

Visegrad Experience: Security and Defence Cooperation in the Western Balkans

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Introduction

A difficult economic situation provoking a greater pooling of resources and experience sharing has in recent years created the preconditions for the strengthening of security and defence cooperation between the Visegrad Four (V4) countries. Mutual military cooperation creates the conditions for reversing this adverse trend and for further intensifying the development of capabilities of the armed forces of the V4 countries.

While the discussion on specific targets and initiatives has intensified in the past 2-3 years, so far, the most significant manifestation of the joint effort of the V4 countries is their expressed commitment to build a common European Union Battle Group (EU BG) to be placed on stand-by in the first half of the 2016. Also, the contribution of non-V4 partners has been considered with Serbia being the first country from Western Balkan region invited to join the project.

What's more, V4 military cooperation in this area is not an entirely new idea. However, it is the first time that a project involves all four countries. In addition to its huge political and military significance, cooperation brings also many challenges and issues at both the legislative and the normative level, as well as at the level of alignment of capabilities and their usage in operations. The experience from this process in V4 countries is an important source of knowledge if such cooperation is to be attempted between the countries of Western Balkans. It can be beneficial especially for Western Balkan countries, whose mutual military cooperation remains limited.

Although there are several regional initiatives (for example in joint training), there is still lack of other common activities in Western Balkans, which stems from the fact that no joint deployment has been debated so far (for example joint exercises). However, if there is political will, and recommendations of the V4 countries are accepted, such intensified military cooperation can be a good prerequisite for intensifying cooperation in the political field as well.

Therefore, the round table "*V4 Experience with the Security Sector Reform: Security and Defence Cooperation of the Western Balkan Countries*" held on October 29, 2013 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, aimed to strengthen the debate on the possibilities of deepening the military cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans, offering a vision of their future joint action in real crisis management. Experts involved in the discussion represented governmental as well as

non-governmental organizations as follows: Institute for Democracy and Mediation (Albania), Centre for Security Studies (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Analytica (Macedonia), Alfa Centar (Montenegro), Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (Serbia), Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs (Slovakia), Ministries of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovakia as well as Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro, and Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. Event was organized with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

V4 Experience in Security and Defence Cooperation

The roots of V4 cooperation can be traced to medieval times when the location of Visegrad was the crossroads of meetings of local kings. Recent-day cooperation was established in 1991 when the representatives of then Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland agreed to help each other in their aspiration for European Union membership. There were several reasons for deepening mutual help, predominantly the ambition to overcome regional differences and mistrust and to reaffirm their will for good neighbourhood relations. Although there is a broad spectrum of areas of cooperation in the Visegrad region, security and defence was one of the most protracted in the last couple of years. This was confirmed by Joint Statement of V4 Prime Ministers meeting in Budapest in October 2013 which had tasked the ministers of defence to prepare a long-term vision of defence cooperation and enhance the possibilities for joint training and exercises, as well as mutual defence planning. Despite this fact and the long history of V4 cooperation, achievements in the field of security and defence are still fragile because it takes quite a long time for political declarations to turn into a sustainable reality.

One of the issues addressed was the question of leadership. Although the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia expected Poland, as the biggest country, to take over the lead of this grouping, Warsaw was not very keen to do so. The main driver behind this was the agreement for creation of a common V4 European Union Battle Group in 2010, which is since then being built under the Polish direction. In general, this has many positive consequences. On the other hand, Poland is aware, also because of its stable defence budget that it is in the strongest position to influence what capabilities the V4 countries should create together. The situation in the Western Balkans is different as there are not such differences in size among the countries and the question “you either go by our rules or we go it alone” would not be very likely.

Based on the experience from the Visegrad cooperation so far, there are three components of cooperation's success. First, political will, as the cooperation is often substituted by competition and rivalries among the nations. To overcome mutual distrust there is a need for common conviction that mutual cooperation will bring more positives than not. Another need is to overcome the fear that the common initiative can also mean vetoing of the possible deployments of joint units into crisis by some nation of the group. Second, resources, as all other kinds of cooperation, require adequate investments. This seems to be the most demanding aspect as the defence budgets of the majority of countries in Europe (including Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia) are shrinking. This fact has a negative effect on the progress of military relations, especially when there are significant disparities among the countries in the level of modernization of their armaments. And finally capabilities, because it is really difficult to rely on partners without providing the appropriate capability level. In this regard the common "starting point" is very helpful as every discrepancy among capabilities creates a problem for enhancing the quality of common action. This was, for instance, the case during the debate on the protection of Czech and Slovak air space a few years ago.

So far, the most promising initiative of the V4 defence cooperation is a preparation of common EU Battle Group which would be placed on stand-by in the first half of the 2016. After the initial questions about the leadership role as well as composition and contributions of particular countries, the building of the group is on the right path. There was also a discussion about the possibility of involving third countries, including Ukraine and some countries of Western Balkans (Serbia and Croatia), although it did not come to fruition. Currently, the most discussed is the issue of sustainability of the group for the future. The argument for keeping this force at the ready in some form says that after years of effort and resources invested (discussions, debates, money), it would not be wise to lose the capabilities achieved in the process of preparation. Therefore, there is an on-going debate among the contributing nations on whether to keep at least some stable components or to offer a V4 Battle Group on a stand-by mode to EU on a regular basis. Although the evaluation of different options by mostly military experts is still in the process, at least from political and economy points of view it would be more than desired. Strong argument in favour is the fact that all countries are prepare high readiness units anyway.

Keeping in mind the history of Visegrad security and defence cooperation, its difficulties and lessons learned, several basic recommendations for Western Balkan countries can be made:

- Support and strengthen all initiatives that help to build mutual credibility and trust among the nations and their political leaderships. This credibility has to be accompanied by strong political commitments and clear vision of the highest representatives of individual countries.
- Focus on small steps in pursuing defence and military cooperation, such as Military Trainings Catalogue for instance. These will create a baseline for possible activities of greater importance, such as common deployments, standing military capabilities or modernization initiatives.
- Involve different actors at a different level in the common discussion and activities. If possible, aim toward the institutionalization of these formats to create stable and regular framework of cooperation.
- Use Visegrad Fund as a good example of a platform for strengthening mutual trust, building of capacities and exchanging ideas and suggestions.
- In developing regional cooperation, take advantage of the NATO and EU aspirations of countries of the region. Commitments to both organizations proved a very strong driver in the transformation of the Armed Forces of V4 countries and contributed to the overall political culture of cooperation and sharing of capabilities.

The Western Balkan Security and Defence Cooperation

Regional cooperation represents cooperation in all spheres of life among states, organizations and institutions of a certain region. In the case of the Western Balkans, the reasons for cooperation have been reflected in political, economic, historical, and cultural nature of a long lasting relationship. The countries in the region are not only building the mutual trust for a long lasting peace and stability, but also help each other in achieving the necessary standards as the main prerequisite for joining the Euro-Atlantic structures.

After the tragic events in the SEE region, we are witnessing the gradual loosening of relations influenced by the process of reconciliation and adoption of the Euro-Atlantic agenda in most of the countries of the region. Normalization of political relations resulted in the improvement of political cooperation between these countries. Shortly

thereafter, the cooperation in the field of security and defence has also begun, giving rise to a large number of initiatives of cooperation in defence matters, police, judiciary, border patrol, and improvements in a parliamentary and civilian cooperation.

In the beginning, most of these forms of cooperation were realized under the auspices of the NATO, EU, UN, OSCE, and the Stability Pact and through some individual country initiatives. This top-down approach facilitated regional-owned initiative that is becoming more visible. Many of these bottom-up approaches were facilitated and supported by the international community but they still bear the flag of a regional initiative.

The most comprehensive form of cooperation is the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP). Many important initiatives like SEEDMs, SEEBBRIG and many others in the field of defence were developed under their umbrella. It is very difficult to make an exhaustive list of currently existing forms of cooperation and according to some data, there are more than 60 regional initiatives of cooperation in the security sector, some more and some less successful.

Cooperation within the Adriatic Charter framework (A5) represents the most positive example of both cooperation in the field of defence and the preparation of the member states for accession to NATO. The countries included in this initiative are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Montenegro. Serbia and Slovenia have an observer role, since some of the initiatives are going toward extending this initiative to a wider format. Very successful activities involving the implementation of training for participation in peacekeeping operations were realized, such as Peace Support Operations Training Centre in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Media Training Centre in Skopje, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; and Nuclear, Biological, Chemical Defence Centre in Kruševac, Republic of Serbia.

Partner states declared that the Adriatic Charter activities and projects should be coordinated and synchronized with other regional initiatives, such as SEDM (South East Europe Defence Ministerial), SEEC (South Eastern Europe Clearinghouse), RCC (Regional Cooperation Council), etc., in order to avoid duplication of efforts and resources.

We can't ignore the significant cooperation which takes place in the defence sector at the bilateral level, as shown in the example of Croatia and Serbia which in its last year had 15 joint activities. Many activities are also conducted on a trilateral level, such as cooperation in the field of airspace protection and the formation of the Balkan Medical Group.

We should not forget the fact that all of the countries of the region are actively contributing to international peace and security through their contribution and participation by military and civilian personnel in peacekeeping missions. For now, due to various reasons, there is no cooperation between the countries in these missions, since the majority of countries join peacekeeping operations at the bilateral level with some international organizations. The promotion of regional cooperation, apart from the significant impact of financial resources, remains under-developed processes of cooperation within the countries.

We can say that the Western Balkans has matured and has come to a stage where a) there is an actual need for such cooperation so there is a demand coming from national governments, b) the (rest of the) Balkans remain EU and NATO's unfinished business in Europe which should ultimately result in a common security space. Even though there are certain unique challenges that the region is facing, such as joint battle groups or air policing that seems to be too ambitious at the time, the cost of not getting involved in such regional processes is higher than if a country decides to join them.

As we can see, regional cooperation is happening in the Western Balkans. Also, government officials and experts agreed that there is even more space for cooperation between these countries, particularly in the process of pre-deployment education and preparation of troops for international peace operations. But at the same time, some inventory of existing forms of cooperation is essential in order to adjust it according to the budgetary constraints and the principle of Smart Defence.

Also, since all countries do not have sufficient budgets for greater participation in missions, forming some kind of regional force would be a big step forward for this region, especially because it was the recipient of international help, and now has the obligation to help in peace missions abroad. The knowledge and expertise gained of this region could be used in the process of peace making around the world.

Needless to say, it is necessary to ensure the appropriate political conditions for this kind of cooperation. Serbia's position in this case is that this cooperation is possible within the EU framework, while some countries that have not signed the institutional framework for cooperation with the EU (such as BiH) still favour cooperation within NATO, or A5 initiative, which in the future might expand the existing format. One of the barriers to regional cooperation at the moment is certainly the status of Kosovo. Kosovo is an integral part of the region, but it progresses towards the normalization of relations with its neighbours, its uncertain status still represents an obstacle due to a

barrier of establishing official cooperation with (e.g.) BiH. Therefore it is not possible to achieve official mechanisms of cooperation.

What is encouraging and what all participants agreed upon is that strong need for regional cooperation in the field of security and defence is evident. This approach is probably the most influenced by the commitment to integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, primarily the EU and NATO. The greatest interest of countries to cooperate centers around this type of cooperation, but also around the positive experiences of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic countries in overcoming such problems. When it comes to future cooperation, according to some, it will be determined by available resources and logistical support which such collaboration requires.

Although there is still no clearly defined cooperation model that would be the most suitable for the Western Balkan countries and consider the overall situation and relations in the region, the commitment of the countries to joining Euro-Atlantic structures and to contributing to peace and security provides a very good basis for the intensification of regional cooperation. The further orientation of the countries of the region is likely to be built on these premises, both at the bilateral and regional level of cooperation. Will it be more along the lines of cooperation under the auspices of the EU, as advocated by some countries, or continuation of successful cooperation within the A5 countries remains to be seen. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the EU represents an attractive framework of cooperation. But it is probably too early to talk of the possibility of the formation of Western Balkans EU BG.

There is no doubt that such an agreement would have a very positive effect on the image and credibility of the region and that properly designed strategy for such a goal would be very positively received by the partners in the EU. It should also be taken into account that the visibility of the EU BG is quite considerable and perhaps even greater than any consideration of actual participation of its military structures in peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the EU. Therefore, these recommendations could serve as a guide for the countries in the region in their development of cooperation that might lead to the creation of the Western Balkan Battle Group in the period after 2020:

- It would be desirable to conduct an inventory of existing initiatives that are taking place within the framework of cooperation in defence and security, and make a decision about their integration into one that would provide the best results and that would be identified by the countries of the region in accordance with their national interests.

- Given the full commitment of all countries to join the EU, the establishment of a regional forum with the aim of forming the EU Battle Group in the period after 2020 would be a timely task, bearing in mind all the assumptions that have to be achieved in order to make this idea become a reality. The planning of basic assumptions should start from a political consensus, followed by the creation of a Road Map with clear benchmarking. This would be a good move in that direction.
- Contribution of the WB countries to peacekeeping operations under the auspices of NATO, the UN or the EU should be taken into account and assessed in terms of how these capacities could be utilized for the process of the building, as well as for the best preparation of countries for establishing the Western Balkan Battle Group.
- Continue with the existing regional cooperation in the field of defence and security with special attention dedicated to education of staff for participation in peacekeeping operations and developing niche capabilities of each country to contribute to building credible capacities for the creation of a joint formation.
- In the case of making a political decision on the establishment of the Western Balkan Battle Group, the countries should work closely with the countries of the Visegrad Group in order to share their experiences and dilemmas posed by such a decision.
- Consider the possibility that the Western Balkan BG would firstly be a part of some other BG as an associate member in order to overcome problems with leadership in the initial stage. Only after this experience, open the assumptions for the formation of an independent EU Western Balkan BG.

Conclusion

Regional security and military cooperation formats usually have many positive impacts on the development of individual countries but might often bring some concurrent negative features. As was shown on the example of Visegrad Four, closing the mutual gaps among participating states can take quite a long time but if approached in the appropriate way, it can reach desirable results. The crucial prerequisite for the satisfactory results of defence collaboration is an adequate high

level of political support. However, it is still insufficient in the region of Western Balkans. Especially the question of how to strengthen the mechanisms within states contributing to the idea of enhancing relations with other neighbours is high on the agenda. There is also a need to make visible progress in trust and confidence building in the region, although it is currently more probable to achieve on the expert level than on the level of political leaderships.

Nevertheless, there are several regional initiatives, which might play an important role in the future of Western Balkans. As the most promising for expanding cooperation in the region seems to be the Adriatic Charter framework, although Serbia and Slovenia still have only an observation status. But also other formats can contribute to the exchange of ideas, if they will do away with different bilateral conditions and obstacles that de-celerate the progress in common activities. All countries should also take full advantage of their relations with NATO and EU in connection with their integration ambitions. While EU integration is the strongest driver for Serbia's defence transformation, the role of the Alliance is very visible in the transformation steps of countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro.

The round table "*V4 Experience with the Security Sector Reform: Security and Defence Cooperation of the Western Balkan Countries*" confirmed the experience of Visegrad Four cooperation, although not without its own problems and obstacles, serves as a valuable commodity to be exported and the region of the Western Balkans appears to be one of the most suitable recipients of this help. Therefore it was recommended by the participants to continue with common discussions and activities with detailed focus on particular areas of security and defence sectors, such as professionalization of Armed Forces, modernization and procurement initiatives, sharing of capabilities, military training and preparation for crisis management deployments.

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