

SNAPSHOT

THE VISEGRÁD BATTLEGROUP — HOW TO MAKE USE OF IT BEYOND DEFENCE ISSUES?

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ABSTRACT

It is a well-known phenomenon in the European Union that small member states can hardly represent their interests on their own. Acting as a group, however, as in the framework of a regional cooperation, has already proven to be effective in many different fields. The same is true for defence issues as well: Hungary as a single country would have difficulties with making its defence interests visible in the EU, while as a member of the Visegrád Group this visibility increases significantly. The decision to create the Visegrád Battlegroup is a step into this direction.

This paper argues that regional cooperation in the field of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union—such as formulating a battlegroup together—can have many advantages beyond the defence issues as well, as the example of some previous battlegroups proves. Therefore, even if at first sight investing energy into common EU defence projects might not seem to be worth the effort, the Visegrád Battlegroup can be and should be efficiently used as another instrument to represent the interests of its participants within the European Union and beyond.

The paper first gives a brief overview about the latest developments of CSDP, summarizes the battlegroup concept and the latest facts about the Visegrád Battlegroup in order to give a background. Then, it defines three possible policy options regarding the Visegrád Battlegroup. The paper's recommendation is to use the battlegroup in a "smart way": considering the possibilities and obstacles of the V4, the Visegrád Battlegroup should be used as a tool to promote the interests of the participating countries beyond the defence issues as well. In order to do so, the example of the Nordic Battlegroup is examined in detail. Finally, the paper defines and recommends some concrete steps as well.

ANALYSIS

Overview: the background of the battlegroup concept

In order to better see the opportunities and constraints of the Visegrád Battlegroup, it is necessary to take a quick look at the current state of European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in general, then in particular at the battlegroup concept and its position within the CSDP. Finally the facts about the Visegrád Battlegroup are summarized and the approach of the paper is defined before moving on to discuss the prospects.

The current state of CSDP

The European Council meeting, held on 19-20 December 2013, focused on the CSDP for the first time since the Lisbon Treaty was put into force. Politicians and analysts agreed that a summit dedicated to the CSDP is in itself a significant moment but nobody expected a big step forward in the field of common EU defence.¹

Considering financial problems resulting from austerity measures all over Europe, and conceptual problems regarding the position of EU defence (related for example to NATO's role in the region), the Conclusions² agreed at the council meeting are seen as a modest success, and, more importantly, a way forward for EU Member States interested in promoting EU defence cooperation.

As expected, no ground-breaking reform was accepted during the council meeting, as the differing interests of Member States are still not harmonised. But the Conclusions provide guidelines in some important fields within defence cooperation.

"...the European Council has identified a number of priority actions built around three axes: increasing the effectiveness, visibility and impact of CSDP; enhancing the development of capabilities and strengthening Europe's defence industry."³

These priorities show the directions for interested EU Member States where to proceed—as opposed to other defence projects which have a lower chance for success because of the clash of interests. At the same time, these priorities do not require too much effort from the uninterested countries.

The battlegroup concept

The Council's Conclusions do not mention the battlegroup concept explicitly. It would not have served as very motivating for Member States because it is not a clear success story of CSDP.

The battlegroup concept started as an Anglo-French initiative, with the aim to develop rapid response capabilities in a way to enhance Europe's contribution to the NATO Response Force as well. Supported by Germany, the concept was presented on 10 February 2004 as part of the 2010 Headline Goal, and was finally launched on 22 November the same year. A single Battlegroup concept document was delivered in October 2006.⁴

Compared to the Helsinki Headline Goal (1999), where the aim was to develop a corps-size force (50-60 000 troops), the battlegroup concept was much more modest quantitatively. It calculated with battlegroups of 1500 troops, two of which would be on stand-by at the same time.

The battlegroups have to be more rapidly deployable, more mobile and more self-sustainable. A battlegroup includes a core battalion, combat support and combat service support to carry out peace-support, peace-enforcement, evacuation or humanitarian operations. It is operated by a framework nation or by a multinational coalition of Member States, but non-EU members can join as well. They have to be deployable within 10 days (following a Council decision) and be able to sustain operations for 30 days—which can be extended up to 120 days if resupplied appropriately.

At the time when the concept was launched, it had a high level of political support. Member States were ready to make commitments, 21 of them (plus Norway) offered to form a total of 13 battlegroups.⁵

The battlegroups reached full operational capability on 1 January 2007. Since then, two battlegroups are on standby for 6 months at a time, following a rotating schedule. Still, they have never been used. The main reason for this is the lack of political commitment by the Member States. Though they continue to offer capabilities and keep on forming new battlegroups, this remains the limit of their willingness. A deployment of the battlegroups (which would require the consent of all EU Member States) is above this limit. This situation raises serious doubts about the viability of the whole battlegroup concept. Therefore today it is often seen as a waste of money, time and energy, and a useless capability in general.⁶

True, the battlegroups have helped improving interoperability and effectiveness among the participants, and this experience proved to be useful in other contexts (such as NATO) as well, so the concept cannot be seen as a total failure. However, these are just minor successes compared to the fact that the battlegroups have not lived up to their initial purpose.

The Visegrád Battlegroup

Despite the questionable success of the battlegroup concept, the Visegrád countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) have decided to formulate their battlegroup as well.

The concept requires continuous offerings from Member States to provide always new battlegroups. Countries apply on a voluntary basis and the participating countries of a battlegroup can join other states for their next one. The Visegrád countries have also participated in several different battlegroups in the past. The Czech Republic with Germany, Austria, Croatia and Ireland; Hungary with Italy and Slovenia; Poland and Slovakia with Germany, Latvia and Lithuania. The Weimar Battlegroup of Poland, Germany and France was on standby in 2013, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia provided the Czech-Slovak Battlegroup in 2009.

Looking at the composition of these battlegroups, often (but not necessarily) a geographical logic can be discovered, while at other times they were driven by political motives. Creating the Visegrád Battlegroup with the V4 countries serves both purposes.

The letter of intent on forming the Visegrád Battlegroup was signed on 6th March 2013 by the four countries' defence ministers at the Visegrád Group's summit in Warsaw.⁷ They also decided that Poland would be the battlegroup's framework nation. According to the plans (although the final figures are not set yet), the whole unit would be a force of around 2500 troops, of which 1200 would be provided by Poland, 700 by the Czech Republic, 450 by Hungary and 400 by Slovakia.

The battlegroup will be on stand-by for rapid deployment in the first half of 2016. It will follow years of preparation, both legal (such as signing of agreements) and military (such as trainings and exercises).

The decision has significance from several aspects, but based on the arguments above, European defence in general is not one of them.

Therefore, in the author's opinion, when discussing the opportunities lying in the Visegrád Battlegroup, it should be regarded first and foremost as a tool of cooperation and advocacy of interests rather than a goal itself. If regarded as a goal, then it could be strongly debatable whether it is worth the effort, energy and money invested in the Visegrád Battlegroup, given the high probability of never being used.

This paper argues from this "tool" point of view: it underlines the importance of the battlegroup as an aforementioned tool of interest advocacy and cooperation. It examines the possible ways to use the Visegrád Battlegroup as a tool of strengthening cooperation among the participating countries and to pursue their interests in the European Union and beyond.

OPTIONS

Considering the situation described above, the Visegrád countries have several options to choose from. Which approach to follow regarding the battlegroup depends on the four countries' priorities, goals, and very importantly, on their available resources as well.

"Good students"

The Visegrád countries have a history with the approach of being "the good students". During the 1990s, when negotiating for EU and NATO membership, the V4 has managed to build a reputation of engaged and willing partners. It would be a viable option to count on this reputation. A properly organized, exemplary battlegroup could ring bells in the EU (and in NATO) about hardworking and reliable Central European countries.

Such a decision would have several advantages. Together with the above mentioned opportunity for brand-building, a well-equipped battlegroup would require the V4 to modernise at least parts of their national armies—which is long overdue. These modernised capacities would later come in handy also in the context of NATO commitments.

There are, however, serious obstacles behind this option as well. The most obvious one is the lack of money. Referring to the economic crisis and necessary austerity measures (just like the rest of Europe), all V4 countries (except Poland) are tightening their defence budgets. Therefore it would be

impossible to convince the four governments to build an “exemplary battlegroup”—that is, one with more than just the most necessary resources, using more money, time, and staff for organizing than what is really needed. It would be too high a cost only in order to show the credibility and commitment of the Visegrád Group.

Another obstacle is that the message might not come through as clear as expected. As described above, the EU battlegroups are nowadays seen as a partly failed project, forces that have never been used. Experts and decision-makers would recognise a well-built Visegrád Battlegroup but it would generate only limited attention, given that because of the lack of political will to deploy a battlegroup, most probably all the money and effort put into organizing the battlegroup would be left unused.

In short, creating the Visegrád Battlegroup with the “good student” approach would certainly have advantages, but given the context and the current situation of the V4, the costs would be higher than the benefits.

“Bad students”

Considering the opinions about the viability of the battlegroup concept, being “bad students” can be another option. This does not seem to be the case, though, as in 2013 the Visegrád countries have voluntarily offered to form a battlegroup. Still, if the decision is made to change the course and focus their resources on other issues, a not-so-well organised battlegroup would have both benefits and drawbacks.

These are logically more or less the opposite of the previous option. Money and other resources would be spent to a limited level; defence budgets would not be burdened that much. At the same time, an opportunity to modernise national capabilities would be missed. Another opportunity to demonstrate the willingness and commitment of the V4 would be lost as well. This is especially important because the Visegrád countries are really in need to demonstrate their cooperation skills in defence issues.

If there is anything the Visegrád countries like in their group’s work, it is demonstrating their cooperation skills. Therefore, even if the battlegroups are not in the best shape nowadays, the V4 is still willing to take the opportunity. Backing out completely would cost too much loss of credibility, so it is not a viable option, but backing out half-way—that is, running the

battlegroup project with the minimum resources acceptable—also would have more drawbacks than benefits.

“Smart students”

The ideal way to go would combine the previously mentioned benefits: it would provide good press for the Visegrád countries, it would not cost too much but it would ensure modernisation which the V4 could later use as NATO members as well.

In the author’s opinion this is a goal possible to reach. It requires, however, an approach somewhat different from what the Visegrád Group is used to. In order to make the best out of it, they need to be the “smart students”, and a higher level of cooperation is needed.

Being the “smart students” means looking at the opportunity to form the Visegrád Battlegroup not as a goal but as a tool with several purposes. Since the success of the battlegroup concept is ambivalent, the Visegrád Battlegroup as a goal can be questionable. As a tool, however, it can be used in several ways—if used thoughtfully and creatively—on the one hand to develop other defence projects of the Visegrád Group (such as their engagement in NATO or the modernisation of their armies). On the other hand, a well-advertised battlegroup project can be a convincing proof of the V4 cooperation in general.

The biggest obstacle to this approach is the lack of trust in each other and the fear from partially losing sovereignty. The only way to reduce costs in the field of defence is sharing defence costs among countries. (In the EU terminology it is called “pooling and sharing”, while its equivalent in the NATO is “smart defence”.) However, cooperating even in defence research and development, not to mention for example relying on each other in air defence, requires a level of trust which is still missing in today’s Central Europe. This phenomenon can be explained with historical reasons but it is high time to pass beyond it. It is a long process but a smartly implemented Visegrád Battlegroup can be the first step.

THE NORDIC BATTLEGROUP AS AN EXAMPLE

How to make the best out of the Visegrád Battlegroup, beyond the context of the European Union, even beyond defence issues? The example of the Nordic Battlegroup can give some inspiration.

The Nordic countries are often referred to as an ideal for Central Europe. Their high level of cooperation and developed approach to common issues is often seen as a way to follow. Although when it comes to membership in different organizations, the Nordic countries are diverse: while Iceland, Norway and Denmark are members of the NATO, Sweden and Finland are not. Similarly, Iceland and Norway are not EU-members.

Despite this diversity they have managed to establish the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). Their willingness to cooperate in the field of defence issues is visible also when it comes to the EU battlegroups: Norway, as a non-EU member, has been contributing to the Nordic Battlegroup since the beginning.⁸

The Nordic Battlegroup was on stand-by already two times and is expected to do so a third time as well. In the first half of 2008, then in the first half of 2011, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Estonia, and Ireland joined to form the Nordic Battlegroup, with Sweden as the framework nation.

Although these countries joined other battlegroups as well and will continue to do so, the Nordic Battlegroup has become a brand. Once the battlegroup was formulated and the standby period was over, after analysing the experiences the participating countries concluded that it would be a waste of opportunity to dissolve the structure and let the gained experience go. Instead, parts of the structure were later used in other national or regional contexts, and the Nordic Battlegroup itself has become a regular contributor to the EU battlegroup project, a perfect example of the participants' defence cooperation skills, and another way to promote Nordic cooperation in general.

It is already decided that in 2015 Latvia and Lithuania will join the Nordic Battlegroup, thus all three Baltic states will become its members. This fits into the overall strategy of the Baltic countries to strengthen their cooperation with the Nordic states as much as possible, in order to increase their visibility in international politics and security issues. Joining the group of their well-developed neighbours and introducing the "Nordic-

Baltic” brand is indeed a smart and relatively cost-effective way of increasing such visibility, be it in the field of defence or elsewhere.

The Visegrád countries do not have their own “Nordics”, i.e. a more developed group of countries which have formed a successful regional cooperation and which can be followed or joined in order to share in their success. The Visegrád Group, however, represents a territory and population large enough to become a significant actor on its own as well.

When it comes to following the Nordic example of cooperation, the two most common counter-arguments are money and cultural-historical issues. The reason, however, why the Nordic Battlegroup has become a brand, is not the high amount of money spent on it but the multiple times it has been (and will be) on standby, that is, its regularity, and its ability to be used in other structures as well. The cultural-historical argument is often the reference to the long history of cooperation in Northern Europe, as opposed to a level of historical hostility in Central Europe. However, during the Cold War some northern countries were NATO-members, others neutral or even under Soviet influence, while the experiences of the Visegrád countries from the same era are so similar that this should not be a valid argument, and certainly not a serious obstacle to cooperation today.

CONCLUSIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS

When it comes to discussions about the Visegrád Battlegroup, it is often concluded that the V4 defence cooperation is underdeveloped and the battlegroup, as their first major success in this field, should be used as a first step to build permanent common defence capabilities and to deepen defence cooperation in general.⁹ While such arguments are certainly valid, real-life obstacles (such as lack of money or political will to spend on permanent capabilities) often do not let them become more than policy recommendations.

This paper instead focuses on some steps which should be taken in order to make the best out of the Visegrád Battlegroup beyond the EU and beyond defence issues only. This approach would make it possible to benefit more from the project by seeing it rather as a tool than as a goal, in order to pursue the V4’s interests in other fields as well.

- Once the battlegroup is formulated, the money spent should not be wasted. The created structure should be multifunctional and

applicable in the NATO's framework (such as NATO Response Force) as well.

- Any developments regarding defence issues should be carried out considering the recommendations of the EU Council meeting dedicated to CSDP. When modernising national forces, cooperation (such as common tenders, joint acquisition) should be seriously considered and rational arguments about cost-effectiveness should overcome historical mistrust.
- The same is valid for research and development projects as well as for plans regarding defence industries of the V4.
- These steps require a strengthened and fluent communication among the four countries about their defence plans, and not only on the highest (representative) level. These communication channels should become permanent.
- The Visegrád Battlegroup and its developments should be given as much as publicity possible, to demonstrate the willingness of the V4 countries to cooperate in the field of defence—which requires the highest level of trust in each other. This message will resonate not only within the EU but also in a NATO context.
- By introducing these measures, the commitment of the Visegrád Group in common European issues will be proven, thus increasing the V4's visibility and credibility in general, beyond defence issues as well.

¹ See for example: Javier SOLANA, "Globalizing European Security", *Project Syndicate*, December 16, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/javier-solana-argues-that-the-eu-s-common-defense-and-security-policy-should-play-a-key-role-in-ensuring-global-stability#ozu5VJR6DKYSFmId.99> or Marcin TERLIKOWSKI, "The EU's December Defence Summit: Towards Fragmentation of European Security?", *Bulletin PISM* no 139 (592), December 18, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <http://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-139-592>.

² European Council: Conclusions. EUCO 217/13, 19/20 December 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/140245.pdf.

³ Conclusions p.3.

⁴ Council factsheet on EU Battlegroups. (Updated: April 2013), accessed January 28, 2014, available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/esdp/91624.pdf.

- ⁵ Jan Joel ANDERSSON, “Armed and Ready? The EU Battlegroup Concept and the Nordic Battlegroup”, SIEPS Reports 2006:2, *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies*, Stockholm, March 2006, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <http://www.sieps.se/sites/default/files/32-20062.pdf>, p.22.
- ⁶ Anna BARCIKOWSKA, “EU Battlegroups — ready to go?” EUISS Briefs No40, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, November 15, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_40_EU_Battlegroups.pdf.
- ⁷ Press Statement of the Polish Presidency in the Visegrad Group, March 6, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <https://www.premier.gov.pl/en/news/news/press-statement-of-the-polish-presidency-in-the-visegrad-group.html>.
- ⁸ ANDERSSON (2006) p.21.
- ⁹ See for example: Milan ŠUPLATA (ed.), “DAV4 II Report: From battlegroup to permanent structures”, *Central European Policy Institute*, November 18, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, available at <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/dav4-ii-report-battlegroup-permanent-structures>.