



# BULLETIN

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## EU Battle Group: A Chance for a Breakthrough in Visegrad 4 Cooperation?

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*By setting up a rapid reaction force known as a Visegrad battle group, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary want to demonstrate their commitment to a strong EU, NATO and transatlantic relations at the same time. The formation of the unit may also be a step toward permanent military and industrial cooperation that would bring tangible benefits and savings for the Visegrad countries.*

On 6 March 2013, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary signed a letter of intent to form a battle group that will be on standby for the European Union in the first half of 2016. Poland had earlier agreed to take on the role of a framework nation responsible for the major organisational effort, under the condition that the contribution of the other partners would be significant enough. So far negotiations show that all four countries have taken seriously the opportunity to strengthen their cooperation. As the leading nation, Poland is ready to contribute the main battle unit as well as a command and control component—950 troops altogether. The Czech Republic will provide 750 men, while Slovakia and Hungary 400 each.

**Motives Behind Deeper V4 Defence Cooperation.** So far cooperation among Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary was chiefly limited to the political dimension. The V4 countries supported one another in their efforts to join the EU and NATO. Having achieved this goal, they continued to coordinate their positions when faced with similar challenges in both organisations. Although they have been successful e.g. in strengthening the credibility of Article 5 in NATO's new Strategic Concept, their cooperation did not result in any practical initiatives. Common military projects were either limited in scale (3<sup>rd</sup> NATO Signal Battalion in Bydgoszcz) or ended in failure (modernisation of the post-Soviet era helicopter fleet). The four allies could not muster enough political will to deepen their cooperation because they were afraid of creating structures that could be perceived as undermining the cohesion of EU and NATO. Despite their similar geopolitical location, they also have different threat perception and draw different conclusions from the growing assertiveness of Russia and that country's military modernisation programme.

Recently, however, fears over the future of NATO and the EU have brought Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary to similar strategic calculations and encouraged these countries to close their ranks even tighter. All four countries deem NATO and bilateral relations with the United States as the main pillars of their security and look nervously at the U.S. strategic shift from Europe to Asia Pacific. The U.S., which provides 70% of NATO's military capabilities, expects that Europe will take greater responsibility for regional security, whereas the European allies with the strongest military capabilities are introducing deep cuts in their military budgets. As a result, NATO may experience deep internal divisions in the future trying to agree on another out-of-area mission. Some allies may fear that the contribution of limited resources to any large operation could affect the ability of territorial defence. Consequently, the unwillingness of some allies to act may force others to form coalitions of the willing that could undermine the cohesion of the Alliance. The European allies' continued dependence on the U.S. capabilities could also convince the U.S. that NATO is a burden rather than an asset, which could have a negative impact on American security guarantees for Europe.

The V4 countries also have every reason to be worried about the EU's ability to run crisis management missions in its neighbourhood as part of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Although EU member states in 2005 began setting up battle groups as a rapid response force to deal with crisis situations, they were never able to agree on their

deployment. EU countries usually differ on whether such deployment would be the most adequate and effective way to deal with a crisis. Some Member States are also discouraged by the sky-high costs of strategic transport required for sending a rapid response unit abroad. On top of that, dwindling capabilities and commitments towards NATO make it difficult for the EU to meet the goal of setting up two battle groups at the same time for a half-year standby.

The need to maintain capable forces ready to protect national interests has encouraged some EU and NATO countries to strengthen cooperation outside the framework of both organisations. In 2009, Nordic states created a regional organisation called NORDEF and in 2010 France and Britain, despite having totally different visions of NATO and the CSDP, signed a bilateral defence agreement.

**Potential Benefits and Limitations of Visegrad Cooperation.** In the declarations signed in May 2012, April 2012 and March 2013, V4 countries reiterated that, by deepening their cooperation, they want to develop mutually supportive capabilities for both the EU and NATO. By setting up a battle group as part of the EU, V4 countries support the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy, which is crucial for the EU's credibility as a global player. They also encourage the development of capabilities necessary for crisis management missions enabling the EU to act where NATO could be unwilling to take over, thus decreasing the risk of divisions within the Alliance. EU battle groups increase the interoperability among the participating nations and are a driver for the transformation of forces, which is beneficial for both organisations.

By strengthening the capabilities of the European allies, V4 countries also aim to prevent the erosion of the transatlantic ties. The Americans may be more willing to invest in European security when they see their allies take a measure of responsibility proportional to their potential.

Finally, the Visegrad battle group may become a platform for deeper military and industrial cooperation among Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, bringing tangible benefits to these countries. The four countries have already begun analysing new areas of cooperation as part of NATO's smart defence initiative and the EU's pooling and sharing programme. The most promising options include joint logistics, medical treatment facilities, air controller training (FAC/JTAC); Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defence (CBRN); helicopter pilot training (MATC); multinational experimentation; training in Counter Improvised Explosive Devices (C-IED), joint construction of armoured vehicles and munitions, individual soldier's equipment and armament, and integrated command and control systems.

However, the rising gap in military expenditures and capabilities between Poland and other V4 countries may become an obstacle to deepened cooperation. Since the economic and fiscal crisis began in 2008, the Czech Republic has cut its defence spending by 16%, Slovakia has cut its own by 22%, and Hungary by 29%. These three countries spend only 1%, 1.1% and 0.8% of their GDP on defence respectively, far below the official NATO target of 2% of the GDP. Also, they channel only 10% of their military budgets for modernisation, which precludes major investment projects.

At the same time, Poland's military budget has grown steadily, due to a fixed level of defence expenditure at 1.95% of the country's GDP, combined with robust economic growth. In 2012, Poland's military budget was twice the size of that of all the other V4 countries put together. Poland also allocates 27% of its budget for materiel and modernisation, and the amount is set to increase to 37% by 2022. This enables ambitious modernisation programmes comprising air and missile defence, battle tanks, armoured vehicles, helicopters, drones and individual soldier's equipment.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** To achieve maximum political, military and industrial benefits, V4 countries should use battle group formation as a vehicle for long-term cooperation. Battle group formation does not lead to new permanent mechanisms of cooperation but results in experience and coordination of military procedures, which makes setting up multinational units easier in the future. Poland has already signalled its readiness to use lessons learnt for regular V4 battle group formation provided partner countries agree to take on the role of framework nations on a rotational basis. By doing so, V4 countries would help solve the problem of a shortage of framework nations, which results in problems with setting up two battle groups at the same time for a half-year standby period. Taking on the role of a framework nation could also motivate the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary to refrain from cuts in military budgets and capabilities.

With significant disparities in defence expenditures and capabilities between Poland and other partners, only long-term cooperation could bring maximum benefits for the defence industry base in all four countries. In the short term, the Polish military modernisation programme could be a driving force of V4 industrial cooperation, giving an opportunity for research, development and implementation of advanced technology. However, broader inclusion of regional partners into Polish programmes would require shifting some profits from the Polish national sector to companies from partner countries. In the longer term, partner countries will also have to replace their post-Soviet equipment and technology, thus opening the way for cooperation beneficial for Polish industry.

Long-term cooperation supported with regular military unit formation could lead to increased trust among the partner countries, facilitating harmonised defence planning, procurement and cooperation during the entire period of materiel utilisation. It would not only bring tangible savings but also lead to the development of a competitive regional defence industry base.

As a practical example of complementarity between EU and NATO, V4 battle-group exercises should be organised as part of NATO's Connected Forces Initiative, which is expected to help maintain the combat readiness of NATO forces after the ISAF mission ends in 2014.