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Visegrad Group defense co- operation: what added value for the European capabilities?

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Abstract

In the last few years, especially after the introduction of the smart defense initiative on NATO agenda and similar in character pooling & sharing initiative within EU CSDP framework, countries of V4 have manifested strong interest in intensification of their cooperation in the realm of security and defense. It is by no means the first time when Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia try to develop such ties – efforts to establish and then stimulate their sub-regional cooperation in context of military and

defense were triggered almost since the very beginning of Visegrad Group. In the past such initiatives brought rather moderate results. However, currently all countries seems to be much more serious about deepening their defense ties. High frequency of top-level meetings and the numerous “solemn declarations” issued after them could be a proof of at least political will to achieve qualitative change in the V4 defense cooperation, earlier not developed as it was expected or planned. Improvement of defense cooperation was among

the priorities of annual V4 presidency of Poland, which ends in June 2013. And even if – as for today – the initiatives taken in the last few years still are not bringing many tangible results, the growing intensity of contacts and debates on various formats and level over V4 defense cooperation cause increasing expectations both among the participants of these cooperation, as well as outsiders. However, the actual possibilities of deepening, widening and accelerating defense cooperation within V4 are probably moderate at best, and the reason for that is not – as it is often said among politicians and analysts – lack of sufficient political will, but rather of structural nature. Moreover, governments of Visegrad countries seem to be aware of those limitations. Nevertheless, having rather short list of viable alternatives and being pressurized by such powerful factors like profound economic crisis in Europe, they will continue their efforts to stimulate V4 cooperation on defense, having in mind its current and future usefulness – even if limited – both from military as well as – more important – political perspective.



Brief history of V4 defense cooperation – ups and downs like ride in the rollercoaster (but not exceeding speed limits)

Visegrad cooperation was established in February 1991. Since its creation it was not a formal international organisation, but loosely institutionalised structure of cooperation (even today the only permanent V4 body is International Visegrad Fund). Security interests has been at the heart of it from the very beginning, since it was intended first and foremost to facilitate development of ties and gradual integration with western structures – NATO and (after its establishment) European Union. However, defense and military cooperation did not develop at the same pace and to the same level as political or economic contacts within the Group. Apart from structural reasons (like limited potentials of the members, particularly in the early 90., as well as differences in their interest, needs and priorities), it was due to common for all V4 members fears that intensive defense cooperation among them could be interpreted in NATO and EU as an effort to build some kind of sub-regional alternative for full integration with western structures. Therefore, defense integration within V4 was limited to some degree because of sober po-

litical choice of the participants.

Another factor reducing the intensity of cooperation was “a temptation” to look for opportunities to strengthening ties with western structures individually, leaving behind less advanced partners from V4. Such inclination to “desert” from cooperation in V4 framework and to make efforts to achieve the same goals on its own was particularly specific for Czech Republic, the most developed Visegrad state and with most technologically advanced armed forces and defense industry. However, such tendencies were not totally alien also to other V4 countries, like Hungary or Poland.

Therefore, V4 defense cooperation has developed in cycles, with many ups and lows. Hence, we could discern several stages of it. In the first stage, in early years of cooperation (1991-1997) it was not particularly intensive. Although conducted on continuous basis, it was almost entirely limited to political consultations (like in form of regular, yearly meetings of MODs) and to exchange of opinions concerning problems of regional security, particularly integration with NATO. Any significant initiative aimed at development of contacts on more technical and operational level (for example concerning maintenance and modernization of military equipment of Soviet origin) has not materialized. Moreover, due to changing political conditions (growth in Czech “individualism” concerning relations with the West and taking power by NATO- and Eurosceptic Meciar government in Slovakia) it has gradually lost its initial impetus. It was reinvigorated, however, in late 90, after invitation of Poland, Hungary and Czech Rep. to NATO in 1997 and the end of Meciar rule in Slovakia in 1998. Then the second, much more intensive stage of V4 defense cooperation started. This “new opening” in V4 defense cooperation was stimulated initially by the interest of three NATO invitees in improving the process of integration with the Alliance and later, after their accession (March 1999) accession, by the willingness to speed up Slovakian integration with the western structures. All that led not only to the quite effective political consultations on security and defense issues, but also to the number of significant initiatives in the realm of technical and industrial cooperation. Six different working groups have been created to develop specific capabilities and forms of cooperation (although their main task was still facilitating process of integration with NATO). Several promising projects, like establishment of joint Polish, Czech and Slovakian Brigade or common modernization programs of helicopters (Mi 17 and 24) and tanks (T 72), were then undertaken

(primarily in years 2001-2002). However, almost all of them, albeit due to various reasons, have failed and ultimately were abandoned¹. When Slovakia joined NATO and all V4 members accessed to EU, Visegrad defense cooperation again slowed down, although was not stopped entirely. In its third stage of development, after 2004, V4 cooperation started to serve mainly as a platform for elaboration and manifestation of common position of Central European states in the discussions on security and defense issues within NATO and EU. V4 transformed itself largely into "sub-regional lobby", able to articulate and defend common interests of its participants in NATO and EU, although with substantial autonomy of members and their freedom to join other groups or act independently when they think that was necessary. Therefore, after 2004 Visegrad defense cooperation returned to be strongly focused on political consultations. V4 countries' ties on operational (expeditionary missions of NATO, EU/CSDP or "coalitions of the willing") and technical level (equipment acquisition, industrial cooperation) were much more loose and flexible – although they often decided to participate in the same operations or project within larger framework (primarily NATO, to the lesser extent EU), it was done not as a common V4 activity, but on the basis of autonomous decisions of every member². Hence, until very recently and after two decades of development, V4 largely remained to be what is was at the beginning – a platform (albeit currently more efficient than in the past) of political consultations on (broadly defined) security issues with still rather nascent capacity to

stimulate technical cooperation and joint capabilities development between armed forces and defense industry of participants.

Current state of cooperation: high with politics, low with "technicalities"

A new stimulus for V4 defense cooperation came very recently, some three years ago. It was directly linked to the introduction of the new concepts of cooperation on capabilities development in NATO (smart defense) and EU (Ghent/pooling & sharing initiative) in late 2010. Central Europeans realized that working within V4 framework, institution already established, tested in practice (although with mixed results) and – above all – recognized in NATO and UE as stable structure of sub-regional cooperation, would fit very well to the logic of these initiatives and could relatively quickly bring some tangible (or at least visible and politically and publicly "sellable") results. That led to dramatic increase in contacts both on political and technical/operational level.

As for today, however, the former seems to be developing much better than the latter. Political cooperation of V4 countries has increased significantly in the course of the discussion over new NATO strategic concept before Lisbon summit (Nov. 2010). V4 members cooperated closely to make sure that the new document would emphasize importance of collective defense obligations and necessity to maintain Alliance's capability to execute them (also through some additional reassurances for more fragile members)³. Later their political contacts were even intensified, at least when measured by the number of

1. Program of joint modernization of Mi helicopters failed mainly because of Russian refusal to grant Poland the necessary licenses (while such transfer of property right and know how has been agreed on bilateral basis with Czech. Rep.). Modernisation of tanks was abandoned due to disputable value of the modernized equipment and members contradictory industrial interests (all wanted to grant work for its own factories and facilities). Multinational brigade was officially disbanded in 2005 because it completed its task as a facilitator of integration of Slovakian army with NATO forces, but in fact it was caused by financial and organizational reasons. See: R. Morawiec, *Military cooperation in Visegrad Group* [in:] M. Madej (ed.), *Cooperation on Security in Central Europe, Sharing V4 Experience with the Neighbouring Countries*, "V4 Paper" No. 1, Warsaw 2010, pp. 12-25.

2. For example, all V4 countries decided to take part in stabilization of Iraq, but did not organised any joint unit and not coordinated their actions. When Hungarian and Slovakian troops were deployed within the area of responsibility of Polish command (Multinational Division Central-South), Czechs decided to subordinate forces to British command. Decisions about deployments to Afghanistan were also done by all V4 countries in fact separately, what resulted in their distribution in various areas and subordination to different ISAF Regional Commands. Other example could be Polish and Hungarian accession to NATO Strategic Airlift Initiative –

done because of individual decisions, not due to any V4 agreement. Lastly, while Poland decided to buy F-16s offered by the US (apart from keeping on duty – although temporarily – Mig-29s), Czech Rep. and Hungary opted for Swedish Grippens and Slovaks stayed exclusively with Mig-29s. J. Blocher, *Conditions for Visegrad Defense Cooperation: A Transatlantic View*, "Foreign Policy Review", 2011, no. 1, pp. 40-64.

3. It is specificity of V4 defense cooperation to put a strong emphasis on value of transatlantic ties and NATO for European security. For all V4 states NATO, especially due to the US membership, remains to be the most important security provider and guarantor for European stability. Therefore, both political and operational aspects of V4 defense cooperation are designed in first place to be coherent with NATO standards and defense planning process, notwithstanding the interest and support of V4 countries to EU/CSDP development. See: Joint Communiqué, Meeting of V4 Ministers of Defense, Litoměřice, 3-4 May 2012, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2012/joint-communication-of-the>; R. Kupiecki, *Visegrad Defense Cooperation: From Mutual Support to Strengthening NATO and the EU. A Polish Perspective*, "Cepa Report" No. 35, April 2, 2013, pp.2-3.

high-level meetings and solemn – and usually highly publicized – declarations adopted (see table 1). However, the actual results of these meetings are limited mainly to manifestation of political will and enthusiasm over cooperation in V4 framework. They also serve as an occasion to formulate, proclaim or explain common positions concerning some security issues, in particular on NATO and EU/CSDP capabilities development⁴. Importantly, such high-level meetings are often conducted in various “V4+” formats, with third states or institutions (i.e. the Baltics, Weimar Triangle, Nordic states, eastern Europeans). It definitely increases a value of the V4 as the consultative platform within NATO and EU (as well as Europe in general, taking into account V4 interest in developing ties with non-EU and non-NATO European countries, like Eastern Partnership participants or countries from the Western Balkans). It also helps to manifest openness of Visegrad cooperation on other actors (something what, being in line with logic of smart defense and Ghent initiative, is recently highly appreciated in Europe). Nonetheless, such approach is intended also to engage in V4 initiatives some “attractive outsiders” – countries with significant military, technological and political potential, possibly offering significant, disproportionately larger than others input and therefore helping to fill the “real” – technical, operational and industrial – cooperation within V4 with the assets that V4 states are seemingly lacking or have in insufficient numbers. That claim is supported indirectly by the fact that when planning and organisation of the Visegrad defense cooperation is concerned, growth in intensity of meetings on the highest level and development of various liaison ties between MFAs and MODs has not proven to be particularly effective. Their results in this context were limited rather to elaborating some postulates concerning future cooperation, setting general goals and manifesting will of making improvements, but not supported, at least until today, with co-

4. See for example: declaration For a More Effective and Stronger Common Security and Defense Policy, Prague, April 18, 2012 and declaration For a More Effective and Stronger Common Security and Defense Policy, Bratislava, April 18, 2013. Symptomatically, when the 2012 declaration is rather substantial on specific projects of capabilities development undertaken by V4 members, the 2013 declaration on CSDP, probably inspired by the relative success (at least in political terms) of the previous document, is largely limited to manifestation of support for already taken efforts for improvement within EU and awareness of challenges for CSDP development, but scarce in context of specific proposals of improvements. It suggests mainly political goal of its adoption and the fact that V4 political cooperation is slowly reaching the point when adding new and valuable content without developing simultaneously ties on technical and operational level would start to be problematic.

herent, comprehensive and “doable” programs of cooperation, or even – with a few notable exceptions⁵ – just definition of specific benchmarks and deadlines for the completion of particular initiatives. In other words, V4 countries managed to show by frequent high-level meetings good intentions and determination to foster the cooperation, but revealed at the same time limited capability to elaborate comprehensive strategy and detailed program of achieving it.

In this light, it is understandable why cooperation on technical and operational level, in form of specific programs aimed at development of new military capabilities or improving the effectiveness (military and economic) of already possessed by the V4 states is still less impressive. Although the “new opening” of military cooperation within V4 in fact even precedes the growth of intensity of contacts on political level – as early as 2009 four working groups for development of specific capabilities were established⁶ – the results are moderate at best. Currently V4 countries are still rather identifying the areas of potential cooperation and defining of its preferred forms and tools than formulating or implementing specific projects. Indeed, the list of areas of potentially fruitful V4 cooperation, based on reviews of national military modernization plans and agreed (provisionally) as worthy of further consideration, is quite impressive – V4 authorities recognized as such (apart of political cooperation) such areas like – inter alia – countering IED and explosive ordnance, individual soldier equipment, integrated command and support, battlefield imaging systems. Additionally, just recently and mainly due to Polish persistence, cooperation in the realm of training and exercises, both concerning territorial defense and different aspects of expeditionary operations, started to take more concrete shape, both as “exclusive” V4 actions and activities in the NATO or EU framework (like periodic NRF Steadfast Jazz or Capable logistician drills)⁷. However, apart from these recent initiatives concerning training and exercises, in most of areas selected for cooperation specific programs are

5. Most important of them are two “flagship” Visegrad initiatives in the NATO and the EU frameworks – respectively CBRN defense multinational battalion and V4 Battle Group, both scheduled for 2016 (see further paragraphs).

6. These groups were devoted to: defense against WMD (works coordinated by Czech Rep.), air and missile defense modernisation (coordinator – Slovakia), soldier’s personal equipment (Poland) and strategic transport (Hungary). J. Gotkowska, O. Osica (eds.), *Closing the gap? Military co-operation from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea*, Warsaw 2012, p.59.

7. R. Kupiecki, *Visegrad Defense...*, s. 4-6. J. Gotkowska, O. Osica (eds.), *Closing the gap...*, s. 60.

Table 1. Main high-level meetings of V4 countries devoted exclusively or primarily to security and defense related issues in years 2012-2013

Place and date	Level	Format	Final document
Bratislava (Slk), 18.04.2013	MFAs	V 4	Declaration <i>For a More Effective and Stronger Common Security and Defense Policy</i>
Warszawa (Pl), 6.03.2013	MODs	V4 + Weimar Triangle (Fra, Ger)	Joint statement <i>Cooperation in developing Capabilities, Solidarity in Sharing Responsibilities</i>
Gdańsk (Pl), 20.02.2013	MFAs	V4 + Nordic + Baltic states	Co-Chair's Statement (Polish and Swedish MFAs)
Litoměřice, (Cz), 3-4.05.2012	MODs	V4	Joint Communiqué
Prague (Cz) 18.04.2012	MFAs + MODs	V4	Declaration <i>Responsibility for a strong NATO</i>

Sources: The official site of Visegrad Group, www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/meeting-of-foreign; Polish Ministry of National Defense site, www.mon.gov.pl/en/arttykul/14030

not identified yet.

More developed are works on specific projects within smart defense or pooling & sharing initiative (that is in which V4 countries – all or majority of them – could even play a key role, but are not the only participants). Up to date, definitely the most profound (and most publicized as well) is the plan to deploy Visegrad battle group (V4BG) in 2016. Despite clumsy beginnings (the idea of Visegrad Battle Group was discussed for the first time in 2007), currently this project now getting pace and more specific shape, also thanks to leverage associated to it as a “flagship” of military cooperation within V4. The V4BG will consist of 3000 troops, and Poland will serve as a lead nation. Importantly, V4 considers making V4BG a semi-permanent unit, placed periodically (in 2-year cycle) in BG rotations schedule and with permanent multinational component on high readiness (i.e. logistics or medical unit) and answerable to various structures and arrangements⁸. Such vision of V4BG is to some degree intended to stimulate reform of the overall program of Battle Groups, which definitely is in crisis and, as for today, turned out to be disappointing.

There are also some other project in NATO or EU framework, in which V4 countries intend to play (or play already) substantial roles – already mentioned CBRN defense battalion, coordinated by Czech Rep. and planned to be fully operable in 2016, NATO multinational MP battalion (with significant share from Czech Rep. and Slovakia

8. See: W. Lorenz, *EU Battle Group: A Chance for a Breakthrough in Visegrad 4 Cooperation?*, Bulletin PISM, No. 39/2013 (16 April); R. Kupiecki, *Visegrad Defense...*, s. 6

and Polish leadership), since the beginning of 2013 certified as fully operational. Moreover, for a couple of years specifically Czech input to cooperation within NATO on capabilities (but in coordination and with support of V4 countries) has been training for helicopter pilots, what was manifested by development of HIP initiative since 2009 and recent (Feb. 2013) launching of Multinational Aviation Training Center⁹. Several other ideas are discussed, including such ambitious programs like air policing and more pro-saic, but equally valuable projects on increasing cooperation in military education, ammunition standardization etc.

However, most of currently developed and discussed project has serious limitations. First of all, majority of them are in initial phases or exists rather as a vague concepts concerning future actions (like in case of cooperation on military education). Moreover, those already introduced are not representing systemic approach and are developed separately and in not thoroughly planned, coherent manner. Most of those, which are intended as exclusively or primarily V4 project, are limited in scope and ambitions and are based on the logic of exploitation of existing opportunities (like in case of granting reciprocal access to training ground and facilities) than on long-term, strategic plan of comprehensive development of V4 capabilities

9. However, in case of MATC, despite long talks within V4, solely Slovakia has joined the project (along with Croatia and the US) and Hungary is considering accession. Therefore, treating that initiative as V4 program is only partially justified. *Multinational Aviation Training Centre document signed by four nations*, www.army.cz/en/ministry-of-defense/newsroom/news/multinational-aviation-training-centre-document-signed-by-four-nations-80184/

ties. Moreover, they are mainly based on coordinative methods of cooperation, particularly on exchange of knowledge and information. What is lacking are the efforts aimed more of integrative character, like creating common units, harmonisation of functioning of armed forces (for example by adopting the same curricula in education and training) or development of common acquisition programs or practices. Highly underdeveloped is also industrial cooperation¹⁰.

Importantly, many of initiatives currently presented as Visegrad projects were indeed initiated by their members, but in fact outside V4 framework, mainly on bilateral basis. In some other cases – like in case of participation in AWACS fleet in NATO (all V4 members) or Strategic Airlift Capabilities or Allied Ground Surveillance (part of V4 engaged) – decisions on taking part in given initiative were taken by V4 countries separately, on the basis of national interests and considerations, not on feeling of “common V4 purpose”. Therefore, presenting them as an example of V4 cooperation is not entirely justified. Cooperation within V4 was neither a condition for establishing such projects or of accession of Visegrad states to them nor is crucial (even if somewhat useful) to their further development. Last but not least, many of currently implemented or discussed projects are not prospective in that sense that they potential to develop and grow is limited. If they succeeded, they bring some results imminently (primarily some financial savings and optimizations, like in case of exchange of access to training grounds and facilities), but will not constitute a starting point for more profound cooperation or integration. It is, however, partially understandable in the light of domination of purely coordinative and consultative approach within V4 defense cooperation.

Obviously, the same criticism and doubts could be justified also in case of many initiatives and projects implemented currently by other sub-regional structures of cooperation, including those perceived as most successful and advanced like Franco-British defense cooperation or NORDEFECO. The short period of implementation of V4 projects discussed here is important as well. Nevertheless, evident imbalance in effec-

tiveness between political and technical/operation level within the V4 cooperation is somewhat disturbing and not particularly encouraging in context of its long-term development prospects.

Sources of limits of V4 cooperation: why Central Europeans are not like Nordics?

First reason of relative underperformance of V4 is somehow genetic – V4 was established as a “task force”, a goal-oriented cooperation, stemmed from the similar lacks and needs of participants, not from their close cultural ties or readiness to coordinate, harmonise and finally integrate their security and defense policies. It led to rather low level of institutionalization and limited scope of the cooperation. Moreover, when original central goal was achieved and transatlantic and European aspirations of V4 countries were satisfied, the differences between participants’ interests, approaches towards cooperation and capabilities, earlier sidelined by the desire to achieve common strategic goals (NATO and EU membership), have emerged as important factors, weakening willingness and ability to cooperate.

Equally important are structural factors. The most obvious of them are differences in size of V4 counties’ populations, economies and, as a consequence, between defense budgets and size of armed forces. Poland’s population is roughly 1.5 and the GDP is about 1.3 bigger than respectively populations and GDPs of the of the remaining V4 countries taken together (see Table 2). Such disproportions make cooperation more complicated, leading to looming distances in capabilities, needs and ambitions among one big and three smaller partners (also substantially diversified, with Slovakia as significantly smaller actor than the others). Even more profound gaps exists between defense budgets of V4 countries, especially currently, after dramatic reductions in Slovak, Czech and Hungarian spending on military and Polish decision to maintain them on roughly the same level (in relation to the state GDP). Polish budget is currently more than twice as big as of the rest of V4 counties taken together (see Table 3). The negative impact of this asymmetry on cooperation (nearly 70% concentration of financial assets in Polish hands) is augmented by the generally limited financial resources for military purposes of V4 countries. In 2011 it was in total mere 13.6 billion of USD, while for example the Nordic counties, which perceived themselves as relatively small military powers, have spent on defense some 21.2 billion of dol-

10. That is caused also by the fact that defense industry of V4 countries is relatively obsolete, underinvested, with limited access to advanced technologies. Therefore, V4 companies would prefer to cooperate rather with external partners, viewed as a potential source of financial assets or new technologies and trigger for modernization and a chance to gain access to other markets. Cooperation within V4 framework would be most probably perceived as a “second best” option, interesting solely when there is no viable alternative or because of fears of being dominated by the stronger partner from the outside.

Table 2. Population and Gross Domestic Product of V4 countries (as of 2012)

	Poland	Czech Rep.	Hungary	Slovakia
Population (thousands)	38 384	10 162	9 933	5 488
GDP (PPP), billion USD (2012)	799.2	286.7	195.4	132.4
GDP per capita (2012)	21 000	27 200	19 800	24 300

Source: CIA World Factbook, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/

lars and budget of Germany alone was 43.4 billion USD¹¹. Finally, significant challenges in this respect are caused by the unpredictability of future defense budgeting in V4 countries – only Poland have legally binding, firm benchmark for defense expenditures (1,95% of GDP), the remaining partners have not introduced such mechanisms and currently think less about stabilization of the defense budgets than about their further reductions. In such circumstances, planning common projects and activities, or even coordinating defense budgeting, acquisitions etc. have to be a demanding task.

Even geography plays rather negative role in context **Table 2. Population and Gross Domestic Product of V4 countries (as of 2012)** of V4 cooperation development. Of secondary importance is the fact that three of the partners are landlocked states (although it is commonly admitted that navies are traditionally a military branch best equipped and most inclined to multinational cooperation). More important is the fact that Hungary and to lesser degree Slovakia tends to be more engaged in the Western Balkans, while Poland is much more preoccupied with the Baltic region. Obviously, such differences are not insurmountable obstacle and could be managed if only political will to adopt some kind of transactional, “*quid-pro-quo*” logic would be present. However, the fact that geographical differences have also its institutional dimension (Hungary are the Southern region NATO country, while the rest of V4 belongs to the North) is not particularly helpful when substantial part of the joint initiatives is conducted within NATO framework.

Very important are differences in motives for cooperation among V4 states. Obviously, in the view of deep economic crisis in Europe, economic considerations (willingness to find substantial savings or at least optimize spending on military capabilities’ maintenance and development)

are important to all participants. However, they are not the only factors shaping their position on the issue and not equally important for all V4 members. They are definitely crucial in case of Slovakia and Hungary, for whom deeper V4 cooperation could be a convenient justification for further cuts in defense spending and occasion to “outsource” to the partners some responsibilities for their own security. However, economic factors, albeit important, are rather not decisive for Czech Rep., which adopted probably the most pragmatic approach to the V4 cooperation and would like to see in its development both a way of improving effectiveness of their own forces (including through joint acquisitions or capabilities development) and a stimulus for improving cooperation in broader Central European format (including Croatia, Slovenia, even Austria and the Baltics). Lastly, economy is definitely not the key issue in Polish case. Undoubtedly, Poland would be pleased by financial savings, but as the biggest V4 country – and therefore potentially main provider of the assets (broadly defined) within the group – cannot expect too much. For Warsaw deepening ties with V4 partners would probably mean also additional costs, particularly in short term. Hence, Poland supports cooperation primarily due to political value of it, namely possibility of confirming by this its status of regional leader, backed by reliable – also thanks to deepening V4 ties in defense sphere – partners. Seemingly successful cooperation V4 (what could manifest itself in form of some common projects with tangible, although not necessarily complex and really significant results) should be politically beneficial for all V4 countries, but particularly would strengthen the position within NATO and EU of Poland, perceived as the natural leader and representative of Central Europe. However, how much Poland would be able and willing to pay to others for such benefits (especially to those interested in transferring costs of their security to partners) remains open (albeit crucial) question.

Motives of V4 states for cooperation on defense

11. *SIPRI Yearbook 2012. Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Oxford 2012, pp. 195-214.

issues are directly linked to their perception of security environment and current and future threats and challenges to their security. Here, despite many similarities between Central Europeans' views, there are substantial differences as well. Obviously, basic elements of threat perception and views on security environment are common to all states: they are concerned about the efficacy of the NATO as security provider and US diminishing military presence in Europe, as well as about "loss of steam", enthusiasm and confidence within CSDP and generally in the EU, exhausted by the fight with the economic crisis. All are afraid of the "Russia rise" (broadly defined). However, the views on importance of all these changes, as well as conclusions driven from them, vary among V4 members substantially. Poland is the most "traditional" in thinking about the regional security and therefore most preoccupied by Russian assertiveness and US (partial) withdrawal from Europe. Czech Rep. is probably the closest in its assessments to Warsaw, also "being serious" about the security, the need of US interest in the region and Russian "revival". However, as a least exposed of V4 countries, could adopt more "postmodern" approach to security issues. At the same time Hungary seems to be least concerned by regional security situation, besides problems – diminishing – in the Balkans. That increases the importance of economic factors for Budapest. Slovakia is the special case. Although, due to its location and the level of energy dependence from Russia (the highest in V4), seemingly preoccupied by the current evolution of security environment, Bratislava is also pessimistic in assessment of its own capacity to improve its position. Therefore, it is currently the most fervent proponent of deepening cooperation, but basically because of hopes to transfer some costs of its security to the partners and relying mainly on free riding. What is also important, for all V 4 countries participation in expeditionary mission of NATO and EU was primarily the investment in cohesion of these institutions, not the way of countering direct threats to their security. Therefore, cooperation in the realm of expeditionary activities, although aimed to minimize the costs of such actions, in times of financial hurdles (particularly Slovakia and Hungary) and growing preoccupation by the security problems in the region (Poland) would be judged as a "saving generation tool" as less effective than simple reductions – obviously declared as temporary – of foreign engagements.

Moreover, V4 countries has not developed significant infrastructure for cooperation in such areas like equipment acquisition or maintenance

even in the previous decades, that is in times and areas where such efforts seems to be relatively easy to succeed. Quite the contrary, by individually taken decisions concerning acquisitions of such equipment like aircrafts or armored vehicles, they seriously diminished chances for effective cooperation on these issues. Separately acquired equipment differ significantly in its technical parameters and requirements, but nevertheless will be used by V4 states for a substantial period of time, thereby limiting for some time possibilities of developing joint programs for upgrading the equipment or training the crews. Moreover, the fact that decision about acquisition of particular equipment were done by different countries in different years means, that it will be hard to find, at least in near future, the moment when coordinating of purchases would be possible. In addition, current capability of V4 countries to develop military platforms "indigenously", by industrial cooperation exclusively within Visegrad framework, is severely limited due to the technological weakness and non-complementary character of their industrial base. Hence, still the main area of potentially successful cooperation is joint or coordinated maintenance and upgrading of equipment of Soviet-origin. However, in the past such possibilities were explored moderately at best and, with the gradual phasing out of majority of such weapons and other equipment, will unavoidably lose its relevance soon.

Lastly, there is an issue of leadership within V4. Poland seems to be a natural candidate for that, due to its size, potential, interests and manifested ambitions. To some degree taking lead by Poland it is also expected also by the rest of V4. However, although substantially bigger than of other participants, Polish potential is simply not sufficient to enable Poland's to play the role of strong leader, who could not only set the goals and strategies of cooperation, but also would be willing and – especially – able to provide appropriate assets to secure success of given endeavor if any of the participants fails to his – more or less agreed – obligations. Therefore, it seems that any effort of Poland to implement a more "strict" leadership approach in defense cooperation could be perceived by other members as unjustified "bullying" by stronger partners, while more consensual attitude would limit the capability of the leader to push the rest to perform their duties properly. In the former case the political cooperation within V4 – highly valued by Poland – could be weakened, in the latter the possibility that Poland will have to take disproportionate price for cooperation development (not only comparing to the rest of participants,

but to the benefits achieved as well) would significantly increase.

All that factors show why, despite declared inspiration by the Nordics cooperation and willingness to emulate some of their procedures and mechanisms of work, V4 cooperation is significantly different than NORDEFECO, commonly viewed in Europe as the most promising and developed multilateral effort on sub-regional level. In comparison to V4, NORDEFECO is definitely much more balanced as far as members' military strength and economic potential are concerned. Sizes (populations) of Nordic countries (excluding irrelevant in this context Iceland) are roughly similar, as well as their defense budgets are. Therefore, all participating states, despite some important differences in their strategic perspectives and choices (notably in case of Denmark), share pretty much the same level of ambitions in their security policy, perceiving themselves as "internationally active and responsible, but nevertheless small states". Albeit they differ also to some degree in perceiving their situation and needs in context of territorial defense (with Danish indifference, Norwegian focus on naval assets and Swedish and Finnish growing preoccupation with Russian increasingly assertive politics), in general they all Nordic think seriously about armed forces' modernization and capabilities development. Even more important in this context, as a stimulator of cooperation, are to large degree similar approaches of Nordic states towards expeditionary missions – their relevance, comprehensive character and purposes. In addition, thanks to Swedish, Finnish and – to lesser extent – Norwegian defense industries, technologically advanced, diversified and complementary, NORDEFECO has substantial "indigenous" base for cooperation development also in the sphere of military technology, joint acquisitions and then maintenance of equipment. Last but not least, cultural factors also play highly positive role in case of NORDEFECO – long tradition of keeping close also in other than defense areas, feeling of Nordic unity, solidarity, as well as uniqueness, even linguistic affinity. According to virtually none of these criteria V4 could have a comparative advantage toward NORDEFECO or even could be treated as "similarly equipped" to deepen its defense cooperation. However, even in case of Nordic cooperation actual results not always meet – rather high, it should be admitted – expectations. For example, several joint acquisition programs (like Viking submarines) were already abandoned; others – like joint procurement of co-produced Archer howitzers by Sweden and Norway – have brought just moderate

savings¹². Such "imperfect successes" of NORDEFECO could therefore serve as a "cooler" for expectations concerning V4 defense cooperation, asking for sober realism in assessing its potential.

Prospects of V4 defense cooperation: Not an engine, but anyway useful supplement for EU/NATO capability development

In the light of described above, rather dissuading circumstances, the question concerning V4 defense cooperation future and its significance in context of NATO and EU/CSDP capabilities development seems to be a crucial one for assessing its overall value. First of all, one has to take into account that for participants it is valuable primarily as a tool for political consultations (as roughly equal partners, it should be stressed) and formulating common position on security issues debated within NATO and EU/CSDP. That clearly helps them to increase their impact in these structures and maximize chances of satisfying their national interests, much smaller when they act alone or through other multilateral arrangements. Therefore, V4 countries will not be interested in endangering such valuable tool of political influence in return for much less certain and not necessarily substantial benefits from closer cooperation on technical and operational level, in capabilities development or expeditionary missions. With the risk of losing currently rather high level of political consensus among V4 members on security issues due to disputes over particular details of given "technical arrangements", what seems possible in the light of above mentioned differences in interest, needs and motives of individual V4 countries to start more specific cooperation, such trade-off would be simply counterproductive. As a proverb says, "better is an enemy of good".

Therefore, in technical and operational aspects of their defense cooperation V4 countries will take rather cautious moves, purposely limiting themselves to projects probably less ambitious, but "safe" in context of maintaining political coherence and unity of the group. Striving to avoid any serious "quarrel within the family", V4 will follow in the first place with the projects rather easy to be implemented, which do not require substantial adjustments in internal defense policy, but despite of that would bring some financial savings or could be useful for promoting the image of the group as determined to be

12. J. Gotkowska, O. Osica (eds.), *Closing the Gap...*, p. 21-22; H.L. Saxi, *Nordic Defense Cooperation after the Cold War*, "Oslo Files on Defense and Security", no. 1/2011, p. 16, pp. 50-52.

Table 3. Military spending of V4 and NORDEFCO (excl. Iceland) countries in years 2007-2011

	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden	Czech Rep.	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
2007								
In USD million*	4332	3074	6181	6235	3136	1819	8774	1320
as % GDP	1.3	1.2	1.5	1.4	1.6	1.3	2.0	1.5
2008								
In USD million*	4499	3309	6215	5545	2673	1690	7848	1351
as % GDP	1.4	1.3	1.4	1.3	1.4	1.2	1.7	1.5
2009								
In USD million*	4230	3474	6596	5438	2752	1506	8414	1293
as % GDP	1.4	1.5	1.7	1.3	1.4	1.1	1.8	1.5
2010								
In USD million*	4504	3400	6390	5886	2498	1351	8781	1130
as % GDP	1.5	1.4	1.6	1.3	1.3	1.0	1.9	1.3
2011								
In USD million*	4515	3656	7083	5960	2254	1287	9149	968
as % GDP	1,4	1,5	1,5	1,3	1,1	1,0	1,7	1,1

* – US dollars constant (2010)

Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2012. *Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Oxford 2012, p. 195-214; J. Gotkowska, O. Osica (eds.), *Closing the gap? Military co-operation from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea*, Warsaw 2012, pp. 94-95 .

active, cooperation-oriented and interested in developing certain capabilities not only for participants, but for the whole Europe as well. Hence, particularly attractive could be development of some niche capabilities – i.e. CBRN defense or rapidly deployable special forces. Such initiatives would be “doable” and relatively “rentable”, because they would offer valuable capabilities (both from national and NATO/EU perspective) achieved with the manageable financial costs and without need of deep transformation of participants’ security sectors or significant loss of sovereignty or freedom of maneuver in their security policies. Possible is also search for new “cheap” programs, intended solely on optimization of use of already possessed assets (i.e. coordination of training initiatives, military educational program and students or researchers exchange). Hence, cooperation will be based – like it was in the past – primarily on coordination and will not lead to substantial integration of forces, defense policies and budgetary planning. V4 members could be slightly more than today interested in cooperation exceeding purely coordinative measures in context of development of capabilities useful primarily for collective defense of the members’ territory (joint airspace control, potentially mo-

bile air-defense systems, on the basis of current Polish acquisition program of that kind). However, in this case still the crucial role will be played by potential costs of such endeavours (primarily of financial nature, but also political ones, for example possible reaction of Russia or other neighbours). Rather less probable are significant in scale and character projects on integration of defense industry and its works (like joint development and production of some military equipment, although some limited joint research projects seems feasible). Also common acquisitions is – at least currently – possible just in specific cases, on limited scale and in “less-visible” aspects (that is, not “big” and highly advanced military platforms, but rather common acquisition of ammunition, personal soldier equipment, support and logistics, etc. – in short, “rather trucks than tanks”)¹³. Possible are im-

13. In case of “big” contracts the obstacle of particular importance would be the mere difference in needs, tasks and ambitions of V4 countries’ armed forces. With such asymmetry in sizes between Polish armed forces and of the rest of partners, in case of any substantial acquisition bid the risk of domination of Polish over the partners’ preferences concerning specification of acquired systems would be high, limiting the partners’ interest in cooperation. However, effort to elaborate more proportional impact of participants on the bid could result in lengthy

provements in coordination of expeditionary strategies, particularly if the development of niche capabilities useful in such missions (SOF in particular) moves successfully. These changes will not be dramatic, but at least they could end – currently rather typical for V4 states – practice of deciding on foreign deployments in fact in separate manner, with consultations limited to mere reciprocal information about the engagement or its form.

However, somehow limited scale and results of defense cooperation on technical, industrial and operational level will probably not preoccupy seriously V4 governments, as long as it will not endanger their political ties and actions. The real qualitative change in this respect could be achieved only if Visegrad states decide to make a substantial qualitative change in their cooperation and go much far than today with real integration of their security sectors and policies, as well as with specialization of their armed forces. Definitely, for a group treated as a whole such moves could create significant savings, although primarily in the long-term (in short-term, due for example to acquisition of new equipment, it could even mean increase in spending, at least of some partners). As for today, however, despite the possibility that some states (namely Slovakia) could consider it as a reasonable option (mainly because of financial reasons and hopes of savings), it seems improbable that any of V4 government would abandon to that extent the autonomy in security policies and limit the control over functioning of its own forces. It would lead to many internal problems, including potentially reluctant attitudes toward such changes within the armed forces and defense industries. Particularly Poland, as the biggest and most capable participant, could not be interested in such developments. In such model of financing the cooperation it would have to accept responsibility for development of the most expensive “combat” capabilities in higher than others’ proportions, or even the need of subsidizing to some less capable partners in fulfilling their obligations (like US did with some allies, including V4 states, within NATO). However, at the same time – because of interest in retaining substantial level of self-sufficiency and autonomy in defense policy due to specific threat perception (accentuation of traditional threats), as well as the willingness to cooperate also in different frameworks (like Weimar Triangle) – it would proba-

process of agreeing on specific requirements and possibly very complex characteristic of ordered equipment (based on expectations and need of all partners), what would reduce economic savings from the common approach, not balanced by the economy of scale of the bigger order.

bly have to retain residual capabilities of all relevant kind and types. So most probably it could turn out to be simply too costly for Warsaw to be implemented¹⁴. And with the leader reluctant to such idea, any kind of “deeper” defense integration of V4 members would definitely not take place.

What could be the impact of V4 defense cooperation evolving in such directions on the development of European (through NATO or EU/CSDP) capabilities? Definitely, in predictable future V4 would not constitute the most valuable “island of cooperation” neither within NATO nor EU. Its input to overall European efforts would most probably be of secondary importance and linked rather to maintaining or improving currently possessed capabilities than developing new ones. Possible exceptions in this respect are some niche capabilities like CBRN or special forces, valuable, but usually not crucial in context of day-by-day activities or participating in stabilisation missions outside the V4 territory. Nevertheless, it will then still constitute non-negligible element of smart defense or polling & sharing initiatives.

However, general rationale and effectiveness of the model of cooperation developed by NATO and EU in form of these initiatives (incl. connected forces initiative) seems to be disputable, taking into account visible limits of such approach (a tendency of states to focus in these frameworks on “low cost, low risks” projects and secondary capabilities) and considerable risks associated with use of assets developed “privately” (that is, in small groups) in “public” (taken jointly by all or majority of NATO or EU members) engagements (the “who pool and who share” dilemma). V4 – as well as other, currently more advanced and promising sub-regional initiatives (like Franco-British or Nordic cooperation) – would definitely not be a panacea for such concerns, although they could prove themselves useful to complete some specific projects and to increase – to limited degree – the pool of defense assets available to the key European security institutions.

14. Taking into account the fact that all V4 members will have to decide soon on the future of their helicopter fleets, this area could be a promising testing ground for any kind of more integrative approach and introduction of specialization of some V4 states in combat/assault component with focus of others on support/transport equipment. Such option is not, however, debated among V4 states. Moreover, as Poland seemingly, according to long term modernization plans of its armed forces, intends to develop all relevant capabilities on its own, that specific “window of opportunity” for trying to introduce more integration-oriented approach to V4 cooperation will rather not be utilized.

Valuable specifically for V4 defense cooperation could be its openness on different partners, also outside of NATO or EU, and its flexibility manifested by possibility of its development in multiple formats (V4+1, V4+n). In case of success of such efforts it should turn out to be a catalyst of broader cooperation among EU and NATO members, as well as with the outsiders. More specifically, of currently developed project especially V4 initiative on reinvigoration of BG system through introduction of semi-permanent V4 BG in 2016, more usable and deployable (at least partially) also in other institutional frameworks, could bring positive and tangible results for the whole EU/CSDP machinery. However, in the light of previous experience with the BGs and current condition of this program, touched by profound crisis, V4 initiative could come simply too late to be effective. In other words, it is not clear if all EU members as a whole are still seriously interested in “healing” BG program.

From overall European perspective some significant assets could be brought in thanks to successes of V4 initiatives on development of niche capabilities, starting with CBRN defense or MP coordination and finishing with SOFs. However, such capabilities would be designed more to be used within NATO than EU/CSDP framework (what proves again V4 strong interest in maintaining transatlantic ties intact and preference to strengthen NATO capabilities in first place).

Nevertheless, although not irrelevant, all V4 efforts in defense cooperation will have limited impact on European security and capabilities development. Therefore, even fully successful V4 defense cooperation could not constitute a new engine for development of broader European cooperation on these issues, no matter within NATO or EU/CSDP. Such engine has to be found somewhere else, although V4 still could play its supportive role quite well.♦

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