

The Military Cooperation of the V4

Péter Sztás, PhD.

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Abstract: *The members of the Visegrad Group are allies within the framework of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Their relationship has evolved over many decades. One of the most fruitful cooperation among these states can be observed is in the field of defence and military. Within the framework of the CFSP their partnership has reached a new level and quality. In this current research article, we will be analysing the military cooperation between the V4 countries, starting with historical roots within the Warsaw Pact Organization and up to recent events, including the questions of budget, joint exercises and the creation of the Visegrad Battlegroup.*

Keywords: *V4, Visegrad Group, Visegrad cooperation, military cooperation, NATO, V4 military, Visegrad battlegroup, Central Europe.*

Visegrad is a symbolic place in Central Europe. The citadel of the picturesque settlement hosted a summit in 1335 where Casimir the Great of Poland, King John of Luxembourg of the Kingdom of Bohemia and King Charles Robert of Hungary pledged allegiance and struck an agreement on trade cooperation. This royal meeting not only settled relations between the parties concerned in a mature way but negotiated resolutions that belied the age, promising a prosperous common future.¹ The intention to bring this great historical event to life and pursue it in principle inspired the successors of the kingdoms – former Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary –, having just

stripped themselves of Soviet occupation, to sit down again in 1991, choosing Visegrad as the place of their negotiations.² Thirty years later this cooperation is still flourishing with a unique form of advocacy within the framework of the European Union. This present study aims to show what the Visegrad Group has managed to achieve in the field of military cooperation since 1991.

The Roots of the Cooperation

The countries of the V4 – Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia – have been military allies for several decades. Between 1955 and 1991, as members of the former Eastern Bloc, their alliance was within the framework of the Warsaw Pact Organization (WPO). Today these nations are all members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Although the bilateral political relations between the former V3 and, after the disintegration of Czechoslovakia the V4, have not always been cloudless, from a military point of view their symbiosis has been professional. The practical reason for this is clearly to be found in the old, socialist covenant. The WPO required a high level of interoperability, which in practice meant the unconditional adoption and application of the Soviet military norms. This was true of military procedures, protocols, training, advancement systems, equipment, armaments, communication, and ultimately the way of thinking.³ Building on these common features the possibility of implementing a V4 military cooperation has been on the agenda since the signature of the Visegrad Treaty. However, this idea was not put into motion for a long time for several reasons.

Political Transformations in CE

Between the dissolution of the WPO in 1991 and the enlargement of the NATO, the region fell into a security vacuum. This is the classical IR textbook situation when countries can only count on self-help to guarantee their own peace and security. The Czech and Slovak Federal Republic ceased to exist on 31 December 1992, and the successor states turned inward, aiming to settle their own lines. Czechia's attitude to the issue of military cooperation was truly reflected in the fact that from 1995 she even suspended her participation in the meetings of the defence ministers of the Visegrad

Group.⁴ The change was brought about by the invitation of Czechia, Hungary and Poland into NATO and their subsequent accession in 1999. After 2004, when Slovakia also managed to join, the Visegrad cooperation became one of the main forums for exchanging experiences. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the cooperation took a more practical form than before. The idea of joint modernization of the obsolete, but technically similar Soviet military weaponry was mainly supported by Poland, however, the realization of the project was made impossible by the decision of the Russian Federation disallowing the upgrade of the Soviet-made assets. Overall, from a military point of view, the Visegrad cooperation remained a forum for consultation for many years. The war on Yugoslavia affected only Hungary directly. The newly acceded NATO state did everything in her power to avoid getting into this conflict, however, she fulfilled her obligations by making her airspace and bases available to international forces.

The Evolution of the V4

Looking back at the time that has elapsed since the beginning of the Visegrad Cooperation, three stages can be distinguished.⁵ The first cycle was marked by problems, rivalries and competition among the Central European states that had just won their freedom back. This period ended around 2004, when every V4 country became both a member of the EU and of NATO. The second stage, which lasted approximately for a decade, was characterized by the integration into these communities and the implementation of structural reforms, finally, finding one's own place in the Transatlantic Community. The tasks undertaken by the V4 countries at this time were primarily related to the support of the CFSP and NATO's transformation and operations. The document, which signalled the beginning of a new era is the "Responsibility for a strong NATO" declaration signed at the 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago. Present, currently running period, however, embodies a higher level of partnership: the countries are cooperating and pursuing an active interest in policy making. The essential part of this partnership concerns national defence.

The European Security Structures

A glaring moment of the European Union's self-determination was the declaration of the intention to appear and act in the field of international security and defence policy. In the three-pillar structure of the Maastricht Treaty, which legally established the

European Union, the common foreign and security policy appeared as one of the main pillars. A milestone in the further completion of the process was the adoption of the European Security Strategy in 2003, which also set out the goal of obtaining a global role for the EU in this field. The former European Foreign and Security Policy (EFSP) has now been transformed into the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)⁶.

CFSP and the European Battlegroups

One of the main novelties of the newly born CFSP was the setting up of the European Battle Groups. A battle group (BG) is the smallest, militarily effective, rapidly deployable force package capable of carrying out the introductory phase of stand-alone or larger operations.⁷ A BG is based on a battalion-sized armed force, complemented by combat support (e. g., technical units, air defence) and other security elements (e.g., logistical support). Deployable headquarters and pre-designated operational and strategic support elements such as strategic delivery capability or logistics are also associated with them.⁸ The EU BGs must be capable to act no later than the tenth day after the decision of the European Council within the 6,000 km radius of Brussels.⁹ The operation of the battle groups are funded through the Athens mechanism.¹⁰ In 2016, the European Council adopted an Implementation Plan on Security and Defence, based on the European Union's Global Strategy, which sets out three key priorities: responding to external conflicts and crises, capacity building, protecting the Union and her citizens.¹¹ Establishing a BG is an excellent opportunity for smaller countries to take part in the CFSP in an active form.

V4 Defence Cooperation

The military cooperation of the V4 has always taken place within a larger system. Although the membership in the WPO was the result of an external, irrecusable pressure, all Visegrad countries joined NATO voluntarily. The latter is true of the European Union, which is constantly shaping and expanding her foreign policy, including military endeavours. The CFSP gives the Central European states an excellent framework for cooperation. The idea of setting up a joint force under the auspices of the V4 was first time officially raised in 2007 on a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff of the four countries in Sliac (SK).¹² The initial intention was that the cooperation would take place on a multilateral basis, in which Ukraine could also be involved. The concept was further built on a summit in Prague in 2008.¹³ The next important step

was made three years later in Levoca (SK), where the defence ministers agreed to set up a joint battlegroup under Polish command¹⁴ by 2016.¹⁵ This intent was reconfirmed in 2013 in Warsaw, where representatives of the four states sealed a letter of intent on the subject. This was followed by the adoption of a memorandum in Visegrad on 14 March 2014¹⁶ and then the confirmation of a technical agreement by the Chiefs of Staff in Stry Smokovec (SK) on 19 June 2015.¹⁷ Prior to the setting up of the Visegrad Battlegroup, several international military exercises took place. Since its existence, the Visegrad Battlegroup performed the rotational watch of the European Union twice, in 2016 and 2019. During the second round the military forces of Croatia supplemented the forces of the V4 countries. In the field of military cooperation, the establishment and operation of the Visegrad Battlegroup can be considered the greatest achievement of the Group until today.

The Military Budget of the V4

The quality of military equipment, its modernization and the purchase of new assets are sensitive budgetary and social issues in all post-socialist countries. From a military point of view, it is evident that states which are unable to keep up with their potential adversaries in technological advancement are at a disadvantage in case of an armed conflict. Military equipment is among the most expensive goods that national economies tend to acquire. Not only their purchase but operation and maintenance also consume huge public costs. As can be seen in the first figure, in 1990 both Poland and Hungary spent more than 2.5 percent of their gross domestic product on defence, which, however, started to decline immediately in parallel with the economic downturn of the early nineties. Following the World Bank's graphs, extending the examination to 2018, it can be seen that 1992 was the last year in Hungary where the 2% of GDP was actually spent on the military. After the disintegration of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic in 1992, there has been a declining trend in military spending in the successor states. In the case of Czechia this was the trend until 1997, when the country received an invitation to join NATO. Surprisingly Slovakia, despite her economic difficulties, allocated the highest funds on army – in the light of her GDP – in the Visegrad comparison between 1993-1998. While in 1994 1.94% of the GDP was spent for this purpose, in 1995 it was 3.155%, in 1996 2.974%, and even in 1997 2.283%. However, the 1998 political turn in Slovakia put an end to this process.

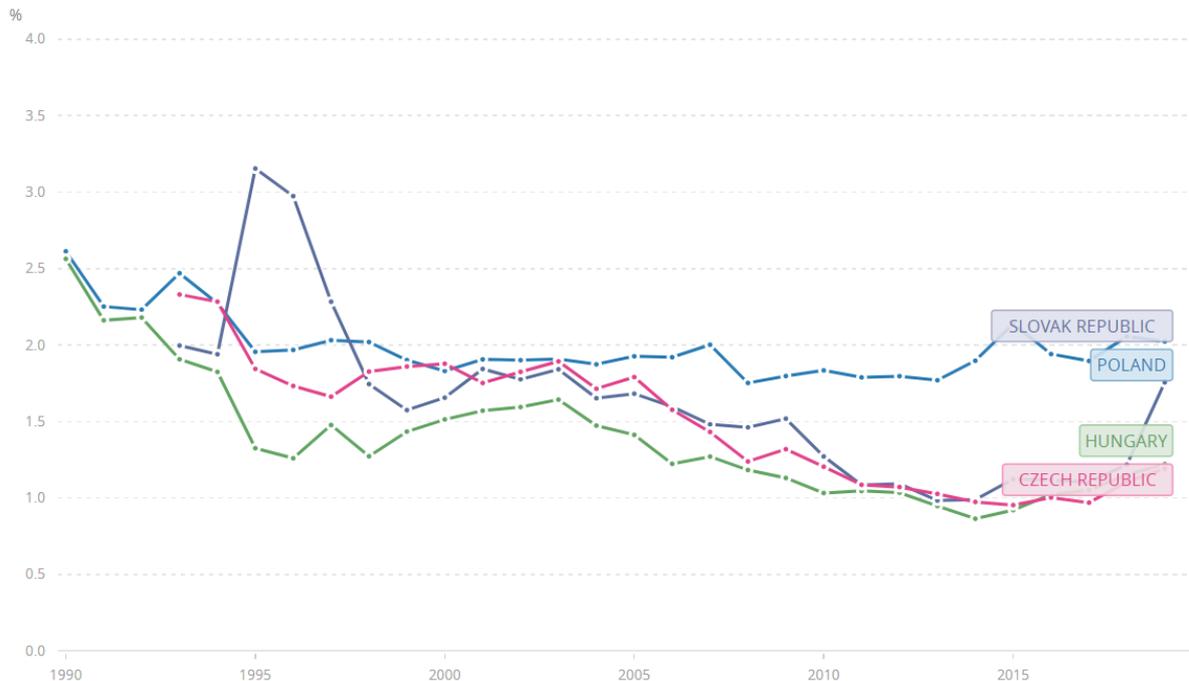


Figure 1 - Military expenditures of the V4 countries as a percentage of GDP between 1990-2019
(Source: World Bank)¹⁸

From the data above, it can be seen that none of the V4 has complied with the defence spending required by NATO, i.e. the expenditure of at least two percent of the GDP for military purposes. However, this situation is constantly changing. During the Trump administration, strong pressure was exerted towards the NATO member states to fulfil their obligations. As a result, serious military procurements have been realised from the side of V4. This affects every field of the military in the examined countries.

Conclusion

It is a long path what the countries of the Visegrad Group had to go along until they entered the European Union and the NATO. While there had been some disagreements among them in particular political issues, their military cooperation has always been professional. After the first decade of the new millennium, significant steps were made in order to turn this cooperation into a more pragmatic direction. The creation of the CFSP provided an excellent base for this motive. The most important achievement since has been the foundation of the V4 Battlegroup. Until now, this body has twice executed the rotational watch of the EU.

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