

PERSPECTIVES OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN MULTINATIONAL DEFENCE COOPERATION

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The financial crisis triggered the impression among European states that the negative effects of the further decreasing defence budgets could be tackled by tighter defence cooperation, especially on capability development. New initiatives have emerged both within NATO and the European Union in this regard, but interestingly, new parallel defence co-operations have also been created and old ones have been revitalized on the sub-regional level. In Central Europe, two frameworks have recently evolved in this field: on the one hand, the Visegrad Countries (V4) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – have been cooperating on various issues since the 1990s, though the first element of their defence cooperation was born only in 2011 by initiating a V4 EU Battlegroup. On the other hand, Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia have begun collaborating within the framework of the Central European Defence Initiative (CEDI) in the fields of training, operations and capability development since 2011. The article raises the question whether such regional forms could serve for incubating and nurturing new projects and giving timely answers to current capability shortfalls in Central Europe?¹

Keywords: *Central Europe, defense, military capabilities, multinational cooperation, Visegrad Countries, CEDI, NATO, EU Battlegroup.*

Introduction

International experts – as well as Hungarians – have been paying ever growing attention to multinational forms of defense cooperation² and capabilities development since the financial crisis hit the defense sector in Central Europe with an austerity not seen since the end of the Cold War. The need for innovative ideas that tailor needs to deeds and provide deliverable options is great. However, most expert papers are limited to comparing strategic cultures, security identities or national security documents and focus less on the *modus vivendi*, on how multinational defense cooperation could be fostered and practical, delivering processes and methods of cooperation could be developed.

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² The multinational development of capabilities, or in other words, Multinational Defense Co-operation (MDC) ‘is any arrangement where two or more nations work together to enhance military capability. This can include exchanges and liaison, training and exercising, common doctrine, collaborative equipment procurement, or multinational formations.’ See: Ministry of Defence, *Multinational Defence Co-operation*, Policy Paper, Paper No. 2, (London: Directorate of Corporate Communications), 2001. p. 2.

After the defense dimension of the Visegrad Cooperation was relatively fruitless for two decades, 2011-2012 brought V4 countries to a new level: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia decided to establish a joint EU Battlegroup. Still there is a long way to go to make the V4 BG a reality, but there seems to be considerable space left for other capability development initiatives as well. Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia have begun collaborating within the framework of the Central European Defence Initiative (in the fields of training, operations and capability development since 2011. The article raises the question whether such regional frameworks could serve for incubating and nurturing new projects and giving timely answers to current capability shortfalls in Central Europe?³

1. Central European multinational frameworks of cooperation in the field of defence

As mentioned above, we can differentiate between two multinational frameworks of defence cooperation in Central Europe, that of the Visegrad Countries (V4) and the Central European Defence Initiative (CEDI, previously also known as the Central European Roundtable on Defence Cooperation). International experts have been paying ever growing attention to these multinational forms of defence cooperation and military capability development since the financial crisis hit the defence sector in Central Europe with an austerity not seen since the end of the Cold War. (On the V4 see: Kiss, 2011; Weiss, 2012, Valasek and Suplata, 2012. On CEDI see: Csiki and Németh, 2012, Kurowska and Németh, 2013) Recently comparative expert papers have also been prepared, aiming at pointing out the lessons learnt from existing defence cooperation frameworks and identifying the best suitable practices that might be able to further enhance and bring forward these collaborations. (Valasek and Suplata, 2012; Budai, 2013) The obvious reason for this renewed interest is the momentum that the Visegrad Cooperation and CEDI have been gathering since 2011.

After the defence dimension of the Visegrad Cooperation was relatively fruitless for two decades, 2011-2012 brought V4 countries to a new level: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia decided to establish a joint EU Battlegroup. Still there is a long way to go to make the V4 Battlegroup a reality, but it is a first step of pooling capabilities beyond doubt. CEDI, born as the Central European Roundtable on Defence Cooperation in 2011, has received less attention as this new framework for defence collaboration among Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia has been

³ Even though the current trends and future prospects of defense expenditures, the present situation of the armed forces of Central European countries and their capability requirements (shortfalls) are fundamentally related to this topic, the current article will not elaborate upon these but focuses on capability development initiatives and viable models and methods of cooperation, wishing to give a comparative evaluation and formulate some recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of these frameworks.

functioning rather as an ‘incubator’ for new, practical initiatives that can be realized on the ground in the short term. The potential in CEDI, however, seems to be substantial, as several actual projects have successfully been carried on by participating states.

It is obvious that these two frameworks differ significantly in terms of structure, institutionalization, membership and the way they function, and have triggered successful initiatives to a different degree. As we attribute the different dynamics behind the functioning of these defence collaborations to the different setup that characterize them, the following subchapters will briefly assess and compare them, highlighting those characteristics that are more capable to bring forward cooperation based on the experience gained and lessons learnt so far.

1.1. V4 Defence Cooperation

Cooperation among the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland in the framework of the Visegrad Group – or Visegrad Four (V4) – dates back to 1991 when regional cooperation on Central Europe was pursued in order to mutually enhance the chances of Euro-Atlantic integration of these four (then three with Czechoslovakia being one federative state) countries. It was determining however, that the cooperation of the Visegrad Countries was based on a wide functional spectrum, including various fields of political, economic and cultural issues that all participants wished to cooperate upon by bringing their joint efforts closer along shared interests. Regional patterns of cooperation among these countries in defence-related matters have been shown only on a limited scale even after NATO and EU accessions (for example by harmonizing point of views and adopting joint declarations on defence and foreign policy), and despite their respective contributions to NATO collective defence and operations, as well as to EU CSDP, a characteristic ‘V4 defence project’ has not appeared on the horizon until 2011.

Following two decades of fruitlessness in this field, the four countries agreed to establish a European Union Battlegroup in May 2011 – expected to become operational and be on standby in the first half of 2016. The role of the leading nation of the Visegrad Battlegroup is undertaken by Poland, also providing the majority of the troops (900), while the Czech Republic provides 750, Hungary 510 and Slovakia 450 troops. Negotiations on force generation are under way as the V4 Ministers of Defence signed their Letter of Intent (LoI) at their meeting on March 6, 2013 on creating the Battlegroup and the Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and Technical Agreements (TA) are under preparation to make practical cooperation possible. Having a modular structure, the leading roles for 7 out of 8 functional modules have already been divided among the participants. However, critical capability shortfalls are still on the table, combat and transport helicopters and strategic airlift among others that will need to be provided. (Tófalvi, 2013) Other issues, including the permanence of the Battlegroup as a sustained capability package among the V4 countries and the

possible application of the BG have also remained as topics for further negotiation.

Moreover, the V4 Battlegroup gives an old answer to an old question dating back to 2004 by pooling such capabilities that might never be applied in practice as the European Union has proven to be unable to generate the necessary political commitment so far to use the much-appreciated Battlegroups even in times of need. Even if allow for the possible use of the V4 Battlegroup in a future EU crisis management operation, we must admit that the creation of lacking military capabilities should be the primary target of newly emerging initiatives of defence cooperation, going beyond putting together existing units into new force structures. The latter also bears significant value for providing capable, deployable multinational units that could not be provided on a national basis, but is less likely to fill capability shortfalls that could be covered only through deeper cooperation in the form of sharing capabilities (joint procurement and development).

It is beyond doubt that the V4 Battlegroup has become the flagship project of the Visegrad Countries – and practically the only such project that has been born and nurtured as a V4 defence project. The reasons why cooperation in the field of defence among them has been limited as compared to other fields (energy policy being a successful example) in our opinion are the setup and characteristic of the cooperation, particularly meaning that:

- V4 is a structured, institutionalized framework for cooperation, thus it is more rigid;
- V4 constitutes of uneven partners regarding size, resources and capabilities (three small and a middle-size country, the latter exceeding the sum of the first three), thus it is likely to create dependencies and inequalities;
- V4 projects are initiated based on the consensual participation of all four Visegrad countries, serving as a shared platform of initiatives, thus limiting the opportunity of spontaneously built collaborations by two or three partners.

These characteristics limit the opportunities of cooperation to a certain extent, especially in the early period of incubating and nurturing newborn ideas when it would be especially important to ensure flexibility for finding suitable solutions. Since both policy makers and experts (see for example: Rasmussen, 2012, Valasek and Suplata, 2012) agree that flexibility and adaptability are key enablers to successful co-operation, less rigid and regulated, and more tailored-to-needs forms of cooperation should be given preference, as explained in the following.

1.2. Central European Defence Initiative

A brand new framework for defence cooperation among Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia begun in 2011, primarily called the Central European Roundtable on Defence Co-operation, more recently

named as Central European Defence Initiative. This framework includes the fields of training, operations and capability development and has achieved the following results by 2013: (Tófalvi, 2013)

- Following upon the Czech initiative a multinational Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) defence battalion has been created involving the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia among the CEDI countries and extended to include Poland, also becoming the lead nation of the battalion, and becoming a successful Smart Defence program. Other countries have also expressed their interest in the formation.
- Based on the ‘food for thought’ paper produced by Austria and Croatia, bilateral cooperation in the field of training Special Operations Forces (SOF) has become a practice by now and might be further extended to further CEDI countries offering joint training of SOF.
- As the Multinational Logistic Co-ordination Centre (MLCC) was established in the Czech Republic in 2010, a regionally focused initiative on creating a multinational Joint Logistics Support Group (JLSG) is now on the table. MLCC has become a Smart Defence Tier 1 project since.
- Hungary produced a ‘food for thought’ paper on Counter-Improvised Explosive Devices (C-IED) cooperation and in this framework ‘Train the Trainers’ and ‘Weapons Intelligence Team’ (WIT) activities have been successful in sharing lessons learnt.
- The joint training of Czech, Croatian and Hungarian Air Mentor Teams for Afghanistan begun thanks to the negotiations going on within CEDI and has been successfully going on since, while also negotiations on deeper regional cooperation in aviation training are going on.

Based on these projects, we can genuinely state that initiatives nurtured in the CEDI framework have proven to be successful, evolving both in terms of participants, attracting further countries to join, and in terms of integration into NATO Smart Defence programs. Thus, even though literature on CEDI is limited (Csiki and Németh, 2012), based on the experience gathered so far we can already outline the fundamental characteristics of this framework, such as:

- CEDI is not structured and has remained un-institutionalized, thus providing more flexible options for negotiation (building on expert-level meetings and the formal meetings of Defence Policy Directors as well as the informal meetings of Ministers of Defence);
- CEDI constitutes of relatively even partners regarding size, resources and capabilities (six small countries, none possessing disproportionately greater capabilities);
- CEDI projects are initiated based on voluntary participation of any partner countries, being able to choose *à la carte* among defence cooperation initiatives without formal obligations.

This means that the participants of CEDI build practical and more flexible forms of cooperation, starting with the spontaneous cooperation of 2-3 countries,

with CEDI playing the role of an open forum and clearing house for them. As experience has shown, there are cases when the ‘incubation’ period was so successful, that more countries also joined the initiative, developing them into broader regional as well as viable Smart Defence programs. Significantly, CEDI seems to be more fruitful and effective than Visegrad’s formalised cooperation.

2. How Central European defence collaborations fit to the main European trends?

We can draw further conclusions by comparing the two main frameworks of military cooperation in Central Europe – V4 and CEDI – to the current European trends. The creation of the Visegrad Battlegroup is a great achievement for the Central European region, if we compare what Central European regional initiatives have and have not achieved since the end of Cold War. Basically, the Central European countries could not establish a single viable, significant regional defence initiative. Probably, it is the reason why many analysts and practitioners raised their head for the particular news of the creation of the Visegrad Battlegroup, and not for other Battlegroups.

At the same time, we have to recognize that the Visegrad Battlegroup tries to answer a demand which emerged ten years ago when the EU Battlegroup concept had been framed in 2004. That time many believed that these force packages will provide the answer for responding to smaller crises, but the usefulness and applicability of EU Battlegroups have been questioned, as they have never been used despite the fact that there was demand for it from the international community. (Major and Mölling, 2011, Hatzigeorgopoulos 2012) In addition, Tomáš Weiss highlights that the Visegrad Battlegroup ‘is not and cannot be the answer to the region’s difficulty in sustaining a reasonable level of military power’. Thus, ‘development of further common capabilities should follow, starting with training, schooling, and maintenance’ (Weiss, 2011). Accordingly, we can perceive the creation of the Visegrad Battlegroup as a late adaptation for a decade old demand of generating rapid reaction forces and capability development packages rather than fitting into the current trend of European defence collaborations, when everyone focuses on cost effectiveness and Pooling & Sharing of capabilities.

Contrarily, CEDI provides a forum for six Central European countries, where they can raise potential areas of practical cooperation and each and every country is free to join and contribute to it. Thus, cooperation is forged on the ground of flexible and practical mechanisms while there is no ‘institutional’ pressure – as would have been the case in the Visegrad format, where the support of all participating countries are necessary to begin to cooperate on any issue. Last but not least, all participating countries in CEDI have about the same level of resources and military manpower, providing equal weight and influence, unlike the Visegrad Group, which includes Poland, which is often considered the ‘lead nation’. (Budai, 2013)

It is also important to note that CEDI has not just provided the ground for new raising initiatives, but in the cases of the Joint Logistics Support Group and the CBRN Battalion these initiatives had been extended to include all Visegrad countries (and even beyond), thus becoming a successful ‘incubator of ideas’ for the V4 cooperation as well, later on further channelled into NATO’s Smart Defence framework in which such ‘grass-root initiatives’ can complement large-scale multinational capability development (e.g. procurement) programs.

We can summarize the lessons learnt of the comparison and also highlight best practices if we also compare V4 and CEDI to NORDEFECO along those characteristics that have been discussed throughout the paper (the summary of the characteristics of NORDEFECO is provided partly based upon Bátor and Matlary, 2011):

| Characteristics | V4 | CEDI | NORDEFECO |
|---|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Structured, institutionalized framework | YES | NO | YES |
| Partners and their capabilities | UNEVEN | EVEN | UNEVEN |
| Participation mechanisms | CONSENSUAL MORE RIGID | FREE-TO-JOIN MORE FLEXIBLE | FREE-TO-JOIN MORE FLEXIBLE |
| Function | PLATFORM | FORUM AND CLEARING HOUSE | FORUM AND CLEARING HOUSE |
| Provides answers to: | EARLIER NEEDS | CURRENT NEEDS | CURRENT NEEDS |

Table 1. A functional comparison of the Visegrad, CEDI and NORDEFECO frameworks

However, CEDI and V4 cooperation should not be seen as competitive frameworks but collaborations which can complement each other. As capability shortfalls in the region are numerous, the division of labour between CEDI (taking the lead in relatively small-scale bi- or trilateral ‘start-up’ programs) and V4 (taking the lead in more ambitious, thus costly multinational programs) can provide a healthy environment for fulfilling different needs regarding military cooperation in Central Europe. As Kurowska and Németh (2012) have spectacularly depicted, if each nation can identify, choose and push forward a specific role (such as initiator, lead nation, facilitator, etc.) for itself within these frameworks and they are willing to underpin efforts with real political, professional (that of the military elite) and societal support, the current regionally focused frameworks could deliver capabilities both to the micro (nation state) and to the macro (NATO, EU) levels. However, the question still remains: how could we foster cooperation when simultaneously facing the challenges of financial austerity, strategic fatigue from current demanding military operations, a non-military security perception of Central European societies, sometimes limited societal trust towards each other, a returning interest in strengthening the nation state and the challenges of harmonizing procurement, development as well as pooling and sharing initiatives among

militaries of the region? In the following – instead of concluding an open-ended process – I will raise some recommendations for this purpose.

3. Instead of conclusion: Recommendations

Beyond the comparative analysis of existing cooperative frameworks in the field of defense provided above, a number of recommendations can be formulated – as assessed briefly upon the comments raised at the “*Expert Workshop on Capability Development among the V4 Countries – ‘How to tailor needs to deeds?’*” – organized on August 27, 2013 in Budapest:

- 1) As the pillars of credibility required for enhanced multinational cooperation such as joint procurement are enduring political commitment and the stability in financial resources, these two shall be improved to the greatest extent possible within countries in the region.
- 2) In order to improve political commitment that is firmly based on societal support, there is a need for a better communicated and channeled discourse – both political and societal discourse. Of course this cannot be complete without getting members of the military involved. A broader political and professional discussion, also more open to the public shall be initiated.
- 3) Cooperation should be based on the widest possible pool of institutional partners in various levels. The idea of the Polish National Security Council should be replicated in other V4 countries, bringing together government representatives from all relevant fields. Cooperation among administrations should be extended and reinforced, including joint sessions of V4 parliamentarians, the regular and formal meetings of defense planners, etc.
- 4) Direct cooperation among Ministries of Defense should especially be strengthened through the exchange of liaison personnel, military planners, procurement officers, etc. Such cooperation could follow the practices of the Franco-British defense cooperation by mutually establishing double-hatted positions within respective Ministries of Defense.

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