

Prospects & Perspectives



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Picture source: 總統府發言人, January 31, 2023, *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=728271801993183&set=pb.100044311095166.-2207520000.&type=3&locale=es_LA>; Petr Pavel, *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/general_pavel>.

Time to Break Old Taboos: Pavel's Call with Tsai as A New Normal

By *Martin Hála*

On January 28, the Czech Republic voted in a new president, the retired four-star general and former NATO Military Committee Chief Petr

Pavel. His election marks the end of the decade-long era of his vehemently pro-Beijing predecessor Miloš Zeman, though the outgoing president will remain in office until the formal transfer of power on March 8.

Even before assuming office, the new president-elect has started sending powerful signals that his approach to foreign policy, and in particular his posture on China and Taiwan, will be diametrically different from that of the outgoing Zeman. Foremost among them was his phone call with his Taiwanese counterpart, President Tsai Ing-wen, on January 30, a mere two days after his electoral victory. The call only lasted about 15 minutes, but managed to break a longstanding taboo on direct top-level contacts with Taiwan.

No European leader in living memory has ventured that far, and even globally, a direct conversation at the highest level would be almost unprecedented for a country that does not maintain official diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The only other case in recent years was a similar congratulatory call after the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

The boy and the emperor

The Czech Republic's relative weight in international relations is obviously not quite at the level of the United States, but that can cut both ways. Sometimes it is easier for a less prominent actor to break an outdated consensus that might seem too daunting to challenge for a superpower balancing complex global responsibilities. After all, it was a small boy who had called the Emperor naked.

The willingness to play such a role is cherished in the Czech Republic as part of the Václav Havel legacy, and historically goes even further back in the national mythology of a small country resisting more powerful foes in the name of truth. Taiwan rhymes well with this democratic David against autocratic Goliath archetype. It was this Havelian ethos that has swept Petr Pavel to victory in the presidential elections. Much of the Czech public has grown tired and disgusted by the shenanigans of his predecessor, in particular by his creepy pro-Beijing stance that had only brought the country international embarrassment, rather than the promised windfall in Chinese investments.

There has been an almost palpable demand for the new president to



change course and save the lost grace. The unprecedented phone call, rash as it might perhaps look from the outside, aligned well with these pent-up aspirations. In the current climate, there have been few critics of what might otherwise appear as a controversial move. People who may have worried about Beijing's retaliation a few years ago, do not seem to care anymore. In terms of his domestic constituencies, Pavel's call has hit the mark.

The dilemma of retaliation

How much sense does it make internationally? That is yet to be seen, and depends much on Beijing's response. That response has so far looked somewhat half-hearted and mechanical, churning worn-out threats and ritualistic accusations. The Chinese leadership seems to be reeling in a state of shock, unsure how to react and retaliate without simultaneously shooting itself in the leg. Given the limited direct economic linkages that have not developed much despite all the promises of the 16+1 and other empty concepts, there do not seem to be too many ready options.

Beijing could try to hit the Czech Republic's substantial indirect exposure through the supply chains of German and other multinational companies, like it had tried with the secondary sanctions against Lithuania. That would, however, amount to torpedoing the precious little remaining goodwill it enjoys in Europe, probably the last thing the Chinese leadership wants in this moment of escalating tensions with the U.S.

The situation resembles the fallout of a similar "incident" two years ago after the official visit in Taipei by the President of the Czech Senate, Miloš Vystrčil. After a barrage of dark threats, not least by the then Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who was touring, like he is now, several European countries at that time, the most significant attempt to make Vystrčil "pay a heavy price" for his diplomatic transgression was a clumsy smear campaign trying to plant in the Czech media a silly claim that the Czech politician had been paid US\$4 million for his trip.

Beijing may yet come up with a similar creative tactic to punish the Czech Republic for the daring phone call, most likely after the next transgression in the pipeline, the planned trip to Taiwan by the Speaker of the House, Ms Pekarová-Adamová, in April. Chances are such retaliation would backfire again.



The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has lost the Czech Republic, and much of the Central and Eastern (CEE) region, through its heavy heavy-handedness and overreach. Pompous “initiatives” like the “16+1,” combined with political and corruption scandals, have alienated much of the local public. Beijing might be well advised to let some steam off and give it a pause.

In search of a consistent policy

Perhaps the bigger question for the Czech Republic is how the phone call fits into its own foreign policy vision. Was it an isolated gesture, or part of a coherent plan? In the last year and a half since the new pro-Western government came into power, a glaring disconnect has persisted with the incumbent President Zeman. That has in turn, in combination with other factors, abated the government’s resolve to “review” the previous China policy, as declared in its program statement.

With the bold new signals from the president-elect, a disconnect is creeping back, this time in reverse order: while the new president breaks old taboos, the government fails to move as little as to leave the discredited 16+1. There is an obvious risk that such disparities could undermine the looming new consensus after Zeman's forthcoming departure. Yet what the Czech Republic needs most after a decade of ad hoc and chaotic “initiatives” is a coordinated, systematic and coherent policy towards both Taiwan and China. Only then can the country find a sustainable position in the emerging new international environment.

The serial breaking of Taiwan taboos, first with Vystrčil’s visit and now with Pavel’s phone call, also seems to harbingers new global trends transcending the Czech Republic. The previous “ambiguous” arrangements in the democratic countries’ relations with Taiwan are stretched to the limits by the new, and evolving, geopolitical situation. The previous willingness to jump through the verbal and diplomatic hoops set by Beijing might have been justifiable by convenience (or in less generous terms, by the laziness to resist); with the current sliding back into bi-polarity, it has become not only inconvenient, but outright dangerous.

Taiwan is not just a democratic partner in the intensifying contestation with autocracies, but a crucial one strategically and economically. Why should



we meekly accept to handicap ourselves in this partnership with convoluted, artificial constraints imposed by our common “systemic rival”? There is no good reason why democratically elected leaders of two self-governing peoples could not call each other on the phone just because a third party (without such democratic credentials) does not like it. A taboo is only binding as long as we willingly submit to it.

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