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Possibilities of Air Force Cooperation in the Visegrad Countries

Air force cooperation in the Visegrad Countries is an important and hardly studied field of interest. In my research, I studied previous and actual V4 cooperation, with a focus on defence cooperation. With the help of interviews of professionals from different fields of expertise, I tried to highlight the possibilities for an air force cooperation in the V4. I created summary tables based on open-source information, the main goal of which is to present the current equipment and capabilities of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. I have also made an attempt to sum up the previous joint military cooperation between the Visegrad Group countries, in order to make predictions for the future.

Keywords: V4, air force cooperation, air defence, Baltic Air Policing, flight safety, NATO, EU Battlegroup

1. Introduction

In his 'heartland theory', Sir Halford John Mackinder has written the followings: "Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland /Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island/ Who rules the World Island commands the world" [9]. With this quote I would like to reflect on the important role of the Central European region in the world. Thus, Visegrad cooperation was created as a forum for the validation and implementation of Central European interests and goals. Since the 14th century, the Visegrad cooperation has played a decisive role not only in the politics of Central Europe, but also of the entire continent. In addition to the political, economic and social cooperation that is increasingly revived in the modern age, it is important to highlight the group's military past. In my current thesis, I would like to focus on the cooperation of the air forces within the military field, and I would like to shed light on the future possibilities of this.

Looking at a specific force such as the air force within the military field, I would like to answer the following questions: is it even possible to develop a potential cooperation between the air forces of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia? From the point of view of the different countries, is there enough willingness, capacity and infrastructure to implement such a cooperation? If not, what are the factors impeding these plans? If it is possible to establish cooperation between the air forces, in which areas is it possible, and how could it be carried out in the most expedient way? To answer these questions, I consider it essential

to analyse the previous military cooperation of the Visegrad countries, as well as to take stock of the capabilities and assets of the four air forces. At this point, I see it as necessary to clarify the concept of air force. The English literature basically distinguishes between two concepts, the terms "air force" and "air power". "Air force" means the air force itself, which includes tools, resources and infrastructure that can be used to achieve goals (military and political) of the given state. "Air power" refers to aerial capabilities that a given armed force uses when conducting operations in the airspace.

With the help of the interviews I conducted, I would like to give a complex answer to the questions asked above, as well as to map the areas that offer opportunities for cooperation.

2. The Visegrad Group

The Visegrad Group or the Visegrad Four (V4) is a cooperation between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Their relationship started centuries before, in 1335, when Hungarian king Charles I organised the Congress of Visegrad to solve different issues in the region. Motivated by the Congress of 1335, on 15 February 1991 another historical meeting was held participated by the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Václav Havel, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary, József Antall, and the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Wałęsa. On that day the Visegrad Group was born, the cooperation has started between the three countries. Initially, they had four main ideas [12]:

1. to eliminate the remnants of the communist bloc in Central Europe;
2. to overcome historic animosities between Central European countries;
3. through joint efforts it will be easier to achieve accomplishing social transformation and joining to the European integration process;
4. to approach political ideas.

Most of these ideas came into reality during the years of cooperation. From 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia took the place of Czechoslovakia due to the disintegration. In 1999 and 2004 the Visegrad Group fulfilled the third point as well: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined the NATO in 1999, in 2004 all countries became members of the European Union (and Slovakia also joined the NATO). These were the most important goals in the V4's history. After joining the EU, the Visegrad Group was not so active in the field of cooperation but the 21st century brought its new challenges.

One of the Visegrad Group's greatest successes was that double food quality was recognised in EU law. It means that products under the same brand have lower quality in Eastern Europe than in Western. Another success story was the International Visegrad Fund. "Visegrad Fund annually allocates approximately EUR 8 million to hundreds of Visegrad cooperation projects and mobility programs across Central and Eastern Europe" [11]. It supports artists, scientists, student exchange programmes, etc. Besides, IVF has significant cooperation with the Western Balkans region. "V4 have been demonstrating a long-standing commitment to the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, supporting cooperation, stability, development and the European perspective of the region" [11].

From the point of my research, it is also essential to talk about V4 Defence Cooperation. Due to the escalating Russian tensions at the Eastern flank of NATO, the rising of China and nowadays the constantly changing security environment motivated V4 Ministers of Defence to adopt a strategy entitled Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on their Defence Cooperation. The main priority areas were:

- establishing multinational formations and contributing to multinational forces and initiatives;
- harmonising defence planning and capability development;
- improving joint education, training and exercises to enhance interoperability,
- cooperating with partners [12].



Figure 1.
Signing of the Visegrad Declaration [14]



Figure 2.
Map of the Visegrad Group [13]

3. Former military cooperations

Besides defence cooperation, the Visegrad Group has had several common projects on the field of military. It is essential to mention here the biggest framework organisations: NATO, EU and the UN.

After becoming NATO members in 1999, the V4 countries' military personnel service has started. However, we can mention many missions where military personnel from Visegrad Countries served together, we cannot speak about directly organised V4 planning or common training. It almost never happened that all the four countries served at the same place and time, but there were good practices for cooperation 2 by 2. In KFOR (Kosovo Force) all V4 members have taken part, currently a high number of personnel are still involved [7]. SFOR (Stabilisation Force) in Bosnia or Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan are also worth to mention. Located on the Eastern Flank, taking part as leader nations in the following missions has been inevitable: NATO Forward Presence, NATO Response Force, NATO Readiness Initiative. In the frame of these NATO projects, international cooperation strengthens the common border of the Alliance. NATO's Multinational Division Centre Command (HQ MND-C) has been established in Hungary and reached initial operational capability in 2023. "HQ MND-C assumed operational responsibility for the central area between the division-level commands already established in the region, in Elbag, Poland, and Bucharest, Romania, which are almost 1,200 km apart in a straight line. HQ MND-C has thus become a kind of gap-filler" [3]. Last but not least, the most important NATO mission from air force perspective is obviously Baltic Air Policing. It ensures integrity and security in the airspace of the 3 Baltic States. Polish, Hungarian and Czech fighter jets serve in the region time to time [1].

I would like to highlight the Polish–Hungarian cooperation in United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). In this peacekeeping mission Poland and Hungary serves together in the same battalion and execute common training.

Talking about the Visegrad Countries' military cooperation, it is inevitable to mention V4 EU Battlegroup (V4 EU BG). This battlegroup is the only military mission carried out by just the V4 countries' own forces. "European Union Battlegroups (EUBGs) are military units of the EU at tactical level, with around 1,500 troops and capable of carrying out tasks within a 6,000 km radius of Brussels. Their readiness for deployment is defined as 5 to 10 days after the unanimous decision of the Council of the EU to launch the operation. Two battle groups should be on standby every six months" [3]. The V4 EU BG was set up three times: in 2016, 2019 and 2023, mostly in V4+ format (with the cooperation of Ukraine, Croatia and Latvia). From the perspective of air force cooperation, I would like to enhance the 2023 formation where air operations were executed by the Czech and Polish Air Force.



Figure 3.
Visegrad EU BG [15]

4. V4 air forces



Figure 4.
Aircrafts of the Czech Air Force [16]



Figure 5.
Aircrafts of the Polish Air Force [16]



Figure 6.
Aircrafts of the Hungarian Air Force [16]



Figure 7.
Aircrafts of the Slovakian Air Force [16]

5. Possibilities of air force cooperation

Based on my previous research, I have unfolded five main areas where air force cooperation could be carried out most efficiently:

- training, exercises, education;
- pilot selection, recruitment;
- radar data exchange;
- air defence (NATO Baltic Air Policing);
- flight safety.

Before presenting each possible field of cooperation, I find it inevitable to discuss conditions which are necessary to create and deepen an air force cooperation. First of all, the most important is common political thinking which is also currently the greatest obstacle in front of the Visegrad Group. Each nation has their own priorities, goals and interests which makes very hard to build common ground. Secondly, similar equipment and doctrines are needed to create interoperability. It is partly given thanks to NATO membership, but the new equipment mostly increased the distance between the V4 countries. Another serious problem is the lack of certain air capabilities (for example air-to-air refuelling). As a result, it can be stated that air force cooperation could only be created within the NATO framework.

Despite the difficulties, there is one big common goal in V4: air defence. There are several existing missions in this field. Firstly, Slovakian airspace is protected by Czech and Hungarian fighter jets because Slovakia currently lacks this capability. V4 countries (except Slovakia) take part in the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission. It would be a useful initiative to organise joint participation and common training and exercises before this.

In order to establish an effective air defence, it is essential to develop radar data exchange. This capability enables member countries to monitor other airspaces as well as their own. It helps in detecting air activities and giving a quick reaction to any violation.

According to my research, the biggest potential is on the field of training, exercise and education. For example, creating a common fighter pilot training would save money and time for each country. This would have meant that fighter pilot candidates should not have had to be sent to the US for training, because it could have been carried out at a base where all the Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovakian pilots could be trained. However, different aircraft types can cause problems, but at the moment we have a similar case in US training as well. Flight training could work on the same rules in all four countries, which would make it easier to continue the training together in the following phases. A mobilisation for air force personnel could be created (like Erasmus) which would help deepening professional knowledge, improving language skills and facilitating interoperability in the future. These fields of cooperation could be organised along the lines of the Hungarian JTAC (joint terminal attack controllers) training. Exercises could be planned as former air defence artillery exercises in the Visegrad Group [5]. On the field of special training, where only a few personnel are trained every year, joint training would be cost-effective and provide a higher quality of training. Another important area is pilot recruitment which is a big challenge for the V4 air forces now. Conferences were held in order to synchronise the procedure of selection and consider different ways to broaden the possibilities of recruitment [4].

Last but not least, I would like to mention one of the most important fields of cooperation: flight safety. Cooperation in flight safety has worked efficiently for decades. Talking about V4 air force cooperation, this field should be highlighted as an already operating aspect. Annual conferences are held where actual accidents are discussed, results of previous investigations are published and experiences are shared. This kind of thought and experience sharing is very useful in case of an accident or a flight safety issue. Several examples were mentioned when an investigation was solved thanks to the help of another member country.

6. Conclusions

In addition to answering key questions on the present topic, my research confirmed the following hypotheses for the future of cooperation:

1. Cooperation between air forces has a right to exist in the Visegrád Group.
2. The main goal is to protect common NATO airspace against threats from outside.
3. The possibility of cooperation currently exists in the following areas: trainings, practices, education; pilot selection, recruitment; radar data exchange; air defence/air policing (NATO Baltic Air Policing); flight safety.
4. The biggest obstacle to cooperation is different political thinking, goals and interests.

Overall, in terms of the results, we can say that the cooperation between the V4 air forces has a future in several fields. It could take place within the framework of NATO and serve the purpose of protecting the common airspace. Alignment of political views is critical for establishing strong cooperation, which in the current geopolitical situation does not provide the most favourable conditions for the future, but cooperation is still taking place in different fields.

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A légierők együttműködésének lehetőségei a visegrádi országokban

Kutatásom célja a V4-légierők közötti együttműködés lehetőségeinek feltárása, a lehetséges szinergiák feltérképezése, illetve a visegrádi csoport eddigi katonai kooperációjának megvilágítása. Katonai területen belül is egy olyan specifikus haderőnemet tekintve, mint a légierő, szeretnék választ adni a következő kérdésekre: lehetséges-e egyáltalán együttműködés kialakítása Csehország, Lengyelország, Magyarország és Szlovákia légierője között? A különböző országok szemszögéből nézve van-e elég hajlandóság, kapacitás és infrastruktúra egy ilyen kooperáció megvalósításához? Ha nem, melyek azok a tényezők, amelyek gátat szabnak ezeknek a terveknek? Ha lehetséges egy légierők közötti együttműködés megteremtése, az mely területeken valósítható meg, illetve

hogyan lehetne ezt a legcélravezetőbben kivitelezni? Az információgyűjtést tartalomelemzéssel és mélyinterjúk készítésével végeztem. Számos hazai és külföldi forrást elemeztem. Az adatgyűjtés során csak nyílt forrásból származó információkkal dolgoztam, a végső konklúziót is ezek alapján vontam le.

Kulcsszavak: V4, légierő, EU, NATO, V4 EU harccsoport, légierős együttműködés

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