

Visegrad four Battle Group 2016: Run up to Visegrad four NATO Response Force 2020?

Barbora Bodnárová

In May 2011 the four Visegrad countries (V4), Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovak Republic agreed on creation of a joint EU Battle Group, which would be ready for its six months stand by period in mid-2016. The Battle Group will be formed under Poland as the lead nation that will contribute 1300 – 1600 soldiers including combat and special forces. Czech Republic pledged to contribute 800 soldiers including medical and logistic units, Slovakia 400 soldiers and Hungary 350 soldiers including their engineer units.

This activity will represent an unprecedented level of defence collaboration between the V4 countries. With all the problems, like the lack of political will to increase defence capabilities and issues that came with the economic crisis, the success of the V4 collaboration in the EU BG is looked upon as a serious chance and a stepping stone for future, more permanent defence cooperation between these countries. This paper will look on the development of this effort and the possibilities of future cooperation with special attention to the possibility of realizing a common V4 contribution to the NATO Response Force after 2016.

Boundaries of the Regional Cooperation

With large multinational projects, like the European Union Battle Groups and NATO Response Force, there is always potential for success as well as for failure. As the DAV 4 report puts it: “If collaboration was easy, many more allies would be pooling and sharing. Instead, most of the past attempts have failed to save money or produce useful units” (Valášek, Šuplata 2012: 3). V4 countries have a very similar perspective on Euro-Atlantic security and the creation of common Battle Group is seen by many as an important contribution to transformation of national armed forces and to interoperability between these armies on regional and international level. The BG is also seen as proof of responsible approach of the Visegrad countries to the Transatlantic and European defence to overrun the fears about the future of the Transatlantic partnership and as a contribution to the austerity defence projects of

Smart Defence and Pooling and Sharing (Lorenz 2013; Kupiecky 2013; Šuplata 2013). Moreover it is perceived as a sign of growing importance of the region in the European Union. Former Czech Minister of Defence Vondra even noted that it is important that the Battle Group is being prepared without backing from EU powers (Buehrer 2011).

The idea of a common V4 BG came much sooner (initial talks were held in 2007) than the idea of Smart Defence and other joint projects among some of the Visegrad countries were executed before the work on the V4 BG started. These past experiences and present projects should be taken in account in the assertion of the future developments. In the case of the Smart Defence and Pooling and Sharing additional question to those about contribution to transformation, modernization, interoperability and support to the global role of the EU arise. It is the question whether the V4 Battle Group is going to bring any savings in defence spending and contribute to the logic of these concepts. This question is currently as important as the other questions from the past.

When it comes to the past collaborations of the V4 countries on the platform of the Battle Groups, there are two examples. In the second half of 2009, there was a common Czech and Slovak BG and in the first half of 2010 a BG consisting of Poland, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovakia. Some friction in the cooperation had been observed mainly in the case of the Czech and Slovak BG. When Slovakia agreed to this BG, they were already in preparation for the BG in 2012 and they could not fulfill the requests from the Czech partners, which was at some instances criticized by the Czech side even though the Czech partners were informed about the Slovak commitments in the BG with Poland, Germany, Lithuania and Latvia. Question is whether these problems could influence any kind

of future cooperation, mainly through lower levels of trust or are even more are these problems pictures of the future. It is not easy to predict the outcome of the V4 BG collaboration, but even if the Battle Group itself would not represent these values to their core, it is highly probable that a successful collaboration among the V4 countries will represent a vehicle for future regional cooperation.

Future defence cooperation is conditioned by many other factors than only the success of the V4 BG and its contribution to the Smart Defence and Pooling and Sharing. The DAV4 Report gives a thorough overview of the criteria for successful partnership in defence and security collaboration (2012, 4). When these criteria are applied to the defence cooperation between the V4 countries and some potential partners like Ukraine, opposing views about their fulfillment arise. The variables seem to be the same, but the opinions on their materialization differ. Some see the Visegrad defence cooperation as workable. V4 countries are conveniently big group of countries for collaboration with common past and similarities in strategic cultures and threat perception. They have similar equipment and some experiences with joint collaboration. On the other hand are the shaky relations between Hungary and Slovakia and the much bigger size of Poland in comparison to the other V4 countries. Also the differences in the equality of equipment are getting bigger (Valášek 2012). Then there are also voices calling the cooperation of the Visegrad countries a wishful thinking or the BG a flagship political project that is not going to solve problems with defence capabilities and budgets. Interestingly they identify the same factors that are underlying the success of the cooperation just see their materialization in not so positive way, Poland as too different from the other countries, threat perception a not as similar and the

common past as not generating enough trust among the countries (Weiss 2012; Balcer 2013).

Nevertheless the DAV4 Report gives us at least little perspective of the positive future of the V4 defence cooperation with real contribution for the militaries in the sense of Pooling and Sharing and Smart Defence also after the BG if the framework and projects are selected carefully. Also the states themselves are already talking about the potential cooperation after the Battle Group. Just recently a joint meeting of the V4 and Weimar triangle countries was held to discuss among other things defence cooperation including EU defence market and promotion of interoperability among countries. Also a joint meeting of defence ministers from Czech Republic and Poland was held, where the representatives talked about the possibility of broadening the cooperation beyond the BG through inclusion of other partners and offering common units to create other Battle Groups after 2016.

Boundaries of the International Cooperation

When it comes to the continuation of the collaboration of the V4 countries once established through the common Battle Group, the development to the V4 NRF does not have to be so straightforward. On one hand some arguments will remain, like the one about showcasing the political will which is actually not that strong and in this form it is not going to solve the most pressing issues of the regional defence and militaries. On the other hand, different structural problems may arise.

Firstly the pool of forces in the case of NRF is larger than by the Battle Group and the commitment is longer and preceded by joint training with other units and finished by certification of the forces, which is not done by

the Battle Groups. Also in the case of deployment the joint contribution does not have to be sent as whole and only certain parts could be selected. Mechanism of force contribution and force deployment is still largely bound to national level in NATO as in the case of expenses. For example if we are not talking about Hungarian engineers and Czech medical unit as a part of larger Visegrad NRF contribution but about mixed CBRN unit with professionals from all V4 countries, the unit to be deployed, each country will need to approve the deployment of their soldiers and on the basis of the "cost fall where they lie" also pay for their deployment. So what would be the purpose for such V4 NRF contribution?

Then there are the practicalities like the language barriers. In the case of the EU BG only the command really needs to speak a common language and the individual units can be managed through their mother tongue. This probably would not be the case by the V4 NRF, where all the soldiers would need to speak English on operational level, even more so when they would be deployed and subjected to NATO command structures. Do we have enough soldiers in the V4 countries that can understand each other and operate on international level?

Although when we look to the near future, we see a major change ahead of NATO, namely the end of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan in 2014. NATO is already discussing how it is going to keep the level of interoperability among its militaries when there would not be a standing operation where the units and commands are working together. Connected Forces Initiative approved at the Chicago Summit in 2012 seems to be heading to join the concept of NRF to support regular exercises of the NATO countries. This seems to open up opportunity for regional initiatives where the V4 cooperation and experience with common BG could be utilized in creating a core for specific activities in NATO that are somehow

connected to the needs or virtues of the countries of the region.

Last but not least is the question of the relevance of the both conceptions of the rapid reaction forces. On one hand there might be certain aspect of the transformation and modernization of the national militaries that was carried out through this kind of multinational projects. But on the other hand the lack of commitment (which is also not allowing the transformation and modernization to reach its full potential) is raising a question about the defence cooperation as such and it can be seen on rising problems to find forces to fill in the rotations of both EU BG and NRF as well as the inability to agree to almost any kind of deployment of these forces. So if the situation will remain to represent mainly inaction, would not it be better for the V4 countries to think about other form of collaboration after the completion of the BG rotation for keeping up the cooperation running than to move towards a NRF contribution?

The answer probably lies in the future of the NRF and the defence cooperation of the NATO states itself, mainly after 2014. The end of the ISAF mission could open new windows of opportunities for deployment, making the defence collaboration and participation in the NRF more convenient and would provide ideal environment for further development of the V4 defence cooperation.

Reference:

Balcer, Adam. 2013. A Wishful Thinking? Military Cooperation in the Visegrad Group. Bratislava: EUROPEUM, visegradrevue.eu/?p=1437.

Buehrer, Jack. 2011. Region: Visegrad 4 to combine defense resources. <http://www.praguepost.com/news/8864-region:-visegrad-4-to-combine-defense-resources.html>

Kupiecky, Robert. 2013. Report no.35: Visegrad Defense Cooperation: From Mutual Support to Strengthening NATO and the EU. A Polish Perspective. Washington: CEPA, <http://www.cepa.org/sites/default/files/documents/CEPA%20Report%20No.%2035,%20Visegrad%20Defense%20Cooperation.pdf>.

Lorenz, Wojciech. 2013. EU Battle Group" A Chance for Breakthrough in Visegrad 4 Cooperation? Warsaw: PISM, <http://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-39-492>.

Šuplata, Milan. 2013. Report from the DAV4 Visegrad Securitz Co-operation Workshop. Bratislava:CEPI, http://www.cepolicy.org/sites/cepolicy.org/files/attachments/viseco_workshop_report.pdf.

Valášek, Tomáš and Milan Šuplata, ed. 2012. DAV4 Full Report. Bratislava: CEPI.

Valášek, Tomáš. 2012. Prospects for deeper Visegrad defence collaboration. London: CER, <http://www.cer.org.uk/in-the-press/prospects-deeper-visegr%C3%A1d-defence-collaboration>.

Weiss, Tomáš. 2012. Visegrad Battlegroup: A Flagship That Should Not Substitute For Real Defence Cooperation. Bratislava: EUROPEUM, <http://visegradrevue.eu/?p=806>.

Author is working at CENAA as junior research fellow and besides the research she works on

several publication projects as the Panorama of the Global Security Environment and the Transatlantic File.

CENAA Policy Papers

No. 9/2013, Vol. 2

Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs

Tolstého 9, 811 06 Bratislava

www.cenaa.org/publikacie/policy-papers/