

## **Summary of Conference held at CSIS on November 4, 2009**

### **U.S.-Central European Relations: Avoiding Strategic Drift**

There is neither optimism nor pessimism regarding the strategic interests of the United States in Central Europe, but there is a definite drift that is of concern to America's allies in the region. According to Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, the U.S. and Central Europe need to be honest with each other and realistic about what are truly their common interests. For instance, Poland and its neighbors that feel more exposed to security threats than some of the older members are looking for more concrete U.S. security guarantees to supplement NATO's article five. Poland and the U.S. could also work together more closely on promoting democracies in NATO's eastern neighborhood.

The U.S. presence in Central Europe has been declining in recent years as the region is not a major priority for Washington. Czech First Deputy Foreign Minister Tomas Pojar believes that it is naïve to think that the relationship could return to what it was in the 1990s, but we must determine new areas of beneficial cooperation to enhance the relationship. We must also overcome the division between "old" and "new" Europe and focus more on the European Union and the new shape it is taking. The application of the Lisbon Treaty could create a clearer bilateral focus between the U.S. and Europe as it may lessen the strategic importance of separate countries. However, the actual impact of the Lisbon Treaty will not be known until the new structure is in place.

Discussion focused on why the U.S. cannot convince Central Europe of its strategic interest in the region. What really convinces the region are military capabilities especially given recent large-scale Russian military exercises close to NATO's borders. The Central Europeans want to see evidence of mutual interests, and if the U.S. can no longer afford to be the superpower that guarantees the region's security, then they need to be told that directly.

In his strategic overview, former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that we need a strong American-European relationship and a united Europe that can work together in foreign and security policy. However, Brzezinski warned that U.S. involvement in a prolonged conflict in South-Western Asia results in a decreased capacity in Europe. This means that the U.S. focuses on a single European perspective and is less able to deal with the particular interests of Central Europe.

Regarding Russia, Brzezinski distinguished two camps within the country: Putin's nostalgic camp which still envisages Russia becoming an imperial power, and Medvedev's camp which recognizes Russia's vulnerabilities and the need for accelerated domestic reform. Russia is not able to solve its problems alone, but needs to cooperate with the U.S. and a single Europe for its own interests.

Philip Gordon, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs who delivered the keynote lunchtime address, asserted that U.S.-Central European interests were converging and emphasized the need for extensive cooperation. Central-East European countries were becoming more actively involved in global issues such as the financial crises, Afghanistan, climate change, and energy security. Moreover, the U.S. shares common challenges with CEE with regard to pan-European security and has a strong interest in strategic cooperation with

Europe on the question of missile defense. Washington supports the framing of a new NATO Strategic Concept and supports the EU's Eastern Partnership program toward the former Soviet republics and back Euro-Atlantic integration for the entire Balkan region. Gordon stated that the Obama administration is rethinking its relations with Russia and will pursue concrete cooperation in areas where there are common interests. He underscored that there is no need for new security institutions but that existing ones should be strengthened.