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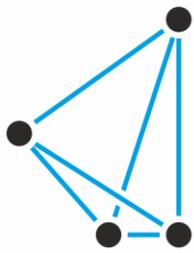
2019/November

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The V4 and the European Defence Initiatives

Gergely Varga





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Summary & Recommendations

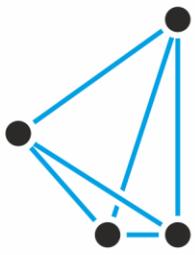
The Visegrad Four are far from unanimous and exclusively critical in their approach to the European defence initiatives. In different forms and to various extent, all are hedging against the risks and uncertainties of the long-term prospects of the transatlantic relationship and the challenges of a deeper European defence cooperation.

Alongside the differences, the V4 has some common traits, including pragmatism, inclusivity, and a genuine 360-degree approach - which are valuable inputs to the debates surrounding the future of European defence.

Introduction

With the new EU commission set to take its place sometime in the next few months, Europeans are in a stand-by mode with respect to how the EU will deliver on European defence in light of the ambitious rhetoric surrounding bold plans and initiatives – such as PESCO, CARD, and EDF - of the past few years. While the EU awaits the new Commission, the geopolitical environment is anything but dull: Brexit is still not completed, the already tense transatlantic tensions have further escalated in light of the sudden withdrawal of US forces and Turkey's new offensive in Syria, while a careful rapprochement is in the making between some core EU members – especially France - and Russia. At the EU level, with security and defence questions likely to crawl further upwards on the agenda in the years to come, the repositioning of core institutional actors – the Council, the Commission, EEAS, EDA, EP – in security and defence affairs have already begun. Nevertheless, with unanimity voting still the general rule in CSDP, member states will remain at the driver's seat on defence matters. As in many other policy areas, it is the Visegrad Four (V4) seemingly counterbalancing some of the more ambitious Western European ideas with regards to the quest of accelerating further integration in the area of security and defence.

Viewed from a distance, one could easily come across a generalized, simplified notion about the V4 and their perspective on European defence initiatives. Such simplifications include the unity of the V4 in their mild support for strengthening EU defence, that their prioritization of NATO only impedes the development of stronger European stand on international security issues, or that they could be the “Trojan horse” of the United States on security and defence policy matters in the European Union. By providing an overview of some of the key features of each Visegrad country's policy with respect to the European defence initiatives, the paper aims to point out the differing priorities and the complex approach the V4 are undertaking. While this paper aims to refute the simplified opinions mentioned above, it will also shed light on some of those common traits of the V4, which could be seen as valuable contributions to the debates surrounding the future of European security and defence.



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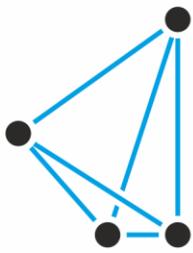
Poland and Hungary: same disappointments, differing conclusions

From the early 1990's, as Central Europeans were still striving for NATO membership, the V4 were considered one of the most pro-Atlanticist countries in Europe. While NATO is still considered the bedrock of their security, perceptions and priorities with regards to the role of the US, NATO and their view on the future of European defence have become more diverse. The most notable example of this difference on the surface is the case of Poland and Hungary. So what happened?

In order to better understand this development, it is worth referring to recent history. After the Suez crisis of 1956, when Britain and France were forced to back down and admit defeat in Egypt under US pressure, the two countries drew completely different conclusions out of their failed experience in Egypt. While the British conclusion was “never again without the Americans” and began aligning themselves even more closely to the United States, France saw a necessity to cease its military reliance on the US and create an autonomous security and defence policy with the necessary military capabilities. As with all historical parallels, this one has its flaws, but there is certainly a resemblance from this story in how Poland and Hungary have behaved in recent years.

Although there was not any such strategic shocks as the Suez crisis for these countries, since NATO accession, there were a series of disappointments with regards to US commitment to Central Europe after NATO accession and especially during the Obama presidency. Just to name a few, the lack of significant political, security or economic yields from the military participation in the Iraqi and Afghanistan wars – such as until 2014 major US troop deployment to Poland or additional economic benefits from the US - the sudden repeal of the Bush administration's missile defence plan by President Obama in September 2009, the lack of meaningful US support on energy diversification during the first decade of the Millenia, or the Obama administration's general absence of interest in Central Europe. Taken all these together with what happened to Crimea in 2014, Poland concluded that it needs to align the US as much as much as possible to the region and prioritise the relationship with the US above all other security policy considerations to secure long-term US support.

With Russia considered to be a direct threat to Poland and the Baltics especially after 2014, Poland has invested even heavily in recent years in its relationship with the United States in all aspects of security and defence. This is reflected in Warsaw's security policy choices in a wider sense, in its agenda in NATO, in its bilateral military relationship with the US as well as major defence procurement decisions, including the purchase of Patriot missile defence system, F35 joint strike fighters, or initiating the establishment of permanent US military base - “Fort Trump” - in Poland.



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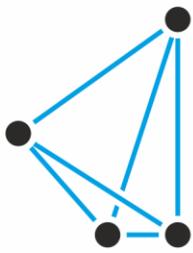
Warsaw has been also highly critical of the use of the term „strategic autonomy”, perceiving it as an attempt to position Europe against the United States and weaken the transatlantic bond. Poland’s approach towards the initiatives tailored to strengthen European defence industry has also been modest. Although it has a sizable defence industry, most of the companies are state owned and would neither cope with open international competition nor would likely be primary beneficiaries of EDF funds in the future. All the above-mentioned does not mean Poland completely rejects European defence initiatives. Warsaw is very much in favour of deeper cooperation on capability development and injecting EU funds into European defence industry. It is also participating in the French led military operation in Mali, demonstrating solidarity with the leading proponent of autonomous European defence. However, Poland unequivocally prioritizes NATO and its relationship with the US in its security and defence policy and views any attempt which could harm them with suspicion.

The annexation of Crimea and Russia’s behaviour in the East since 2014 also raised alarms in Hungary. Hence, Budapest supported without hesitation the reassurance and deterrence measures, contributed to these NATO efforts, and recognized the military significance of US military presence in the region also through a DCA with Washington. NATO clearly remains the bedrock of Hungarian defence policy, for article five as well as for crisis management missions, which also reflected in the NDPP-driven Hungarian defence planning and capability development process.

However, considering the wider foreign policy agenda, it has also emphasized the importance of dialogue and engagement with Russia. In the understanding of Hungary’s leadership, while Russia was clearly the aggressor in 2014 against Ukraine, the Russian threat is not as immanent and severe, and with dialogue and sound policy, tensions could be reduced. Furthermore, as there are greater concerns in Budapest with regards to the risks of depending too much on Washington than in Warsaw. Hence, Hungary has strengthened its security and defence relations with core European powers, primarily through its major defence acquisition program, the Zrínyi 2026.

Within the context of the program, Hungary has begun to replace or field completely new military capabilities, from tanks, to howitzers, infantry vehicles, fixed wing transport aircraft, helicopters, all them European – mostly German or French – made. A major component of these decisions was economic and defence industrial considerations, however, given the dependencies and cooperative frameworks they imply, they can influence long-term security and defence policy developments as well. Furthermore, while the Hungarian government supports the defence and deterrence package of NATO in the East, it puts a similar emphasis on the need to tackle Southern challenges, notably terrorism, failing states and illegal migration, both within the EU and NATO framework.

In addition to the defence procurement and defence industrial considerations, migration as a security challenge raises the security policy significance of the EU from a Hungarian perspective. Furthermore, the Hungarian Prime Minister himself referred to the concept of a European Army multiple times in the past few years, realizing the



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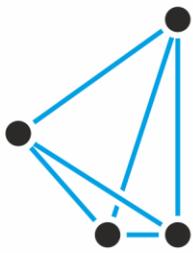
threat of a strategically weak and vulnerable Europe, and the necessity in strengthening Europe's military potential. It's true that the above-described engagement toward the European option on security policy haven't resulted in a very pro-active pursuit of European defence initiatives, nor does it place Hungary in the camp of the supporters of a more integrated CFSP and CSDP. Hungary is actually one of the staunchest opponents of expanding Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) mechanism into the area of CFSP and hasn't been considerably a frontrunner in PESCO projects. However, it demonstrates a flexible and less US-oriented approach on the matters of security and defence.

Searching the Middle Ground: Slovakia and the Czech Republic

At the other end of the spectrum is Slovakia. Although committed to NATO and the alliance's reassurance measures in light of Russia's assertive behaviour, its approach towards the US and Russia is more balanced. One such sign was the recent rejection of the conclusion of a Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United States, which Poland and Hungary already signed with Washington. Behind this decision lies the fact that Slovakian society still has a more amicable attitude toward Russia and is generally more critical towards the US, as a recent Globsec study observed.

At the same time, through membership in the Eurozone, Slovakia is more integrated into the EU core, and is generally considered to be the most open among the V4 for further European integration. Furthermore, Slovakia has demonstrated strong commitment in the European defence initiatives, especially in PESCO projects – it is a participant in two higher end capability projects, the Euro-artillery and an armoured vehicle. However, the recent decision to replace the aging MIG-29 fleet with US made F16's instead of a European aircraft shows that buying European is not necessarily a top priority of Bratislava. In sum, future Slovakian approach on defence initiatives will

The Czech government is also seeking to strengthen its political relationship with the Trump administration, signalled by a White House visit earlier this year of Prime Minister Babis. The increased Czech contribution to NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltics is also a sign of commitment towards NATO. Czech approach to the European defence initiatives have, however, been mixed. Former Prime Minister Sobotka was one the few leading politicians who openly spoke about the need of an EU army, although primarily with the task of defending EU's external borders against illegal migration. There is also a general understanding that taking into consideration the sizable Czech defence industry, it is in the interest of the Czech Republic to move



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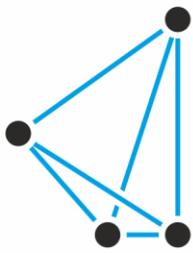
forward on European defence industrial and common procurement cooperation, fully making use of the new EU instrument PESCO, CARD, EDF in the area. However, initially the Czechs were seen to have been lagging behind in terms of the initial planning phase of PESCO projects and also showing only modest commitment in pushing through the projects. In sum, both Slovakia and the Czech Republic seem to pursue a careful balancing approach with regards to NATO and the EU defence initiatives and would go to great lengths to avoid any controversial steps in either direction.

Naturally, most EU and NATO members have commitments towards both organizations as they see them as complimentary frameworks and instruments. Furthermore, most of them are cautious about embracing “European strategic autonomy” too loudly and are ambiguous with regards to where all these defence initiatives should be heading. The point is, the Visegrad countries are neither united in these questions nor fully prescribed to a “NATO- and US-only” approach to European security and defence architecture. They are more-or-less carefully exploring the new opportunities of European defence and hedging against uncertainties as the whole transatlantic geopolitical arena and European political environment is in flux. All this also implies that the V4 will not be capable of substituting the UK as a formidable military power, with a firm pro-Atlanticist agenda capable of balancing French or German aspirations. It is not just the military potential that is missing, but a clear and unified political direction by the V4.

What the V4 has to offer

After confuting some of the misconceptions about the V4, it is worth taking a look at some of those common traits which Central Europeans can constructively bring to the debate on European defence. First of all, there is considerable amount of pragmatism in their approach. One aspect of this pragmatism is their focus on actual military capabilities instead of institutional reforms or ideological debates with the US administration. President Trump’s “novel” approach to diplomacy and lack of computability has certainly caused a lot of tension in the transatlantic relationship, but at times Western European overreaction to President Trump’s controversial statements, questionable moral high ground – as with the narrative of the US “abandoning the Kurds” while not willing to put more troops on the ground in Syria - and lack of taking responsibility in many of the security issues on the agenda has not helped either. In the transatlantic context, Western Europeans could be sometimes rightly criticized the same way as Western Europeans denounce Central Europeans when it comes to taking responsibility in common European interests.

Within the transatlantic tensions, Central Europeans usually stuck to a pragmatic, factual criticism of the US administration, seeking to avoid politically capitalizing on anti-



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American sentiments. Such a constructive approach towards the United States – irrespective of who occupies the White House – is a valuable asset in the transatlantic relationship.

The same approach is valid concerning third country participation in European defence projects. Strengthening European defence industry is a crucial objective, and the principle of spending EU money in the EU is also understandable goal. However, EU members cannot dismiss the concerns of NATO allies – including countries such as UK, Norway, and Canada - who have contributed to European defence for decades. The issues on the table concerning EDF and PESCO – including property rights, export controls, security of classified information - are certainly not easy to solve, but it will take a constructive, pragmatic approach also from the European side to find solutions which would at least prevent a further widening of the rift within the Alliance in the short term, and gradually form an operable compromise.

Another useful element which the V4 represents is the 360-degree approach to European defence. If core European powers are serious about gradually building a more unified security and defence policy with more formidable military capabilities in an EU framework, they cannot avoid seriously taking into consideration the priorities of Central and Eastern Europeans. This does not mean that the European defence initiatives should be tailored towards replacing NATO on article five and territorial defence; this is the last thing a country like Poland would like to see. It does, however, mean that the instruments at disposal, among others the EDF funds, PESCO projects, the European Peace Facility, crisis management capabilities, would have an Eastern dimension alongside the Southern dimension. Maintaining political unity concerning the long-term objectives in the EU should be a greater priority than short-term gains through a small group of like-minded countries, as disunity within the EU would have dire consequences in NATO as well, which Europeans cannot afford to risk.

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