

SNAPSHOT

THE ROLE OF THE VISEGRÁD COUNTRIES IN THE TRANSATLANTIC FUTURE¹

Dániel BARTHA — Péter RADA

ABSTRACT

The European continent has not witnessed large scale violence, since the Balkan Wars. The threat perceptions changed accordingly in Europe. Most European allies believe that even the current crises with Moscow doesn't change the overall European security environment, but it proves, that Europe still needs the United States in maintaining security but also needs to substitute American resources in places which are important to the United States but may be abandoned in the future. Thus, Europe can prove that the Transatlantic Alliance is still important. The article assesses the consequences of the changing American foreign policy focus for the Visegrád countries. The article itself does not intend to give a full and comprehensive picture on all the possible scenarios for a joint Visegrád foreign policy initiative which would substitute effectively the waning American presence in Europe but it aims at highlighting the general strategic picture in Central and Eastern Europe and to provide an example for a joint effort.

¹ This article is the shortened and amended version of the Peter Rada's article from the Panorama 2013. Due to the recent European events many arguments of the original article are outdated. To see the original article: RADA, Peter, 2013. Pivot to Asia and the Role of the Visegrád Countries in the Transatlantic Future after 2014. In: ONDREJCSÁK, Robert et al (eds.), 2013. *Panorama of Global Security Environment 2013*. Bratislava, CENAA, pp. 121–136

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the American foreign policy became overstretched and the burden-sharing questions became relevant again. (Magyarics, 2010) The rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific is rather an organic orientation back to a “normal” American global presence as the United States has always been both an Atlantic and a Pacific power. (Ondrejcsák, 2012, 25) The American foreign policy ambitions are limited by the financial crisis and the necessary budget cuts. Thus, it was necessary to give a new shape to the foreign policy and deliberate a changed focus. The false sentiment that the United States paid the most attention to Europe during the last decades was fed by the active American engagement in the transitions of Central and Eastern Europe, the NATO enlargement and the active participation in settling the Balkan Wars. (Haas, 2011) Before the Ukrainian crisis, the predictable developments in Europe gave more confidence to the American decision makers to place more responsibility on the European allies. Washington also had to put some pressure on its allies, to match or at least credibly support American defense commitments and capabilities within NATO. Unfortunately the US withdrawal, with the misinterpretation of the security challenges was rather used by politicians as an argument for further downsize armies and military budgets. In parallel NATO’s smart defense and Europe’s pooling and sharing program couldn’t create credible capabilities. There were warnings signs, such as the operation in Libya, that US support will be needed to European allies to conduct any bigger mission or operation, even on fields where Europeans have the strongest capabilities on paper (such as air force). It is clearly seen now that the United States needs to keep some troops in Europe to avoid further encouraging Russia to become even more animated towards Europe aiming at filling any real or perceived power vacuum in Eastern Europe in face of low resistance, which means Europe failed to create a credible power even for territorial defense.

The impression that Washington gave up Europe is false and is not in line with the real intentions of the Obama administration. (Ditrych, 2012, 52) The many ties between Europe and the United States continue to keep Europe as one of the central pillars of the American foreign policy. It is a false conclusion to consider Europe as a finished business. The European geopolitical order is more fragile than it is assumed in general. The fragility is fed by the ambiguity of the strategic future. The problem is even deepened by the fact that beyond the strategic foresight, also the common

threat perception is missing. This was clearly echoed in the first reactions on the Ukrainian crises by the European Allies. The fragmentation can be also seen among the lines of regional interests and ambitions. Without providing and supporting the possibility to likeminded countries to conduct defense planning, development and create strategies in smaller circles and clusters, the United States will find itself in a similar situation like now, when it has to return to the continent to create a realistic deterrence capability. Unfortunately, the fragmentation appeared among the V4 countries as well, and without further developments or at least stronger political ambitions towards the support of Eastern Partnership countries by the smaller Visegrad countries, this will challenge the Visegrad defense cooperation.

Even though, it is clear that the United States will not abandon Europe it is less predictable how Europe can fit in the new American global strategy. Obama's pledge of 1 billion USD to reassure European allies suggests a short-term US answer to the current question, as the money can fund the presence of only non-permanent structures by the end of 2015 (Chivvis, 2014). The commitment of US, most likely will strengthen the demand of raising military budgets as well. While Poland already announced a raise, Slovakia's Prime Minister at GLOBSEC 2014 excluded this possibility, while significant Czech and Hungarian leadership remained silent on this question. Meanwhile, the modernization of the weapon systems to replace Soviet systems is further delayed, which can end up in loosening strategic cultures and through that further eroded credibility of these countries. This problem may test the transatlantic bond with the Visegrad countries already at the Wales Summit.

The Lisbon Treaty provided at least institutional legitimacy for the more integrated development of the European foreign policy. However, the institutional decision making process is still too bureaucratic and complex through the overlapping domains of the Commission and the intergovernmental process of the Council. Furthermore, the foreign policy goals of the EU represent rather a wish list. (Bressand, 2011) Beyond that heavy burden, we need to take the note that the relation between the two sides of the Atlantic has always had multiple dimensions and the defense cooperation has meant only one of those. The real untearable bond is the trade and the foreign direct investments. The United States and Europe are mutually dependent on each other due to the enormous volume of these. Consequently, it is a clear mutual imperative to maintain security and

stability in the Atlantic region. (Techau, 2011) The economic anchor is strong and keeps the United States as a European power, even if physical military presence decreases. Nevertheless, fine-tuning the emphasis on mutual interests is as important as ever both for the United States and Europe.

THE OPTIONS FOR CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE VISEGRÁD COUNTRIES

The international security environment has changed significantly and the American relative power and global leadership has been challenged by new emerging competitors. On the global level, China is perhaps the most important factor of this change and even Russia seems to be less important from Washington. Due to the same reason, Russia has become more active in its near abroad on the periphery of Washington's European allies. This Russian policy was extended into new and more sensitive territories of Europe by the current operations in Ukraine. To that happen numerous facts had to co-exist. The power vacuum of Ukraine and the perceived danger, that the Eastern Partnership program of the European Union will be successful in bonding some of the countries such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine on a longer term to Brussels, the relative weakness and political crises of the EU, as the consequence of the economic crises and the vacuum created by the withdrawal of US forces from Europe, was a unique reality and possibility for Moscow. This unique nature suggests that the crises with Russian can only temporary effect global security trends.

Even though, the sources of Atlanticism are deep in Central and Eastern Europe and stem from historical experiences: the United States was the power which toppled communism, facilitated integration and later balanced the other European powers. (Asmus et al, 2005, 203) Central and Eastern European countries may be the best allies of the United States within the NATO but today they are definitely not the most important ones. Thus, Central and Eastern Europeans should also reconsider their strategic assessments on security issues because comfortable institutional answers may be not ready in the future. (Mitchell et al, 2013) The United States has long functioned as security anchor also in the European neighborhood. As such, the United States cannot leave the region completely in a fortnight and coordinated strategic efforts (such as the Visegrád cooperation, see Balogh, 2012) may keep the United States further interested in providing

enabling support in protecting the European neighborhood to become a space for new geopolitical contest.

Today, the real interest of the Central Europeans and as such of the Visegrád countries² is the growing coherence, better functioning and clear division between the NATO and the EU. The slowed down integration process of the NATO and the EU is partly due to the decreasing trust between West and the East part of Europe. Being in the middle, the Visegrád countries are more sensible to any developments in this regard. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Central Europeans are still more cooperative than competitive with the United States. However, the support is not unlimited. Thus, having no global aspirations, the Visegrád countries, which are many times seen as troublemakers by the Western European EU members, need to prove that they are important partners. (Samson, 2011)

The Visegrád countries have been reliable contributors in many NATO led missions, most importantly in Afghanistan. In some regards, the Visegrád countries even performed beyond expectations and sent more troops relative to the size of their economies than many older allies. Thus, they were relevant partners for the United States. This condition will definitely change after 2014 even though all of the Visegrád countries already expressed their commitments to stay in Afghanistan in a different mission. (Nagy et al, 2013) Consequently, the fulfillment of the basic obligations within the NATO will be more important than ever. The defense spending is one of these crucial points. Obviously, there is a lot to do in this regard because except Poland the other three Visegrád countries are far from the informally agreed 2 per cent per GDP ratio. Despite the valued and strong defense cooperation between the United States and the Visegrád countries (Balogh, 2012) this fact always provides source for criticism even though many Western Europeans underachieve in this regard, too. On the other hand, because of the much stronger gravitational pull of the EU the label “best allies” is not as rewarding anymore for the Central Europeans. The Central European countries need to show that they understand today’s strategic international reality and the quid pro quo principles in order to maintain at least the American enabling protection or support. The Visegrád countries can, however, prove their willingness to participate in a

² The article uses the labels Central and Eastern Europe and the Visegrád countries as some kind of synonyms. It is obviously an oversimplification but in terms of coordinated strategic decisions in foreign policy the Visegrád Cooperation and the Visegrád+ formats represent Central and Eastern Europe. (See similar argument in Ruzicka, 2012)

mutually beneficial global division of labor if they take a constructive role in managing and solving problems that are also defined as such by Washington but where the United States reasonably expects more of a readiness to act on the part of Europe. (Marton et al, 2013)

The actual homework for Europe and also for the Central Europeans is to figure out how to fill any real or perceived vacuum in the wake of smaller American presence. Europe needs to prove it has a strategic vision regarding these developments. As such, smaller regional blocks, as the Visegrád Cooperation³ can take certain responsibilities with particular regard to the Western Balkans (Huszka, 2010) or to the EU's Eastern Partnership countries⁴. In line with the mutually shared American and European interests, the already significant Visegrád involvement in these regions means a real added value to the strategic retrenchment on the part of the United States and it sends signal to the EU that the Visegrád countries are willing to take an active role on resolving the strategic rebalance within the North Atlantic Alliance. The NATO necessarily has a role in these regions, too, and the organization must remain active (e.g. further expansion by letting new members in) even if the United States cannot afford the same efforts in Europe. In principle, it means more responsibility and more reliance on the European component of the NATO.

CONCLUSIONS

The ties between the United States and Europe will definitely keep Washington's eye on Europe. The geopolitical situation shows that Europe is far from a finished business and but Europe needs to invest significantly more at least in maintaining its own security in order to sustain the relevance of the North Atlantic Alliance.

The NATO still has important role in providing security in Europe and in representing a global security forum. Thus, the members need to put joint effort in maintaining the strong alliance.

³ Associating the Visegrád countries with defense cooperation is rather new phenomenon and the group may provide a functioning platform or model on how to maintain NATO capabilities in a fiscally constrained environment. (Kron, 2010). The planned set up of the Visegrád EU Battle Group by 2016 is an example for both NATO's smart defense and the EU's pooling and sharing efforts. (Suplata, 2013)

⁴ The EU's Eastern Partnership platform is important region for the V4 even though this article, mostly due to the page limits, argues for the growing importance of the Western Balkans.

Even though the pivot to Asia is not intentionally a pivot away from Europe it is rather a sobering recognition that in today's world any policy reorientation inevitable leads to changes in all the existing relations. The pivot means obviously significantly less American attention to Central and Eastern Europe, even though crises situations can change that for shorter periods. There will be serious criticism towards those members of the NATO which are not able to contribute more significantly to the mutual burdens in terms of for instance defence spending.

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