

The V4-US relationship and the Western Balkans in light of the U.S. pivot to Asia

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Abstract

Ongoing shifts in patterns of world economic interaction and prospective shifts in the balance of military power provide the backdrop to the US pivot to Asia. As a result of these contemporary developments, members of the Western Alliance, including EU countries in general, and Central and Eastern European countries in specific, need to rethink their fundamental approach to contemporary security challenges. One of the most pressing issues in this respect is how to maintain the stability of Europe's peripheries in the Western Balkans once the US further scales back its presence in these areas. This article argues that besides a clear road to European integration, continued financial assistance, and the credible Europeanization of the commitment to security assistance for the countries of the region, V4 countries have a meaningful role to play as well – a role for which they may be well positioned and which they clearly are required to play in a constructive and strategic division of labor with their partners.

Analysis

In line with the redoubled interest in Asian affairs it is reasonable from the American point of view that the US needs to keep only some troops in Europe, just enough to avoid encouraging Russia to become more animated towards Europe. In case Russia were to see Europe as abandoned it may suggest to Moscow for instance to seek to increase its leverage in the Balkans or in Central and Eastern Europe and to fill any real or perceived power vacuum there. On the other hand, NATO and the security of Europe is not a direct function of the physical presence of US troops on the continent. The latter stems much more from the Article 5 commitment underlying the Alliance which keeps the US in Europe regardless of its troop presence. At the same time, however, *both* a reiterated signal of this commitment and that of the Europeans' resolve to invest in their own security are needed for an effective response to

recent developments. Somewhat paradoxically, without the signal of European resolve even the signal of the transatlantic security commitment may wane in credibility over time.

European countries are obviously unprepared and unwilling to play a military role in any meaningful way in the Asia-Pacific. But Europe does not need to emulate the US pivot to Asia to remain a partner of the US. Firstly, US officials emphasize that the pivot to Asia need not necessarily be understood as a military move. It is, at least in part, a reflection of the obvious economic trends and the shift in patterns of economic growth and trade and investment towards the other hemisphere. Thus, even though the EU remains the most important trade and investment partner for the US to this day, the traditional focus on transatlantic space may, at superficial glance, seem to be overwhelmed by a tsunami of interest in Pacific affairs.

Having said that, the Pentagon's setting up of the AirSea Battle Office, supervising the development of its joint *AirSea Battle* concept, relevant as it is for the moment in hypothetical scenarios centered on China, clearly indicates that there are military considerations as well behind the declaration of the turn towards Asia, connected to uncertainties of what the future holds by implication of China's rise. This is also underlined by the deployment of the US marine contingent sent to Darwin, Australia during the Spring of 2012. Such preparation for future military conflict is one area where the EU cannot hope, and does not wish, to counter the unpleasant trends shaping its perceived importance on the world stage. Even though the EU as a whole is by far the second largest military spender in the world, reflecting the actual economic weight of Europe, the efficiency of its member countries' defense spending is low and from Washington it is felt to be little contribution to current US foreign policy goals. The European defense market is fragmented and suffers from protectionist trends in spite of recent efforts by the European Commission to remedy this problem. Defense spending in the case of most European countries simply does not correspond to a global notion of strategic change. In fact, many of them are fundamentally uncomfortable with such a grand strategic approach, as noted in a recent paper by the European Council on Foreign Relations.²

Thus European countries need in alternative ways to prove that they are still important allies. The strategic rationale for this is ambivalent and contradictory: the US will decrease its presence in Europe, Europe needs the US in maintaining its security, but for this purpose it needs to improve its military capabilities and to demonstrate that it is able to defend itself, eventually working against the need for the US to stay in Europe. Furthermore, decreasing US troop presence means that the US is less well positioned to influence European security and

defense affairs, hence it may risk losing its leverage over European security. Thus, the US approach to an independent European security identity has been somewhat ambiguous historically – Washington would have always liked to see a larger European commitment but historically it has also been skeptical of such projects as they risk decreasing US influence over European security.³ The arising contradiction can be resolved if EU countries consciously look to substitute the US in places that remain somewhat important to the US but where this may allow the US to shift some of the burden it carries to Europe, in a strategic transatlantic division of labor. The Western Balkans is the case in point as to where this may be necessary.

The US can withdraw from the Balkans (both its ground troops and by scaling back its development aid) only if the EU is ready to substitute it there with determined and constructive leadership. The EU can hardly assume that this should be someone else's problem. Clearly, Europe needs to take on greater responsibility for its security in its own neighborhood.

The change in US foreign policy thinking should not have come as particularly surprising given how in any realistic assessment Cold-War-era geopolitical calculations are outdated. The Warsaw Pact long since ceased to exist, many of its members now belong in NATO, and there is no longer a hundred-plus-divisions-strong Soviet Army ready to move across the North German Plain and the Fulda Gap. The new generation of strategic thinkers in the US is not “Berlin-focused” and even the Cold War strategists of old have come to emphasize that the new challenge is Asia. US administration officials whom Europeans seem to have expected to be members of an old guard somehow, with a stronger sense of personal attachment (read: one unaffected by current and future interests) to the transatlantic bond, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel or Secretary of State John Kerry, have proved no deniers of the need for said readjustment.

The shock of the economic and financial crisis and the resulting cuts in the US defense budget have worked as the final catalyst in bringing about the US determination to lessen its engagement globally, including and especially where it may no longer be warranted as much as it once used to be. Europe is the safest bet in this respect. Less money, coupled with the effect of the new focus has resulted in less attention to Europe. Thus the question is not how Europe can help in Asia, but how Europe can fill the vacuum in the wake of the US presence on the continent. European countries must prove they have a clear strategic vision regarding this and as to how they will contribute to NATO after 2014 and the end of the mission in

Afghanistan. This will certainly need to include plans concerning ways for the Europeans to relieve the US in places close to Europe (or in Europe proper). Smaller regional blocks such as the V4 can and ought to show leadership in this strategic adjustment, with particular regard to the Western Balkans.

NATO still has a role to play there, and the organization can and must remain active even if the US scales back its European commitment: in principle, this should only mean relying more on the Alliance's European component in the future. The planned shift of emphasis from operational engagement to operational readiness under the *NATO Forces 2020* vision should not be interpreted as a wild card for anyone to abandon all existing engagements. The stability and security of the Western Balkans will have to be maintained by the European NATO allies, working within the framework of the existing Berlin-Plus arrangement, perhaps under the aegis of the EU's CFSP and ESDP, thus giving clearer signal of a resolve to act on Europe's own.

This is where Visegrad countries enter the scene. The involvement of the V4 in the region is significant and this political leverage may be real added value to the above mentioned goals of selective retrenchment on the part of the US and the marginally important signal of resolve on the part of the EU, in line with common US, European and regional interests.

Central and Eastern European countries may be some of the best allies of the United States but in 2013 they are definitely not the most important ones. The pivot to Asia ought not inevitably translate into a pivot away from Europe but it certainly means significant change in the decades-long paradigmatic understanding of transatlantic arrangements. This may leave CEE countries in search of answers to important issues in their security policy where in the past seemingly much safer answers used to be found, such as is the need to maintain stability in their direct vicinity where US presence long functioned as a security anchor for them and for all of Europe.

In fact, the US willingness to lead in dealing with security issues in and around Europe has already come to an end. Since the inauguration of Barack Obama the clearly indicated global foreign policy intention of the US is to be present but not deeply involved in all global issues. The intervention in Libya in 2011 serves as the perfect example in this respect: a joint Anglo-French initiative executed with a decisive, even critically important, US contribution, eventually brought under the NATO framework. Here the US was content with less than leading from behind, making a point out of leaving key strategic decisions and the bulk of the

aerial bombing campaign against the Gaddafi regime to European and other allies even as it in many ways enabled Europeans to act in the first place.

We cannot expect change in this respect during President Obama's second term. The US is overstretched politically and economically. It is balancing on the edge of the fiscal cliff, with the effects of sequestration setting in, and it faces numerous global security challenges as several emerging competitors seem to challenge its global power and leadership, most notably China. It is exactly here, on the global level, that Russia by now is perhaps less important than China is for the United States. Due to this reason any Russian reanimation in its "extended near abroad", a possible concern for the CEE states, could be of secondary importance only for Washington.

Nevertheless, the US cannot altogether ignore such developments, either. This may put the V4 in a position to keep the US interested in providing marginally relevant, or in other words enabling, support in protecting the region, to thus prevent Eastern Europe from becoming a space for geopolitical contest once again.

After 2014 and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is a risk that V4 countries will become even less relevant both within NATO and for the US. Their contributions to allied operations will remain important in sustaining the transatlantic relationship as well as their ties to the US but the fulfillment of their basic obligations as allied countries within NATO will perhaps become even more important in the future. This is problematic as, with the exception of Poland, the other three V4 countries are far from meeting the desired GDP-proportionate ratio of defense spending. The US will be interested in making sure that security free-riding in the alliance is no longer an option. Thus the US commitment to Europe can be maintained only if the Europeans invest seriously in their own defense, redressing the balance within the currently lopsided burden-sharing arrangement within the Alliance. Apart from NATO, the only security guarantor for the CEE countries may be the European Union but for all intents and purposes even the EU cannot be reasonably expected to be effective without working in unison with the broader Western alliance. Some of the same countries that do not at this point do what this would take within NATO ought to do more for defense if they were to offer an alternative security guarantee in EU colors. As to V4 countries, they must in any case cooperate with each other just as they need be able to show to their partners a coherent strategic vision and real initiative in this respect.

Preferably, the relation with Washington needs to be improved from its present state. Today for the CEE countries the EU's gravitational pull may be stronger, and the position of "best

allies” of the US seems less enticing or rewarding to pursue. The V4 countries today are, however, EU insiders and in this capacity they also participate in shaping the foreign policy of the EU wherein lies both an opportunity and the need to act.

The US will not completely abandon interest in Europe but in a time of financial difficulties its motivations for engagement are rather modest and V4 countries need to show that they understand the quid pro quo principles of politics if they are to continue to enjoy the kind of enabling protection alluded to above. The US cannot invest more in Europe’s security than Europe itself, and the US strives to redefine the role of NATO to just this end. “Europe whole and free” has always been an idealist expression of US foreign policy objectives, and it is clear that CEE countries’ security cannot be taken for granted all by this stated commitment for eternity. Simply complaining about the decreasing attention will no longer pay dividends in Washington. V4 countries can, however, prove their willingness to participate in a mutually advantageous global division of labor if they take a constructive role in managing and solving problems that are also defined as such by Washington but where the US reasonably expects more of a readiness to act on their part.

In the last years respect for NATO has shrunk in the Western Balkans, and so has, simultaneously, the popularity of the US. Keeping NATO relevant in the region in maintaining security and stability is an important goal for the US in order for it to be able to leave the region without losing face. Some room for maneuver for the V4 countries stems from this: they need to emphasize their already significant presence in the Western Balkans and their role in support of the European integration of the region. The stability of the Western Balkans is important both for the EU and the US. The continued enlargement of the EU towards this region would contribute to the general foreign policy goals of the US in maintaining stability in the Western Balkans at the time when Washington intends to decrease its engagement. The above logic is valid even if the Western Balkans has also become a source of contention among V4 countries as Slovakia does not recognize the independence of Kosovo. Thus, while a clear V4 interest can be established in the region, there is also considerable intra-V4 coordination that needs to be done in order to clarify each country’s approach to the region. Furthermore, the Western Balkans also directly pertains to V4 countries’ relations with Russia. However, despite the obvious difficulties involved in coordinating V4 policies via the Western Balkans, these efforts do represent an added value as all of them are interested in the region’s stability in general.

On the other hand, the US cannot leave the future development of the Balkans simply to the EU and the countries of the region. The US is present in the Western Balkans since the 1990s and the region for long used to be *the symbol* for Washington that Europeans are not capable of solving their own problems. The uneven enthusiasm of EU countries to be engaged there and the fatigue of even the larger project of European integration call for caution. EU accession may be the final destination on the road for the countries of the Western Balkans, but for this to be a viable perspective, a commitment to provide continued assistance is going to be necessary. Washington therefore still feels it has a responsibility in maintaining stability in case the EU cannot substitute it in providing for this. From Washington's vantage point an ideal process would be EU-led and US-supported. However, EU-US cooperation regarding the Balkans is less robust than in other areas. A fundamental source of divergence is that whereas the US prefers a clear map of integration, the EU today is more comfortable with ambiguity in this respect. The rhetoric as to the foremost foreign policy goal of the EU remains to expand its sphere of security, stability and prosperity in its neighborhood – what exact measures this eventually corresponds to remains an open question. This is where V4 interests are perhaps more aligned with those of the US than the EU: a clear road to integration with appropriate conditions serves regional stability in the wider CEE region as well.

Thus, the ambivalent approach of the EU may need to be revisited soon. As to why, it may suffice to point out prominent US voices' calls for the withdrawal of all US ground troops and development aid from the Western Balkans. The transfer of responsibility of peacekeeping from NATO, and thus per consequence the US, to the EU is already in progress. There is no denying the fact that the region is more important for the EU and that in a geopolitical and strategic sense US goals are rather marginal there. This is also evidenced by the fact that the Obama administration hardly expressed clear strategic statements on the Western Balkans. During the last years there have been several high level visits to the region on the part of the administration which, however, focused mostly on specific pragmatic issues rather than on the region as a whole, corresponding to the above indicated lack of interest in strategic leadership by the US. Only some voices have remained in Washington that refer to the US goal of containing growing Russian influence in the region. Obama's policy is in fact the direct continuation of the Bush administration's policy and its goal of stabilizing the region by supporting its European integration.

Despite the EU's internal problems and doubts, the EU is still popular in the Western Balkans, and this should give the EU decent prospects in substituting for the US leverage its own. Due to the diminishing US presence in the Western Balkans it is a strategic imperative for both the EU and the US that the EU fill the vacuum or else it may be filled by Russia and possibly, although less so, by China. Economically, the EU is already lagging behind as Russia has consolidated its positions in various markets of the Western Balkans. Thus, it is perhaps time to make up for this in the realm of security, which of course cannot entirely be separated from the realm of economy. In the midst of the financial crisis the level of financial support to the Western Balkan countries cannot match earlier amounts. Consequently, a permanent shift from development aid to more viable and effective technical assistance is needed that under the circumstances would allow for sufficient concentration of resources and the achievement of maximal effect.

Focusing on the Western Balkans is not a new idea for the Visegrad countries. The region is formally on the top of the common agenda since 2009, and V4 countries coordinate their positions before EU meetings regarding it. In October 2012, the foreign ministers of the V4 met in a V4+Balkans format and agreed to set up the Balkan Expert Network which will assist the European integration and the democratic transition of the countries of the region. The EU is supportive of this initiative, as evidenced by the fact that Stefan Füle, EU Commissioner for Enlargement, was present at the meeting. The EU as a whole is a respected mediator of the conflicts in the Western Balkans, and the V4 can provide leadership in utilizing this political capital in furtherance of common objectives.

Visegrad countries need to actively promote this role on the stage of EU and world politics, as they have recent and firsthand experience with parallel processes of European integration and democratic transition. The transfer of know-how remains added value for the stability and the progress of the Western Balkans at the various stages of their transitions. The Visegrad countries may consider engaging and partnering with other countries with similar experiences in some kind of V4+ format inviting Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia (and possibly non-NATO-member Austria). The aim of this idea is the formation of a significant informal group within NATO with a notion of clear new imperatives. This group could also reach out towards the Black Sea region which is considered strategically more important to the US.

There are several instances of how V4 countries can support the otherwise vague American goals in the Western Balkans. NATO expansion towards the Western Balkan countries slowed down, but the accession of Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia remains

important for Washington. The process is supported by the V4 countries. A good example is that the Hungarian Embassy to Podgorica also functioned as official NATO contact point up till 2010. Poland is the largest provider of ground forces in the region from within the V4 and thus has considerable clout over the transformation process of KFOR and the management of the situation in the wake of the prospective withdrawal of US forces. Slovakia, for its part, has several top diplomats who have extensive experience working in or with the region.

Today the Balkans is becoming more a concern for CFSP than that of NATO. In case the V4 countries want to influence and shape the common foreign policy of the EU, which is obviously a goal especially in the case of Poland, and an interest especially in the case of Hungary, V4 countries together need to develop a clear position on the Western Balkans. On the other hand, NATO also needs to remain relevant there, which is the goal of the US even as it seeks to sacrifice marginally less for this purpose. From this stems that NATO's open door policy needs to be kept alive, especially considering the fact that NATO enlargement is only imaginable towards the Balkans now, in contrast to the perceived potential of the Eastern Partnership of the EU in terms of future EU enlargement.

In short: whereas the centre of gravity in European politics may be as hard to locate as ever, with Brussels as well as London, Paris and Berlin all playing a role in this respect, and although the European Union itself has expressed interest in becoming an actor on the world stage, the EU as well as V4 countries need a pivot to the Western Balkans first of all if they are to succeed in projecting security, stability and prosperity into their immediate neighborhood.

Conclusion: Recommendations

- Continue focusing on the Western Balkans. The Eastern Partnership countries are also important but the payoffs are more visible in the case of the former.
- Focus on issues where marginal contributions can be made by substituting US efforts.
- Demonstrate credible leadership capacity as a regional bloc.
- Intensify consultations for this purpose within the framework of the V4+Balkans format at the same time as the overarching EU and NATO framework of the initiative is also emphasized.
- The Visegrad Battle Group has to be a reflection of truly found interest in contributing to the future stability of the neighborhood in ways that may be necessary as other

countries may become less forthcoming in offering assistance in the security dimension.

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² Available at: http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR77_SECURITY_BRIEF_AW.pdf

³ **Kay, Sean** [2013]: *No More Free Riding: The Political Economy of Military Power and the Transatlantic Relationship*. In: **Matlary, Janne Haaland** ; **Petersson, Magnus**: *NATO's European Allies: Military Capability and Political Will*. Palgrave Macmillan, Hounds Mills, 2013. p. 97.