

Defence Policies of Small States in Central Europe: The Role of Visegrad Cooperation

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Abstract

After years of remaining mainly at the aspirational/dialogue level, defence cooperation has recently moved to the centre stage of Visegrad Group (VG) cooperation. This brief reflects on the evolving character of security and defence cooperation in the VG and will focus on several questions. It will examine the main determinants of the present emphasis on defence cooperation and consider how some important features of the broader system of cooperation in the VG support the defence cooperation endeavour and keep it on track despite the intrinsic difficulties involved. It will also show how defence cooperation within an established regionalism has generated an improved platform for potential joint participation in initiatives developed by primary alliances (NSATO and EU) such as the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

Key findings

- Visegrad Group defence cooperation has undergone significant development since 2010
- Budgetary pressures and other external factors having been the prime determinants but some key attributes of the general VG cooperation model have played an important role as well.
- Regional cooperation organisations may therefore provide small states with frameworks to develop security and defence cooperation agendas within the context of the main broader alliances

Executive summary

The Visegrad Group's defence cooperation agenda has moved particularly rapidly since 2010, both in the declaratory sense and in terms of actual and proposed developments. The most high profile outcome so far, the VG EU Battle Group (VG EUBG) is but one of many common defence projects contained in the broader VG 'Long Term Vision' for defence cooperation announced in October 2013. The main determinants of the post-2010 'surge' in VG defence cooperation have included the **Financial Crisis and Defence Funding Pressure** and raising the **Central European Profile in CSDP and NATO**. The **Ukraine/Crimea Crisis** is an important context but not a primary cause. Some important attributes of the general model and experience of regional cooperation in the VG framework have also made important contributions to the development and sustainability of VG defence cooperation efforts. They include the longstanding **Culture of Cooperation**, the role of the **International Visegrad Fund** in sponsoring analysis of defence cooperation and generating feasible proposals for joint projects, the **V4+** mechanism that facilitates cooperation with other states and regional groupings and a key VG tenet of avoiding '**Taboo Issues**' that could contaminate cooperation and coordination in other areas. Russia is a prime example of such a taboo issue.



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What is the problem?

Since defence cooperation with allies is important for even large states/major powers it seems axiomatic that it makes sense for small states to look for cooperation as well, especially where there are some existing regional cooperation frameworks they might be able to make use of. So what is the relationship between regional cooperation frameworks and defence cooperation? Does the original thinking about the security-related functions of regional cooperation, which mainly stressed 'soft security' contributions (Cotter, 1999, Bailes, 1997) and ruled out any kind of 'hard' security/defence role still hold? The challenge is to find meaningful projects and shared solutions to defence policy issues that align with: the participants' national interests and perspectives; any regional priorities and joint approaches they are able to identify; primary alliance obligations and opportunities – e.g. the NATO and EU context where applicable. This paper seeks to throw some light on how regional cooperation frameworks can support defence cooperation among small states by looking at the case of the Visegrad Group (VG).

What Has Been Done at VG Level?

There has been a clear post-2010 'surge' in VG defence cooperation that has entailed significant progress in terms of actual and proposed developments. The most visible and high profile outcome so far has been the V4 European Union Battle Group (V4EUBG). The V4EUBG was on standby in the first half of 2016, is scheduled to be so again in the second half of 2019 and is being discussed, in terms of future development, as a potential joint V4 contribution to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, and other future contributions to EU and NATO operations.

Though the V4EUBG is often touted as the flagship achievement of VG defence cooperation, the documents that accompanied the signing of the *Memorandum of Understanding on Establishment of the V4 EU BG* On 14 March 2014 were arguably more significant for the prospects for meaningful and enduring defence cooperation in the VG. The *Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening their Defence Cooperation* and the *Framework for Enhanced Visegrad Defence Planning Cooperation* are regarded as genuine milestones „which created – for the first time in V4 history – both a strategic concept of the goals, scope and level of ambition in defence cooperation, as well as a mechanism for coordination of defence planning, including acquisition issues” (Gawron-Tabor, 2015). These agreements confirmed certain areas that would form the main focus of the VG defence cooperation efforts. The programme of the current Hungarian VG Presidency, in accordance with the *Action Plan of the Visegrad Group Defence Cooperation (July 2016-June 2018)* specifies five ongoing areas of cooperation: Defence Policy Cooperation; Operational Cooperation; Joint Capability Development; Defence Industry Cooperation; Joint Training and Education. The *Framework for Enhanced Visegrad Defence Planning Cooperation* stated that “success of the V4 defence planning cooperation requires certain structures to be put in place in order to facilitate the identification and implementation of capability development areas and projects” (Visegrad Group 2014, 3). It created a three tier structure for this purpose comprising: at the top level, the committee of State Secretaries/Defence Policy Directors who will receive and make political decisions on proposals coming from the (second level) V4 Planning Group (V4PG), composed of defence policy experts and defence planning chiefs and tasked with selecting 'the most promising areas of cooperation'. The V4PG is in turn supported by a third level of Working Teams that convene around project proposals and develop the details and specifications for them. The *Framework* gives defence cooperation a longer term character and enables crucial continuity between VG Presidencies. It also improves the chances of joint participation in any initiatives coming out of the overriding NATO and EU frameworks - such as the EU 'Permanent Structured Cooperation' (PESCO) for example. When the V4 Defence Policy Directors (DPD) met in Budapest in July 2017 they “decided to organize a V4 Planning Group (PG) meeting of defence planning experts to examine possibilities for cooperation in the framework of EU PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation)” (Visegrad Group, 2018).

What are the Dynamics of Defence Cooperation at VG level?

Though always having a place on the VG cooperation agenda, defence cooperation nevertheless spent many years mainly at the aspirational/dialogue level. This was seemingly a reflection the longstanding assumption

that despite some enthusiastic rhetoric, Visegrad cooperation in the security and defence realm was primarily a support for the process of gaining entry to NATO and the EU. In fact, until the revival after 2010, defence cooperation largely drifted off the VG agenda after EU accession in 2004. This analysis of defence policy's rather dramatic elevation to centre stage of VG cooperation focuses on two sets of factors. First the direct determinants; second the support and sustainability provided by the broader features of the Visegrad cooperation model.

Direct Determinants

The importance of external factors in driving the current 'surge' in the VG defence cooperation agenda seems rather clear. Efforts to upgrade VG defence cooperation have been specifically associated with the outbreak of ***Crisis and Conflict in Ukraine*** and breakdown in EU-Russia relations.¹ While this is an undeniable context that has lent substantial urgency and political impetus, the upsurge in VG defence cooperation efforts over the last few years is not a simple result of threat perceptions associated with Russia, not least because many of the key developments pre-date the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. Also the V4 states do not have consistent preferences for relations with Russia (see below).

The primary cause was the ***Financial Crisis and Defence Funding Pressures***. As the VG's own official documentation states, by 2010 a "completely new stimulus" for defence cooperation had arisen due to a combination of the "(f)inancial crisis and introduction of the new cooperation concepts on capabilities development, NATO Smart Defence and EU Pooling and Sharing" (Visegrad Group, 2016a, p.1). Indeed, the most authoritative account of VG defence cooperation issues, the so-called DVA4 Full Report states that "the emerging regional defence collaboration is essentially a (budgetary) 'crisis management' operation to them [Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia] conducted by heavily underfunded defence ministers (except for Poland) which seek to save money on logistics, maintenance or training while giving themselves the opportunity to acquire items which would be unaffordable on a national basis...Poland too is interested in all the capability-related benefits that collaboration offer. But it also has a geopolitical goal in mind: it seeks to play a prominent role in the region, enjoying the respect of its neighbours and prestige among Europe's largest countries" (Batora et al, 2012, 9).²

Budgetary considerations following the financial crisis coincided with and complemented other pressures already at hand. The V4 states have used the V4EUBG as an **Opportunity to Raise their Profile in the EU Security and Defence Arena**. Paulech and Urbanovská (2014, 3), for example, noted that all four VG states also shared the goal of wanting to contribute in a more distinct and visible way to the CSDP which would "demonstrate these countries commitment to the [CSDP]...(and) help the EU fill in the half-empty list of useable battlegroups, which would increase the credit itself of these countries within the entire EU". This in turn was seen as a response to US calls for greater European contributions to NATO efforts (and other NATO initiatives, especially 'SMART Defence), this arguably being the primary motivation from the VG perspective.

Finally, the successful experience of the **VGEUBG** itself seems to have supported the wider programme of VG defence cooperation, by generating confidence and trust and laying solid foundations for deeper military cooperation.

Indirect Determinants – the VG Cooperation framework

Specific characteristics of the VG have played a key role in facilitating and sustaining the development of the forward moving defence cooperation agenda. The first thing to highlight is that, as mentioned above, security/defence cooperation was not only a significant element of VG cooperation during its initial phase but was actually a key driver of VG cooperation and a key motive for the Visegrad states mutual activities. As well as the strategic reorientation ambitions and efforts that underwrote the VG during the first phase of cooperation, there were important defence/military accomplishments, including the abolition (rather than transformation) of the Warsaw Pact and hastening the withdrawal of Soviet/Russian troops from central and east European soil. When discussing defence, as well as any area of VG policy coordination, it is important to stress the importance of what can be seen as the longstanding ***Culture of Cooperation*** which reflects the VG's status as an ingrained element of the V4 countries' political processes and a key platform for permanent dialogue and varying degrees of cooperation and coordination. Since 1999 the VG has had "a quasi-institutionalised structure



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for the intergovernmental cooperation...to ensure stability via a more permanent basis for VG cooperation” (Dangerfield, 2008, 644). The overall VG cooperation process is supported by the VG working procedures that were established at this time. Defence cooperation is, like many other policy areas, a well-established area of regularised dialogue and cooperation. Defence Ministers have met regularly, at least once per year, since the VG was reconvened in 1999 and other parts of the defence establishment have been part of the process too. All in all, as Kořan et al (2016, 9) have noted, the “cooperation amongst the Ministries of Defence benefits from well-established procedures of meetings and working groups”. Another important vehicle of support is the sole permanent VG institution, the Bratislava-based *International Visegrad Fund (IVF)*, which plays an important role in terms of the generation of policy analysis and policy advice on V4 affairs. A particularly important IVF-sponsored study of defence cooperation was the ‘DAV4’ project, mentioned above, which had two broad aims: “First to explore the most cost-effective, politically feasible and militarily useful areas of defence cooperation among the Visegrad Countries. Second to establish regional defence collaboration as one of the top priorities for the Visegrad framework, and to build its top-down support” (CEPI, 2014, 1). Major research studies financed, via the IVF, from the VG countries’ state budgets have a notable advantage of easy and rapid access to decision-makers. The DAV4 project does seem to have been influential, it has been argued that the report has played a key role in VG defence cooperation thinking and planning as the “concrete recommendations and outputs of the DAV4 project are gradually becoming a sort of guide book for defence experts (Globesec 2014, 1).

Defence cooperation efforts have also been supported by the so-called ‘V4+’ facility that facilitates engagement with Third Parties. VG-Nordic Council cooperation is one such relationship that has been harnessed for the purpose of information gathering and possible lesson-learning for VG defence cooperation. As well as official fact-finding and information exchange at the political and ministerial level to support lesson-learning for the VG, the cooperation framework has been used to facilitate policy studies being carried out via the IVF, for example as a channel to ease researchers access to NORDEFECO defence experts and policy-makers. For the DAV4 report the “experts started their research by exploring best practices from other countries. In January 2012, they undertook a trip to Norway and Sweden to discuss Nordic Defence Co-operation with senior defence officials including the Norwegian Minister of Defence” (Batora et al, 2012,15). Finally, another key tenet of VG cooperation is to avoid ‘*Taboo Issues*’ that are contentious at the VG level and/or where there is clear and significant divergence between the individual VG states. Relations with, and policies towards, Russia are clearly a taboo topic for the VG and VG cooperation towards Russia is and has always been, at least since the very early days of the VG, a ‘non-policy’. Thus the VG way of doing cooperation enables the defence agenda to steer well clear of the Russia factor and avoid the inevitable contamination that would occur.

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¹ Marušiak (2015, 37) wrote that "(t)aking into account the escalation of the political and security situation in Ukraine, they (the VG – author's insertion) declared their commitment to strengthening cooperation on defence and security affairs". Indeed, the 2016/2017 Polish Presidency Programme emphasises the need for the VG strive for closer defence cooperation due to the 'worsening security situation', most notably changing conditions in the EU's Eastern, and the V4's immediate, neighbourhood.

² Indeed, the crucial factor of defence funding crisis is revealed by the very fact that DAV4 is an abbreviation of the full title of the project which is 'Defence Austerity: A New Paradigm for Defence and Security Cooperation in the Visegrad Region'.



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