

VIEWPOINT

The White House is far more strongly engaged in central and eastern Europe than its critics realise, argues **Tyson Barker**

OBAMA'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Last November, just one day after signing the Lisbon Treaty and removing the final roadblock to a more streamlined EU, feisty Czech President Vaclav Klaus was in Washington, DC to celebrate his country's national day.

Never one to shy away from controversy, the contrarian Klaus delivered a series of rousing speeches where he warned of a centralised European Union, faulted governments as the true villains of the financial crisis, and questioned the veracity of climate change. He did not, however, mention the issue that has made headlines and been on the minds of many Washington-based Europe-watchers: American policy toward central Europe.

This surprised some people, though it should not have. Despite murmurings to the contrary, the Obama administration is building a constructive relationship with central and eastern Europe. But ambivalence in some Washington circles has complicated the State Department's attempts to recalibrate the relationship along less ideological, more pragmatic lines. Klaus has been one of many jet-setting senior officials from central Europe to visit the US capital in recent weeks. These government policymakers have been discussing expanding bilateral relations and greater cooperation, not lamenting the demise of their US links.

As Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Philip Gordon recently stated

in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "US and central European interests are converging, not diverging." This is contrary to conventional wisdom.

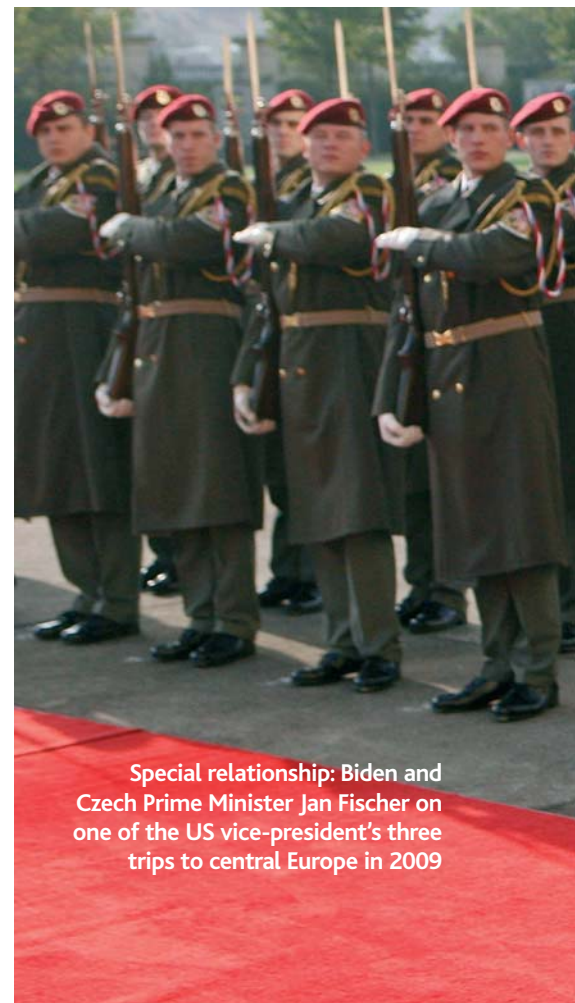
Some have criticised the Obama team for not sharing the previous administration's commitment to a more pro-active approach to the region. Former President George W Bush did a great deal to expand US ties to central Europe, cultivating a deep sense of partnership and equality in the strategic relationship. Yet it did so in a divisive manner that caused profound fissures between the central and western parts of the bloc.

The US has reaffirmed that its commitment to NATO Article 5 is "rock solid", countering central Europeans' concerns. They fear the obligation of all NATO states to come to the aid of a member under attack will be weakened in next year's negotiations on a new strategic concept for the alliance, which will provide a vision for it over the next decade. But the White House has indicated that it will guarantee central European security. Indeed, many in the Obama administration, when they served under President Clinton, showed their dedication to the region by shepherding Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary into NATO.

That commitment remains in force when Washington deals with Russia. The administration has gone to great lengths

to demonstrate that its "reset" policy with Moscow does not exclude strong relations with central and eastern Europe. It is true that the roll-out of the administration's reconfigured missile defence policy fed into perceptions that the US was looking to placate Russia. But since September, Washington has effectively communicated that the policy shift was based on a reassessment of Iranian short- and intermediate-range missile technology, not the US-Russian relationship.

Moreover, the new plan on missile defence effectively "NATO-ises" a



Special relationship: Biden and Czech Prime Minister Jan Fischer on one of the US vice-president's three trips to central Europe in 2009

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previously strict bilateral agreement, which is a win for central Europe as a whole because it gives a voice to states from Estonia to Bulgaria, which were formerly unrepresented in such accords.

October's US-EU summit in Washington was another indication of the broadened cooperation between the Obama administration and central Europe. The summit served as a platform for the launch of a new US-European Energy Council, the first priority of which is to "make energy markets stable, reliable and transparent, particularly in oil and gas and electricity supply". The Council builds on cooperation on energy security that began under the Bush administration at the US-EU summit in Vienna in June 2006.

US Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy Richard Morningstar, who had a direct hand in the design of the Energy Council, will lead the working group on energy security and markets. In this dialogue, the State Department will communicate directly with Europe's new High Representative for Foreign Policy, Catherine Ashton. In a briefing on the Energy Council after its first meeting, Morningstar made clear that issues related to third countries would top its agenda. This would include the "diversification of roots" and the creation of "non-discriminatory

markets", code for Russia and its use of energy as an extension of foreign policy.

The US-EU Energy Council has the potential to make European pipeline politics a transatlantic issue. While the US and EU would have been better served by incorporating this effort into the existing Transatlantic Economic Council, the Energy Council is an indication that the US has an interest in the future of European energy security. Bringing the US into the discussion of Eurasian energy provides ballast for the central European position.

Vice-President Joe Biden has become the de facto special envoy to central and eastern Europe. Of the seven trips that Biden made in 2009, five were directly related to policy for the region. And three trips have been to the region itself: to the western Balkans in May; to Georgia and Ukraine in July; and to Poland, Romania and the Czech Republic in October.

Biden's trip to the Munich Security Conference last February was the first major trip of a senior Obama administration official. His speech at that event has since become recognised for outlining the US reset policy toward Russia. But it also confirmed that this policy does not alter US commitments to central Europe.

Washington remains adamant that it

will not tolerate antiquated concepts such as spheres of influence. In fact, in an October speech in Romania, Biden directly addressed central Europeans' concerns that the US is no longer focused on them. He turned that notion on its head by offering central Europeans a sweeping and equal partnership on issues ranging from security to economic policy to energy. As the vice-president stated, "The time for Central Europe has come." The message seems to be resonating.

Perhaps the greatest proof is in the goulash. From Bratislava to Bucharest, public opinion is consistently more favourable towards the new administration than it was towards its predecessor. In Slovakia, approval for the Obama administration is at 71 percent, up from an anaemic 19 percent for the Bush administration in 2008. In Bulgaria, the approval rating has shot up from 22 percent in 2008 to 72 percent. Similar trends can be seen throughout the region (although less dramatically in Poland).

While the Obama administration's approach to central Europe is less sentimental, that is perhaps just what the relationship needs.

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