**MINUTES FROM THE MEETING OF THE HIGHEST CONSTITUTIONAL OFFICIALS ON FOREIGN POLICY MATTERS**

On 11 March 2020, the President of the Czech Republic, the President of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, the President (Speaker) of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defense and the Minister of the Interior met at Prague Castle to, in particular, discuss the following foreign policy issues:

**Measures Related to the Worldwide Spread of the Coronavirus Covid-19**

The participants were given information about the current situation surrounding the spread of the coronavirus Covid-19 in order to evaluate its international implications and they affirmed their **solidarity with the most virus-affected countries**. **They called on the Czech people to take a calm, responsible and rational approach** to this problem and reviewed the measures already taken by the Czech Republic, both to protect the Czech population and in relation to the activities of other states and international and regional organizations. In particular they took positive note of the actions taken by the members of the Visegrad Group. It was hoped by all that the situation would soon stabilize and do so as quickly as possible.

**Increased Migration Pressures at the EU-Turkish Border**

The participants discussed the current situation at the EU-Turkish border and stressed the importance of protecting the EU external border and of implementing the EU-Turkey Agreement of 2016, which had previously substantially reduced migratory pressures at this border. **The participants stressed the need to keep the EU external border closed to illegal migration and expressed their support to Greece and Bulgaria**. At the same time, the Czech Republic expressed its readiness to provide additional aid to cope with these increased migratory pressures, including to the Balkan states.

**Relations between the Czech Republic and the People's Republic of China, their Current State and outlook**

The participants reaffirmed their interest in exploiting the potential of bilateral Czech-Chinese relationship and to do so in a **mutually beneficial way**, particularly in the economic area. A key goal would be to reduce the current long-term negative trade balance and to actively support the elimination of those trade barriers, which limit the access of Czech companies to PRC’s market. They noted that, to date, the **results of these efforts have been well below expectations**.

Czech-Chinese relations need to be based on mutual respect, pragmatism and respect for the sovereign rights of each party. Diplomacy based on standard inter-state communication in line with international norms, rules and procedures is the only environment where such relations should be conducted. The participants further underlined the sovereign right of the Czech Republic and Czech leaders to make decisions on foreign policy issues independently of external actors and solely in the interest of the Czech Republic. In this context, **they rejected any form of coercion and condemned threats of retaliatory measures from any side.** At the same time, the participants confirmed Czech interest in developing economic and cultural cooperation with Taiwan, without calling into question the One-China policy, which the Czech Republic and the EU have long maintained.

**Brexit**

It was noted by the participants that, since their last meeting, an agreement has been reached on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union with the effective membership termination date at the end of January 2020. They welcomed the fact that the EU Member States had already agreed on a mandate for the negotiation of a new EU-UK Partnership Agreement and expressed their support for the closest possible EU-UK relationship. They hoped that an agreement could be reached within the transitional period by the end of the year. They agreed the Czech Republic will continue to provide the greatest possible assistance to Czech citizens in the UK seeking confirmation of their settlement status. It was also noted that, given the importance of the United Kingdom as a trading partner (the country’s fifth most important market), **greater attention should be paid to helping Czech companies maximize their opportunities**. This should be achieved also with the help of strengthened consular sections at the embassy in London and Czech Consulate General in Manchester, along with the promotion of the maximum possible degree of free trade between the two countries. The participants also stressed the key importance of the UK for European security as well as the need to maintain the closest cooperation possible with the UK in the area of both internal and external security, including smooth exchange of information.

**Middle East**

The participants discussed US President Trump long-awaited plan for a possible peace deal between Israel and Palestine. At long-last, there is a concrete proposal, which, despite a series of open questions, has the potential to give the peace process a new momentum that can hopefully lead to the resumption of new unconditional negotiations by both parties. The Czech Republic hopes that the recent parliamentary elections in Israel will lead to the establishment of a stable government with which we will be able to **continue to develop bilateral cooperation between our countries, including the strengthening of our representation in Jerusalem and the fulfillment of other specific Czech interests in Israel**, i.a. in line with resolutions of the Chamber of Deputies. The participants noted that they consider it important that the Czech Republic advised the International Criminal Court of its interest in acting as a friend-of-the-court (*amicus curiae*) in the matter concerning the situation in Palestine. This is based on the Czech Republic's long-standing position that it believes the Palestinians have not yet met the requirements for statehood, as required under international law.

The participants further noted that the Middle East region **remains a zone of great instability and a source of terrorist threats**. In this context, they expressed concern about the activities of some of the key players in the region, which are not conducive to calming the situation and have negative impact on the security of the EU as well as the Czech Republic. They stressed that a number of negative developments in the region have their roots in the activities and approaches of Iran. In this context, the participants stressed the pressing need for a speedy de-escalation of the conflict in Syria. They welcomed the ceasefire in the Syrian province of Idlib and expressed hopes that the ceasefire would enable the protection of civilian lives as well as access of humanitarian aid into the area. The Czech Republic continues to be ready to further engage in the fight against terrorism, including in activities against Daesh especially in Iraq. The contribution of the Czech Republic's engagement so far was highlighted by the Czech Republic's accession to the so-called Small Group of the Coalition against Daesh (C-ISIL) in January 2020.

**Russia**

The participants confirmed their readiness for a meaningful and constructive dialogue with Russia, in line with both EU and NATO positions stressing the importance of implementation by Russia of the Minsk Agreements. They stated that bilateral relations are currently burdened with a number of technical, administrative and historical issues. Thus, Czech-Russian relations remain politicized and limited both in terms of topics and communication channels. **The Czech Republic remains ready to enter into negotiations to remove some of these roadblocks and to do so in a rapid, pragmatic and balanced manner**. It is hoped that such efforts can be advanced by, among other things, a meeting of the respective countries´ presidents in May this year. This of course is based on the assumption that the **interest in improving bilateral relations between the two countries is a mutual one.**

**Western Balkans**

For a long time, the EU’s enlargement has been one of the Czech Republic's foreign policy priorities. It is the most effective EU tool for the stabilization and growth of the entire Western Balkans region. With respect to this policy objective, the Participants acknowledged the recent reports from the European Commission confirming the significant progress Albania and Northern Macedonia have made in meeting accession requirements and the recommendation for the start of accession talks with both countries. **They fully endorsed the immediate start of such talks.** Appreciation was also expressed for the Communication by the Commission to the European Parliament on Strengthening the Accession Process, which it is hoped will provide new support for the stalled enlargement agenda and speed up the momentum in negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro. The Czech Republic's support was highlighted at the recent meeting of V4 + Western Balkans foreign ministers in Prague.

**Foreign Operations Mandate of the Army of the Czech Republic after 2020**

The participants continued in their strategic policy discussion on the future engagement of Czech Armed Forces in foreign missions and operations. They agreed that ensuring the defense and security of Europe, combating terrorism and building up the capabilities of foreign partners must remain priorities. Geographically, the Czech Republic’s primary focus would be on areas adjacent to Europe and areas important for Europe's security. In this regard, they stressed the increasing importance of providing stability and security to the Sahel region. Here, it is the Czech Republic's intention to contribute its armed forces to French-led Operation Takuba, with the aim of strengthening counter-terrorism capabilities.

In Mali, the Czech Republic has been involved for a long-time in helping to build-up these capabilities as part of an EU training mission; and, to underline the seriousness of its engagement, the Czech Republic will take over the EU operational command here in the second half of 2020. The participants also confirmed ongoing engagement of the Czech Republic in NATO and coalition missions and operations in the Baltics, Iraq and Afghanistan. In this context, they stressed that the resolution of the long-standing conflict in Afghanistan lies primarily in the hands of the Afghans, and **warned against any hasty withdrawal of NATO troops**, which are considered an essential element of stability and counter-terrorism efforts in the wider region. It is important that NATO member states closely coordinate their further steps and act in unity. They also agreed that the Czech Republic will comply with its alliance commitments reached at the conclusion of the NATO Summit in Wales in 2014.

**Euro-Atlantic Relationships**

The participant stressed that it is important to continue to strengthen Euro-Atlantic ties on a wide range of topics and at various levels. Appreciation was expressed for the US’ continued engagement in the security of Europe and its growing interest in strengthening bilateral relations in political, economic and security areas. In this context, the participants expressed the wish to organize the postponed U.S.-Czech Business Forum at the Prague Castle and **confirmed the interest to welcome U.S. senior government representatives at the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII.** All of these are evidence of the strong existing alliance and the desire to strengthen and develop the transatlantic relationship. The participants also welcomed the planned 5G Security Conference, which will take place in Prague on 5-6 May 2020.

**Preparations for the 2022 Czech Presidency of the EU**

The participants reviewed the course of the country’s preparations for the Czech Presidency of the EU Council in 2022. This will offer an opportunity for a heightened visibility of the country within the EU and represents one of the most important foreign policy challenges for the near future. This year, the Prime Minister's office as well as some ministries created teams focused on CZ PRES. This will help advance the preparations in a significant way. At this moment, the focus is on organization issues and logistics of the Presidency. At the same time, the first list of themes for the CZ EU PRES programme is being drafted and will be discussed with all relevant actors.