursively as those governments’ own motivations. The Czech narrative contained strong elements of the US vision of what the Czechs should do in Afghanistan, but without any critical reflection on why the US-as-a-leader insisted on its presence. The mechanically transferred discourse on the need to go to Afghanistan therefore did not contain an explanation of the changing reasons for being there. Originally, this mission had been a result of the US’s effort to free its hands in order to deal with Iraq. Later, under the Obama administration, it became part of the US strategy to increase the number of soldiers and civilians in Afghanistan with the US serving as a supposed role model in the “surge” strategy officially unveiled in March 2009.

After US President Obama started to speak about the “Afghanisation” of Afghanistan, i.e. the gradual process of transferring responsibility to Afghan political and security bodies, and about negotiating with the Taliban, the Czech political elite once again passively reproduced this narrative without any innovation. Bizarrely, when the then Czech PM Petr Nečas and his minister of defence Alexander Vondra (ODS) were asked to explain why the Czechs were involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and should remain there, they both pointed out that this was obvious since the Czechs had been there for some time working alongside allies, most importantly the United States.<sup>31</sup> The latest manifestation of Czech governmental passivity and subsequent reactivity to US recalibration can be seen in the period since NATO’s 2012 Chicago Summit. As soon as the US announced its exit plan, Czech government officials began to use exactly those terms.<sup>32</sup> The Czech intention was, thus, to create an image of itself as a responsible – albeit reactive – NATO member state whose newly gained maturity was demonstrated in its acceptance of the role of follower, or in the frequently used phrase, ‘net security provider.’<sup>33</sup>

## Limits of Narratives: Public Opinion and Elite Contestation

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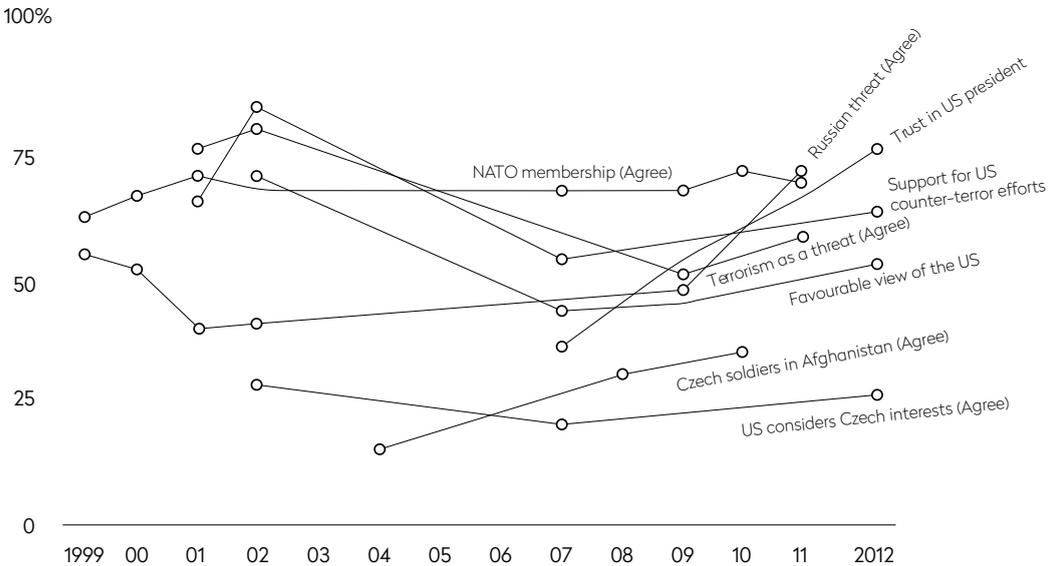
This section demonstrates the limits of strategic narratives. Specifically, it shows how a narrative successfully internalised by a government can be contested at political and societal levels. Arguably, this is what happened with the Czech strategic narrative on Afghanistan. The primary focus here is on several opinion polls with additional glimpses into the parliamentary debate. In this way, the discussion challenges a popular belief about why it has been possible for allied countries to maintain external – yet deeply unpopular – security engagements. The most convincing explanation that specifically deals with Afghanistan’s reconstruction can be found in the scholarship of Sarah Kreps.<sup>34</sup> Taking Kreps as a foil is also seen as a productive move since her comparative analysis features the Czech Republic. She offers the following account in a bid to understand a seeming paradox:

Theoretical expectations about international cooperation and evidence from case studies point to elite consensus as the reason why leaders are not running for the exits in Afghanistan when their publics would prefer that they do .... [O]perating through a formal institution such as NATO creates systemic incentives for sustained international cooperation. The result is that elite consensus inoculates leaders from electoral punishment and gives states’ commitments to Afghanistan a “stickiness” that defies negative public opinion.<sup>35</sup>

However, when the existing data are analysed, a different picture emerges: there has neither been an elite political consensus nor any widespread societal acceptance concerning the government’s strategic narrative. So while Kreps is right to point out that the Czech government ignored public opinion concerning the country’s reconstruction of Afghanistan, this was not at all because the political elite – i.e. the government and its political opponents– forged any consensus on this matter. What I offer as an alternative explanation is that in trying to overcome opposition from the Social Democrats, which escalated in a series of direct political assaults on the ISAF mission, the Czech government used the mechanism identified earlier as post-decisional politics. This – in the context of the Czech public being oblivious to the issue and actually knowing very little about the Czech engagement in Afghanistan – allowed the government to set the course on Afghanistan quite autonomously. The government’s use of a strategic narrative on

Afghanistan had greater resonance externally since it was part of the Czech contribution to forming a transnational elite consensus within NATO. Put otherwise, once the US strategic narrative had cascaded into the Czech Republic through NATO, it was internalised by the Czech government then rejected by its political opponents and most of the public, only to bounce back to NATO and prove that the Czech Republic was a valid member of the Western security universe.

*Detering  
Russia*



The above graph combines data about attitudes in Czech society concerning aspects of the country’s engagement in Afghanistan. Generally speaking, the majority of the Czech population consistently approved of the country’s membership of NATO.<sup>36</sup> A crucial reason for this – if not the primary one – was the provision of security guarantees vis-à-vis Russia. The data available show a rough correspondence between views on Czech NATO membership and the perceived Russian threat. This is most visible before 2011 and over the last few years (especially since 2008 and chiefly due to Russia’s military blitzkrieg in South Ossetia, its naval

military exercises and bellicose rhetoric). The events of 9/11 skewed this link. A poll taken in November 2001 showed that concern about the Russian threat went down very briefly from 40% to 18%, only to return to its original height and rise even further.<sup>37</sup> Czech respondents feared the possible consequences of the terrorist attack. The emergence of an imminent threat of terrorism and Islamo-fascism replaced the Russian situation as the gravest perceived danger to the country.<sup>38</sup> What is more, this link between NATO membership and the Russian threat is reinforced by the available pre-1999 data which are not included in the graph for practical reasons.<sup>39</sup>

A cluster of corresponding polls directly touch on the central issue of Czech public support for the country's involvement in Afghanistan's reconstruction. The data available from the period between 2004 and 2010 indicate a rise in the popularity of that engagement, albeit from the very low figure of 14%.<sup>40</sup> The peak was recorded in 2010 when 35% of respondents – still a considerable minority – supported an increase in the number of Czech soldiers sent to Afghanistan as part of President Obama's surge strategy.<sup>41</sup> I learned, however, from many interviews with Czech government officials that this was mainly due to the strategic focus of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence on presenting the contribution as an infrastructure enhancement in Afghanistan. One member of the Czech PRT in Afghanistan was a media expert who took care of the government's website on the Czech engagement in Afghanistan. This online image of the Czech contribution did not, however, represent the true extent of Czech activities in the country.

Overall, the military and reconstruction engagement in Afghanistan was never popular among Czechs. Rather, it was approval – or the lack thereof – of the US president's personality that almost matched positions on the Czech security engagement. Also at work were the dynamics around how favourably the US was seen as a country and Czech public perceptions of how much the US cared about Czech interests (a very low figure across the board).<sup>42</sup> While the latter views aligned significantly, trust in the US president reflected a different dynamic, especially since Obama was far more popular – and Bush Jr. far less popular – among Czech citizens than the United States as a country at those given times. The rise in general support for US counter-terrorism efforts among Czech respondents mirrored public perceptions of terrorism as a threat.<sup>43</sup> As such, the US practices around this issue were widely considered legitimate.

The overall dynamics of Czech public support for us counter-terrorism activities hinged on how favourably the United States was seen as a country at any time. This development was completely disconnected from how the Czechs viewed Afghanistan as a country. A poll for 2012 showed that Afghanistan finished with only 7% approval, putting it at the very bottom of all states in terms of popularity among Czechs.<sup>44</sup> In addition, when asked about their support for economic and security investments in Afghanistan, 66% of respondents disagreed with these measures.<sup>45</sup> This hints that the Czech Republic's great alliance dependence and its notable followership of the US were the important factors in the government's decision to participate in Afghanistan's reconstruction. And that decision was made autonomously, irrespective of the attitudes of the Czech public.

Furthermore, the government's decision to engage continuously in Afghanistan took place despite the disagreement of the country's main opposition party, the Social Democrats. Therefore Kreps's argument about the forming of a national consensus is flawed. Though originally constructive, the opposition's frustration with Czech participation in the ISAF mission - which included the Logar PRT - veered at the end of 2008 into a counterproductive political conflict. The debate on the government's proposal to commit Czech armed forces and resources to foreign operations, was the event during which relations between the government and the opposition grew terse and the threats from the opposition intensified. The tension rose in December 2008 when the government asked Czech parliament to agree to increase the number of military personnel in the Czech Logar PRT by 120 soldiers.<sup>46</sup> The former chair of the Social Democrat Party Jiří Paroubek, along with its then vice-chair Lubomír Zaorálek and the then deputy and chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies Jan Hamáček took the government to task for not explaining the sense and purpose of the mission, refusing to discuss any peaceful, non-military solution to the Afghan conflict and over-emphasising the military component of the mission at the expense of the civilian component.<sup>47</sup>

The peak of the struggle between the government and the left-wing opposition came when the Social Democrats, whose votes the government needed to push through the proposal, announced that they would only vote to extend the commitment to Afghanistan if the government cancelled mandatory fees for healthcare facility visits in the Czech Re-

public. As the government refused to scrap these fees, the proposal to involve Czech armed forces and resources in 2009 foreign operations was voted down by the Social Democrats and the Communist Party on 19 December 2008; it had received only 99 votes in the Chamber of Deputies instead of the necessary minimum of 101. What followed was mutual blaming of the highest order. The then interior minister Ivan Langer went so far as to say that ‘if anything happens to our troops in Afghanistan now, then Jiří Paroubek is a base murderer. Their blood will stick to his hands, for the troops are now left without a mandate.’<sup>48</sup> Paroubek replied that former PM Topolánek was a base cynic.<sup>49</sup> After some difficulties, the government’s bill finally passed on 04 February 2009 in a vote of 105% based on the support of four Social Democrat MPs and seven independent MPs.<sup>50</sup>

This clash subsequently came under criticism from General Jiří Halaška, who was responsible for the ISAF mission. He emphasised the related dangers, noting specifically that the Czech army faced two key time limits that could not be shortened when readying a contingent for the ISAF mission. The first meant that a year was needed to plan all the activities connected with the contingent’s preparation and dispatch; the second required six months for the general and all-round preparation of the contingent before its dispatch. ‘Connecting our participation in approved missions with questions of politics and thus holding our participation hostage to feuds between different sides of parliament is a huge mistake,’ he stated.<sup>51</sup> I have highlighted the conflict above as the most acute illustration of the extent of political polarisation over the Czech contribution to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. There were, however, several other instances.

Despite the polarisation of the public and the political opposition’s disagreement, the Czech government created its “own” motives on the US/NATO structure of expectations. The key political motive for the government’s involvement in the post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan was not related to Afghanistan as such, but rather to the nature of the Czech ideological followership of the United States. What remains is to show how the government attempted to reduce the domestic political paralysis over the ISAF mission. As I have suggested, this can be explained through the notion of post-decisional politics. On precisely these grounds, the Czech government, represented by the then minister of defence Vlasta Parkanová, opted for the following justification when the set-up of the Czech PRT in Logar was proposed:

This material fully reflects the political-military ambitions of the Czech Republic and is an expression of the shared responsibility of the Czech Republic for the safety of both itself and its allies and also for the defence of our shared values and interests... I consider it necessary to remind you here that in October of this year [2007], the members of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly... at their plenary session in Reykjavik in October accepted two resolutions in which they emphasised the strong resolve of the North Atlantic Alliance in relation to solving the situation in... Afghanistan and exhorted the NATO states to become more involved. It is completely certain that some colleagues, who are present here today in this hall, contributed to the acceptance of these resolutions, and I want to single out this moment as a moment that is, in my opinion, utterly crucial for future political decisions.<sup>52</sup>

Quoting the full length of this government justification is important in order to understand the complex conflict between the Czech government and the opposition over the question of Czech PRT and ISAF engagement in general. The reasons why the opposing parties (and especially the Social Democrats, who had otherwise supported foreign missions) had a problem with the PRT Logar were not so much related to its *content* as to the related *procedure*. This meant especially the lack of political debate and the failure to invite the Social Democrats to help in creating the government's proposal.<sup>53</sup> Thus, on one side stood the Czech government which considered the passing of its proposal in the Chamber of Deputies to be an automatic matter given that not only NATO framework executives, but also representatives of various national parliaments - including members of the Czech opposition - had accepted the allied commitments through the NATO parliamentary assembly.<sup>54</sup> On the other side was the Czech parliamentary opposition which was waiting for an invitation to join a real discussion of the proposal and saw Czech parliament as the key forum for confirming its political influence.

Such situations are well-known in political theory as instances of post-decisional politics. As we have seen, the principle of post-decisional politics holds that political decisions are accepted at the level of international communities and institutions while traditional domestic politics are reduced to an automatic seal of approval.<sup>55</sup> From the analysis presented here, it is clear that there could not have been a great difference of opinion on post-decisional politics and parliament's role in relation

to the Czech engagement in Afghanistan than the one between the right-wing governmental coalition and the opposition.

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## Conclusion

This study has attempted to discuss the Czech government's motivation for engaging in Afghanistan's reconstruction. It has highlighted the government's successful internalisation of the US and NATO strategic narratives on the need for the allies to rebuild Afghanistan. Over time, consecutive right-wing Czech governments accepted these narratives at a political level and then passed them off discursively as their own motivations. This work has also maintained that the main reason for these developments lay in the Czech Republic's ideological followership of the United States. This was characterised by its reactive behaviour as a docile ally. While the contours of the Czech strategic narrative produced for domestic public consumption emphasised the immediate terrorist threat and solidarity with a poor country/Afghan society, the real reason for the country's involvement in the ISAF mission was its alliances and US dependency. This point was made clear during parliamentary debates: the burden-sharing commitment was placed high within the NATO context and also seen as a prerequisite for the provision of US security guarantees against a Russian threat. This research has demonstrated that while the "Czech" strategic narrative – essentially a relayed US narrative – contributed to the formation of transnational consensus within NATO, it was never accepted domestically. Opinion polls indicated public division on the issue. Probing the parliamentary debate points to an on-going political split between the government and opposition. As a result, no national consensus was formed over Afghanistan, and we need to correct Kreps's claim that the presence of a domestic political consensus is the main reason for the endurance of unpopular missions.

Given that these findings refute Kreps's argument, a key question lingers: If the consensus of domestic elites does not explain the Czech commitment to the ISAF mission, then what does? As the empirical analysis has shown, a combination of factors allowed the government to continue with a deeply unpopular mission: first, as opinion polls indicated, the ISAF mission was a marginal issue for the domestic political audience. The relative lack of casualties meant that people did not pay heed to the country's presence in Afghanistan. Simultaneously, while the

mission itself was unpopular and somewhat ignored, public support for Czech NATO membership remained strong. This generally corresponded with the understanding that Russia was a national security threat. An additional factor was the lack of security guarantees on a public level. While the political opposition, especially the Social Democrats, used the high-risk strategy of linking parliamentary support for the mission to a domestic issue, this was the only venue where the issue was contested. The main reason why the Social Democrats avoided the larger security questions was that they themselves lacked a credible alternative policy. As such, they did not use this topic to inflame broader media and public attacks on the coalition government. The difference between the parliamentary attacks and the wider societal attacks can also be understood in terms of post-decisional politics. The theoretical point which this study has made is that the opposition expressed procedurally-based frustration at not being politically consulted rather than formulating a substantive alternative plan. No doubt, its risky parliamentary strategy of linking disparate agendas was also made possible by the fact it had been out of power for many years, and there was no immediate need to take command.

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