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INTRODUCTORY WORDS BY THE DIRECTOR

Dear readers,

If a single thread runs through this June issue, it is that the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz has ceased to be a regional concern.

Tokyo and Seoul have agreed to pool their oil and gas reserves; Canberra is making deliberate use of its position as an indispensable supplier; Wellington and Singapore have committed to keeping essential goods moving between them, whatever may happen elsewhere, and Japan is actively pursuing crude and critical minerals from Brazil to Angola.



The second theme is the contest for partners. Within a few days in May, Beijing received both Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, a sequence reflecting the deepening of the dialogue between the great powers against the background of the changing polarity of the international order. Smaller states feel that pull in their own ways.

The governments of Central Asia are working to satisfy Moscow without falling foul of Western sanctions; Bangladesh is moving cautiously toward Chinese and Pakistani fighter aircraft, to New Delhi's considerable unease and deepening relations with Italy; and even the Solomon Islands and Nauru find themselves courted as significant prizes.

None of this unfolds at a comfortable distance from us. Taiwanese expertise and investment are taking root in the Czech semiconductor sector, whether at Czech Semicon Days here in Prague or at the new logistics hub rising in northern Bohemia to serve TSMC's plant in Dresden.

From October, a direct route will connect Prague with Hanoi, and onward to Central Asia. And our diplomacy with Beijing continues its familiar balancing of principle and practical cooperation.

On a welcome note, I am pleased to introduce H.E. Egemen Bağış as a new member of our Advisory Board, and I am grateful to all who contributed to this issue. Including Mr. Štefan Füle, whose reflections in the Interview section on the enduring importance of diplomacy feel especially timely.

Jan Železný, Ph.D.

Executive Director of the Center for Asia–Pacific Studies (CAPS), CEVRO University

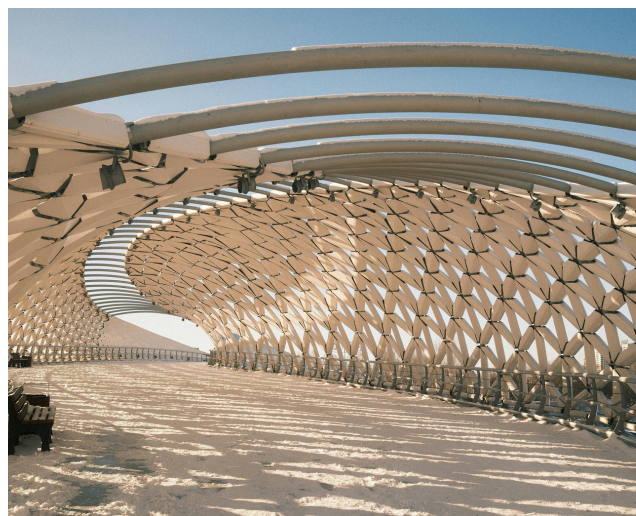


CENTRAL ASIA

EAEU Summit in Astana

Russian President Vladimir Putin's state visit to Astana for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) summit underscores Moscow's pressing need to consolidate its traditional sphere of influence amidst growing geopolitical competition. While the multilateral EAEU agenda serves as the official backdrop, the core of the visit lies in Putin's bilateral talks with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, focusing heavily on strategic energy integration. Key discussions revolve around securing the transit of Russian oil and pushing for the construction of a Russian-built nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan. For Moscow, deepening these infrastructural and energy dependencies is a critical mechanism to mitigate Western sanctions and maintain its economic leverage in the region.

From an analytical standpoint, the visit forces Astana into a complex balancing act within its multi-vector foreign policy. Kazakhstan remains deeply intertwined with the Russian economy, yet it faces mounting pressure from the West regarding secondary sanctions – a risk highlighted by neighboring Kyrgyzstan's recent crackdown on sanctions evasion. Putin's presence in Astana illustrates the broader Central Asian reality: regional governments must manage their heavily sanctioned northern neighbor's demands while actively courting alternative investments and security partnerships from the EU, China, and South Korea, which are increasingly challenging Russian regional hegemony.



Kyrgyzstan: Sanctions Evasion Crackdown

The Kyrgyz government's sudden suspension of roughly 50 companies suspected of facilitating Russian sanctions evasion marks a significant shift in Bishkek's regulatory enforcement. Driven by the lucrative re-export of dual-use electronics and machinery to Russia, Kyrgyzstan's grey economy had surged since 2022.

However, this unprecedented domestic crackdown directly follows intensified pressure from the EU and UK, which recently blacklisted several Kyrgyz entities and financial institutions. By deploying a newly established rapid interdepartmental mechanism to shut down these operations, Bishkek is urgently attempting to demonstrate tangible compliance with Western partners and avoid broader economic retaliation.

This move highlights the precarious position of Central Asian states profiting from Moscow's logistical isolation. While the re-export trade has provided a substantial economic boost, the credible threat of sweeping secondary sanctions targeting the broader Kyrgyz banking sector has fundamentally altered Bishkek's risk calculus. It illustrates that targeted Western economic statecraft can effectively force regional actors to police their own jurisdictions when their core financial arteries are threatened.



SOUTHEAST ASIA

48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu

The 48th ASEAN Summit was held in Cebu, Philippines, on 8 May 2026 under the Chairmanship of the Philippines and President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. Member states reaffirmed support for the Chairship under the theme “Navigating Our Future, Together,” emphasizing ASEAN unity, cohesion, and cooperation in a changing global environment.

The Summit focused on ASEAN community-building under the ASEAN 2045 Vision, covering political-security cooperation, economic integration, and socio-cultural development toward a resilient, people-centred ASEAN.

The ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026–2030 was highlighted as key to deeper integration, resilience, and sustainable growth, including the goal of becoming the world’s fourth-largest economy by 2030.

Connectivity and narrowing development gaps remained priorities through the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan and the IAI Work Plan V (2026–2030), with emphasis on capacity-building in countries and Timor-Leste. ASEAN stressed the importance of multilateralism and cooperation with partners, particularly the United Nations, and supported the ASEAN–UN Plan of Action (2026–2030).

On security, leaders addressed the South China Sea, calling for restraint, confidence-building, and peaceful dispute resolution under international law, alongside progress toward a substantive Code of Conduct. They also expressed concern over ongoing crises in Myanmar, the Middle East, and Ukraine, urging de-escalation and respect for international law.

Subregional initiatives and the ASEAN Smart Cities Network were highlighted as tools for inclusive development, digital transformation, climate resilience, and reducing regional disparities.

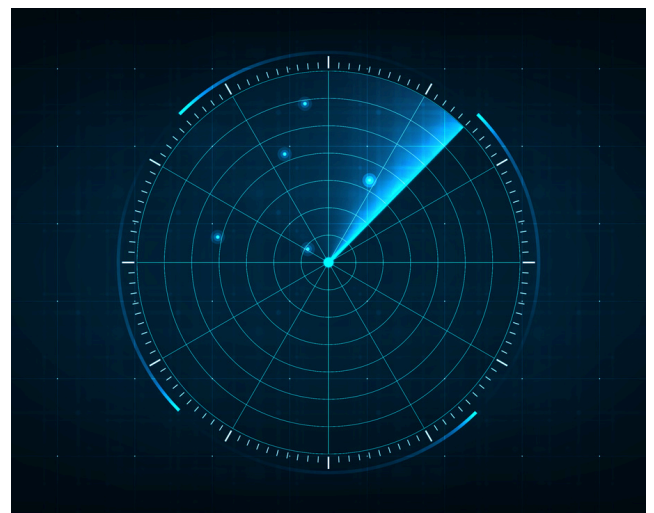
SOUTH ASIA

India's Smart Border Initiative and Deportation Drive Deepen South Asian Tension

India's new "Smart Border" project – using drones, radar, and thermal surveillance to seal its frontiers – signals a major shift toward technology-driven border securitization against both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

On the western border, the system is designed to curb militant infiltration from Pakistan by creating a heavily monitored security zone that reduces opportunities for covert cross-border activity. This approach strengthens military deterrence but also reinforces the long-standing stalemate between the two countries, leaving little room for diplomatic progress.

On the eastern frontier, the policy is creating tensions with Bangladesh. Alongside the border initiative, authorities in West Bengal have intensified efforts to identify and deport alleged illegal migrants under the broader political climate shaped by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The crackdown has reportedly caused panic among migrant communities and increased pressure at border crossings such as Bithari-Hakimpur. For Dhaka, the combination of tighter border controls and deportation measures risks damaging relations with India and adding further strain to regional stability in South Asia.



Bangladesh's Potential JF-17 Acquisition Signals Strategic Realignment on India's Eastern Border

Bangladesh's advancing negotiations to acquire China-Pakistani JF-17 Block III fighter jets marks a profound shift in Dhaka's defense procurement and regional alignment. Seemingly driven by the urgent tactical need to replace its aging fleet of Chinese-built F-7 fighter aircraft, the transition has moved beyond mere commercial interest, as signaled by Islamabad's delivery of flight simulators to the Bangladesh Air Force. For Dhaka's post-revolutionary administration, this procurement represents a deliberate effort to diversify its strategic dependencies. However, by deepening defense and hardware ties with Pakistan and China, Bangladesh is effectively introducing a joint Sino-Pakistani defense platform into a theater historically dominated by Indian security architecture.

This development alarms New Delhi because it threatens India's eastern security posture, particularly around the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor. While a limited number of JF-17s would not seriously challenge India's military superiority, the political message is significant. For decades, India depended on a friendly government in Dhaka as a stable eastern buffer. Bangladesh's growing defense ties with Pakistan now signal a move away from that exclusive alignment.

Rubio and Modi discuss trade, security and regional challenges

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to reaffirm the strength of U.S.-India ties amid evolving global tensions. Rubio described India as a key strategic partner and conveyed President Donald Trump's invitation for Modi to visit the White House.

Talks focused on Middle East security, especially protecting shipping and energy routes through the Strait of Hormuz, alongside ongoing diplomatic efforts involving Iran. The discussions also addressed trade and mobility issues. Jaishankar emphasized shared economic interests and both sides' push to finalize a bilateral trade agreement despite recent tariff disputes. He also raised concerns over visa restrictions affecting Indian professionals, while both countries committed to expanding cooperation in defense and technology.

The meeting reflects broader geopolitical balancing in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. continues to strengthen ties with India as a counterweight to China, while India carefully watches Washington's outreach to both Beijing and Islamabad. At the same time, New Delhi maintains its policy of "strategic autonomy," deepening relations with the U.S. without abandoning longstanding partnerships with countries such as Russia and Iran.

India–UK Free Trade Deal Delayed by Steel Dispute

India’s proposed free trade agreement with Britain has been delayed by the UK’s new steel import restrictions, despite both sides being close to implementing the deal.

The issue centers on the UK’s decision to tighten protections for its domestic steel industry starting July 1. The measures will reduce tariff-free import quotas and impose higher duties on shipments exceeding those limits. This could weaken some of the expected benefits for Indian steel exporters, who were expected to gain improved access under the trade pact. Officials from both countries are now negotiating a solution to prevent the steel dispute from derailing the broader agreement.

India and Italy Elevate Ties to Special Strategic Partnership

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Italy, the two countries upgraded their relationship to a “Special Strategic Partnership,” introducing a new foreign ministers-led review mechanism and a five-year Strategic Action Plan (2025–29). Both sides set a target of €20 billion in bilateral trade by 2029 and reaffirmed support for the EU–India Free Trade Agreement and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

The partnership focuses on cooperation in advanced technologies, defense industrial collaboration, space cooperation, and improved mobility between the two countries. Both sides also agreed to deepen economic and industrial ties through joint initiatives and investment frameworks. In security matters, India and Italy strengthened defense cooperation through a roadmap for joint production and regular military dialogue. Both countries also reaffirmed their commitment to counterterrorism cooperation, including efforts to combat terrorist financing.



EAST ASIA

Takaichi Visits Lee to Address the Energy Crisis

Japan and South Korea agreed to deepen their energy cooperation in response to the ongoing crisis in the Strait of Hormuz. South Korean President Lee Jae Myung and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi announced plans to share oil reserves and liquid natural gas supplies.

This agreement shows warming relations between the two countries as both rely heavily on imported energy. They also discussed strengthening their three-way security cooperation with the United States.

The leaders are taking a pragmatic approach to face external threats from China, Russia, and North Korea, especially given the unpredictable policies of U.S. President Donald Trump.

The Downsides of Taiwanese Economic Growth

Taiwan is experiencing explosive economic growth in 2026, driven by the global artificial intelligence boom and its powerful semiconductor industry. The gross domestic product of the island expanded by over 13 percent in the first three months of this year.

Exports surged to more than 640 billion dollars last year, with technology goods making up the vast majority. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company produces most of the advanced chips used by companies like Nvidia and Apple. This single company now accounts for more than 40 percent of the total value of the local stock market.

However, this massive wealth is not shared equally among the population. The semiconductor sector employs only about 300,000 people out of a total workforce of 11 million. Many workers in traditional manufacturing and service sectors face stagnant wages and rising housing costs.

Experts warn that Taiwan is becoming a dual society where technology companies absorb most of the talent and financial resources. Furthermore, traditional exporters suffer from United States tariffs, which makes the economic situation even more difficult for ordinary citizens.

Expanding Japanese Trade Networks in South America

Japan is preparing to engage in trade discussions with the Mercosur bloc, which includes Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia, with the aim of expanding its export markets, securing access to critical resources, and reducing its exposure to instability in global trade. These talks are expected to take place in mid-June. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is anticipated to address this initiative in discussions with Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The deal is especially important for Japan's auto industry, which risks losing competitiveness in South America as the European Union (EU) advances its own trade agreement with Mercosur. Japan is also prioritizing access to energy and rare earth minerals over earlier concerns about agricultural imports.

Brazil has offered to increase crude oil exports to Japan amid disruptions in Middle Eastern supply routes and remains a key source of rare earth materials used in electric vehicles and electronics.

Japanese Diplomatic Expansion in Southeast Asia and Africa

Outside of Latin America, Japan is actively building security and economic partnerships in Southeast Asia and Africa. Japan and the Philippines are preparing to negotiate a General Security of Military Information Agreement to share classified military intelligence.

At the same time, Japan signed a new defense cooperation agreement with Indonesia that allows for the transfer of defense equipment. Indonesia is already showing strong interest in buying used Japanese submarines. These agreements strengthen the defense network in Asia at a time when the U.S. foreign policy remains highly unpredictable.

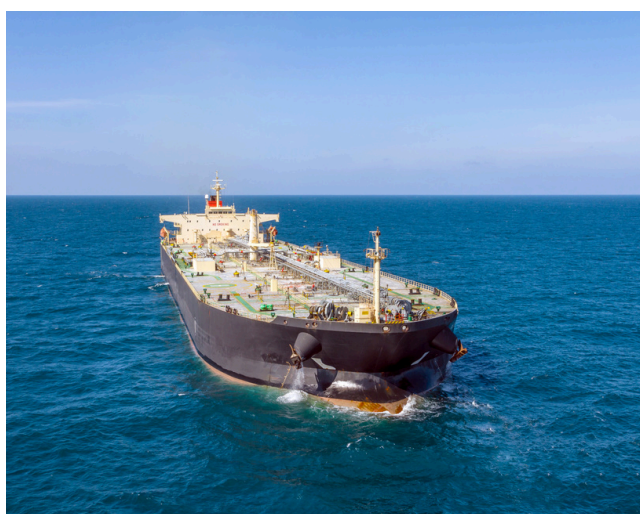
In Africa, Japan is making a new diplomatic effort to secure crude oil and industrial minerals. Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi visited Angola, Zambia, Kenya, and South Africa. In Angola, he expressed strong interest in expanding cooperation in the oil sector and critical minerals.

Motegi also discussed new investments in copper and cobalt mining with officials in Zambia. This tour is a direct response to the energy risks caused by the conflict in the Middle East, and it also aims to offer African nations a safe alternative to Chinese infrastructure loans.

Semiconductor Demand Offsets Hormuz Crisis Costs

The Bank of Korea says booming semiconductor exports, driven by demand for AI technology, will offset the economic impact of the global energy crisis and tensions involving Iran. Although South Korea depends heavily on Middle Eastern oil and gas imports, strong chip exports have pushed overall trade performance to record levels.

Despite this, the central bank kept interest rates at 2.5% because of persistent inflation, a weaker Korean currency, rising housing prices, and high household debt. Officials also warned that while the tech sector is thriving, industries such as steel and petrochemicals continue to struggle with high energy costs and competition from cheaper Chinese products.



CHINA

Beijing at the Epicenter of Global Diplomacy

In May 2026, Beijing hosted a major wave of high-level diplomatic meetings that confirmed China's central role on the global stage. Building on earlier visits this year by Western leaders like German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, the May diplomatic push was highlighted by the state visit of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Accompanied by prominent business figures such as Elon Musk and Jane Fraser, Trump focused negotiations on trade imbalances, tariffs, and technology transfers. Ultimately, the two sides reached basic working agreements to maintain stable supply chains and avoid direct economic conflict.

Just days after the American delegation departed, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing to showcase the enduring partnership between Russia and China. The two leaders focused on broad economic cooperation, energy projects, and financial systems designed to bypass Western sanctions, presenting a united front on regional security. Concurrently, China strengthened other key relationships.

President Xi Jinping praised Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif for his diplomatic efforts in the Middle East and offered Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić a major infrastructure deal to build small modular nuclear reactors, a move that deepens Serbian economic dependence and bypasses standard European regulations.

To complete this diplomatic offensive, China significantly expanded its economic activities across the African continent as a direct response to strict Western trade barriers. By offering African nations lower tariffs and better market access for agricultural goods and raw materials, Beijing is cultivating a strong network of dependent emerging markets.

This strategic shift provides China with new destinations to sell its manufactured goods while securing a long-term supply of the critical minerals necessary for its advanced technology industries.

Technological Evolution and Global Market Expansion

China is continuing to recalibrate its economic and technological strategy in response to shifting global conditions, with direct investment in Europe reaching a seven-year high and focusing primarily on electric vehicle and battery production. Rather than acquiring existing firms, Chinese companies are increasingly establishing manufacturing bases in countries such as Hungary and Spain, allowing them to operate within the European market and mitigate tariff risks.

At the same time, European automakers are losing ground in China as domestic electric vehicle producers reshape consumer demand, forcing foreign firms to scale back operations or pursue partnerships with local competitors. Technological rivalry with the U.S. has also intensified, highlighted by Huawei's introduction of a new Kirin processor that demonstrates progress in overcoming semiconductor restrictions, alongside high-profile visits to China by Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang, reflecting the tension between regulatory compliance and market access.

Beyond high technology, Chinese firms are accelerating their global expansion through acquisitions in the consumer goods sector, driven by strong domestic competition and deflationary pressures. Outbound deals reached 2.4 billion dollars in the first quarter, largely targeting Europe and North America, with notable examples including Anta's stake in Puma and Shein's acquisition of Everlane. While consumer sectors remain relatively accessible to Chinese capital, regulatory scrutiny is increasing, as seen in European investigations into Shein and the review of JD.com's bid for Ceconomy. Overall, acquiring established international brands has become a key strategy for Chinese companies seeking rapid global growth and diversification across industries.



AUSTRALIA AND OCEANIA

Diversification and Resilience of the Australian Economy

Canberra has significantly accelerated its strategy of trade diversification to counter escalating economic pressures from its two largest trading partners. The Australian government recently finalized a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, a milestone that brings the total number of the country's bilateral and multilateral trade pacts to twenty. This aggressive expansion includes new economic partnerships with the United Kingdom, India, and the United Arab Emirates.

The imperative to broaden trade horizons emerged as a critical defense mechanism after China imposed steep tariffs on Australian agricultural and resource exports in 2020. While diplomatic and commercial relations with Beijing have recently stabilized under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Australian policymakers recognize the severe risks associated with structural over-reliance on a single consumer market.

Simultaneously, Australia is navigating the unpredictable nature of U.S. trade policy under the Trump administration. The recent application of American tariffs on Australian pharmaceuticals highlights the continuous threat of protectionism. However, the Australian economy has proven resilient because its primary commodity exports are highly adaptable and can be rapidly redirected to alternative international buyers. Furthermore, global energy disruptions stemming from the conflict in Iran have elevated the strategic importance of Australian resources. The Albanese government is actively leveraging its status as a secure supplier of natural gas and critical minerals to negotiate guaranteed fuel and oil imports from regional partners across Asia.

Restarting and Expanding the Australian Mining Sector

The Australian mining sector is undergoing a notable revival, particularly in the area of critical minerals and lithium. Rising global demand for electric vehicles and energy storage technologies has driven a strong rebound in lithium prices in early 2026, prompting major firms to scale up production.

For instance, Mineral Resources, in partnership with China's Ganfeng, has committed to expanding the Mount Marion lithium mine in Western Australia. The project will shift operations underground and introduce a new flotation facility, significantly increasing the output of high-grade spodumene concentrate.

This renewed momentum is visible across the broader industry, with several previously suspended mining operations returning to production in response to improved market conditions. Sites such as Bald Hill and projects in the Northern Territory have resumed activity, reflecting growing confidence in sustained demand. At the same time, structural changes are taking place in the financial environment supporting the sector.

The acquisition of Cboe Australia by Canada’s TMX Group is expected to facilitate the creation of a more accessible market for smaller exploration companies, particularly those focused on rare earths and critical minerals. This development may ease longstanding barriers to financing and support the expansion of supply chains critical for both green technologies and strategic industries.

The New Zealand–Singapore Supply Chain Deal

In response to major global trade disruptions linked to the conflict in the Middle East, New Zealand and Singapore have established a bilateral supply chain agreement designed to ensure the uninterrupted flow of essential goods, including food, medical supplies, chemicals, and energy resources, even during periods of crisis.

By committing to keep key air and maritime routes open, the agreement aims to strengthen economic resilience against external shocks, a priority underscored by New Zealand’s dependence on Singapore for refined fuel imports and the broader vulnerability of smaller, trade-reliant economies. Both governments have also presented the pact as a potential model for wider international cooperation, encouraging similar initiatives to safeguard global energy and food supply chains while reinforcing principles of open trade and multilateralism.



The Battle for Influence in the Solomon Islands

The political landscape in the Solomon Islands experienced a major upheaval following the removal of Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele through a parliamentary vote of no confidence. Manele had attempted to navigate a highly delicate diplomatic path, maintaining the controversial security arrangements with China established by his predecessor while simultaneously signing new policing agreements with Australia. His sudden exit creates a leadership vacuum that threatens to disrupt recent security initiatives supported by Canberra and Washington. Regional observers note a high probability that the incoming administration could revert to a strongly pro-Beijing stance, potentially reviving the intense geopolitical competition for influence that has characterized the politics of the island nation over the past several years.

The Nauru–Vietnam Diplomatic Nexus

In a demonstration of diversifying diplomatic ties within Oceania, Nauru is actively strengthening its bilateral relationship with Vietnam as the two countries approach the twentieth anniversary of their formal diplomatic connection. Nauruan officials have identified Vietnam as a valuable developmental model and a vital prospective partner for ensuring food security, developing sustainable fishing practices, and modernizing local infrastructure. Both nations share acute concerns regarding climate change and rising sea levels, providing a foundation for coordinated advocacy in international forums. In return for agricultural and technical expertise, Vietnam is seeking Nauru's diplomatic support for its candidates in key United Nations maritime tribunals, illustrating how smaller Pacific states are leveraging their voting power to secure essential development assistance.



ASIA IN CZECHIA

Establishing Direct Aviation Connectivity with Vietnam

In a significant enhancement of bilateral connectivity, the Vietnamese carrier VietJet Air will launch a direct flight route between Hanoi and Prague beginning October 10, 2026. Operating twice weekly using modern Airbus A330 aircraft, the route will feature a technical refueling stop in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Passengers will remain on board during this stop, but the airline will notably offer ticketing options for the Prague-Almaty segment, simultaneously opening a new travel corridor between the Czech Republic and Central Asia.

This development resolves a long-standing logistical gap in one of the most lucrative unserved aviation markets in Europe; the route recorded nearly 75,000 transit passengers last year alone. Furthermore, this strategic expansion establishes Václav Havel Airport Prague as VietJet Air's inaugural European destination, reflecting the deepening economic and demographic ties between the two nations.

Integrating Taiwanese Expertise at Czech Semicon Days 2026

The Czech Semicon Days 2026 in Prague highlighted the country's drive to build a robust domestic technology sector by forging strategic international partnerships, most notably through deep bilateral cooperation with Taiwan.

While the summit established vital agreements with European entities to integrate domestic research into global value chains, its defining feature was the prominent inclusion of Taiwanese academic and industrial expertise.

Leading figures from the National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, including former TSMC CTO Yuan-Chen Sun, shared crucial insights on talent cultivation, artificial intelligence, and advanced fabrication with local institutions like the Czech Technical University and Charles University. This strong Asian-Czech engagement underscores the ambition to leverage top-tier Taiwanese know-how and academia-industry partnerships to develop a highly competitive, localized semiconductor ecosystem.

Strategic Taiwanese Logistics Investment in Northern Bohemia

The Taiwanese logistics firm i-TRANS Global plans to build a specialized distribution center for semiconductor chemicals and gases in the Ústí nad Labem region, backed by an initial investment of 20 million euros (approximately half a billion CZK). The facility will cover nearly 17,000 square meters and function as the main supply base for the upcoming TSMC factory in neighboring Dresden.

Operations are scheduled to begin in early 2028 with a team of 60 employees. Operating within a one-hour drive of Dresden, the high-security hub will process around 19,500 tons of specialized materials annually while managing inventory, quality control, and regulatory compliance.

This project gives the Czech Republic a valuable opportunity to participate in the European semiconductor supply chain in a much more advanced capacity than standard manufacturing. CzechInvest expects the investment to support a broader recovery of the chemical industry in northern Bohemia by drawing on the region's strong industrial history and available workforce. In the future, i-TRANS Global plans to cooperate closely with domestic chemical producers and academic institutions, specifically the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University and the University of Chemistry and Technology in Prague. The shared goal is to train a new generation of experts capable of handling the highly specific demands of the global semiconductor market.

Navigating Sino-Czech Diplomatic Complexities

During a bilateral meeting at the UN General Assembly, Czech Foreign Minister Petr Macinka and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi discussed key friction points, including the espionage trial of a Chinese national in the Czech Republic and Beijing's objections to Czech parliamentary visits to Taiwan.

Macinka assured Wang of the Czech judiciary's independence regarding the detained suspect and defended the democratic right of lawmakers to travel to Taipei, while reaffirming the executive branch's adherence to the One China policy. Despite these ideological differences, both ministers expressed a mutual commitment to restoring pragmatic diplomatic ties and functional economic cooperation, agreeing on the importance of insulating practical bilateral trade and tourism from ongoing political tensions.

CAPS INTERVIEW



From Geopolitical Periphery to Strategic Partner: Rethinking Central Asia's Role in Global Affairs. An Interview with Štefan Füle

Štefan Füle is a Czech diplomat and former politician who served as EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy (2010–2014) and briefly as Minister for European Affairs in the Czech government in 2009.

He held multiple diplomatic posts, including ambassador to NATO, the United Kingdom, and Lithuania, and worked on Czech accession to NATO and EU enlargement policy.

What led you to diplomacy and international relations?

I must admit, probably my father, who was a soldier. I felt a need to do something that would compensate for the fact that he took care of weapons as the means of resolving disputes between States in that way, and I somehow felt a need to do it differently. So maybe that was the reason. But I certainly cannot claim that I had been interested in it since I was eight years old. It was only later, in high school, that I was able to formulate it for myself in this way.

Could you say how working as a diplomat changed you?

Tremendously. It gave me the opportunity to learn about many things and taught me to appreciate and make use of them. And I do not want this to sound pathetic, but it contributed to my enrichment and personal growth. I think it opened my mind to such an extent that even in what I do nowadays, I am able not only to hear what others are saying, but also to understand it and help in a somewhat different way than if I had never worked in diplomacy. I know that every word carries a certain meaning, and perhaps I can work with that differently.

It seems to me that, partly thanks to this experience, I approach every person as a potential partner and give everybody a chance so that our conversation, and whatever we may do next, can benefit both sides. And I cannot imagine being where I am today without having studied diplomacy and tried, as I always liked to say, to understand everything and nothing at the same time, because that is, in essence, also what diplomacy is partly about.

Do you think there is a common misconception among the public about the work of a diplomat? If so, what is it?

I must admit that I do not really know what the public perception is. Perhaps if we were discussing perception twenty years ago, we would find that it is different from the perception today. That is related to the fact that diplomacy today is truly something quite different from what it used to be.

During my diplomatic career, I even went through a period when my children expressed a desire to consider following in my footsteps, and I tried to talk them out of it. I told them: "Look, in the age of the internet, when embassies, diplomatic missions, and diplomats are no longer the only means of communication between states, the job is really about something else".

Today, people can simply call each other over the internet, send emails, and learn far more about another country online than from diplomats' reports. And I thought that this essentially meant a kind of twilight of diplomacy. But in recent years, it has become clear that it is certainly not a twilight, because even today's world needs people who are willing to listen, who are willing to draw conclusions or make recommendations, and who are willing to engage in dialogue with the other side. Such dialogue, if not immediately, then eventually leads to a handshake and a move toward cooperation rather than conflict.

In this respect, the complicated and unpredictable world we know today needs diplomacy just as much as it did fifty years ago. New technologies and new forms of communication will not change that. Perhaps the art of diplomacy has simply retreated further into conference rooms and is less visible than it once was.

But without diplomats, without diplomacy, and without the ability to listen and to speak in a way that helps move the other side from point A to point B, it simply cannot work. This is not something people are born with. And to those who possess such skills and are prepared to use them, I would say today: "For heaven's sake, do everything you can to pursue diplomacy, because being attentive and being able to interpret today's world for others is incredibly important."

Is contemporary diplomacy more about values or about pragmatism?

Let me give you an example, I did not agree with Václav Klaus on everything, but I must say that I respected him greatly. One thing I also learned from him was to be attentive and not to put people into boxes. I do not think there is a clearly defined boundary between a values-based approach and a pragmatic approach. In fact, I am convinced that a pragmatic approach without at least some connection to basic values does not really bring anything particularly new.

At the same time, these are two elements that have always been, still are, and always will be part of foreign policy. Sometimes circumstances favour one of them, and sometimes the other. But it seems to me that the best diplomacy is practiced when both approaches are used. Those who claim that one of them, whether the values-based approach or the pragmatic one, is wrong, are, in my view, not particularly good diplomats.

When you served as a European Commissioner, did Central Asia ever feature in your work or within the EU agenda?

Yes, it did. It appeared towards the end of my mandate because I was responsible for the Eastern Partnership, and the Eastern Partnership essentially ended with the Caucasus. Beyond that there was a blank space. At that time, there was no document and no clearly defined policy within the European Union, within the European External Action Service, or within the European Commission.

What we did in the field of Eastern policy later became, to some extent, a model for shaping policy towards Central Asia. As I mentioned during today's lecture, the second reason why we needed to define a separate policy towards Central Asia was that, during our disputes between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, we had already begun to realize that countries in our neighbourhood, once they decided in favour of one organisation or the other, could no longer be part of the alternative framework. In other words, it was a choice that carried certain consequences.

At a time when Central Asia itself was seeking its own path towards integration into economic relations, not only within the region but globally, we wanted to be part of that process and present our own offer. I think this worked extremely well. Within just a few years, we were able not only to establish a clearly defined policy towards Central Asia and secure the necessary instruments to implement it, but also to conclude strategic partnerships with those countries and develop rather ambitious and concrete programmes in various fields. In today's world, especially after the COVID pandemic and given the unpredictability of current international relations, this is tremendously important.

Do you think that today it has become a strategic issue for the EU?

I think it is now one of the key strategic issues. I believe that the period when we essentially tried to look only inward and focus mainly on ourselves has come to an end. Likewise, I think the time has passed when we strictly distinguished between countries that wanted to join us and all other partners. Instead of that we have begun to pay attention to this part of our neighbourhood with a level of interest that is, if not identical, then very similar to the attention we devoted to countries that have a positive relationship with the European Union and aspire to become part of it. That is certainly a good development. I think Central Asia is precisely the region where the European Union began to act as a truly global player. The European Union undoubtedly is a global player, even though many people in our country are still not entirely convinced of that.

Is there any country in the region whose development in recent years has surprised you, either positively or negatively?

Each of them has its own trajectory. As you know, I serve as an adviser to the President of Uzbekistan, so my attention is focused primarily there. Uzbekistan has undergone tremendous economic and social development in recent 10-15 years, in particular. It is the country where its past importance as the key part of the Silk Road meets with its future potential based on young society and modern policies.

Uzbekistan has also played a crucial role in establishing a positive agenda and process of Central Asian regional cooperation. I also see Kazakhstan as a very significant example. What I admire about Kazakhstan, to give you another example, is its methodical approach to have people in public administration and state institutions who possess the education, knowledge, and skills needed to help ensure what the country requires for its security and for its economic and social development.

If there is something that has genuinely surprised me in a positive way and that I strongly support, it is the effort of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to develop cooperation within Central Asia, rather than focusing only on their own interests. They are using even sensitive issues such as water sharing and energy as a basis for creating a platform of cooperation among these countries. I believe this is driven not only by a sense of common identity but also by an understanding that they will be stronger if they stand together.

From the perspective of the European Union's relationship with them, I can personally say that this was one of the factors that attracted the European Union's attention. It is no longer merely a collection of six completely different countries, but rather a group of countries that have embarked on a path of closer cooperation in areas that are important to them.

What security challenges do you think could become the most important for the region in the future?

Essentially, wherever you look. Afghanistan, Iran, relations with a powerful northern neighbour that still maintains its own vision of how to return to the past and how to exercise greater control over this region. There are an enormous number of challenges facing these countries.

I think this is also one of the driving forces pushing them to seek partners such as the European Union. I know that they are also striving to build strong partnerships with the United States and with other important global actors. They are seeking integration into the world economy and into the global financial system so that they become part of it rather than merely serving as an outpost for someone else's plans.

The more partners you have and the more deeply you cooperate with them, the stronger you become and the more respect you gain. This is something that the region has achieved very noticeably in recent years through its increasingly coordinated approach.

If you had to estimate what this region will look like in ten years, what would you say?

I only know what I would like to see. I would like to see a region that avoids becoming merely an object of competition between the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Belt and Road Initiative, which is no longer purely a Chinese project but increasingly a Chinese led multilateral integration effort. I would like the region to develop a model of cooperation with each of these frameworks that it considers successful and beneficial for its economic and social development.

If the European Union can contribute anything to this process, it is primarily through the fact that it has institutionalised its relations with the countries of Central Asia and provided them with a clear framework. We have regular summits, concrete cooperation programmes and projects, and a long-term strategy. All of this has been achieved without calling into question the rules of the European Union, including the fact that only a European country can become a member of the EU.

In other words, the European Union has moved beyond the notion that meaningful and intensive relations can only be built with future candidate countries. It has demonstrated that it is possible to cooperate very actively with states in its strategic neighbourhood to help them strengthen their position, stability, and self confidence in the international environment.

At the same time, we are talking about a region with an extraordinarily rich history. To those who try to interpret current geopolitical issues solely through the lens of the last few decades and use that perspective to justify Russian claims to this region, I would recommend looking deeper into history.

Central Asia was once one of the centres of world civilisation, education, and scientific progress. Many important mathematical and scientific discoveries that influenced the entire world originated there.

For that reason, I believe it is entirely right that the countries of the region are now building their identity and development on their own history, culture, and partnerships with a variety of actors. It is also a good thing that the European Union understood this development in time and was able to respond to it, particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In your view, what should ideal cooperation between the Czech Republic and Central Asia look like in practice?

I think it should not become hostage to somewhat outdated approaches that view the region either as something very distant or as an area dominated by someone else. We need to realise that this is an incredibly young region facing challenges that are the exact opposite of those associated with our ageing population. Cooperation with such regions gives us an opportunity to mitigate, or at least better manage, our current demographic crisis among other things.

I would like the agreements that Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other countries sign with the European Union not to become merely thousand-page documents sitting on shelves, but rather genuine guides for building bilateral relations. We should make full use of the fact that these agreements establish compatibility of legal frameworks, protection of our interests, and favourable conditions for business.

When you come to do business in Uzbekistan, you should know that there are mechanisms, institutions, and instruments in place that will protect you and ensure that your rights can be enforced.

I would also like Central Asia not to be viewed solely as a tourist destination for hundreds of thousands of people, although that is certainly important as well. Above all, it should be seen as a partner that offers many interesting opportunities for cooperation. These include mineral resources, many of which are becoming increasingly strategic.

I would be pleased to see new deposits and new projects developed through the work of our geologists and through the expertise we have built over many years, because this is an area in which we have traditionally been among the world leaders. At the same time, we are an important engineering and manufacturing country within the European Union, which means we could help build processing industries directly in these countries. Raw materials would then not need to be transported thousands of kilometres to Europe for processing but could gain added value closer to the places where they are extracted. And there are many other possibilities.

One example is cooperation in addressing drought and in agriculture. The Czech Republic is home to research centres that are among the very few in the world capable of effectively addressing the impact of extreme climatic conditions on agriculture.

I would like to see closer cooperation with Uzbekistan, which only ten years ago was one of the world's major cotton producers but now must reconsider its approach because, from the perspective of water consumption, it is unsustainable in the long term.

There are simply many areas where cooperation is possible. I would like Central Asia and Uzbekistan not to be perceived as distant and unfamiliar places, but rather as a region that enriches us, strengthens us, and helps us develop, just as we can contribute to its development.

Kateřina Kovács, Daniela Finkousová



UPCOMING EVENTS

Czech-Vietnam Partnership: The Past, Presence, and Future

The Center for Asia-Pacific Studies (CAPS) will hold a panel discussion called Czech-Vietnam Partnership: The Past, Presence, and Future on the 23rd June, 5 pm at CEVRO University aula in Jungmannova street. The debate will map relations of both countries and will focus on areas of possible future cooperation, mainly in the area of business and trade, highlighting the 2025 agreement on strategic partnership between Prague and Ha Noi. The list of main speakers includes H.E. Hynek Kmoníček, the former Czech Ambassador to Vietnam; Mr. Cong Tu Pham, the Chairman of the Association of the Czech Citizens of the Vietnamese Ancestry; and Mr. Jan Sechter, the Deputy Minister of Industry and Commerce. The event will also be addressed by H.E. Duong Hoai Nam, the Ambassador of Vietnam to Czechia. The communication language will be Czech.



PREVIOUS EVENTS

Czech Republic and Central Asia: Partnership for the 21st Century. An expert debate on the future of mutual relations took place at CEVRO University.

On Thursday, April 14, an expert debate titled "Czech Republic and Central Asia: Partnership for the 21st Century" took place at CEVRO University in Prague, organized by the Center for Asian-Pacific Studies.

The guests were Radek Vondráček, a Czech politician and lawyer who serves as the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. Štefan Füle, a Czech diplomat who served as European Commissioner in the years 2010–2014, and Milan Sedláček, the Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Azerbaijan. The discussion was moderated by Jan Zahradil, Chairman of the CAPS Advisory Board.

The debate focused on the current state and perspectives of relations between the Czech Republic, the European Union, and the states of Central Asia, their growing geopolitical significance, and the transformation of the EU's approach to this region in the context of the current international environment.

In a subsequent interview, Štefan Füle emphasized that Central Asia is no longer a marginal topic of European foreign policy, but on the contrary, is becoming one of its key strategic regions. He stated that in recent years, the European Union has been overcoming its previous focus primarily on its own internal integration as well as the traditional division of partners into "candidate countries" and other actors.

According to him, the EU is paying increasing attention to the broader neighborhood, with the same degree of systematic and detailed attention it previously devoted primarily to states with a membership perspective, which he considers a positive development.

In response to a question regarding the development of the region over the next ten years, Füle stated that he would wish for Central Asia to be a space that will not merely be an object of rivalry between major integration projects, but will manage to maintain its own autonomy and the capacity to cooperate with various actors in a balanced manner.

He mentioned that the region is located at the crossroads of the influence of the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, which according to him is gradually becoming a broader, more multilateral integration project. According to him, the states of Central Asia should strive for such a model of relations with these actors that will be economically and socially beneficial for them.

The panel discussion was followed by an open debate with students, the academic public, and other guests from professional and diplomatic practice.

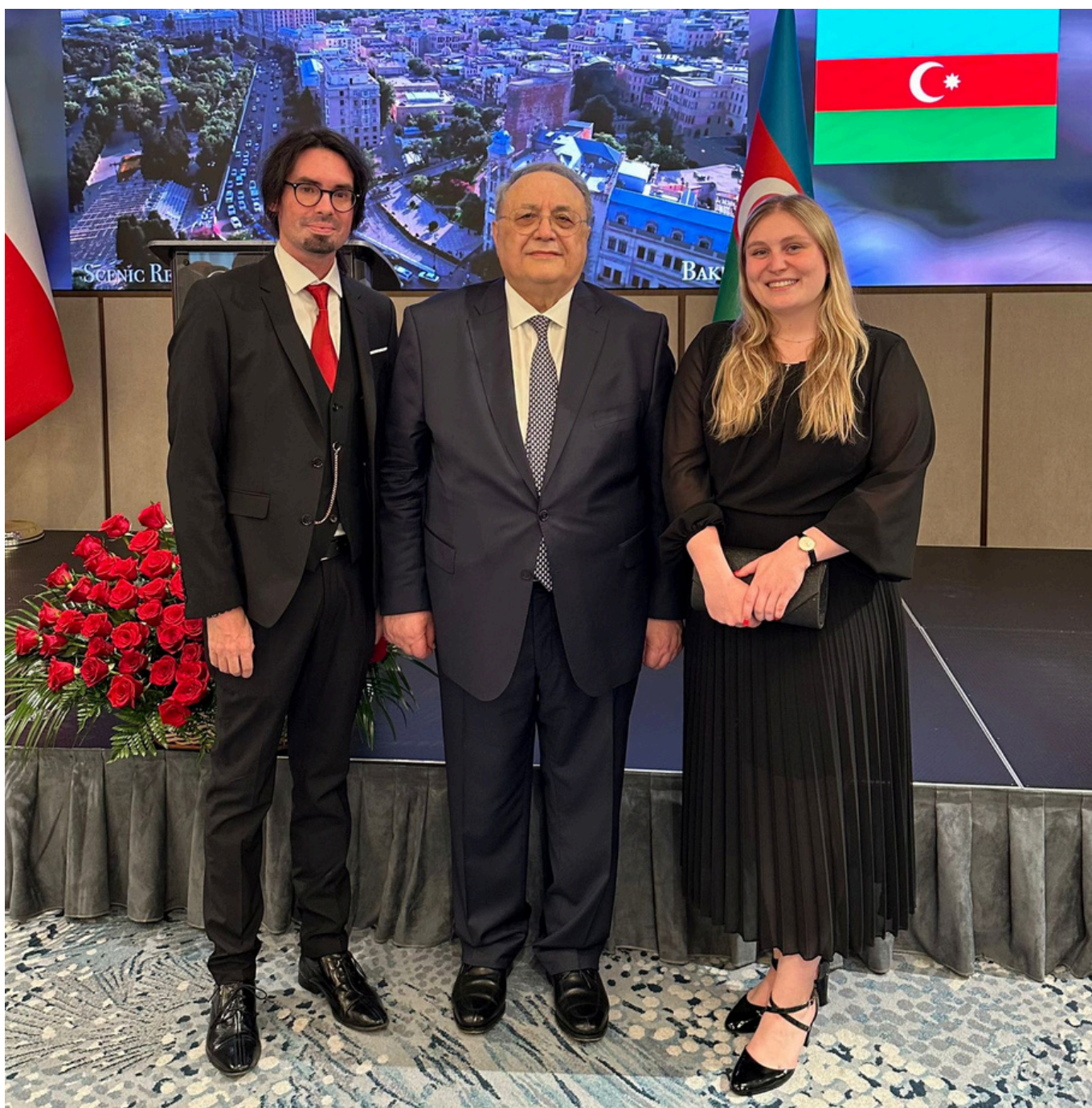
Kateřina Kovács





CAPS representatives at the Azerbaijan's Independence Day celebration

Dr. Jan Železný, Director of the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies (CAPS), and analyst Daniela Finkousová attended the Independence Day celebrations at the invitation of H.E. Jashar Aliyev, Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan. During the evening, not only were the events that led to Azerbaijan's independence in 1918 commemorated, but lively discussions were also held on issues related to deepening the partnership between Prague and Baku. Azerbaijan is becoming an increasingly important partner of the EU, particularly in the areas of security and energy diversification, while also emerging as a globally significant transport hub.



ANNOUNCEMENTS



Dr. Egemen Bağış joins the CAPS Advisory Board

The Center for Asia-Pacific Studies (CAPS) announces the appointment of H.E. Egemen Bağış, former Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the Czech Republic, as a new member of the CAPS Advisory Board.

He previously spoke at CEVRO University as part of an expert discussion on Turkey-EU relations, a topic that closely aligns with CAPS' mission to produce expert research, connect academic debate with practice, and foster open discussion on international issues involving Asia and Europe.

Egemen Bağış is a prominent figure in Turkish diplomacy and international affairs. After completing his studies in the United States, he took on leadership roles in Turkish-American civic organizations and later returned to Turkey in 2002, where he contributed to shaping foreign-policy priorities at the time. He was subsequently elected to the Turkish Parliament, representing Istanbul, and served as the Prime Minister's chief foreign policy adviser. In the years that followed, he held senior positions in international relations, including appointment as State Minister, and served as Turkey's Chief Negotiator for EU accession talks. He later served as Minister for European Union Affairs, focusing on European integration and institutional cooperation.

He also played an important role in transatlantic cooperation. He served as President of the Transatlantic Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and led the Turkey-USA Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Caucus. In 2010, he was named a "Young Global Leader" by the World Economic Forum. Alongside his political and diplomatic career, he has also supported initiatives in culture and international cooperation. From 2019 to 2024, he served as Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the Czech Republic. He continues to cooperate with the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and represents Turkey at selected international institutions and forums, and is a member of the High Level Advisory Council of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

CAPS is honoured to welcome H.E. Egemen Bağış as a new member of its Advisory Board. His experience reflects the kind of well-grounded understanding and informed expertise that CAPS seeks to advance through research, education, and public discussion.

Viola Vojtová

CAPS IN THE MEDIA

Dr. Jan Železný on the Trump–Xi summit for Info.cz:

<https://www.info.cz/podcasty/livestreamy/trump-si-pekingsummit-taiwan-iran-ruskocina>

Dr. Jan Železný on Sino–America relations for Český rozhlas Plus:

<https://www.mujirozhlas.cz/zive/plus?autoplay=1>

Dr. Jan Železný on Trump’s visit to China for TV Joj24:

<https://joj24.noviny.sk/studio-joj-24/1207881-studio-24-usa-a-cina-partneri-ci-rivali>

Dr. Jan Železný on the Putin–Xi summit for TV Joj24:

<https://joj24.noviny.sk/studio-joj-24/1209728-studio-24-pekings-po-trumpovi-prichadza-putin>

Dr. Jan Železný on the South China Sea and the international maritime trade for Info.cz:

https://www.info.cz/podcasty/infotalks/jan-zelezny-chokepointy-mista-ktera-mohou-vypnout-svet?fbclid=IwVERFWASBB1BleHRuA2FlbQlxMQBzcnRjBmFwcF9pZAo2NjI4NTY4Mzc5AAEekZlAYwEOpJUB9A4IYQUVY3CUyQiB9bWryHWD4K-Rly3JAV8WGC4BpCOZy8M_aem_d5UcOTJYIWjv9QVI5flb5A

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