

CSDP on the agenda of Visegrad cooperation – An increasingly important and practical instrument in a Central European concert

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Security and defence policy within the Visegrad cooperation

The security and defence dimension of Central European interactions and identity represents a specific and increasingly relevant area of relations within the so-called Visegrad Group of four states (V4): Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Within the range of sectoral policies of their sustained regional co-operation, defence matters represent a particular aspect of foreign and security policy V4 co-ordination. Compared to consultations and collaboration in other areas, security and defence policy was not entirely absent from, but stayed on the margin of V4 co-operation for years even following the full involvement of the four Central European states in the operation of the EU and NATO from 2004.

It did not exclude political statements or pronounced intentions, but without much substance or serious consideration of practical forms of joint security undertakings or initiatives for several years. Already years ago, ministries of defence joined the overarching pattern of consultations and coordination practice within the Visegrad Group and began to hold meetings at the level of ministers, chiefs of general staff and experts to discuss a variety of issues. These have simultaneously determined by the aspirations of security and defence policy in the European Union and the evolution of the strategic agenda in the North Atlantic Alliance.¹

These complementary contexts of security and defence policies across the V4 region focused on the discussion of co-ordination of national positions regarding questions

figuring prominently in policy debates both within the EU and NATO such as military modernisation, defence transformation and preparations for crisis management operations. Staying on the course of their consolidated practice, the V4 countries continue to closely coordinate their national positions regarding major security policy issues in the preparatory rounds of talks at the level of ambassadors in the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and also in the Council meetings paving the way to forthcoming debate on CSDP in the European Council of December 2013. V4 coordination of views and preferences with regard to security and defence policy matters is foreseen during the expected follow-up policy debates within the EU and also in run-up to the next NATO Summit in 2014.²

The pursuit of cooperation in defence capability development

Besides the strategic issues of the Transatlantic alliance before and after NATO summits, the quadrilateral discourse on military matters among the Visegrad partners embraced practical questions of the development of certain modern systems and types of capabilities and means of operation (such as the tools of protection against weapons of mass destruction as well as the equipment for air defence and strategic transport) needed in all V4 partners to meet the demands of membership in NATO and requirements of effective participation in EU crisis management.

Instances of earlier specific memoranda of understanding testify to the intentions of the Visegrad parties to collect the poten-

tial yields of co-operation in this pragmatic aspect of defence relations.³ Possible V4 co-operation in armament development programmes and investments is naturally not limited to NATO priorities and expectations. The Visegrad partners declared to seek mutual support, exchange of information and explore possible ways of joint participation in projects within the schemes of the European Defence Agency (EDA). By placing the aims of their defence co-ordination in technical modernisation within the institutional context of the EU, the V4 government began the "Europeanization" of their capability development aspirations.⁴

Despite the acknowledged and predictable benefits of effective "pooling and sharing", V4 governments continued to struggle with the coordination procurement of new equipment that would enable greater interoperability. Even though the V4 established a series of working groups in 2009 intended to enhance more fruitful consultations on the purchase of new armaments and cooperation between their defence industries, the harmonization of national regulations and defence capability strategies made little progress.

Regional initiatives and projects were ecogized to offer an effective way to mitigate capability shortfalls efficiently, avoid overlaps and duplication through practical cooperation among our armed forces and defence industries.⁵ The tangible benefits of military collaboration within the Visegrad Group identified in the shared costs and more efficient use of restricted defence resources. Coordinated armament and procurement programmes are expect-



ed to deliver potentially significant economic gains for V4 defence collaboration.

Although the development of adequate military means for traditional (territorial defence) and expeditionary undertakings are recognized to remain national responsibility for all EU and NATO members, multinational projects hold the promise and potential of cost-efficient approach to the maintenance and advancement of adequate capabilities for all purposes in the era of financial austerity. For that reason, the V4 states also embraced the idea of inevitable defence cooperation driven by the need to preserve operational capacity even under the conditions of shrinking defence budgets. The effects of relentless financial restrictions on national military capabilities seemed to be best alleviated in the Visegrad countries through the implementation of projects in line with the Smart Defence and Pooling and Sharing initiatives of NATO and the EU respectively. At this stage, the identified scope of V4 cooperation in this respect will focus on certain selected areas: capabilities of protection against weapons of mass destruction, common logistics in multinational operations, specific armament projects, cyber defence as well as air and missile defence.⁶

Future joint operational capabilities: a multinational Visegrad unit

In the intersection of rapid reaction capability requirements of both NATO and the EU, the Visegrad countries have found another section of defence co-operation where co-ordinated enhancement of national capacities would seem imperative. Multinational military contingents as the constitutive units of the agreed NATO Reaction Force (NRF) and EU battlegroups are composed of the contributions of various Member States. In pursuit of collective efforts for institutional capacity-building, partner countries undertake to set up and sustain these units in close co-operation with each other to complement and reinforce the set of capabilities and resources they agreed to pool for the purpose of

collective participation in EU or NATO crisis management operations.

Already in 2007, the V4 Defence Ministers publicly endorsed the possible establishment of an EU battlegroup composed of contributed military forces from the Visegrad states and set 2015 as the earliest possible date for its readiness.⁷ The generously extended timeframe indicated the caution of the Visegrad partners to commit themselves to any immediate obligation. With regard to their constrained military budgets and simultaneous participation in NATO operations in the Afghan theatre, the Visegrad countries seemed natural partners in the combination and multiplication of their crisis management skills and tools which are fairly limited in case of the three smaller V4 countries. Although the Visegrad Defence Ministers repeatedly expressed their "continued determination to actively participate in the EU Battle Group initiative"⁸, in practical terms not much progress was achieved in that respect. For several years, cooperation in defence matters within the V4 cluster continued to be limited to further analyses and consultations with respect to the definition of general conditions and rules for the possible deployment and engagement of the future Visegrad military unit in crisis management operation.⁹

In May 2012, the Visegrad countries took an important step towards the achievement of their declared intention when the V4 defence ministers stipulated the creation of a joint multinational unit in more concrete terms announcing the agreed size and timeline for its formation: altogether 3000 troops from the four Visegrad states to stand ready for potential EU security undertakings in 3 years.¹⁰ Eventually, the process moved from the level of statements to formal commitment as the V4 defence ministers signed their letter of intent in March 2013 to establish and add the Visegrad Battlegroup to the EU roster of available forces for the first half of 2016.¹¹

It is important to note that the declared availability of the envisaged Visegrad unit for EU missions does not imply that it will see action even if the need for its deployment arises during the period when it will be placed on duty. Even in case of a crisis that may call for its activation, the dispatch of an EU battlegroup to any theatre of conflict must be approved by all contributing V4 countries even when a decision has been adopted in the Foreign Affairs Council on the necessity of an EU operation by military means.

Reluctance of EU member states to throw EU battlegroups into action can be explained by political caution or divergent perceptions of European security priorities and, perhaps equally importantly, by material considerations. In order to overcome the financial obstacle to the more active use of these instruments of EU foreign policy, V4 foreign ministers stressed the need for burden-sharing with respect to the deployment of EU battlegroups.¹² Presumably, spreading the costs of CSDP operations among member states could greatly increase the willingness of participating states to consider the use of these military units for the agreed aims of their formation.

The envisaged Visegrad Battlegroup is conceived by the participants as their distinct and highly visible contribution to the future enhancement of EU rapid reaction capacity. At the same time, the V4 multinational unit is going to deliver a valuable asset with the potential to serve as a vehicle for further capability development efforts and increased political and military cooperation among the four Central European partners. It is expected to provide not a convenient opportunity, but also an incentive for the rehearsal, practice and the advancement of deployable skills and capabilities in EU or NATO missions.¹³

CSDP as an area of extended V4 consultations with other EU members

As a prelude to the V4 prime ministerial meeting with the French President and

the German Chancellor in March 2013 in Warsaw, the defence ministers of the V4 countries, France and Germany gathered in Warsaw on 6 March 2013. The meeting of V4 defence ministers with the participation of their counterparts from leading EU member states underlined the increased significance of security and defence policy in the discourse on current European issues among the V4 countries. In clear illustration of the shared interests of the Weimar Triangle and the Visegrad quartet with Poland as the common hinge, the list of issues to be discussed by the participants included the search for new areas of multilateral cooperation, improved defence capabilities to bolster CSDP as well as the prospects for better EU-NATO cooperation.¹⁴

V4 view of CSDP as a potential tool for the engagement of external partners

To some limited extent, defence consultations may also serve to develop and maintain the V4+ format in another dimension of the search for more engagement and co-operation with partners such as Ukraine. The invitation to the Ukrainian defence minister and the chief of General Staff to attend meetings of V4 defence ministers and chiefs of General Staff already in 2008 demonstrated the intention of Visegrad countries to explore the potential of collaboration in order to offer Central European experience and provide assistance for the reform processes in Ukraine in the military realm of security.¹⁵

V4 partners share the perception that CSDP represents a potentially useful area that could be explored and enhanced in the external partnerships of the EU with specific countries.¹⁶ Cooperation with foreign countries outside the EU is understood that it may not be only a necessary activity for the improvement of the external security environment around the Union, but it could serve as an instrument for the reinforcement of the various threads of political ties of engagement with certain partners. Strengthening political bonds that could hold or return Eastern

Partnership states to their European trajectory represent an overall priority of the V4 Group in EU foreign affairs which needs to be underpinned by all possible means. Defence cooperation in training and modernisation with countries in the Eastern neighbourhood of the Union may present one of the useful and pragmatic ways to demonstrate and offer tangible benefits through collaboration with EU members even in times of relentless Russian pressure for opposite ends.

The next steps towards improved V4 defence cooperation

At the latest prime ministerial conclave of the V4 Group, the mini summit assigned several tasks to the Visegrad defence ministers in order to attain more effective and pragmatic Visegrad cooperation in security and defence.¹⁷ These include the determination of a long-term defence cooperation strategy that would enable the Visegrad partners to streamline their capability development efforts. On the basis of a shared comprehensive strategic perspective for future investment in the means of operation, the V4 heads of government also agreed to explore the possibility of cooperation at the level of defence planning. Although not expressly stated in the in the tasks list, coordination in defence planning would imply the synchronization of defence cycles of replacement of military assets and the harmonization of their acquisition.

Training and exercises of the armed forces in V4 format emerged as another area where cooperation should be improved. The four prime ministers confirmed the need for joint V4 military exercises on an annual basis which should be harmonized with NATO, EU and national timetables. The combined training practice of the armed forces in Visegrad countries is expected to sustain and improve their interoperability. In this respect, the V4 position reflected the prevailing concept within NATO regarding the best available way for the preservation of operational experience gained in Afghanistan by all

participating armed forces including the units from Visegrad countries.

Concluding remarks

There is no doubt that the V4 will continue to face challenges in defence matters. Each Visegrad country had to make decisions about large cuts in their national defence budgets. Poland will carry a greater burden as the largest participating state to the envisaged Visegrad Battlegroup under its leadership. The question remains as to how the demanding construction of the V4 multinational formation will affect closer and continued V4 collaboration in security and defence matters. Within the broad range of all policy areas which the V4 cluster of Central European countries has embraced, cooperation in security and defence issues remained the most underdeveloped for years. Despite its recent acceleration and expansion, the successful delivery of expected benefits from joint capability improvements and combined operational means still require sustained commitments from the Visegrad Group.

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Notes

1) Joint Communiqué of the Ministers of Defence of the Visegrad Group Countries, Bratislava, 12 April 2007

2) Budapest Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Heads of Government On Strengthening the V4 Security and Defence Cooperation, 14 October 2013

3) Executive Report on Polish Presidency in the Visegrad Group, July 2008 – June 2009, pp. 20, www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=943

4) A Visegrádi csoport magyar elnökségének programja (The Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group), 2009-2010, pp. 34, www.kulugyminiszterium.hu

5) Budapest Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Heads of Government On Strengthening the V4 Security and Defence Cooperation, 14 October 2013

6) Joint Statement of the V4 Ministers of Defence, Brussels, 4 June 2013

7) Joint Communiqué of the Ministers of Defence of the Visegrad Group Countries, Bratislava, 12 April 2007

8) Joint Statement of the Ministers of Defence of the Visegrad Group Countries, Prague, 25 April 2008

9) Executive Report on Polish Presidency in the Visegrad Group, July 2008 – June 2009, pp. 20, www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=943

10) Visegrad Group pledges to form EU Battlegroup by 2016, CTK, 4 May 2012, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/news/visegrad-group-pledges>

11) Meeting of Defence Ministers of V4 countries, France and Germany, Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 6 March 2013, http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign_policy/europe/visegrad_group/polish_presidency_of_the_visegrad_group1/meeting_of_defence_ministers_of_v4_countries__france_and_germany

12) For a more effective and stronger Common Security and Defence Policy, Declaration of the Visegrad Group Foreign Ministers, 18 April 2013

13) Budapest Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Heads of Government On Strengthening the V4 Security and Defence Cooperation, 14 October 2013

14) Meeting of Defence Ministers of V4 countries, France and Germany, http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign_policy/europe/visegrad_group/polish_presidency_of_the_visegrad_group1/meeting_of_defence_ministers_of_v4_countries__france_and_germany

15) Joint Statement of the Ministers of Defence of the Visegrad Group Countries, Prague, 25 April 2008

16) For a more effective and stronger Common Security and Defence Policy, Declaration of the Visegrad Group Foreign Ministers, 18 April 2013

17) Budapest Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Heads of Government On Strengthening the V4 Security and Defence Cooperation, 14 October 2013

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